

**Human Touch**  
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Just a little of that human touch.  
Not prayers or pity, just something to hold on to.  
Someone to hold on to.

Just a little of that human touch.

Hug me.

We're talking about desire this month, about how we  
are a people of desire.

How we desire a life of meaning, to put our heart in a  
place of purpose; and how that requires us to put our  
treasure there, also - our gifts of time and love and  
service and wealth. Misha talked about our desire to be  
loved. Next week, I'm going to talk about our desire for  
spiritual experiences, for connection to the holy, for  
God - even if we're repelled by the word - but that's  
next week. Today, I want to get really elemental.  
Physical. Earthy and material.

Just a little of that human touch. We desire touch.  
To be held, to hold, to feel contact.

I mean it in the broadest sense:  
the handshake;  
the high five;  
the fist bump;  
the quick pat on the back hug;  
the long hug.

How big a hug is this supposed to be? How long shall I hold this hug? "Already we could be eternal," writes Tess Gallagher, in one of my favorite poems.

I mean all these forms of human touch: the held hands, the hug, yes, and the kiss, the caress, and of course, sex, in all its varieties and forms.

I mean human touch in all these ways - some ways that are right and appropriate for all people, some that are not for children, some that we all seek, some that only some seek, but I mean human touch in this broadest meaning: human contact. Skin-to-skin.

What shall we say about human touch?

Knowing I could — and have! — preached a whole series of sermons on human sexuality, and that yet I am being broader here -- to speak of touch in sexuality and not in sexuality -- what shall we say today? What are the essential and core principles, the key realities of a Unitarian Universalist -- a liberally religious -- understanding of human touch?

Three things.

Human touch, to be good and worthy and sacred, should be three things:

human touch should be joyful, mutual, and intertwined.

Let's start with joy. It feels good, right? Our cactus wants so much to be touched - knows that it will bring a kind of joy that nothing else is doing. And finally finds someone safe to touch, someone who needs it

themselves. It feels good! It makes us smile, it makes us laugh, it makes us feel better. It makes us feel joy.

Joy - the feeling of elation, light-heartedness, gratefulness, gladness, a bounce in our step, the capacity to see and feel what is good and be resilient in the face of what is hard - joy - is produced by human touch.

This is not a romantic, intuitive guess. This is science. Human touch -- skin-to-skin contact, or even a hug while still in your winter coats -- human touch lowers the levels of cortisol in the human body. Cortisol is what is produced by stress - by the fight or flight response, by danger.

Cortisol is helpful in a crisis, but it also shuts down other parts of the body - like the immune system - so it can get through the moment of high stress. But when the moment is over, the cortisol needs to go away. And think about it - what do people need after trauma? A hug. To be held.

Because it makes the cortisol fade.

Not only that, human touch raises the level of oxytocin. Oxytocin is the body's natural high, the natural pain-killer and mood-lightener. Just as much as cortisol makes you suspicious, oxytocin makes you trusting, opens you up. It makes you feel joy.

So we sing, when I am frightened, will you comfort me? Will you hold my hand?

When I am angry, will you still embrace me?

Human touch has a joyful healing power.

When we are frightened, we need to know we are not alone - and we know that when someone holds our hand. When we are angry, we need to be brought back to our center, and we can do that when we are embraced.

Human touch can lighten our load and give us joy for the journey. It doesn't take much!

Sometimes, a hand on the shoulder, an elbow-tap, and we feel strengthened. And sometimes we need much more. To be held in someone's arms while we weep, to be jumped on and grabbed on, to make the joy real — and it doesn't matter if we're a pro athlete being lifted on our teammates' shoulders after a win, or a passerby helping a stranger up off their feet after they slipped on the ice, or a lover resting in the embrace of our beloved, human touch brings us comfort when we are troubled, and amplifies our joy when we are glad.

As true as this can be for adults, it has an even stronger reality for infants. Plenty of studies indicate the essential need for skin-to-skin contact for newborns and for children. They need touch to create the bond, to learn trust. You all have heard of the stories, I'm sure, of children in pre-1989 eastern Europe, those in under-staffed orphanages where they got very little, if any, touch. They were fed, but that's about it. And many of them had what we call "failure to thrive." Some died. Because they were not touched. Those who were adopted out - many to Canada - some made full recoveries - with lots of touch - but others always had trouble - more likely to have illnesses, including challenges of depression, anxiety, and so forth.

The need for human touch is hard-wired into our bodies, into our nervous systems, our hormones, our very skin. We crave it because it brings us joy, because it takes away pain and heals our hearts.

And yet, it isn't that simple, is it?

I could end here, say, human touch brings us joy, and that's it, and let you go, but you know it is more complicated. This isn't 1969, free love, whatever goes. We know better.

Back to the infants. When my daughter — who turned nine yesterday, which I cannot believe - was an infant, she wasn't colic-y, but she could scream. Still can if she wants to. And she'd cry and cry. Clearly tired. But she would not sleep. So we'd rock her, sing, walk around the house, try anything. Nothing. Crying and screaming. When I was just about at wit's end, I swaddled her tight like you're supposed to, and then just put her down in the crib, crying, tired. Walked away. 30 seconds. She was fast asleep.

