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"I've Got You Under My Skin":

Touch and Skin in Health

It is through the skin that we touch and are touched. This sense, like the skin itself, is so often taken for granted, but the role of touch in our lives is vital. When Michelangelo sought to portray God animating Adam, he didn't paint a bolt of lightning whitening Eden's sky, he chose an outstretched hand, reaching down from above—now an eternal symbol in our culture for the power of touch.

When Christa McAuliffe perished in the fiery *Challenger* space shuttle tragedy in 1986, President Reagan searched for the most meaningful way of capturing who she and her colleagues had been and what they had accomplished. He didn't talk about their military courage, their athletic prowess, their technical know-how, their vision, or even their boundless energy. Of all these strands of their lives at the moment they were shattered, the president chose to quote John Magee, a World War II Royal Canadian Air Force pilot and poet:

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth . . .
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.*

In one brilliant couplet, the primitive and the sublime, the horrific and the beautiful, the sum of their experience on this earth was captured with the image of touch.

Ever since the Tower of Babel, words and language have had their limitations as forms of communication, but touch—that most basic function of skin and of our nervous system—remains an unchanged universal link. But despite being a fundamental human sensory tool, touch plays different roles in different cultures. Imagine yourself at a party for the parents of children attending an international school in some very cosmopolitan city. The parents of the French girl rush up to greet perfect strangers with a kiss on each cheek. The English parents, backs stiff, heads upright, immediately extend their hands to give a firm grasping shake while protecting their personal social zone. The Italian parents, their bodies open with outstretched arms and their personal zone boundless, embrace others tightly. The Japanese parents bow courteously and smile imperceptibly.

The point is that in each of these cases, touch has played a critical role in initiating the social interaction. You might say, “Sure, but without vision, they couldn’t see whom to greet or embrace.” Actually, many people deprived of vision will tell you that the keenness of touch is what permits them to get through the day.

In chapter 4, I mentioned briefly the connection between the brain and the skin. But because we can’t see the nerves and because their activity in the skin is constant and unremitting, it proceeds unnoticed. Unnoticed,

To check authenticity, antique dealers rely on touch rather than sight. Repairs can fool the eye, but not the hand.

that is, until we itch, sting, burn, tingle, or ache, or are numb, feel cold, or can’t really tell what we are feeling.

The panoply of words to describe the sensations we feel through the skin highlights how important this function is.

Holding a pen, swinging a golf club, and delicately applying mascara are obvious examples of the role of touch in life. But it turns out that the skin is of far broader importance than assisting in the activities of daily living. From shortly after we are born, the skin helps our intelligence develop, as it begins to define our emotional and physical world.

Years ago, the famous anthropologist Ashley Montagu studied the role of touch in development. He suggested that because of this function the skin was an arch through which all early experience passed, permitting integration by the brain and the development of patterns of sensation. When we stop for a moment to ponder touch, we realize that Montagu’s idea is quite plausible.

Because the sense of touch is so important to health in general and skin health in particular, and because it is rarely approached from this perspective, I think it is interesting to explore how touch comes to be the gateway to our physical experience and how it helps us feel our way through the day.

▪ FIRST TOUCH

The birth process itself is an example of a primal, touching experience. The newcomer's slow journey toward and through the birth canal is a vital internal massage. While sometimes barely endurable for the woman in labor, her efforts stimulate the infant, who is about to engage the world for the first time. The contractions that move the baby through the birth canal massage the newly minted, well-protected skin. The press and release of each contraction assists circulation, sensitizes nerve ends, and prepares the skin of the newborn for the barrage of sensations, from temperature to pressure and texture, that he or she will encounter instantly in the brave new world.

First there will be the cool gusts of the delivery room air. Never felt that before. Doctor's latex gloves? Not nearly as smooth as skin. Cotton blanket? Who dreamed up this rough material?

Shortly after birth, it is touch that connects the infant to Mom and Dad and in turn to the world. Touch is nurturing. Touch is security. It is also one of the foundations of your child's healthy development.

▪ BABY TOUCH

Studies have shown that healthy touching—and lots of it—is important not only to a baby's emotional development and stability, but to learning in general. Babies that are held, cuddled, rocked, and carried tend to walk sooner and even speak sooner. Remember, the natural state for the infant is to be held by his or her parents. When this occurs, the infant experiences the swaying motion of the adult and hears the adult talking. This is where your baby's education starts: in the front seat you create with your arms, shoulders, and hands. Carrying your baby as much as possible is a wonderful way to add to the infant's sense of security and connection to the world.

When discussing human development, it is most important to note that in the years before a child can talk, touch is a loving as well as a learning

RUBBING IT IN

Since touch is good for you massage can't be a bad thing. Once there was the good, old-fashioned rubdown. Now, when you decide you want to try a massage, you have lots of options—so many that it may all seem a bit confusing. Here is a quick guide to some therapeutic effects of hands-on bodywork:

Choosing what's right for you will involve familiarizing yourself with the options; trusting your instincts regarding what type of touch you respond to best (some massage therapies can be rougher than others); making sure you know what your goals are (do you just want to feel good and reduce stress, or would you like to increase flexibility, improve posture, etc.); and trying a few options before committing yourself to one technique.

