

## *The Healing of Touch*

### **A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By The Rev. CJ McGregor**

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I don't like massages. The idea of a massage gives me what some might call the "willies." This doesn't matter here at All Faiths as there will never be an occasion to get a massage from a member of the congregation. I suppose I get this aversion to touch from my father. I remember when he graced the Catholic church with an annual visit, and I watched as he avoided touch during the mass. It was when you were to rise and shake hands with everyone around you and say, "Peace be with you." He just stood there, facing front with his arms crossed, motionless. People around him would nudge him, tap him on the shoulders, poke him, and put their hands out. He stared blankly straight ahead and would not acknowledge anyone. He didn't want to be touched. I tried this once and received a pinch from my mother. I don't mind touch. Hugging is no problem and I like to hold the hands of others sometimes as way to comfort.

Physical touch is often taken for granted, but it plays a vital role in healing. Many years ago, I remember reading an article about babies born during World War II. Scientists experimented on a number of orphaned babies. During that time, they observed two sets of infants. One group of babies had all of their vital needs met but in addition to having their physical needs met, they also received the comfort of reassuring words and physical touch. The other set of babies only received care for their daily needs. They did not receive the benefits of kind words or physical touch. Other than having their diapers changed and being given nutrition, these babies were left in cribs all day without any form of communication. They began to lose weight and became sickly while the babies receiving attentive care, grew and thrived. Doctors noted the importance of physical touch and observed the role it played in the happiness and development of these children.

There have been many studies performed since that time on the healing power of touch. Those in the medical field are finding healthful benefits for patients in the form of nonverbal communication such as a pat on the hand, a gentle hug or some form of skin-to-skin contact. The healing power of physical touch can be measured. Doctors have found, through laboratory tests such as MRIs, that there are evident changes in the patterns of brain activity during touch. Certain types of endorphins are released. These endorphins combat stress hormones, resulting in a sense of relaxation and peace. I've witnessed and experienced the power of touch in healing. An arm on the shoulder, a pat on the hand, or a tender hug meant the world to me and to others. These kind expressions help us feel like we matter. I have no doubt that you've been on the giving and the receiving end of healing touch. Most of us crave love and acceptance. What better way to communicate than by reaching out and touching someone? I feel like that was an add for the telephone company. Reach out and touch someone.

Humans are designed to touch and be touched – which is why so many who live on their own have suffered during the pandemic. Listen to part of a conversation I had with one of our own members. She told me that There's only so much a dog can do, even if that is a lot. I live alone

with my dog, and by week eight of the first lockdown she was rolling her eyes at my ever-tightening clutch. I had been sofa-bound with Covid and its after-effects before lockdown was announced, then spring and summer passed without any meaningful touch from another person. I even missed the smell of my friends' clothes but, more than anything, I missed the groundedness only another human body can bring. The pain and anxiety caught me off guard. The need for touch exists below the horizon of consciousness. Before birth, when the amniotic fluid in the womb swirls around us and the fetal nervous system can distinguish our own body from our mother's, our entire concept of self is rooted in touch.

We may not comprehend the importance of touch even when it disappears. "We might begin to realize that something is missing, but we won't always know that it's touch," says Prof Francis McGlone, a neuroscientist based at Liverpool John Moores University and a leader in the field of affective touch. "But when we talk about the problem of loneliness, we often ignore the obvious: what lonely people aren't getting is touch." As the pandemic continues, many of us will be trying to cope with profound stress without the comfort of touch. We all have different needs and boundaries. Not everyone *suffers* from a lack of touch, but the total absence of touch, particularly when emotions are high, contravenes the hardwiring that regulates us from our preverbal years. How do you know if you're touch starved? There's no definitive way to know. But in a nutshell, you may feel overwhelmingly lonely or deprived of affection. These symptoms may be combined with feelings of depression, anxiety, stress, low relationship satisfaction, difficulty sleeping, a tendency to avoid attachments. You may also subconsciously do things to simulate touch, such as taking long, hot baths or showers, wrapping up in blankets, and even holding on to a pet, whether your pet likes it or not. A hunger for touch is a signal that a primitive need is not being met. But evolution is on our side. Every scientist I spoke to was hopeful that, once we can come together again, we will adjust quickly. "It will differ between people, probably based on the duration people have been alone, and there may be a period of clumsiness and renegotiation," says Dunbar. "But we have evolved to adapt."

There is another way to look at the healing of touch and that is to be touched. The sense of touch is far more intimate than smell. It's as if our heart has caught the scent, and then we move closer in order to be immersed in it—to be enveloped, to be touched. The presence of the spirit of life is not only an irresistible attraction, but through touch, we are unified in our inmost being—we experience oneness. We talk about Spirit as the breath of life and being breathed on by Spirit ... is this not the ultimate and most intimate touch we can experience? As Tennyson said, "Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet." The most powerful touches we encounter are those that are unplanned, seem unrehearsed, and arrive unannounced. When we risk leaning into these unrehearsed moments, we discover the need to be open to life, the desire to be in the continuous flow of Spirit. However, there's an interesting paradox inherent in the continuous flow of spirit. It always brings us to places where we must risk being open, being touched, and being vulnerable. If we do not allow this opening up, we can never be changed by our experience. We won't be anointed by the beauty and the suffering necessary to participate in our world—a world that invites us into a gritty and mysterious territory called our humanness. It is here that we are touched by Spirit, where we touch each other's divinity—hence the paradox.

So how do we rejoice in the mystery of being human when touched in such painful ways? And when I say rejoice, I am not talking about finding a silver lining, or affirming away pain with the idea that there must be a blessing in there somewhere. Whether we are touched by life in ways

that are sweet, empowering, ecstatic, peaceful, or joy-filled, or in ways that are painful, fearful, or despairing, when I attend to that touch, allow myself to be embraced by it, **I am once again opened to the sheer joy of belonging.** We let go of our own identity and get lost in the delight of the spirit of life. It then overflows and my body is touched—my physical body feels the touch and rejoices with my heart. As Father Thomas Keating says, “The spirit can transform the entire organism into an immense celebration of love, peace, and joy.” **Our sense of touch never turns off—it is always at work, helping us explore our world and make meaning of things.** Touch opens us, heals us, and ultimately brings profound peace. Each sense broadens the depth and texture of life. We are awakened and touch the world in ways that are true, beautiful, and good.

May the physical and spiritual power of touch heal us, hold us, comfort us, and may our hearts be touched giving us the power to heal and transform others and our world.

May it be so.