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FOR SEMPERVIVUM'S SUMMER PROGRAMME IN EDINBURGH SEE ENTRY UNDER GROWTH CENTRES'

James Crippledini

Taboo on Tenderness

We all need to be touched and handled tenderly. But our society, our culture, has told us that we can't have it. And so we suffer - often without even realising what it is we are missing, and why we feel so unsatisfied.

Someone once said, only half-jokingly, 'If you are not stroked, your spinal cord will shrivel up.' Someone else said 'Everyone needs four good hugs a day.' But how many of us get what we need?

This need for contact comfort goes all the way down the animal kingdom. Animal psychologists like Harlow have shown that given the choice between a comfortable mother without milk and a hard cold mother with milk, baby monkeys will choose to spend most of their time with the warm and cuddly mother, even though they get nothing from her in the way of cupboard love.

This certainly applies to children. A hospital experiment showed that children who were given a dose of TLC each day recovered from operations much more quickly, and

were noticeably happier and healthier than children who were given none of this treatment (as was usual). And TLC stands for Tender Loving Care. This is one of the reasons why parents are now allowed into children's hospitals much more freely.

But do parents give enough tender touching to their own children in any case? Often at a certain point, we stop touching children; we teach them to keep their hands to themselves. We may even stop them touching their own bodies and exploring them.

We have been taught to keep our distance, and we often teach our children in turn to keep theirs. Stay at arm's length, shake hands quickly, or give a peck on the cheek, and avoid real contact. Touch may mean so many things, but all the things that it means are a distraction from the serious business of earning money, staying cool, getting on. And our inherited Puritan ethic still values these things more. Our cultural heritage of competitiveness has no place for mutual support and affection on any wide scale.

So what happens? The expression of tenderness gets narrow and constricted. We find one partner, and we say - 'I have now found my one and only, and you are I are going to make it against the rest of the miserable lousy world out there.' And so we now have a shoulder to cry on - just one person we can turn to and trust and feel at home with. And this can become very sick, very ingrown. We can demand too much of one another.

The extent to which we actually touch each other has been documented by the psychologist Sidney Jourard. He has drawn 'touch maps' of the human body, showing for men and for women with parts of their bodies they allow to be touched by mother, father, same sex friend and opposite sex friend. The findings are often fascinating: for example, a man's best friend can touch his knees but not his face; while a woman's best friend can touch her face but not her knees. On both men and women, father can touch much less than mothers. It seems clear that there are strong cultural messages which are never spoken or written down anywhere, but are very strong and quite uniform.

What we are finding, then, is that there are very sharp separations set up in our society, which are very rigid, which have never been examined very closely by most of us, and which may often do harm to ourselves and to others.

Imagine the whole area of the ways we can touch people as a French loaf - one of those really long ones. And let's say that the crust at one end represents the coldest, most formal touch possible - a handshake, a pat on the back, a peck on the cheek. Let the crust at the other end represent the most involving touch of all - say passionate sexual intercourse. What seems to have happened is that we can only think in terms of these two ends - as soon as we move away from the safe formal contact, instead of saying 'Oh, well, that's another two inches, that seems all right' we say 'I'm not sticking to this end, so I must be going all the way to the other end.' And this means that we can't ask anyone for a hug or a cuddle, even when we may most desperately need one. We can't put an arm round someone's neck as we sit with them, even if we feel a lot of sympathy for them; we can't walk hand in hand even if it's nice day and we feel at peace with the world. Particularly if the other person is of the same sex as ourselves.

Now suppose we want to challenge this? How do we go about it? Well, already many young people are finding other ways. At any pop festival young people are found in groups, putting their arms round one another, and not seeming to care too much if it is with a friend or a stranger, male or female. But also people have found group experiences useful simply to explore their own feelings in the matter.

In a sensitivity group, which often lasts for a day or a weekend, one can find a kind of protected island where one can experiment safely with new ways of relating and new rules for behaviour. It is a way of taking moderate risks in a secure atmosphere. You may decide, after experiencing such a group, that there is nothing here for you, and no need to change anything you do. But if you do decide to change in some measure, the group will give you a lot of ideas on how.

One of the exercises often done in a sensitivity group is to find a partner you have not met before, and get to know them non-verbally, simply through the sense of touch. Sometimes the leader will suggest that you start with the hands - just hold a dialogue with the hands - eyes closed or blindfolded - now let the hands have a fight - let them make up again - express affection - now tell a joke with those hands - and so on. Then perhaps you will change partners and do something similar again. I remember once I encountered one of the nicest, warmest, most sensitive and concerned hands I had ever met; it was a shock when I opened my eyes and found it was a fat man who I found ugly, and who I would never have gone anywhere near in the ordinary way of things. It brought home to me how much we do everything through the sense of sight, and completely ignore the equally important messages we could get through the other senses.

Another thing I have learned from this kind of exercise is not to assume anything, but to take things as they come. I had as a partner an attractive woman, who someone had told me was a group leader herself. The instruction given was - 'Start at your partner's feet, and with eyes closed, get to know that person using only the sense of touch; be conscious of what you are touching and what you are leaving untouched, and how you feel about that.' Well, I resolved that I wasn't going to leave *anything* untouched - here was an experienced leader, who had no doubt been through all this before, and I wasn't going to chicken out! So I proceeded slowly but firmly upwards (she was wearing jeans and a battledress top) until I met her hands equally firmly stopping me going any further. Much upset by this, I started again at her waist, and again worked upwards . . . only to meet firm hands again. It took me some time to get over this, and I felt very disturbed and disappointed. (It turned out that she had a personal thing about not being touched by strange men.) But it was all due to my expectations, taking the form of - 'Any experienced group leader *should* . . . ' *And one of the things you learn in a sensitivity group is to drop the shoulds* and stay with what is genuinely there for you at that moment. It is the shoulds which cause a good deal of the world's misery.

