

Skin. It's our largest organ—it serves any number of purposes but it is our main conduit of physical sensation—touch. It's likely not an overstatement to say we can not survive without touch. We certainly can't thrive with out it. I learned this in psych 101. Robert W. Hatfield, Ph.D writes:

"[The] Harlow's studies (1962-79) involved taking newborn monkeys from their mothers and raising them in isolation. The young monkeys were deprived of maternal and social touch (i.e., "contact comfort"). In every other way the monkeys were very well cared for. They were well fed, their cages kept clean, and their medical needs attended to. They were "merely" isolated from any physical contact with their mother or other monkeys. Even physical contact with the researchers was severely limited".

"In his original classic "wire mother" study, Harlow placed the touch deprived monkeys in a large cage that contained two crude dummy monkeys constructed of wood and chicken-wire. One dummy was bare wire with a full baby bottle attached. The monkeys had been regularly nursed from similar bottles. The other dummy was the same as the first except that it contained no bottle and the chicken wire was wrapped with terry cloth. Placed in this strange environment, the anxious young monkey very quickly attached itself to the cloth wrapped dummy and continued to cling to it as the hours passed by. The infant monkey could easily see the familiar baby bottle no more than a few feet away on the other dummy. Many hours passed. Although growing increasingly distraught and hungry, the infants in these studies would not release their hold on the soft cloth of the food-less dummy. It was soon apparent that the young monkeys would likely dehydrate and starve before abandoning the terry cloth surrogate mother".

As adult human beings, touch may not be essential to our existence, but it remains an important ingredient of our well-being, both our physical and psychological well-being. The truth of this prompts legitimate questions: are we willing to touch and be touched; are we willing to be blessed by touch, be saved by touch, to be healed by touch?

Lets acknowledge that touch is a touchy subject. Who decides when and how it's ok to touch? What about personal boundaries? One can loose a job if it's deemed one touched inappropriately. Different people have different thoughts and reactions to touching or being touched. Different cultures deal with touch very differently. So how do we honor the importance of touch and navigate the touchy territory of touch?

When I was 17, I spent most of the summer in Zambia. At that age, a summer in a foreign country teaches one a great deal. Of the many things that I learned that summer, one broadened my awareness of touch. I was quite taken aback to see that there was a cultural norm for men to dance with men. In the US women were allowed to dance with women, but not men with men. In Zambia, men could often be seen walking down the street holding hands, as friends, not lovers. I had never seen such a thing in the US.

Not many years later, while in college I worked as a salesman at a car dealership. I can't remember if I was told about this or just learned it on my own, but people have very real personal space boundaries and they differ widely. When talking to someone, I learned to pay attention to their sense of personal space and tried to stay at a distance that allowed them to feel I was engaged with them but not so close as to make them uncomfortable. To err, in either direction, was a way to loose a sale!

There are so many kinds of touch, gentle, urgent, pulling, caressing, erotic, and supportive touch, helping someone to stand or to move around. There's rubbing, scratching, hugging—with only the top 20% of one's body, or the full bear-hug embrace of long lost friends. Hand shakes, at arms length, and pats on the arm or back. In some cultures, it's customary to kiss both cheeks when greeting.

Then there are the extensions of touch, indirect touch—lovers gazing into one another’s eyes, the evil eye my dad shot across the table when we misbehaved. The warm sense of connection we have with our kids, family, and dear friends, just being together. We can feel held, loved, accepted, appreciated by just being in the presence of those we know love and care for us. Or we can feel the cold distance of disapproval of those we know well and strangers on the street. We can feel alone in a crowd of people we don’t know or who seem to have no concern for us.

We are touched and touch in so many ways its almost impossible to delineate the myriad forms of touch. When we talk of touch, our minds tend to go to the external, the physicality of touch. Our minds tend to conjure some form of external touch. But if we limit ourselves to the external nature of touch, we will miss an extraordinary world. The world of the internal—our internal selves, the world of feelings and emotions.

While the world of external touch is important, maybe even life saving, there is another world we carry inside us all the time. Sometimes that’s a bright and shining world, full of excitement, joy and aliveness. Or it can feel like a dark, dismal, tight place; a place one might be inclined to avoid at all costs.

The same question I asked earlier is pertinent here too. Are we willing to touch and be touched; are we willing to be blessed by touch, to be healed by touch? Are we willing to truly engage our inner selves? Are we willing to acknowledge that part of ourselves we carry everywhere we go?

Are we willing to open ourselves to ourselves? To be vulnerable with ourselves, to caress and hold the inner child that may be in great need of love and attention? I’m convinced that if we are unable to go inside ourselves, we are unlikely to find our sense of spirit and spirituality. I believe it largely resides inside of us.

When we can live from a place of being in touch with ourselves, others will experience us as being authentic, real, and probably will experience us as trustworthy. When we are not in touch with ourselves, others are likely to know that too—they may not use that reference point, but they will likely feel uneasy in our presence.

Touch is elemental. We touch and are touched, all the time, whether we are aware of it or not. As we live, we impact others. As we live in community we can’t help but touch and be touched by others. It strikes me as a truism. And if true, wouldn’t we be better off if we did so with some amount of awareness, some amount of intentionality?

We as Unitarian Universalists, are a covenantal people. We covenant to be in right relation with one another. It seems to me that alone calls for a certain amount of intentionality in the way we conduct ourselves with one another. To me, it means we are not only cognizant of our interactions with each other, but intentional and aware of our interconnectedness with our faith community and with the world.

As Harlow demonstrated in his studies with infant monkeys, touch can be transforming. Both the absence of touch and the receiving of touch can have a profound impact on our sense of self and our place in the world. Let us as UUs, be more willing to touch and be touched by each other. Let us open ourselves to being transformed by our faith, beliefs and values. Let us be willing to be transformed by each other.

As Desmond Tutu tells us, “a person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others...We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.”

Let us spread our arms and embrace one another and together let us reach out with open arms to the whole of humanity.