

REACHING THE MIND WITH TOUCH

Touch as Language in the Body's Landscape of Perception

"There is no teaching until the pupil is brought into the same state or principle in which you are; a transfusion takes place; he is you and you are he; there is a teaching; and by no unfriendly chance or bad company can he ever quite lose the benefit.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

In my adventures as a bodyworker over the last thirty years, having touched thousands of bodies, I have come to view the opportunities of these contacts as something far deeper than pleasurable relaxation, far more than the relief of aches and pains, more than physical therapy and rehabilitation, more than what is usually meant by stress reduction. I have increasingly come to appreciate these explorations in touching as bridges connecting personal, private and deeply subjective worlds, messages of potentially profound meaning between myself and others. I have come to regard touch as a *language*, a language that speaks to our innermost sense of who we are, how we are, and what deeper relations are possible between us. Touch is a language that is older, and forever beyond words, and the responses to that touch can open a dialogue that can interpenetrate these personal worlds in ways that words could never achieve.

We have been educated to think of language as spoken and written words, even educated to believe that no creatures but humans can properly be said to acquire and to use "language." But organisms have been communicating among themselves and with their environment from the very beginnings of life, or life could never have succeeded and evolved. Energy fields, vibrations, chemical exchanges, physical contacts, gestures, projected needs and intentions have organized individual cells and ever-more complex organizations of life, orchestrating their mutual existence and interdependence. And these wordless exchanges have developed their own vocabulary, grammar, syntax and meanings over many millions of years, connecting the entire fabric of life and the world that sustains it. And for us as human beings, this more ancient language continues to be of primary importance, laden with deeper and more abiding messages than all of our words and symbols can provide. Much more than our words, it is feelings that guide our development, and feelings which unite us. Feeling is experience, and by this experience we grow.

Because there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both--touch and touch of that which is the citadel of the central I-am's private own...let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too. --William Faulker, Absalom, Absalom

With these thoughts in mind, then, I want to suggest some of the dimensions of the languages that our bodies speak. In a recent class I had quoted one of my teachers, Milton Trager: "My work is directed towards reaching the mind of the client. Every contact, every move, every thought communicates how the tissue should feel when everything is

right. The mind is the whole thing. That is all I am interested in.” The next day a participant raised her hand and asked, “What do you mean my reaching the mind?” The following is a summary of my attempt to answer her question.

The Language of Water

Without water, no life form as we know it is possible. Water makes up 70-85% of our physical being. Its molecules are bi-polar, negatively charged on one end of their delta-winged configuration and positively charged on the other. They are continually tumbling about together randomly, agitating one another, bonding and breaking, configuring and re-configuring. It is this restless activity that directs the Brownian movement of all other substances suspended within their medium. And it is their organized currents of circulation that irrigate all of our cells and distribute the substances that nourish them, and that carry away all their toxic waste products. The ongoing task of life is the continual replenishment, circulation and cleansing of this primary milieu of life that is the watery womb of our creation and constant re-creation. Within us, and in every nook and cranny of our planet, all water is connected, a single sea without boundaries: Vapor, rain, rivers, lakes and oceans within us and around us are all literally one continuum, sustaining the growth and flow of all life. And in all aquatic environments (which we are and in which we exist), stagnation always breeds pestilence.

And further, containers of water, such as ourselves, are exquisitely sensitive to all vibrations and rhythms around them. Virtually every sort of contact from outside the container sets off reverberations among everything it contains. Every vibration, no matter how subtle, echoes within it. All pressures, no matter how slight, are distributed throughout the container and its walls, which then rhythmically pulsate and transmit these pressures to all containers around it. We are made up of trillions of water balloons, which all jiggle in an entrained harmony. Among the fundamental benefits of bodywork and movement of all kinds are the reinforcing and freeing of this turbulence, this flow and these rhythmic vibrations, and this unity of water’s language is one of the principal elements that connect us.

The Language of the Skin

The skin is the surface of the brain; to touch the surface is to stir the depths. I cannot touch an organism’s skin anywhere without arousing that organism’s entirety. That is to say, the skin on one hand a primary *boundary* of our physical selves, and on the other hand a primary *threshold of interactions* that connect our inner world with the world around us in many ways. The stimulation of this threshold is as necessary to us as water, food, or oxygen. Without adequate stimulation of our skins we will languish. Infants sufficiently deprived of touch perish, regardless of being fed and sheltered. Slightly more, but still inadequate touch results in “deprivation dwarfism,” with severe abnormalities of development that closely mimic those caused by chronic malnutrition. Adults experimentally deprived of tactile sensations become psychologically deranged.

There is indeed “something in the touch of flesh with flesh” without which we simply cannot thrive.

