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Reach Out and Touch Someone this Season

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Your Life Your Health

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If there is healing in the human touch, as we discussed last week, is it possible to help others by reaching out and touching them? The answer is an unqualified, “yes.” At this time of year, when we think of gifting in terms of “things,” we should never forget that the greatest gift which we can give is a gift of ourselves. Reaching out and touching others is more valuable than a package wrapped with pretty ribbon for a number of reasons.

The first reason is that reaching out and touching another cannot be done by proxy. It cannot be delegated to others; it has to be personal. I learned this the hard way a number of years ago. My wedding anniversary was approaching and I wanted to give my wife a meaningful and beautiful card to remember the day. I thought I was too busy and so I asked my office manager to go to the card shop for me. Now I was not as obtuse as not to realize that it was important that “I pick out the card,” so I asked her to buy five cards. She did and I selected the one which I would give my wife. Technically, I had “reached out and touched someone,” but actually, I had delegated the responsibility. I gave the card to my wife. She read it and expressed her appreciation. She then asked the leading and potentially lethal question, “Who picked this out?” Speaking technically, I said, “I did.” Consistent with the fact that in 43 years of marriage, I have never gotten away with anything, she followed with the *coup de grâce*, “How many cards did Kitty (my office manager) buy from which you chose this one?” How is it that the young people say it today, “Busted?”

The second thing about “reaching out and touching someone” is that it cannot be done for a price calculated in dollars and cents, but it requires the greatest price and that is “you.” Think about the most treasured gift you have ever received. Are you thinking of an object or of a gift of love and of the heart you? I started college at seventeen. I was away from home for an extended time for the first time in my life. By December, I was very, very homesick, as my college had not allowed freshman to go home for Thanksgiving. I wanted to quit school and go home. The thing I could not wait to leave was now the thing I could not wait to regain. I remember announcing that to my mother and father on the telephone. They did not try to solve my problem with a toy or a trinket; they solved it with what I needed most: themselves. Through an ice storm, they drove that night, arriving the next morning. The day with them met my need and salvaged my education. They paid a price for meeting my need but it was not a price of coins; it was a price of time, of energy, of self. To this day, that and other incidences similar remain as my estimate of the greatest gifts I ever received from my mother and father.

The third thing about “reaching out and touching someone,” is it is only potential. Potentiality becomes reality as events unfold. Because the act of reaching out to another only has potential means that there is risk involved. When I was in high school one of

my friend's father died suddenly. I lived in the country and could not drive so I asked my father to take me to his home that night. I expected all of our friends to be there but they were not. Shortly, the two of us were joined by an across-the-street neighbor. The three of us talked and visited. At one point, we were laughing about something a parent had done. As a fifteen year old, I said, "If my father ever did that I would kill him." I turned ashen and thought that I would not breathe. I could not believe that those words had come out of my mouth. I wanted to die. The next day, I said to my friend, "I am so sorry; I didn't know what to say." It has now been fifty-one years since this event took place. He responded with words which I will never forget, "Larry, you didn't have to say anything, you were there." I have practiced "being there," since that day.

When I was twenty-two, I was a graduate student at Baylor. One Sunday afternoon, my wife and I took a ride. Gas was 18 cents a gallon then so the cheapest thing we could do was go for a ride. We drove passed the home of a fellow-graduate student. I thought about stopping and almost did, but the "risk" of intruding overcame the impulse to stop. The next day, I told my friend that we had almost stopped. He asked the time; I told him. He said, "At that moment, I was in my garage hooking up the vacuum cleaner hose to my car exhaust. I was going to kill myself. When you have the impulse to stop, always stop." A number of years later after we had both finished medical school and my brilliant friend lived far away; he did take his own life. I have never forgotten this lesson. Reaching out and touching someone can be risky but it is always worth the risk.

The fourth thing that reaching out and touching some one is that it must be purposeful. The miracle of touching others will not happen because you think it is a good idea, or because it accidentally happens. It will usually happen only because you make time and take time for it. My wife visits a number of elderly ladies. Some of these ladies are in their nineties and they wait for her visits as a thirsty man awaits a drink of water. And, those visits nourish them mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. But, perhaps the greatest miracle of purposely reaching out and touching someone is that you can not touch someone else without simultaneously being touched yourself. It is more blessed to give than to receive because when you purpose to give, as an inevitable result of giving, you receive.

The fifth thing about reaching out and touching someone is that it may not be popular. Some years ago a friend was indicted and subsequently convicted of a crime. The night I heard of the indictment, I called my friend and told him, "I hate what you did but you are my friend and I want to help if I can." His crime had involved inappropriate touching but his only hope was that someone would reach out and touch him. He responded and said, "I knew if you rejected me I had no hope." My friend with the automobile exhaust came to mind. Over the next nine months we spent a great deal of time together. There was great criticism about eating with and being seen in public with a felon. Nine months later, my wife held our friend's left hand as I help his right. As he drew his last breath and passed from this life, he was alone and that he experienced true intimacy in the last days of his life.

In this Christmas season, if you are Christian, or in this Passover season, if you are Muslim or Jewish, or if you have no faith, as an act of humanity, reach out and touch someone. Whether they are socially acceptable, or not; whether you know them, or not, reach out! In most nursing homes there are dozens of people who never receive a personal visit, note, or phone call from anyone but the employees of the facility. You don't have a grandmother? Adopt one. Reach out and touch her and you both will be changed. You do not have a child? Find a child without a parent. Reach out and touch him or her and you both will be changed.

Touching is life giving; it gives a part of your life to another, but the unique thing is that as you give part of your life away, you miraculously discover that you have more after giving than you had before. You cannot wit this principle. Those who have the most life are those who have given the most of their life away to others. This is your life and it is your health, for you will never be as vibrant, vigorous or vital as you are when you are giving to others by reaching out and touching them.