

The Healing Touch of God

Mark 5:21-43

Every day, Sol Rogers asks the aides to make room for him on his wife's bed. He removes his glasses and puts them on the table next to the door. Slowly, he takes off his shoes and swings his 89-year-old frame onto the tiny twin hospital bed.

He cuddles up to Rita—his wife of 61 years—wraps his thin leg over hers and squeezes her shoulder. He presses his face into hers and kisses her.

“I love you, Rita, I love you,” he says. “Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

“I love you more.”

“No...,” says Rita, 85, her voice slurred by advanced Alzheimer's disease.

He laughs.

Sol...spends about three hours a day at the Briarwood Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center in Needham, singing Rita old songs, taking her out to the garden, or simply lying in bed with her, telling her how much he cares.¹

This scene could be repeated on a daily basis in virtually any nursing home in America, or it could occur in any household where a small child is sick in bed and a loving parent or grandparent offers comfort and relief. Such care is both ordinary and extraordinary—an image of sweet beauty with family caretakers who offer their loved one comfort and a merciful touch. It expresses a meaningful, yet largely unremarkable, act of healing.

What is remarkable is how much good a compassionate and caring touch does for anyone who is ailing—who is not well. I'm not sure if it's simply due to the primal memories from infancy, or if it's innate to mammals where intimate touch is a natural ritual in the animal realm. It's now common to see hospitals caring for patients by providing an integrative therapeutic approach using touch, as practitioners all over the world are providing anecdotal evidence for

¹ Neil Munshi, “A Healing Touch,” *The Boston Globe*, August 10, 2008.

how a simple normal expression of love and care can make a qualitative difference in terms of the length of and, in some cases, even the degree of recovery from surgery or illness. Dr. Robert Stein, co-director of Boston University's Alzheimer's Disease Clinical and Research Program, comments: "We all need touch; we all deserve some kind of intimacy. And there is ... research out there that the body and mind respond to touch in very positive ways."²

I began with the story of Rita because as it turned out, in five months, she went from near paralysis in her limbs to a limited measure of mobility; from constant agitation, irritability and incoherent yelling to a more settled state where she could even utter lucid thoughts in conversation. Most of all, she went from having absolutely no recognition of her husband to responding with a smile to his daily presence. Even the staff attributed the remarkable change to the attention and affection that Sol offered her—something he started doing because he was so depressed himself over the loss he was experiencing from her dementia.

This case, obviously, is not unique. Dolores Kreiger, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Nursing at NYU, one of the forerunners of the Therapeutic Touch movement, routinely found impressive results in clinical settings, enough that she taught her students to use it to complement their medical training.³ Arthur Katz, a cardiac surgeon in Boca Raton, Florida, subscribes to healing touch as a vital part of his post-operative care. In an article published a few years ago in *USA Today*, he is quoted as saying, "Every time I have used it on one

² Ibid.

³ Anne Spencer, Ph.D., "Healing Touch," www.infinityinst.com.

of my patients, I have had a favorable outcome. ...The body is more than a machine. It has a mechanical component, but also an emotional and psychological component, and an energy component.”⁴

It’s this “energy” component that intrigues many practitioners. At the University of Minnesota Medical Center, they have a department of integrative medicine that has adopted touch and Reiki therapies as part of their curriculum and services. They define the approach in this way:

Healing Touch is an “energy therapy” that uses gentle hand techniques thought to help re-pattern the patient’s energy field and accelerate healing of the body, mind, and spirit.

Healing Touch is based on the belief that human beings are fields of energy that are in constant interaction with others and the environment. The goal of Healing Touch is to purposefully use the energetic interaction between the Healing Touch practitioner and the patient’s energy system. ...[P]ractitioners believe that this process balances and realigns energy flow that has been disrupted by stress, pain, or illness. The process eliminates blockages in the energy field so that the patient is in an optimal state for healing to occur.⁵

I doubt if this therapeutic definition would be affirmed across the medical establishment, but it certainly is intriguing given what it suggests: that the human body possesses energy—a perspective that doesn’t contradict the way that quantum physics postulates that all things ultimately consist of stardust and energy—that we’re all products of the Big Bang. In terms of medical science, it may remain a mystery, but is it out of the realm of possibility that human bodies possess some form of energy that can be influenced or manipulated to positively impact the health of tissue, bone, and marrow, down to the molecular level? Who knows?

⁴ Phil Galewitz, “Healing touch: A new patient outreach program,” *USA Today*, 2007.

⁵ “Healing Touch,” in *Taking Charge of Your Health*, University of Minnesota, www.umn.edu.

I understand the reluctance of skeptics, but I also recognize the role that spiritual care has in our physical wellbeing. Trust, love, and security reduce the isolation and stress that many patients often feel. We often refer to people's energy level changing when cared for. Is this somehow related? If a medical professional is warm and expressive and empathizes with patients, doesn't that help reduce stress and aid them in preparation for treatment? That's even more evident when a loved one offers a caring touch through a hug, a warm handshake, a kiss, a pat on the back, or a rubbing of the feet or hands in a way to help someone they love relax and know they are not alone. Obviously, care must be taken to ensure a patient is receptive to being touched, but when it is offered and received well, it can bring a measure of comfort to one who is in pain and distress.