Another exercise which is often done in sensitivity groups is the *falling leaf*. One member of the group stands in the centre of a closed circle. With closed eyes, straight knees and feet together, he or she falls back - and is caught and passed around the circle, or across the circle at different speeds, in different directions. This is about trust

- can the person let go enough to let it happen, without trying to keep control? Different people behave very differently in this situation: some can never stop themselves taking a step forward or back, to avoid falling; others go almost into a trance, and seem made of rubber by the end. What is so good is that often people who are very rigid and stiff at the beginning, and who start off by compulsively moving their feet, often change after only a few minutes in this game, and become more relaxed and open all round afterwards. This shows that in many ways our social conditioning is very superficial, and can be shaken off as soon as there seems any real point in doing so.

A very beautiful exercise is *lifting and rocking*. Here the person is lifted up very gently off the floor, in a lying position, by about eight other people - perhaps the same people who have been involved in the falling leaf exercise earlier. The person is then rocked to and fro, from the head towards the feet and back again, in a rhythmic motion sometimes with a hum or wordless chant. Then lowered very slowly and gently to the ground again. Wait round the person till he or she opens eyes. This can, depending on circumstances, be anything from a nice experience to an ecstatic one, for the person being cradled. Another variation is to take the person round and round the room or open space for a while, and then put slowly down; often it seems to the person that miles have been covered, and that the end must be very far from the starting point - even though it may actually be the same place!

One time in a group a woman came to me and asked me to rock her in my arms like a baby. I did my best for about fifteen minutes, and afterwards she said it had been one of the nicest experiences of her life. There was nothing sexual about it, as far as I was concerned, but I was glad to be asked to do it. It showed the kind of trust and warmth which I would like to see more commonly in the world. But how many of us could ask for something as simple as that? Yet it is possible!

One of the nicest exercises is one which sound so simple and so undramatic that it hard to believe that it can have any effect; it is called *shoulder touching*. It is preferably done with bare shoulders, but it doesn't have to be. You stand behind your partner, and very gently put your hands on top of the shoulders next to the neck. Stay alive in your hands, and feel the warmth build up between your hands and the shoulder. Stay there for as long as you can keep that aliveness and feeling of energy going - something like a minute. Slowly, very slowly, take your hands away. Give your partner enough time to digest the effect of this contact - maybe 30 seconds. Then do the same again with the next bit of the shoulder outwards - still on the top of the shoulder, but next to the area where you have been already. Follow the same instructions, and pause again. Then do the third and final touch, just round the curve of the shoulder, this time pressing very gently inwards instead of downwards. Don't hurry, but make sure that the energy is flowing. Then move away slowly, and when your partner is ready, change places. Not talking. This can be incredibly beautiful if it is done in the right spirit.

What *is* the right spirit for exercises like these? It is one of staying with the Here and Now. Not analysing. Not worrying about what it means or how it works. Just fully being in the moment. And the exercises themselves help to make this easier. We tend

very often to use our eyes to mess up our other senses; and to use words to mess up our experience.

What can we get out of groups like this? Do they really make any difference? I think they do - or at least that they certainly can, if we let them. They enable us to explore our own sensibilities, and to find out where our limits really are. They enable us to really experience for ourselves some of that large territory which exists between the two ends of the French loaf. We can find out for ourselves just how safe or how dangerous it is for us personally - which may be different for each person. But almost invariably we find that we can start to change some of the arbitrary rules which we have been observing for so long.

For example, when I meet people, I more often hug them now, particularly if I know them well. This seems to make a warmer atmosphere straight away, and we can talk more easily and get into what we are really interested in more quickly. It seemed funny the first time I kissed a man, though it arose very naturally, but I found that it didn't have any particularly homosexual implications, and now it just seems an ordinary thing to do. I find I can ask the men or women I know to scratch my back if it needs scratching, or to massage my neck or shoulders if they ache. These are simple kindnesses which one person can do for another. Again, if I am sitting next to someone I know and my leg touches theirs, I don't automatically draw it away - I don't *automatically* do anything. Everything now becomes my choice, which I take responsibility for.

There can even be more to it than this. On one occasion when I was in a group doing the exercise about getting to know someone else by the sense of touch, I was feeling someone's face. And for some reason, the leader didn't stop it after the usual two minutes or so, but just let it go on as long as it wanted to. And I started by trying to find out as much as I could about the face - was it a man or a woman, old or young, big or small nose, mouth, ears, and so on . . . Then my imagination started to work - what would this person be like at work, in the kitchen, in bed, in a pub, in the country . . . Then I got down to pure feelings - what was I experiencing at this moment, how was my body reacting, how did the feelings register in bodily terms, how did it change as I observed it, what was the feeling now . . . And finally it all went away, all the striving, and the trying, and working out, and checking out - and fingers were no longer just my fingers - it was the sea touching the shore, or the sky touching the edge of the ocean - and there was no such thing as time . . . There was just the touching.

And it is true. The body can be more than just the body. By going all the way into the body we can arrive at something which ultimately can only be described as spiritual.

One of the reasons so many of us fear the body is because we feel it is too earthy, too animal - it releases blind forces which we cannot control. But if we can have the courage to let the body have its own wisdom, we may find that it is not animal but human. It is not the case that we have animal bodies but spiritual minds or souls. Our bodies are just as human as our minds. And in tender relations between people, in which we let the other person become real to us, just as we offer our own reality to the other person, we become most human, with all that means. In mutual tenderness

we can become whole people, who have let go of the need to separate and define what is considered correct and what is not.

The taboo on tenderness is a taboo on being human.
