



A
TOUCHING
Place

Nick Wright

A Touching Place

Social distancing: a novel, contemporary means to avoid close proximity and physical touch. Yet there's something about the phenomenon that feels strangely familiar. Step back with me metaphorically, for a moment, to the days before Covid-19 arrived, unexpected and uninvited, and so rudely invaded our space. What were our personal and cultural realities then and, technology apart, how far have they really changed?

Let's be honest. Touch has been difficult, awkward, suspect even, in British culture for some time now. We've relegated physical contact to analogy, to expressing it in words: 'I felt touched when you did that'; 'Let's stay in contact'; 'That really moved me'. We say to our children, 'Look – but don't touch'. In fact, even looking is a bit tricky. It's as if looking, really looking, constitutes an extension of touch, a frowned-upon breach of sacred space.

Ask yourself: when was last time you really looked at someone, gazed at them intently, studied their features, their body, their movement, without you or they feeling acutely embarrassed? 'Don't look – it's rude to stare!' It's a deeply-embedded cultural thing. We learn from our earliest experiences and responses: what is acceptable and what kind of behaviours will bring punishment, awkwardness, surprise, fulfilment or reward.

So it is with physical touch. We have written and unwritten rules and expectations about what constitutes appropriate touch; amplified socially and politically by a legitimate desire to protect vulnerable people. And so we don't touch. Risk determines our psychosocial stance. We live lives largely devoid of contact; of the joy, support and healing that can come from a simple touch: that deep feeling of tangible, life-giving, hope-inspiring contact.

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To bring this closer to home: I remember visiting my parents a few years ago. In my family, we certainly didn't touch. It would feel awkward and embarrassing, but I decided to hug each of my parents on my arrival. At first, they looked shocked. It felt rigid, stiff, difficult – but they didn't push away. I persevered each time we met or I left, until the time came when they protested if I arrived or departed without giving them that now-traditional embrace.

I'm reminded of how often Jesus touched people - and allowed himself to be touched by them too - sometimes in surprising ways and with unexpected results. He didn't just work miracles through words or connect from what we may regard as a suitable distance. He touched people physically and, in doing so, he touched them at profoundly human, deeply spiritual levels too; resulting in the most amazing, transformational experiences and effects.

Today, by contrast, touch feels unsafe. Our professional norms and boundaries are designed defensively to safeguard people, relationships and reputations. It's sometimes emotionally about protecting ourselves or others from embarrassment, hurt or rejection too. In the pandemic era, we stand at a distance to avoid contracting or transmitting a deadly disease. It's a conscious behaviour with an explicit rationale that, in this case, makes good sense.

Yet still, at times, I believe our avoidance of touch is a matter of unquestioned reserve; a cultural heritage we introject from others as children and perpetuate and reinforce subconsciously through our own attitudes and actions. What part, if any, does touch have in your coaching or supervision practice? The Virus aside, would you ever touch a client...or allow them to touch you? Where does touch fit with your ethical beliefs, values and practice?

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