Soon enough, I learned to tell the difference between the "pick me up and hold me" cry and the "put me down and leave me alone" cry. Nine years later, I still have to judge regularly which is which.

Sometimes we don't want to be touched.  
Sometimes we want to be left alone.

This is more complicated than "human touch brings joy." Because sometimes we don't want to be touched at all. Or we don't want to be touched like that. Or we don't want to be touched by that person.

So we say, human touch should be mutual. Consensual, freely chosen - not just "un-coerced", that's too low of a standard. It should be freely and affirmatively chosen by any person involved.

We're talking here about bodily integrity, the rights of people to make their own decisions about their own bodies, their own selves - for our body isn't just something we carry around, but is us.

And we decide what feels good, what brings joy.

And though human touch, in the abstract, does bring joy, we are dealing with concrete realities.

And some specific touches don't feel good -

they are controlling, they are too hard, too forceful - or we just need our space at that moment.

There's a little cartoon, maybe some of you have seen it, that made the rounds a few years ago. In it, the narrator uses the analogy of tea to talk about sex in particular and human touch in general.

Person A says, "I would like to offer you a cup of tea."

And Person B might say, "Yes, I would love a cup of tea." And you make the tea, and it cools a bit, and they drink it. Or person B might say, "No thank you."

And so you don't make them tea. And even if they say, "yes," but then, while person A is boiling the water, change their mind, or if they are unconscious, or even if they had tea some other day, you do not force them to drink tea.

It's more than "I am willing." It needs to be "Yes, I want." "OK" isn't good enough, frankly.

Human touch is joyful and healing and good,

and so if both people aren't saying "hell yes!" then step back. Because it is joyful and healing and good and very powerful, a power not to be misused, a trust not to be abused, a freedom not to be squandered. When what is good becomes hurtful, well, there are few more damaging traumas. It can poison what should be good for years, or a lifetime, to come. So don't. Make sure it is genuinely mutual. "Hell yes." Human touch should be to heal, to celebrate, to connect, to warm, never to control or to make pain.

We take that stance because we recognize the power of human touch, of this connection. This isn't just about cortisol and oxytocin. It's about something more. It's about something spiritual, something sacred. The word for this is hard to name. I've called it intertwined. We could say "woven" or "connected." I mean the way in which human touch makes real our embodied interdependence as sacred beings.

Springsteen sings:

Girl ain't no kindness in the face of strangers  
Ain't gonna find no miracles here  
Well you can wait on your blessings darlin'  
But I got a deal for you right here

I affirm there's not outside miracles, no blessing to wait for, but I deny that means there are no miracles right here, right here, though we need a touchup, a little paint, we are the blessing. We, which includes our bodies.

We are not just spirits, trapped in bodies.

That's the theology that some people hold, and I deny it. I deny it. We are embodied beings, sacred bodies, holy bodies, in all shapes and sizes, with creaky joints and springs in our step and bruises and soft parts and hard parts; we are holy bodies, incarnations, embodiments, of the creative spirit, of love. Every night a child is born is a holy night, and that means every body, messy, real, earthy, real.

And we are interwoven bodies - connected to each other. We need that connection — to exist, to live, to breath. We need one other's body, hands, to come into existence. To eat. To live. To make meaning. To laugh and sing and learn and grow - we need another other.

I want this church to be a place that enacts interwovenness, that testifies to the sacredness of our actual bodies. That's why our music isn't performance, but part of worship. That's why in a world where people don't sing together, we still do - we sing together, because when you breathe together, you connect, you listen and join in one body.

That's why we hold hands at the end of the service.

Now, I do say, "hold hands or stand near" the person near you, because even here consent – mutuality - is important, but we invite everyone to hold hands together and sing together.

And here's the truth:

I know that there are folks for whom this moment, when we hold hands across the aisle, that is the only time all week that anyone will touch them with love.

That's it. And so that moment is sacred.

You may say, that's sad. But it is true, and it is real.

And what it tells me is that the church matters.

In a world where touch is too often either absent or coerced, here, we preach, we say, we affirm, we live: it is good, it must be free, and it is holy. Hold that hand across the aisle. It may be soft, it may be small, it may be warm or cold. Large or rough or hard. Young or old. Our hands are different. Our wants are different. But we are human, and mutual; loving touch is good for us, body and soul, which are two words for the same thing. It is joy and healing, it is strength and it is celebration, it is life, it is power, it is the place where the holy is present.

I got a deal for you right here,  
When all the answers they don't amount to much  
You might need somethin' to hold on to  
a little of that human touch.

Joyfully.  
Mutually.  
Woven-ly.

Let us reach out.  
Let us touch.  
Let us welcome, when it is right for us.  
Let us respect each other.  
Let love guide us, friends and strangers, family, lovers,  
healers and helpers.  
Let us lean on each other.  
Let us breathe, and sing, and live in our real, sacred,  
right here bodies,  
with joy, with freedom, with love.

We need one another.  
Let us sing.

