

## **James L. Holly, M.D.**

**The Healing Touch**  
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It was intermission at the ballet; she sat down at the table with him and his family where they were enjoying a cup of hot chocolate. She looked at him with a smile filled with love and caring. Unconsciously, she placed her hand on his back and rubbed his shoulder while she talked to him. He accepted the gesture of love and affection and said, "The human touch is more healing than all the chemotherapy in the world." So began my thoughts about the medicinal power of touch.

The tragedy is that distortions of healthy actions make people shy away from what was once very common. Normal human interaction has always involved touching. Whether in the form of a handshake, a hug, a kiss on the cheek, greetings whether between the same or opposite genders have always included chaste and appropriate touching. Human bonding has always involved touching. Parenting involves touching, loving, and hugging children. Wholesome parenting involves wrestling, cuddling, caressing and touching children. Again, distortions and perversions have made some people nervous about showing affection physically.

When my son was a child, we made a deal. He would never, ever get too old to hug and kiss his father. Today, as he approaches middle age himself, he never concludes a telephone conversation without saying, "I love you, Dad," and he never leaves my presence without hugging me and often kissing me on the cheek. When he was in college, I was sitting in my library with several friends. He walked through the room, sat on my lap for a moment, hugged my neck and kissed me on the cheek. My guests asked what that was all about. I responded, "It's our deal," and I explained.

When my father was alive, I hugged and kissed him as often as I could. When we rode together in the car, I held his hand. They were big, powerful, scarred and wrinkled hands and I loved them. My mother would often say, "Don't do that; it doesn't look right." I would always respond, "I don't care what it looks like; as long as I have him I'm going to hug and kiss him and hold his hand because I know the day will come when I will not be able to." After his death, I devised an algebraic equation for the determining of how many hugs, kisses and hand-holdings were enough for someone you love. The formula includes the variable "x" which represents the number of times you have hugged, kissed or held the hand of the one you love. The calculation of the right number is determined by solving the equation " $x + 1$ ." Enough is just one more.

When my father died, my brother called and told me that he had passed away. Without thinking the thought, and still not certain from where it came, I said, "Ask them not to embalm him before I get there." Three hours later, in the preparation room at the funeral

home, I held that precious hand, now cold but still soft and human, one last time. Touching is an essential part of our humanness.

Children communicate with games and adults who interact creatively with children adopt this method of conversation. I play a game with my grandchildren of “hugging, kissing, tickling and biting.” Through these games we express our love and affection, as well as learning appropriate limitations to touching, particularly when it comes to “biting.” We “love bite,” which is like a nibble. And, of course, there is the always favorite “telling of time,” because regardless of what the clock says, it’s always “nibbling time,” the announcement of which results in shrieks of joy as everyone flees hoping against hope to be caught.

Appropriate touching is not sexual although in the covenant of marriage, it takes on an appropriately sexual element. If you do an internet search on “touching,” you will read heart breaking stories of the betrayal of youth by adults through inappropriate touching, but you will also read inspirational stories of the medicinal value of touching. In the study of history and sociology, you will read of cultures where people were classified as “untouchables” because of social ostracism. Prejudice has often been associated with the refusal to touch another who is considered unworthy either because of religious or social considerations. In the Gospel, touching is repeatedly associated with acceptance and redemption. In Luke 7:39, it is recorded, “This man (speaking of Jesus Christ), if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him, for she is a sinner.” Jesus turns the incidence upon the arrogant Pharisee because the touching by the woman was an act of devotion and adoration.

There is a scene in the movie Papillon when a leper hands the lead character a cigar. Knowing that this is a test of acceptance, he takes the cigar and the leper says, “How did you know I have dry leprosy, that it isn't contagious? The star says, “I didn't.” There is always a risk to touching. You may be rejected or you may be infected, but there is also a great opportunity for intimacy which has nothing to do with sexuality and has everything to do with the receiving of one by another and the creation of the human bond which results. With touching, we form connections with others and without touching, at best, we will remain acquaintances but without experiencing the friendship which can enrich our lives, heal our souls and which can sustain our life.

In the healing arts, more often than not, more than a cure, those who are sick want to be human. They want to know that no matter how disfigured, how ill, how infirmed, how close to death, they may be, that they are still accepted and cherished by others. Often, a touch is all that is required, while the withholding of that touch leads to further isolation and often to the worsening of one's condition.

In a society where “high tech” has provided us with effective means of improving the care of the sick, all patients will tell you that what they want most is “high touch.” No matter how expert their care, people still want to be treated like humans. Intimacy is more valuable in human relationships than virtually any other experience. Intimacy means “a close, familiar (comfortable, warm) and usually affectionate or loving personal

relationship.” Even more than how knowledgeable or expert a healthcare provider is, a patient wants to know, “do you care about me; do I matter to you?” These are concerns of touch and of intimacy more than of science.

As we are between the season of thanksgiving and of Christmas, remember to touch someone’s life. The greatest tragedy is not the losing of a life; it is the loss of the opportunity to have had a life to lose. Alfred Lord Tennyson said it best in his poem *In Memoriam when he said:*

“I hold it true, whate'er befall;

“I feel it, when I sorrow most;

'Tis better to have loved and lost

“Than never to have loved at all.”

As we take the risk to love and to be loved; to touch and to be touched, to be intimate with others, let us remember that this is the spring from which the quality and the value of life flows. Do not quench that flow. Let it stream from you to others and from others to you. When you do, you become a healthcare provider no matter how little medicine you know. When you don’t, no matter the depth of your scientific knowledge, you limit your skills and power as a giver of health.