As I've thought about the therapeutic role that touch plays in healing, it appears to have been characteristic of Jesus' healing ministry as well. It's difficult to fully grasp the intention or purpose of biblical healing stories due to our historical distance and the limited way Gospel texts describe exactly how Jesus went about healing people. But there does seem to be a frequent element of his touching the individuals who were healed.

The text for today offers the stories of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman. In both instances, it's noteworthy that their healing involved a transference of power (or energy) out of the body or hands of Jesus and into the recipient, who then experienced a remarkable sense of healing. Again, it's hard to know what actually happened if there was a physical cure, however, we can notice both instances did involve a healing touch.

The woman, of course, touched Jesus as he was walking by. He was in a crowd, and yet he felt her grasp the fringes of his cloak.⁶ He felt “energy” leave him. She was depicted as one who had been hemorrhaging blood for twelve years, which means it most likely was a chronic condition (and one that made her ritually unclean), with Mark employing the symbolic number of twelve referring to the fullness of time, meaning the time of her deliverance was at hand. Because of her condition, she represented all those who were declared the same by the religious purists, which meant she was denied formal access to God, particularly at the temple in Jerusalem. An underlying assumption is, she might not have participated in any religious ceremony or setting because of the purity codes of the time. Therefore, her healing served as a divine act of restoration, as well as symbolizing Jesus’ deliverance of all those in similar conditions who were overlooked and bypassed in the normal scheme of life. Restoring them to life is what made them “well.”

Jairus’ daughter (also, not coincidentally, twelve years of age) was restored when Jesus took her hand and brought her back to life. Again, the question to ask is not how it happened medically, but rather, why it happened. This child was representative of all who typically had their lives shortened because of the primitive health conditions of the time (in fact, sixty percent of children died before their mid-teens). Jairus, as president of the synagogue, might have expected an exception to this rule given his role and responsibility with an assumption of divine favor. But not until Jesus took the hand

⁶ In Jewish antiquity, males wore a ceremonial cloak or prayer shawl (“tallit”) with fringes called “tzitzit”, which this depicts. It is still worn today by observant male Jews.

of his child did he receive such favor—not until his understanding of the world was turned upside down by one whose authority and word were now to be trusted, even though Jesus sought to reform the very institutions which Jairus led. Hence, political distrust was overcome by personal experience.

What is interesting is that in each case it may not have been a magic formula applied to a medical mystery—instead, it was mainly the restoration of a life that had been robbed of meaning by misfortune, social isolation, and pain. That’s a kind of healing that is often overlooked when situations are only assessed medically. The mind/spirit interplay is a significant factor in our physical welfare. In many cases, there isn’t much that doctors can do to cure us or to improve our prognosis, but there is a generative power or energy that comes when we are embraced and cared for with love and compassion—when the healing touch of God transfers a sensation of wellbeing from a caretaker to a patient.

In Sol’s and Rita’s case, the physicians did notice a measurable difference. They attributed her limited responses to a reduction in *cortisol*—a stress-related hormone—that in a raised state, affected various functions of her body and brain, including memory. His constant physical contact allowed her to relax, as even Alzheimer’s wouldn’t deprive her of the deeply-ingrained memory of his smell and touch. That’s what makes it therapeutic to both the patient and the caretaker. It allows them both to feel better under the circumstances—that they both are loved in a soothing and healing way.

Back in Rita’s room on a recent afternoon, Sol locked his fingers in Rita’s, between their frail bodies. Her left hand shook, and she wore a

distant smile—not quite as firm as the one in the faded black-and-white pictures on the bedside table—but a smile nonetheless.

Sol knows his efforts will not ultimately save the woman he loves. “She’s got advanced Alzheimer’s, I know she’s not going to recover from that,” he said. “But while she’s with me, I want to enjoy every minute of it.”⁷

Perhaps, giving Rita a sense of connectedness and to being included in the love of her life to her dying day brought a measure of healing no one could predict or promise—maybe that is what healing is in a life destined for mortality. Maybe knowing love through a beautiful gentle touch at every possible moment is what makes us whole and well.

If so, then the healing touch of God is something we all can experience, as we are loved and as we express love. It may not seem dramatic at the time, but in many circumstances, it may be the most effective way to communicate comfort, reassurance, and abiding love so one who is suffering can make it through well.

Comforting and abiding love are gifts of mercy from one to another—ministries to the body and soul that help keep a person’s spirit strong. As Jesus touched those he healed, we can carry on that same hope for each other—each as healers, each as one who is healed—all in the embrace of one who loves. Of all that we may know in this human journey through life, from science or by faith, to be made well from birth to death is a mercy no one should live without.

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1 July 2018

⁷ Munshi, op. cit.