Here is a brief rundown on five of the most common techniques:

- **Acupressure** is the needle-free cousin of acupuncture. Acupressure derives from Chinese medicine and is based on the concept that the circulation of the qi, or life energy, is at the heart of good health. A massage using this technique claims to treat the same 365 points present on the body's so-called meridians that acupuncture will.
- **Rolfing** came of age with mantras and self-help movements as an antidote to the effects of gravity, which over time does cause wear and tear on our joints and bones. The rolfer claims to stretch the body's connective tissue. Supposedly this technique can help to restore alignment and flexibility. Rolfing takes a series of ten treatments, so it is a sizable commitment of money and time. Some people who have experienced rolfing report that it can be painful. As with most forms of massage therapy, scientific support for benefit is hard to come by. Only you can tell if it is helpful to you.
- **Shiatsu** is a popular body massage technique. It derives, as acupressure does, from Chinese medicine. Shiatsu technique is more rigorous or forceful than acupressure and supposedly focuses on 600 points in the body.
- **Swedish massage** is the classic body rub, used mainly for relaxation. These days most practitioners of the gentle Swedish technique have added to their repertoires in order to compete with the ever-increasing massage options. Some masseurs and masseuses combine Swedish and shiatsu techniques, others use kripalu technique, an amalgam of Swedish massage, yoga breathing techniques, and energy stimulation that has become popular.
- **Trigger-point therapy** focuses on the tender areas present in the fasciae, the tendons, and the muscles. The therapist applies pressure to these tender areas with the fingers, knuckles, and/or elbows in an effort to "release" or free up the point where there is pain and tenderness. Then the muscles in the surrounding areas are stimulated deeply to avoid a recurrence of the problem. In addition to its use by massage therapists, chiropractors, physical therapists, and even some physicians use this technique.

tool. Simply put, the child who is stimulated by touch will learn more quickly.

▪ LOVING TOUCHES AND SECURITY

Cuddling, hand holding, hugging, a pat on the head all contribute to a healthy childhood and are directly related to the child's optimal social and sexual development later in life. Conversely, a child who has not been held and cuddled in childhood will almost surely suffer more during adolescence and young adulthood.

We live in a culture where we are more aware of abuse of children than ever. Our visceral reaction to news stories about the physical and emotional abuse of children, often mediated through touch, is inescapable. Because "mishandling" seems so prevalent, we begin to fear touching and equate bodily contact with harm. But appropriate touching is a way of communicating love, of connecting people, and of soothing and comforting people of all ages. It is an intimacy we cannot do without. When, for reasons of fear and indoctrination, we try to, things go wrong. Bad things happen. Children and teenagers act out. Violence can be a more frequent occurrence. And intimate, personal relationships can slam up against a brick wall. Nothing highlights the negative effect of isolation from touch more than the experiences of countless Romanian orphans reared in virtual isolation. Today, many experience psychological and social problems that are overwhelming.

▪ SOOTHING TOUCH

Even doctors, skeptics that we are when it comes to anything that hints of the touchy-feely, must grant that touch offers an irreplaceable form of emotional nourishment.

Touch can be a force of healing. In our Western culture, we feed people various medicines as if they were food, but we often forget to give the patient other important medicine—our healing touch.

Perhaps the most impressive demonstration of the power of touch is something I encounter daily. During the range of surgical procedures I perform under local anesthesia, anxiety and fear predominate in the patients. All the reassuring words in the world do not accomplish what the gentle squeeze of the nurse's hands can. More interestingly, our tendency to offer a hand to a worried or anxious patient is frequently met with a comment

such as, “Oh, that was wonderful,” or “Thank you for your hand. I hope I didn’t break it!” Touch, in this setting, has no equal.

▪ TOUCH AND AGING

What the aging fear most is loss of control. They also fear not being taken seriously. What many suffer from, though, is loneliness. And if loneliness can kill, then lack of touch is its weapon.

We have a warehouse full of techniques to make the aging look younger, but that only goes so far. To the extent that looking younger makes people feel more attractive and thus more likely to engage in social activity, it yields an extra benefit. Often, this dividend of judicious cosmetic surgery is not always appreciated. The truth about aging is that while skin tone and quality change, the need for tactile stimulation does not.

While skin may change on the surface as time and weather pound away at it, we should remember that the nerve endings still carry the spirit of touch throughout the body. In fact, it is a cruel irony of life that while most of the other senses dull as we journey through life, the sense of touch can sometimes be the bane of an older person’s existence. Itching from dry skin can be very bothersome and even lead to skin infection. Worse, the elderly are far more likely than younger people to suffer intractable, even disabling pain after a bout of shingles. Would that those painful nerves could degenerate like those of smell and taste and hearing!

▪ TOUCH AND DYING

Just as we cannot tolerate the withdrawal of physical support when we are infants, we need touch in our final days. The dying fear abandonment as much as they fear pain. Abandonment for a dying person is marked by the lack of physical presence of loved ones and those around them. If you are near someone you love who is ill and may be dying, never underestimate the power of your touch. Support for the dying can best be expressed through touch—whether it’s a hand in a hand, a kiss, or a caress.