

## THE HUMAN TOUCH: WHO NEEDS IT

Every human being needs to touch and be touched. Each of us have thoughts and feelings so deep and personal that words will simply not bear their weight. And yet, we long to communicate them, to share them with another. Our most intense joy is amplified and given permanence by being shared. Our deepest fears and anxieties are made endurable and manageable by being shared. But they can only be truly shared in their full depth and significance when they are shared in the totality of who we are. They cry out for touch.

We need to touch. Perhaps in our artificial technologized culture we need the closeness and intimacy of touch more than ever. Our western culture has achieved such a level of cerebration, of the worship of intellect and intellectualizing, that we are terrified of touch.

We have so hidden from ourselves those deep feelings about which we cannot intellectualize that their sheer pressure inside of us terrifies us. We are taught almost from birth that man's glory is his intellect and his emotions are fetters from which he needs to be freed. Emotions are to be risen above, avoided, denied, escaped. One of the greatest unlearned lessons of history is that emotional and intellectual freedom is to be found not in freedom from feelings, but in being freed for them. Indeed, I have come to the conclusion that what differentiates man from the beasts is not his mental skill, for all his superiority in that. What sets man apart most profoundly is the depth and complexity of his capacity for emotion.

We need to share ourselves with each other as surely as we need to breathe. But just as surely, that sharing cannot be accomplished on a merely verbal level. What we need to communicate is more primal, more basic, than language.

You have perhaps heard of the nursery babies who die without the human touch, who need only to be played with, handled and cuddled to survive. Recent experiments with baby monkeys, even, indicate that without the physical intimacy of mothering they do not develop properly. Those completely starved of touch, die.

Research in the teaching of reading indicates that not only is verbal facility -- the ability to use words -- not our primary mode of communication, but children who do not crawl, and touch, and handle things, almost invariably have difficulty with language. The thought and word are not our primary mode of communication. We are primarily animals

who touch! Our deepest thoughts and feelings can only be communicated by touch . . . by physical intimacy.

When your child comes to you, frightened and hurt, TELL him you care, TELL him you love him, TELL him you are sorry. Then TOUCH him. Take him in your arms and cuddle him. Then he will believe you. Then he will know you care.

But to whom can you go when you are frightened or hurt? With whom can you share those deepest feelings, which can, only be shared by touching?

We adults have limited touch to three areas. We allow the handshake and such similar symbolic, but safe, gestures. We may touch in sexual intercourse. And we may touch in hostility, where one feeling -- anger -- protects us from others that might burst out. That is just about it! So far as a language of touch is concerned, we have condemned ourselves to a sort of pig latin where, when we touch at all, our meaning must always be veiled.

Let us examine these three areas of touch open to us.

A handshake. Why this symbol? I am told that this ritual derives from the days when men wore swords. They held out their unarmored hand as a gesture of peace and trust. But why is it still with us if it fills not need in our arsenal of communication.

The handshake is a ritualized caress. It is a symbolic reestablishment of communication. As a gesture of friendship, no symbol could be as powerful as that of touch. For there is power in touch. It demands and communicates a dimension of commitment and trust unlike any other form of communication. I may talk to you and remain hidden from you. But, if we touch, I am vulnerable. I may reveal more of myself to you than I can trust you with. There is a feeling of control in verbal discourse that is absent with physical intimacy. Sham and pretense is much more difficult.

This is precisely why we are wary of touching. It is a terribly risk-filled form of human relatedness. The more so because we need it so much and are starved for it. We are well aware that if the power of touch is loosed, those feelings that we keep carefully bottled up inside may come spilling out. Touch has the power to burst the floodgates of our dammed up emotional lives.

And we are right! Touch is dangerous. It is not by accident that we use the same word . . . feeling . . . to refer to emotion and to touching. They are closely related.

So, when we meet after a period of separation, we shake hands. We need to reestablish contact, to be together again. But touch is dangerous. So we keep it off, out there. The handshake becomes at the same time a caress and a fending off, a contact and a buffer. We need to touch, but we are afraid of its power and the trust it demands.

The second area of touch we allow ourselves . . . sexual intimacy . . . is really our only area of open intimacy. In bed, preferably with a member of the opposite sex and properly only one who is a legal mate, we finally allow ourselves to touch. There we may speak, as only touch can, of who we are and how we feel.

That the courtship-intercourse-situation is virtually our only allowable intimacy. And so we fill that one allowable intimacy with all of our needs to touch. We thrust all sorts of totally inappropriate feelings into that relationship. That one act must bear the weight of all our needs to communicate what cannot be said! Is it any wonder our culture is obsessed with sex, and yet plagued with problems and frustrations about it?

Is it any wonder our teenagers, like their parents, are hung up on sex? The only vocabulary of feeling we have given them is that of seduction. In any given parked car with young people necking, there is involved FAR LESS sex than the need to be close to another -- to speak in touch the anxiety, the joy, the affirmation and the uncertainty of being alive; to give and to receive the comfort and security of being together that CANNOT be said.

There is, in back of our so-called sexual revolution, more than simply new attitudes towards sex. There is rather a groping for a new vocabulary of feeling. The major problem in that revolution is not the threat of sexual license. The major problem is our culturally inherited inability to distinguish the need for an expression of sex, from the rest of our deepest feelings . . . the inability to distinguish physical intimacy from seduction.

The final area where we allow ourselves to touch is that of overt hostility. It is seen in contact sports; both those in which we engage and those we watch, touching vicariously. It is seen in the discipline of children. It is seen in the various outbursts of physical violence, even in much antisocial behavior.

The need to touch can be expressed in hostility while minimizing the risk of the floodgates bursting. The expression of strong hostility keeps the other feelings from being revealed. There is more love present but hidden, in most of our acts of anger than we are often aware. And, tragically, many a child is only able to get physical intimacy from his parent by misbehaving.

The consequent emotional confusion, misunderstanding, and apparent irrationality that clutter our lives are quite understandable in light of our starvation for touch. This unfortunate state of affairs even infects that one intimacy we allow ourselves. Misplaced and misused hostility is often responsible for our hang ups in our sexual adjustment.

To whom Can YOU go when YOU are frightened, or hurt, or just need to be WITH someone? To whom can you go for the human touch?  
 To a handshake?  
 To a fight?  
 Or, to bed?

We are alone with our deepest feelings, and we long to share them. But we have cut ourselves off from this most profound means of communication. We have invested too much stock in talk and we are in danger of bankruptcy. No one is hung up for lack of an argument . . . philosophical, theological or scientific. NO ONE!

if we would administer to the terrors and hurts of the world; if we- would care, the only way caring can be heard; if we would be whole again, and bring wholeness to those we love; we must, perhaps, become as little children, and learn again the human touch.

"To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm over so lightly around his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?  
 I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea. There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,  
 All things please the soul, but these please the soul well."

from "I Sing The Body Electric," LEAVES OF GRASS  
 By Walt Whitman