

THE HEALING POWER OF TOUCH

Background and Context

Little do I know the extent of my identity with my body until I am touched. Little am I present to my body, until a hand is laid upon me calling me to the “temple,” to the housing of my self, to the homing of my spirit, to the dwelling of my existence. . . The hand that touches my body touches my life. My body is in me. . . So, when you touch me, the “commons” of me, my body, you enter my life, my being, you come into my dwelling—no matter where you touch me. Touch always involves the presence of the body, my own and the other’s. Touch presences.

-Dianne Connelly (All Sickness is Home Sickness, pg. 100)

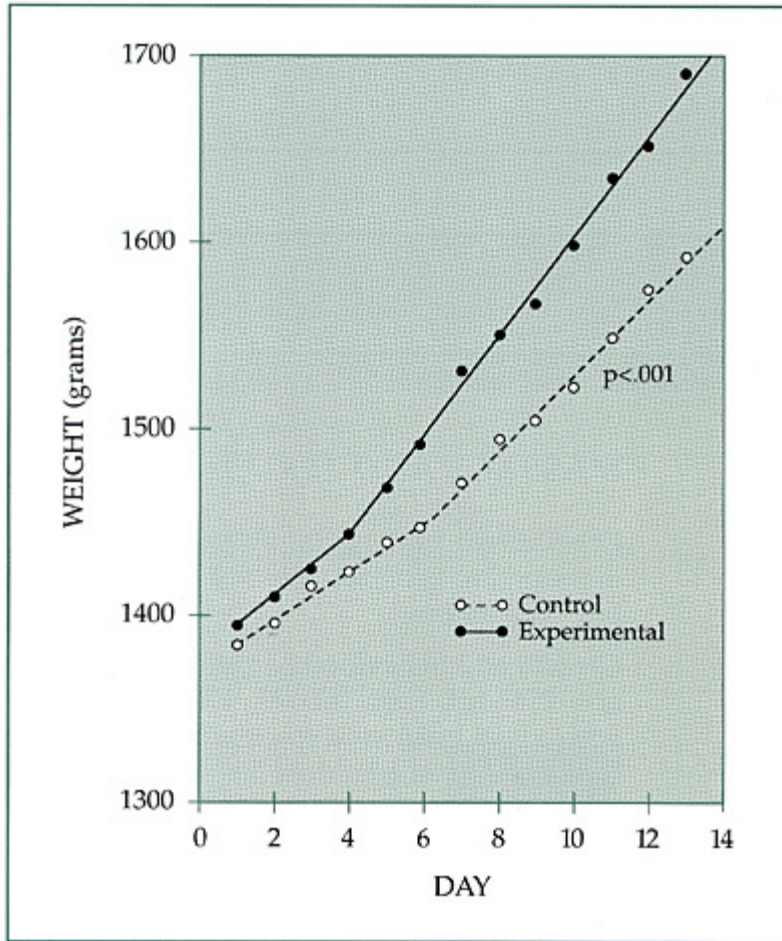
From an early age, we hear the message, “Don’t touch!” This remonstrance comes in many forms—Don’t touch the stove, the wet paint, your father’s tools, that bug, that child’s toys, your “privates”.... The message is clear: touch is dangerous. The prohibition on touch is particularly emphatic in our schools where touch is associated with sexual harassment and promiscuity. For both teachers and students alike, the message is: Keep your hands to yourself!

The fears that surround body touching in our culture have been reinforced by Christian religious teachings that regard as shameful and therefore sinful any kind of participation in actions that bring pleasure to the body. Is it any wonder that children and adults, alike, seek substitutes—in the form of stuffed animals, baby blankets and pets—for the human touch we crave?