The Language of the Connective Tissue Matrix

Just underneath the skin--in fact an integral part of it--begins the intimately interwoven web of our connective tissue. Once regarded as an inert, sort of nylon-like wrapping that *divided* our bones, muscles, organs, circulatory systems and neural pathways into separate functional entities, this web is now appreciated as an extraordinarily sensitive and energetic matrix that in fact *connects* all of our internal structures and processes, down to our innermost microscopic cellular interiors.

Far from being inert, our connective tissue matrix is a sensitive conductor of electromagnetic currents. And it is a conductor of a special class, called *piezo-electric*. "Piezo" is a Greek derivative, meaning in this usage "self-generating." Every movement, every pressure, every distortion through movement, every vibration creates polarizations within this matrix, and between the polarities flow currents of electricity that surround and penetrate all six trillion living cells in our bodies, carrying not only *energy* but also *information* to their membranes and to their interiors that help to both fuel and to orchestrate many of their inner activities, and harmonize them with one another.

In these energetic and informational roles, our connective tissue matrix was the precursor to our nervous systems in both evolutionary and embryological development, animating and coordinating organisms before the first neurons arrived on the scene. And it continues to supply an exquisitely sensitive (responding to vibrations below neural thresholds of stimulation) and rapid (traveling at the speed of electron streams, not action potentials) source of vitality and organization both within us and between us.

The Language of Neuropeptides

Science has long known about our many hormones, synthesized and released by our endocrine glands, and circulated through our waters to their target organs to stimulate much of our biochemical communications and responses. What has been more lately discovered and begun to be explored is the enormous significance of another, much larger class of biochemical messengers, our neuropeptides.

Their co-discoverer, Candice Pert, calls them the "molecules of emotion." They are synthesized, released and received by most (possibly all?) of our body's tissues, and trigger their cells to respond in a wide variety of ways. One of the principal areas of production and reception appears to be our limbic system in the brain, associated with our *feeling states*. Through these neuropeptides, the limbic system is not only a modulator of our of our consciously perceived emotions, but also of the many ways that our emotional lives are translated into cellular responses throughout our bodies, orchestrating innumerable reactions to our current feeling states, to our long-term habituated and dominant feeling states, and to changes introduced to those feeling states. They are the molecular players that are the means of our emotions impacting our bodies.

Among the highly receptive cell populations to neuropeptides are our immune cells, which can be either depressed or stimulated by our thoughts, our emotional reactions to those thoughts, and to the abiding beliefs that these thoughts and feelings generate.

These chemical choreographies unite our brains, our endocrine system, our immune system and many other cells within us in a highly interdependent molecular dance that can powerfully serve, or just as powerfully undermine our well-being. Perhaps this is what we are referring to when we speak of some emotions as being “negative,” and others “positive.” These discoveries are pregnant with the possibilities of the ways that the language of healing touch can mobilize the body’s wisdoms and resources on many levels.

As a therapist effectively speaking the language of touch, might these processes be prominent among the means by which you can help clients/pupils enter into a “tracking” with you, and through which they can be “brought into the same state or principle in which you are,” precipitating a lasting teaching, the benefits of which can never be quite lost? I think so.

The Language of Nerves and Muscles

Nerves and muscles share a common language in their communications and responses: the rhythms of action potentials that ripple along their membranes and orchestrate their collective activities. All these cells are tightly linked at many levels of our neuromuscular systems, and are constantly interacting with one another. It is impossible to experience a sensation, a feeling or a thought without stimulating a muscular reaction--large or small, conscious or unconscious. And it is equally impossible to experience a movement without changing the landscapes of our perceptions, our sensations, feelings and thoughts. No muscle can create any movement without neural stimulations, and no movement can occur without consequent changes in the stream of these stimulations. And further, all of these stimulations and movements are ultimately nothing less than the summary of the totality of all of our sixty trillion cells activities and their myriad and complex interactions--the activities of our entire landscape of perceptions and responses that are translated into our behaviors of all kinds and on all levels. “Mind” is vastly more extensive than “brain.” Mind involves the whole of our landscape, and all of the internal and external ecological processes that are fused into those mysteries and miracles that we call life and consciousness. We are moved by all levels of our feelings, ideas and beliefs, our current assessments, needs and intentions, and by all of the countless processes that underlie them.

These are the dimensions of the language of sensations, feelings, thoughts and movements in our lives. The vocabulary, grammar and syntax of this language are the stuff of all of our motor experience and development--all functional skills and all dysfunctional blocks, all successful adaptations and all persistent limitations, all habituated repetitions and all new possibilities. This is another domain into which we can enter and positively affect through our touch, if we can learn to speak its language.

