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Mother-Touch

Roxanne Clark

Attempting to rest from the Northern Indian heat last summer I chanced to glance through the lattice of my hotel window, and what I saw held me entranced. A young woman, squatting in the speckled shade of her courtyard, was massaging and exercising her infant son, who gurgled with pleasure as his mother swiftly and gently massaged oil into his chest and belly. As she rhythmically and



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lovingly stretched the baby's arms across his chest, and kneaded and stroked his kicking legs, I felt drawn in to a ritual born of traditions inherited from her mother, and grandmother before that.

Quietly I merged back into the shadows of the room, suddenly guilty at intruding on such intimacy. So involved were mother and child in their morning ritual, however, they were completely unaware of my existence, and I realised it was not a romantic glorification of motherhood (though the setting certainly lent itself) to which I responded, but the significance and naturalness of such nurturing through touch, and the fundamental importance the bonding, nurturing and communication that such touch creates.

As a massage practitioner I continually encounter people who need nurturing touch and who have become 'out of touch' with themselves, unaware that the deep-seated tension lying in their bodies is related to unexpressed emotion. However, it is gradually being accepted in this society that a lack of tactual bonding in infancy, or receiving abusive touch, contributes to a lack of self-esteem, emotional disturbances and social dysfunction. "The cuddles and strokes we receive in infancy help us to build a healthy image of ourselves, nurture the feeling that, because we are touched, we are accepted and loved."¹

While in India, an invitation to the home of a friend, Praveen, found me walking into a room in which sprawled a colourful carpet of women stroking, massaging and cuddling each other. I responded with a deep primaevial ache that left me feeling totally isolated, for my

links with them had long been severed by generations of conditioning in a culture which has gradually repressed within itself the instinct to reach out to connect and support through touch.

These women were communicating in a language that raised in me all my childhood longings for such sensual, reassuring and safe contact. Perhaps sensing this, Praveen's mother drew me into this small community of women and girls, preening and plaiting their metallic hair, stroking and teasing her granddaughter.

To some people this might seem an indulgent and aberrant lifestyle but only because it sharply contrasts with that of our western society which demands rationalisation of experience. The growth of urbanisation along with industrialisation has made people increasingly isolated, disenchanting and alienated. Alexander Lowen, who developed Bioenergetics, puts it: '... the culture we live in is not oriented toward creative activity and pleasure ... it is not geared to the values and rhythms of the living body, but to those of machines and material productivity. We cannot escape the conclusion that the forces inhibiting self-expression and therefore decreasing our energetic functioning derive from this culture and are part of it. Every sensitive person knows that it takes considerable energy to protect oneself from becoming caught up in the frantic pace of modern living with its pressures and tensions, its violence and insecurities.'²

Many of us living in industrialised cultures have not experienced the essential bonding of healthy, nurturing touch, so how can we know how to bond properly

with our children?

Wilhelm Reich, who pioneered the understanding of mind/body inter-relationship believed that '... adults themselves have rigid bodies and lack self-love, they cannot relate to their children in a gentle feeling way. Instead they treat children as objects, and thus teach them to deny and fear their own bodies in turn.'³

It is ourselves as adults whom we must learn to nurture and mother so we in turn may create healthier, nurtured offspring. This does not mean we are to regress to the state of being infants, but we need to become aware of how our own early experiences are connected to the way we interact with our personal world, and we need to connect with our feelings.

The need to be touched in a nurturing reassuring way is inherent in all creatures, and if our need is either ignored or abused the desire for touch, which never diminishes, is either suppressed — settling into the body as tension rigidity and illness — or is distorted into the limited or abusive expression we learnt when young.

Massage is a way we can begin to get in touch with, and nurture, ourselves. Just taking the step to trust someone and

allow ourselves to totally receive is in itself a nurturing act. And having someone gently kneading our sore shoulders can be enough to elicit an inward sigh of relief as the tension of 'holding ourselves together' washes away. Gradually, through regular massage, we can reconnect with long denied feelings and needs and allow ourselves to experience the connection between nurturing touch and feeling good.

Most body-oriented therapists, including Bioenergetic and Reichian therapists (who place emphasis on healing the mind/body splits), body-work groups, rebirthers and dance therapists, can also lead us to dissolving the barriers within that limit us in bonding with and nurturing our children.

However, we must also begin to reassess how we live our lives, question our priorities, and evaluate our attitudes to what constitutes quality of life.

Just as we need to acknowledge the interconnection of our mind, body and emotions, we must acknowledge that we are all interrelated and realize that what each one of us does affects others. We need to work toward a spirit of community which is supportive and nurturing, and which encourages us to be in touch with ourselves and our children.

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