



November 2020

Dear Friends,

We walked towards each other, and in the instant before we touched, we paused, our minds running quick, last-minute calculations on the risk of physical contact. We live 131 miles apart but there's rarely more than 6 to 8 weeks between seeing each other - it had been 36 weeks. The hesitance felt alien - we're a tactile family who always hug. But, after turning our faces away from each other, we finally connected. Wrapped in my sisters bear hug, I momentarily forgot we're in the midst of the worst global crisis we've experienced in living memory.

We're living in a world respecting social distancing rules to avoid being infected with (or potentially spreading) COVID-19. For many staying connected with friends and family has been through Zoom and Skype, but those virtual interactions are no replacement for being with each other, being able to give them that hug. With the closure of so many community social events due to COVID restrictions (teas/coffees/lunches, hobby groups, children's activities etc.) many of us feel we're losing touch with not only loved ones but also others in our communities.

Ahh, yes... touch. When did you last touch someone outside your family bubble or intimate relationship? I don't mean a brush of the fingers when you took your parcel from the delivery guy. I mean a handshake or hug. I've touched no-one outside my bubble in months, but in a usual week there would have been numerous instances of acceptable touch before distancing rules. The most recent being the blessing of a wedding couple - we were 2 meters apart instead of my hand on their head.

Humans love touch - we crave it. Touch is the first sense we develop in the womb, possessed even of 1.5cm embryos. We love it so much that the word has the power to sell a heap of products from soft-touch pillows to velvet touch tights. But somewhere in adulthood what was instinctive to us as children comes to feel awkward, and in an age of pervasive and historical sexual abuse and harassment and with the added COVID restrictions touching no longer feels safe and is out of bounds.

Is this what a crisis of touch looks like? And if so, what do humans risk losing, when we lose touch? Touch is commonly thought of as a single sense, but it is much more complex than that. Some nerve endings recognise itch, others vibration, pain, pressure and texture. And one exists solely to recognise a gentle stroking touch.

- Touch and hugs "slow down heart rate, blood pressure and the release of cortisol", which gives people better control over their stress hormones.
- Being touched increases the number of natural killer cells, the frontline of the immune system.
- Serotonin increases. That's the body's natural antidepressant.
- It enables deeper sleep.

We instinctively understand the power of touch and Princess Diana knew this when she held the hand of an Aids patient in 1987. In the UK over half a million older people go weeks without touching a soul. A fact highlighted to me, when as an acupuncturist, I visited a housebound gentleman. He looked forward to my weekly visits which consisted of a social chat with a neck and shoulder massage - the only touch he had from anyone other than his G.P. The bible encourages us to '*greet one another with a holy embrace*' (2Cor13:12) When all this is over let's remember this and return to greeting one another with a handshake, pat on the back, a hug - it may be the only touch that person gets!

*Rev'd Nicki*