The Persistence of Memory and the Precipitation of Novelty

The phenomenon of memory is one of the deepest mysteries of biology. No one has ever found the location in which it resides or been able to fully articulate the causes and effects of its accumulations. This is because it does not reside in a particular *place*

within us and does not function according to linear chains of causes and effects. In living organisms, there is simply no way to separate out any single sequence of cause and effect from all the surrounding streams of events within which it operates. Everything conditions everything else, and ultimately our biological and and conscious memories reflect all of the orchestrations and choreographies of the molecular and energetic fabric of our beings--those of water, skin, connective tissue, hormones and neuropeptides, nerves, muscles, and many more besides.

Memory is the ghost in the machine, inaccessible to the parsing of parts that characterizes typical avenues of inquiry. It is a *systems phenomenon* that resides not in these parts but in the ephemeral language of the interactions between them, in the constantly shifting *global relationships* of the many varied objects and processes of our landscape of perception. It does not consist of the instruments or the notes, the choreography charts or the the steps. It is the symphony and the dance themselves that constitute our minds and our lives. In the words of Gregory Bateson, is the *pattern which connects*, and not the things that are connected. We enter directly onto this symphony and this dance when we let "flesh touch with flesh."

And novelty is equally mysterious, both to physicists and to biologists. Like memory, it is simply not allowed for in our normal habits of thinking about cause and effect: "If A, then B, C will follow." This is because there are an innumerable plethora of A's and B's and an indeterminate number of C's that may or may not follow. This requires a complete re-thinking of how organisms--and therapies--work. For us bodyworkers it requires thinking of the language of touch as an open-ended narrative, and not a dictionary or script or a protocol.

Karma and Grace

These mysteries of memory and novelty are, I believe, more helpfully approached through the concepts of *Karma* and *Grace*. Karma refers to the idea that we are continually depositing our entire personal past upon each succeeding moment of our conscious present, and that these deposits are made up of unchangeable events in that past. We can never escape what we have done, or what we have been. These things have made us what we are, and in this sense our Karma is our accumulated burden and debt, the conditions which we have created and with which we must move forward. But it is also possible to be stimulated toward new directions, toward that which we have not yet done or become. This brings us to the concept of Grace.

Grace refers to the idea that every moment of the present includes not only the past but also the invaluable seed of a present *novelty*, an unforeseen experience that has the power to act upon what our past might become. These novelties in our landscape of perception are occurring constantly, but they are usually overwhelmed by the the mass and momentum of Karma and by our beliefs of what must be that are based upon what has been. But Karma is not the only determinant of our journey. We may always have the same baggage from the past, but this does not mean that we are bound for any inevitable destination. The rails we have travelled got us to where we are, but it is possible to be given a new ticket, and to change trains. Or to fly.

These novelties of the moment are doorways through which we can discover the option of stepping off the relentless wheel of Karma, our past, and into a state of Grace, which now adds these seeds of novelty to that past and which have the fragile potential of changing everything in our future, a future that is not at this present moment yet determined. This is the therapeutic moment, the spiritually transforming kernel of consciousness that is the interface between the repetitious depositing of our past and the opening towards what we might become. These potentially transformative events in the landscape of our perception have the possibility of occurring every time we engage in the touch of flesh with flesh, when another's history touches our own and makes us aware of what has been for another--and could be for us-- perceived and acted upon differently.

There is a story I like. Two students were sitting with their guru under a large willow tree. The first asked, "Master, how many more lifetimes will it take me to achieve enlightenment?" The guru replied, "I think perhaps two or three hundred more." This student was dismayed that after all his disciplined efforts there remained so many lifetimes of labor to realize his goal, and he collapsed in grief. The second student, unsettled by the answer and its devastating result for the first one, resolved nevertheless to ask the same question, "Master, how many lifetimes will I have to labor to achieve my enlightenment?" The guru pointed upwards toward the large willow and replied, "As many lifetimes as their are leaves on this tree." This second student was so overjoyed to hear that there would indeed be a successful end to his efforts that he immediately entered Nirvana.

And this is what I meant when asked by the woman in my class, "What do you mean by reaching the mind?"

Useful sources of reference:

Job's Body: A Handbook for Bodywork, by Deane Juhan

Energy Medicine, by James Oschman

The Hidden Messages in Water, by Masaru Emoto

Molecules of Emotion: Why You Feel the Way You Do, by Candace Pert

Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air, by Theodor Schwenk

Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity, by Gregory Bateson

The Phenomenology of Perception, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The Biology of Belief, by Bruce Lipton

Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin, by Ashley Montague

The Self-Embodying Mind, by Jason W. Brown

Copyrighted October 12, 2010 by Deane Juhan

Deane Juhan resides with his wife Jessica Turken in the San Francisco Bay Area

1 Chapparal Place
Orinda, California
(925) 386-0131
deanejuhan@comcast.net