Tragically our fears around touch deny us of the many gifts that body touch offers. Human touch is essential to human survival and well being. Babies who are denied touch fail to thrive and often die. Indeed, the great majority of infants (less than one year old) who were cared for in orphanages in the early 1900s in the U.S. died. Absent the presence of a mother to hold them, rock them, and nurture them, they literally wasted away. And as adults touch is also essential to wellbeing, particularly when we become ill. For example, the fluttering heartbeat of coronary patients in intensive care calms down, becoming more regular, when a nurse holds the patient’s hand to take his pulse only to revert to an abnormal state when the nurse leaves.

Warm-up Exercise

The below chart depicts age (days) vs. weight (grams) for "Control" and "Experimental" group neonatal infants in a 1986 research study. The chart shows that "Experimental" infants are heavier and gain weight faster than "Control" infants at all ages, yet, **the infants did not differ in caloric consumption**. What factor do you suppose might have led to this difference between the Experimental and Control infants?



Note to Instructor:

If students become stuck, you might provide this hint:

Sidney Jourard, a University of Florida psychologist, visited cafés in different parts of the world and recorded the number of times two people who were sharing coffee did a certain thing over the course of an hour. In London, the tally was 0; in Gainesville, Florida, 2; in Paris 110; and in San Juan, Puerto Rico, more than 180. (Tiffany Field, Touch, Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000.)

What the two people did in the cafes is the same thing that explains the difference in the above graph? What did they do? What explains the difference?

Answer:

The experimental variable is **touch**.

A summary of the scientific paper containing the above graph reads:

Tactile/kinesthetic stimulation was given to 20 preterm neonates (mean gestational age, 31 weeks; mean birth weight, 1,280 g; mean time in neonatal intensive care unit, 20 days) during transitional ("grower") nursery care, and their growth, sleep-wake behavior, and Brazelton scale performance was compared with a group of 20 control neonates. The tactile/kinesthetic stimulation consisted of body stroking and passive movements of the limbs for three, 15-minute periods per day for a 10 days. The stimulated neonates averaged a 47% greater weight gain per day (mean 25 g v 17 g), were more active and alert during sleep/wake behavior observations, and showed more mature habituation, orientation, motor, and range of state behavior on the Brazelton scale than control infants. Finally, their hospital stay was 6 days shorter, yielding a cost savings of approximately \$3,000 per infant. These data suggest that tactile/kinesthetic stimulation may be a cost effective way of facilitating growth and behavioral organization even in very small preterm neonates.

Field TM, Schanberg SM, Scafidi F, Bauer CR, Vega-Lahr N, Garcia R, Nystrom J, Kuhn CM. "Tactile/kinesthetic stimulation effects on preterm neonates." *Pediatrics*. 1986 May;77(5): 654-8.

Check In

How do you feel about being touched casually (for example, lightly on the arm when you are in conversation with a close friend), and why?

Activity One: Personal Touch History

We humans are made for touching. We are covered by skin, not a hard shell. In fact, the average human has 18 square feet of skin embedded with five million nerve endings each ready to be triggered by touch. Do you suppose this is some accident of nature? Hardly! Our skin is there for relationship. It allows us to experience and receive the world. Think about it: If touch didn't feel good, there would be no pair bonding, no sex, no mothering, no fathering, no species, no survival! We are, as they say, hard-wired for touch. Yes, by our very nature, we humans are "touchy-feely" creatures. Yet, some have found that, in American culture, touch is taboo. What is your experience?

Instructions:

Briefly reflect on these questions regarding your own personal "touch history." Think back to as many eras of your life as you can. As this question resides in the back of your mind over a period of time, more and more of your history will reveal itself. Be content with what you uncover now.

- Earliest memories of being touched?
- Experiences of being touched by your mother, father, siblings, grandparents, teachers, dentist, others?
- Favorite ways of being touched?

- Personal prohibitions and/or discomforts around touch?
- Touch and pets?
- Touch and sports or other body work?
- Clothing and objects (e.g., teddy bear) that offer tactile comfort?
- The last time that you were touched?
- The last time that you touched?

Spend 10 minutes on reflecting on these prompts, taking notes in your journal as you go

Discussion:

- What did you learn?
- Stories to share?
- Are there gender differences regarding touch? (see note below).
- If touch is so good for infants, what might that mean for us?
- What keeps you from extending more touch?
- Comments? Questions? Diatribes?

