

## Staying in Touch with Touch

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**Touch-- as in the actual, physical contact of one living being with another-- is a vital element**, if not the vital element in bringing people into presence, awareness, and interconnection with life. Increasingly, more psychotherapists are exploring the role of touch as a vital component of body awareness in helping their clients heal from emotional wounds by becoming trained somatic therapists or by referring clients to qualified somatic practitioners to complement their therapy. The growing number of post-Reichian somatic therapies such as Bodydynamic Analysis, Core Energetics, and the Hakomi Method, among others, attests to this growing interest. Touch, in fact, offers such a potent means of effecting immediacy and reality to a feeling sense of oneself and in relationship to others that I believe it needs to be more widely acknowledged as a necessary component in the process of inner growth and personal development.

Touch begins in the awareness of our own physical beings, as in the movement of our breath rippling tissue against tissue within our bodies or the pulsing of blood activating our heart as we accelerate the pace of our movements and emotions. Much earlier, the tension or ease of the womb enclosing our fetal bodies is the touch that sets the tone for our responses to later interactions in the world.

In recent years there have been increasing amounts of research and clinical evidence that touch heals-- more, that touch is requisite for the survival and development of living beings. It is so vital a component to well-being that The Touch Institute was created at the University of Miami specifically to research the value of trained touch in promoting health for people of all age groups. Director Dr. Tiffany Field has demonstrated, for example, that struggling, premature infants begin to thrive with caring, regular massage appropriate to their bodies' needs. In *Job's Body*, author and somatics instructor Deane Juhan describes a number of medical research studies focused on children's physical and emotional development, and concludes: "Tactile stimulation, physical contact with the environment, appears to be a food that is as vital for development as is any protein."

As we begin to individuate in our early development, we sense our bodies and reach out to touch the world around us, learning about freedom and restrictions in so doing. From the beginning, we interact with others through touch, gaining affection, developing support, and acquiring societal restraints. The quality of the touch we receive and are encouraged to give from earliest infancy on is the basis of our feeling of connection or disconnection with others. The novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* illustrates vividly this sense by consistently avowing the value of compassionate, aware touch as the single

most life-affirming act between people-- while its absence denies and stultifies intimacy and well-being: "I knew it with [my] men [in the army]. I had to be bodily aware of them and a bit tender to them . . . Ay! it's tenderness, really . . . And it's touch we're afraid of. We're only half-conscious and half alive. We've got to come alive and aware."

This "touch" that leads to "consciousness" and "awareness" lies at the root of relationship and connection between people; in addition, it creates the context for the opening of spiritual awareness that deepens relationship and connection. For example, "darshan"-- the Sanskrit term for the sense of presence from a holy person that is deeply felt by others-- can include touch that brings people into direct awareness of unconditioned love and even spiritual liberation. The expression, "touched by an angel," echoes this profoundly resonant dimension of our experience with touch, as does the poet Kahlil Gibran's words: "You would touch with your fingers the naked body of your dreams." The power of even the metaphor of touch carries us directly to our healing core of dreams and deepest intuition.

As beneficial as caring touch is in all aspects of our development, though, it is unfortunately also true that many people have been hurt by painful forms of touch or denied that very contact they most needed. "Touch . . .," as Dr. Christine Caldwell noted in her *AHP Perspective* article (Oct./Nov. 1999), "is a vital and necessary body food." It is, however, necessary to be able to ingest this "food" and for optimal well-being, to share it with others. For a variety of reasons, many people have difficulty taking in and being nourished by touch-- or in reaching out and connecting. They are starving for this contact-- and deeply afraid of the intimacy it offers and reveals. To be able to take in its healing potential, they may require the assistance of people either trained in touch-based work or having the presence to be able to hold them within healthy parameters of touch.

Traumatic residue that includes fear and avoidance around touch is, of course, a major issue for many survivors of sexual and physical abuse, wars, severe accidents, or difficult surgeries, where, physically and emotionally, they suffered and experienced intense agony. As a somatic practitioner, however, I have noticed that even people with no obvious histories of developmental or traumatic disturbances can feel some level of sensitivity, distrust or unawareness at the level of touch due to a number of factors such as one's cultural environment, life transition struggles, or episodes of acute pain. In an interview with Deane Juhan, for example, he mentioned: "I grew up in a part of the country where the mode of touch was being punched in the playground . . . My first massage at Esalen was really the first knowing kind of touch that ever penetrated my musculature and my sensibilities."

As Juhan suggests, touch can alienate or profoundly integrate the connection between people depending on its nature and intent. It also can lead a person deeper into his or her own being, opening space for change and possibilities to arise. As a young woman I work with said: "Your hands on me feel like a mother's, holding me in a place where I can safely be and experience my own unfolding." People who are fearful of themselves in their bodies, of touching and being touched, feel alone in the universe,

sentenced to a lifetime of solitary confinement. Paradoxically, touch may be both the key and pathway out. Along these lines, Jungian analyst Mario Jacoby cautiously explores the possibility of touch as a guiding and healing tool in his essay, "Getting in Touch and Touching in Analysis": "I think here of analysands who tend to get temporarily into . . . a 'frozen' state where their own feelings-- let alone persons of the outside world-- are not reachable. Everything is far away or just lifeless . . . As a response to such a state of being cut off, I felt in certain instances that these patients needed my active help in trying to find them in their prisons and to reconnect them to humanity."

One way in which I help some people who are lost in their own pain experience this opening is to place my hand gently on a safe place on their bodies and simply say, "You are not alone." It continues to amaze me, the power of this touch with these words to reach through years of self-constructed fear barriers. In so doing, I feel that I reaffirm my client's and my own primary, existential need for and right to our humanity and connection through touch.

Clearly, when one person touches another with mindfulness and compassion, there is no limit to the possibilities for transformation. The energetic focusing of this contact ignites the deep inner awareness inherent in the human consciousness, yet so often dulled through neglect or injury in a person's development. In *How Can I Help?*, Ram Dass and Paul Gorman share this example of healing touch based in selfless presence:

"At last Yeshe Donden [Personal Physician to the Dalai Lama] takes her hand, raising it in both of his own . . . In a moment he has found the spot, and for the next half hour he remains thus, suspended above the patient like some exotic golden bird with folded wings, holding the pulse of the woman beneath his fingers, cradling her hand in his . . . all at once I am envious-- not of him, not of Yeshe Donden for his gift of beauty and holiness, but of her. I want to be held like that, touched so, received."

In my life, I have been led by touch where I would not otherwise have known or dared to go. To be guided by touch, one needs to learn to be aware of its immense power to change or refocus stagnant ways of being and relating with the slightest pressure of contact. Then it is possible to take advantage of its life-healing properties, its ability to help us "come alive and aware."

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