

“To Touch the World is to Grow in Spirit”
By Rev. Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
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Babies love to touch everything. The last time I held a baby girl, she grabbed my dangly earrings, and I had just kept her from ripping out my earlobes when she started yanking on my hair. I managed to get my hair out of the way with my one free hand and her two little hands were making fists around my cheek and nose. Her mother looked at me sympathetically and I gratefully passed that beautiful little girl back to her.

And not only do babies want to touch everything with their little hands, they want to put everything into their mouths –toys, bugs, carpet fuzz–pretty much anything they can reach. But why? We might guess that it’s because they have an innate urge to suck. Well, it turns out there’s more to it than that. Actually, a baby’s most highly developed sensory area is in his mouth. So when a baby or toddler sticks an object in his mouth, he’s feeling the object and exploring it with the sensory nerves that line his tongue and lips.

Touch is the first sense we develop in utero. Imagine ourselves, for a moment, back in the womb, when life was really good. What do we feel? Amniotic fluid gently holding us, with the pressure of the liquid increasing or decreasing over different parts of our body, as our mother moves around. The temperature is perfect. We bump gently against the soft, spongy placenta. We feel the pulsation of our mother’s body, synchronized with our own.

From the moment a baby is born, their reason for being is to explore the world around them. They use their eyes and ears to look and listen, and they respond to what they see and hear. But for babies and young children, physical touch is the most basic and essential way of learning about everything.

Our bodies are amazing, in so many ways. Our skin is like a giant antenna. We have hundreds of nerve endings in every square inch of skin. Some nerves are specialized to feel texture and pressure. Others detect temperature or register pain. There’s a whole system of nerves known as proprioceptors, which sense the position of our body parts in space - enabling us to cross our arms easily, or lean out a window without falling. “Kinesthetics” means literally, “movement through space,” and philosopher and dance scholar Maxine Sheets-Johnstone writes, “We

build our perceptions and conceptions of space originally in the process of moving ourselves, in tactile-kinesthetic experiences that in fact go back to prenatal life where the movement that takes a thumb to a mouth originates.”

Touch is also a foundational part of our evolutionary history. Early humans lived in a world without spoken or written language. Human thinking relied on movement and touch. Sheets-Johnstone says, “Thinking in movement is in fact the bedrock of our intelligence...”

Educators and informed day-care providers know that preschoolers and kindergarteners learn best through experience: handling things and moving through space. Educators are recognizing that tactile and kinesthetic teaching are beneficial for primary school students. But, after about 4th or 5th grade, most teaching is done through words, spoken and written. This is when the kids who are primarily kinesthetic “hands-on” learners start to run into trouble. By that point, the general consensus for education is that past a certain age, “they’re not supposed to need to touch things.”

There are a few exceptions when it comes to education; most of those exceptions are found in private schools, which, sadly, are not available to every child who needs to learn tactilely and kinesthetically. The Forman School in Connecticut is a private high school which I happen to be familiar with. It specializes in teaching these tactile and kinesthetic learners, all of whom are very bright. Suddenly, these young people, who were failing in public school (or we could say that public school was failing them), begin to excel. They have found, lo and behold, that the rest of the students at the school who have other so-called “learning differences,” also learn better because they’re taught through a combination of visual, auditory and kinesthetic methods. In other words, seeing, hearing and touching.

I’m reminded of a relatively new phenomenon, called “Please Touch” museums. The administrators of these museums also seem to recognize that kids find the museums a lot more interesting when they can feel things. And the adults also find it more interesting!

I’m grateful for these educators who recognize the importance of touching things.

How many times are children told, “Don’t touch!” With my own kids, I tried not to overdo it, but I know they heard it a lot. Think back to your own childhood for a moment. Can you remember being told, “No, No. Don’t touch!”

Here's what I've been thinking. It's as if touch is the forgotten sense. I'm telling you all these things about how foundational touch is to...to our humanity, and yet Western society, for the most part, devalues touch. Denis Diderot is one of the few philosophers to, er, touch on touch. Mark Patterson, author of Senses of Touch, writes, "not only the banal, everyday nature of touch, but also its transience and deeply subjective nature...make it unattractive for philosophers to consider seriously. There are no treatises on tactility, and few works praising the hand as opposed to the eye."