Note: A study by S. M. Jourard revealed that female infants were more frequently touched by both parents than male infants, and that daughters later touched both parents more than sons did. In another study by Jourard and Rubin, both mothers and fathers touched their daughters in more regions of their bodies than they did their sons, and that daughters in turn touched their parents in more of these areas than sons did. It is conceivable that later gender differences could result from these early differences in touch (Tiffany Field, Touch, Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000).

Activity Two: Exploring Degrees of Contact

i. "Touch My Coat"

What are the degrees of contact? What is it to come into touch with another? If you hold your mother's coat—or your sister's, your brother's, your father's, or your best friend's—do your hands and body sense something more than just the cotton, canvas, nylon, or leather? And when another holds yours? What are all the reasons that a high school girl wears her boyfriend's football sweatshirt? Does one of those reasons have to do with touch, with the way she feels him through it?

Instructions:

- Pair up and face your partner.
- Place a coat or another item of size and weight that is clearly yours before you.
- Reach out and touch your partner's object.
- Take your partner's item into your hands.
- Turn around so that your back is to your partner's back.
- Be with the item (for a minute or two).
- Return the item.
- Ask yourself, "What just happened?"

ii. "Crossing the Stream"

In 1974, pre-eminent American and Pulitzer Prize winning author, Eudora Welty, reviewed Annie Dillard's, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek for the *New York Times*. Welty was a little baffled and underwhelmed by the soon-to-be Pulitzer Prize winning work. Welty found, "an ambition about Dillard's book ... the ambition to feel. ... [yet, in Welty's view] ... if this is what she [Dillard] has at heart, I am not quite sure that ... she wholly accomplished it." Nonetheless, Welty held fast to one paragraph where she saw Dillard accomplish that ambition to feel:

She takes us through a flood on Tinker Creek and I think she sees truly when she says: "Tinker Creek is out of its four-foot banks. It looks like somebody else's creek that has usurped or eaten our creek and is roving frantically to escape, big and ugly, like a blacksnake caught in a kitchen drawer." She walks out into the flood on a wall and on the return trip meets a young boy who's going in the opposite direction. "The wall is one brick wide; we can't pass. So we clasp hands and lean out backwards over the turbulent water; our feet interlace like teeth on a zipper, we pull together, stand, and continue on our ways." There's grace and quickness of writing. It also marks the rare appearance, momentary as it is, of another human being in her book, and the closest any human being comes into the presence of the author.

—Eudora Welty, "Meditation on Seeing," *New York Times Review of Books*, March 24, 1974.
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/03/28/specials/dillard-tinker.html>

Instructions:

- Pair up.
- Ask yourself, "Do you remember what it was to be a child, to have imagination, to see—truly see—other worlds before you?"
- Imagine the stream snaking out of its four-foot banks. Imagine the thin wall, one brick wide; the distance you would fall from; the current that would take you.
- Begin from the wall's end opposite your partner. Both of you, make your way across it. Meet and pass, as you can.

Discussion ("Touch My Coat" & "Crossing the Stream"):

- What did you feel when you held your partner's personal item? What other thoughts does this question spur?
- Welty thought Dillard had an ambition to feel, yet she also thought that she failed this ambition, for the world of her book was largely devoid of any other human; in fact, was devoid of touch. In your experience—as you just relived it—can Dillard's crossing of the stream bear the weight of the whole book's ambition to feel? Truthfully, can it bear a life's?
- There are many degrees of contact—touching through the intimacy of imitation; touching through the material objects of others; touching, as we commonly know it, through the hand. Here is a fourth, perhaps wholly encompassing and undergirding degree of contact: Attention. What do you have to say about the proposition that we touch and that there is an intimacy, to a degree, in the simple act of paying attention to someone? For instance, would there be touch if, instead of asking you to imitate a person's actions in an effort of "body listening," I simply asked you to watch somebody—for example, a stranger sitting in the library, or a girl or guy a few seats away from you in the cafe?

iii. The Teachings From Our Hands

Such wondrous gifts these hands of ours! The Buddhist teacher/activist Joanna Macy, in an effort to promote radical amazement, points out that it has taken almost five billion years of conditions particular to Planet Earth to bring forth the human hand. Macy offers a guided meditation that invites you to an awareness of the evolutionary history of your hands. Though this exploration can be done alone, it lends itself to group settings.

