

Losing touch: a man without his body

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Abstrak

Ian Waterman lost touch and movement/position sense (proprioception) below the neck over 40 years ago, though pain and temperature perception and his peripheral movement nerves were unaffected. Without proprioceptive feedback he was completely unable to move and felt both disembodied and frightened. Then, slowly, he taught himself to dress, eat, and walk by thinking about each movement and with visual supervision. Through his experiences we can better understand proprioception. The narrative moves between biography and the scientific research he has been involved in. He has been married three times and built up successful careers in disability access audit, using his impairment to his advantage, and in rare turkey breeding and journalism. The neuroscience has led to data on movement without feedback, the pleasantness of touch, gesture, pain, and orientation of the body in space. This account shows how the science was actually done but also reveals Ians journey from passive subject to informed critic of science and scientists. His unique response to such a rare condition has also led to a BBC documentary, theatrical portrayals, and a weightless flight with NASA. As a young man Ian sought triumph over his impairment; now, nearly 65, he has more mature reflections on living with such an extraordinary loss, the limits it has imposed, and the opportunities it has enabled. He gives his views on scientists and on others he has met including Oliver Sacks and Peter Brook. In an Afterword those from science, the arts, and philosophy give an appreciation of his contribution.