Descartes declared that sight is the noblest of the senses. Platonic thought is suspicious of touch and tactile sensations. Aristotle divided the senses hierarchically, with sight being superior and touch being dismissed as the lowest. Diderot was one of the few to describe touch positively, as "profound and philosophical."

A lot has been written about education and touch. And we've heard quite a bit about human to human touch, and touch between humans and animals. It's a little difficult and artificial to talk about touch and set aside those two topics.

But here's the thing. We don't hear much about touch as an important way of engaging with the world. That's why I say it's as if touch is the forgotten sense. I contend that as human beings who want to experience the world as fully as possible, we are going to have to consciously go against social conventions—the idea that, if you're an adult, you don't need to touch anything.

Think for a moment about how much more cerebral first world countries have become. The vast majority of us don't build our own houses, chop wood and feed a fire for cooking and heat, weave our own fabric or prepare animal skins, sew our own clothes, grow and harvest all our own food, make our own music, make our own pottery...

Most of us pay other people to provide us with these things. Who are the carpenters, the seamstresses and the farmers? Who are the people who work with their hands? And who are the people whose hands are smooth, who don't need to get their hands dirty? (Pause) So not having to touch things becomes a mark of class, of superiority. Let us not forget that.

In our society, it's become less and less common for people to do their own home and car repairs. Or to fix household machines and devices. In most schools, students no longer learn to cook and sew and do basic carpentry. Are we headed

toward a lifestyle in which most of our touching involves a computer mouse and the touch screen on our iPhones?

I'm coming to believe that our lives are very much the poorer for the loss of the routine touching in our environment. Not only are we becoming less and less competent in basic life skills. It's more than that. Physically interacting with the world around us is so basic to our human bodies and brains, and even to our evolution. It's a way of knowing, of understanding that is built right into our cells, and possibly into our genetic code. I can't measure it, I can't prove it. But how can our tactile disengagement with the world NOT be a spiritual loss?

The ancient Sufi poet Rumi writes: "There is some kiss we want with our whole lives, the touch of spirit on the body." Within each of us is a part that wants to kiss the world, to touch the spirit, to touch the sacred.

As spiritual beings, sometimes we long for "peak" experiences—a dramatic wave of spiritual awakening that's going to change our lives. Some of us get to have those experiences. But to sit back and wait for our personal "big bang" to happen would be a mistake. If, as many traditions teach, the sacred is in the ordinary, we have a constant stream of opportunities for little peaks. It's a matter of what we give our attention to. A sunrise, streaked with rose for only a minute. A cardinal singing right outside the window. The smell of fresh bread baking. A mouthful of your favorite dessert. The feeling of the warm sun on your face as you lie on a sandy beach. We find a chain of experiences which bring us closer to that which is larger than ourselves.

We are trained, from very early in life, to look and listen, to experience the world primarily through our eyes and ears. Smell and taste are kind of sidebars. And touch—well, most of us have a lot of unlearning to do. But what a rich life we can have when we take in our surroundings with all of our senses.

I have a little confession to share with you. When I go into a department store, as I pass the clothing aisles, I like to pause just slightly, so I can brush my hand against a silk blouse, a cashmere sweater, a soft fur collar. I can't say exactly why, but feeling these textures brings me a childlike delight. As I'm thinking about this, I'm realizing that I also get this feeling like I'm disobeying some unwritten rule. Here I am, 57 years old, and the message, "Don't touch!" is still very deeply engrained in me.

So I'm still unlearning. I hope you'll join me in breaking the taboo against experiencing the world through our sense of touch. We can give ourselves permission to enjoy tactile sensations. We could start right now. (Invite touching our clothes, chair, hymnal, etc.)

Right now, as winter is getting VERY old, I think a lot of us could use a little boost in being able to appreciate our world, which is still cold and mostly covered with snow and ice. After we leave here today, we can ask ourselves some questions: Does my scarf feel warm and soft against my neck? When I take off my boots inside the house, how does the rug feel against my feet? How does a mug of warm coffee, or tea, or hot chocolate feel in my hands? And so forth. Or just go to any department store, and feel the clothes. These are some of the gifts that "come in ritual procession," as Richard Gilbert said in our opening words. Gifts that we "give back in gratitude, if we can."

Let us reclaim the right to explore our world through touch. If we must see in order to believe and listen to hear the truth, we must touch the world in order to know, deep inside our very being.