Instructions:

- Begin by standing and facing your partner.
- Then, take their right hand in yours and close your eyes so that you can bring all your attention to the sensation of touch. Now listen to this guided meditation:

What is this object you are holding? There is life in it. If you were anywhere in outer space, in intergalactic reaches, and you were to grasp [this object], you would know that you were home. It is only made here. This is a human hand of Planet Earth and it has taken five billion years of conditions particular to this planet to shape it. Take both your hands now and turn it, feeling it, flexing it. Explore it with great curiosity as if you had never known one before, as if you were on a research mission from some other solar system. Please note the intricacy of the bone structure. Note the delicacy of the musculature, the soft, sensitive padding on palm and fingertips. No heavy shell or pelt encloses this hand. It is vulnerable; it is easy to break or burn or crush. It is an instrument of knowing as well as doing.

Open your awareness to its journey through time. This was a fin once in the primordial seas where life began, just as it was again in its mother's womb in this lifetime. Countless adventures since then have shaped it... This hand connected with tree and wind as it refined its intelligence. This hand: the ancestors are in it, ancestors who learned to push up on dry land, to climb, to reach, to grasp, to chip rocks, to gather weeds and weave them into baskets, to gather seeds and harvest them and plant them again; to make fire and carry it, banked, on the long marches through the ages of ice. It's all in that hand from an unbroken succession of adventures.

Similarly, open your awareness to this hand's journey through this particular lifetime, ever since it opened like a flower as it came out of its mother's womb. Clever hand that has learned so much: learned to reach for breast or bottle, learned to tie shoelaces, learned to write and draw, learned to wipe tears, learned to give pleasure. You know there are people living now who believe they are worthwhile and lovable, because of what [this] hand has told them. [And] there are people living now whose last touch in life will come from this hand and they will be able to go into their dying knowing they are not abandoned. [Too,] there are people living now who will be healed in mind or body by the power that this hand allows to flow through it. So experience how much you want [this] hand to be strong and whole for this time, to serve its brother-sister beings and the planet of which it is a part. And before you part, learn it by heart so that you can remember it is always part of your world. Experience how much you want it to be strong and play its part in the building of a culture of sanity and decency and beauty. Without words, express your appreciation of this hand, and your blessing for it (Macy and Brown, 1998; page 96-97).

Discussion:

- Stay in groups of two and talk over what just happened with your partner.
- Consider the evolution of this universe from energy to matter; from matter to heavier elements; from heavier elements to planets; from planets to microbes; from microbes to worms; from worms to you and your hand.

Take-Away Quote:

The impersonality of life in the Western world has become such that we have produced a race of untouchables. We have become strangers to each other, not only avoiding, but even warding off all forms of 'unnecessary' physical contact, faceless figures in a crowded landscape, lonely and afraid of intimacy.

-- Ashley Montagu, Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin

OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: TOUCH

1. Field Observation

Observe the touch of others. Sit somewhere—in a cafe, for example—and watch others for at least 45 minutes. Keep a careful record of all touch that you observe. Compose a short summarization of, and response to, your observations.

2. Field Work

Now, touch or be touched. How this happens is up to you. You know more than anybody else about your chances for touch. Examples include:

- Try ballroom dancing: <http://www.clubs.psu.edu/up/ballroomdance/> .
- Go get your hair cut.
- Play a contact game—find a partner, field a team, if you need to:
<http://www.psu.edu/RecSports/> .

Write a response piece centered upon this particular experience with touch.