



Reflections

Touch

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My life is rich with touch. In the early morning darkness, I lie in bed. My 4-year-old daughter, who crawled into bed with me and my husband at 5:00 AM, is asleep. She is pressed close to me, with her breath against my cheek—a soft rhythmic reminder of her presence. My toes rest on top of my husband's warm foot. Soon, no doubt, our dog will reach over the side of the bed to nudge her cold nose into the small of my back. My family's touch surrounds me, providing a comfort that is easy to take for granted.

Much needed

I think of my grandmother: the last decade of her life was almost empty of touch. In the years after her husband died, while still having a caring family, she did not regularly feel the warmth of another human being's body. At the most, she experienced an occasional peck on the cheek in greeting, perhaps a brief hug. When she was 83 years old she developed lymphoma. She grew weaker each day. My uncle, my aunt, and my mother stayed with her as much as possible. When she needed 24-hour care, we employed nurses to be with her when the family could not be. My grandmother was lucky, as she had been able to stay at home almost up until the time of her death just as she had wished.

One weekend I stayed with her to spell off her caregivers. I had recently completed my residency and was full of recommendations and practice guidelines. I was keen to review her medications and offer suggestions for her comfort. I prepared her food, although she ate almost nothing. We talked quietly, or she slept.

In the evening she asked to have a bath. I helped her undress and get onto the lift that lowered her into the tub. Her legs and arms were like sticks. Her once-luxurious bosom had disappeared. Her skin was like parchment paper, so easily bruised or torn. Movement, even speech, seemed an effort for her.

I lathered the shampoo and rubbed it lightly on her scalp, half afraid of breaking her. "Press harder," she said. So I massaged her fragile scalp more firmly, while she closed her eyes and her body relaxed.

Afterward, I supported her to her room and lifted her easily into bed. She weighed perhaps 80 pounds. When I asked her if there was anything more I could

do for her, she said, "Rub my legs. Please." I gently rubbed her legs with skin lotion for a few minutes. My mother had told me my grandmother often asked the nurses to do this. At the time, I assumed her legs ached. Now I wonder if all she needed was to be touched. I said good night and went to my own bed on the foldout couch. I wish, instead, that I had offered to lie next to her and hold her hand or rub her back as she fell asleep.

Sought-after sense

Touch can be a touchy subject. As physicians, we are aware that touch might be misconstrued by patients, or can be frightening or disempowering to those who have been touched in hurtful ways. We teach new medical students to approach it cautiously, to

draw clear professional boundaries so patients know that their touch is purely clinical. We rarely discuss the potential of touch to bring comfort or to help with healing. At the same time, most family physicians have worked with patients, especially the dying, who seem to crave physical

contact. So many of us have sat by an elderly patient's bed for 15 or 20 minutes, our hands clasped with the patient's during the entire visit and reluctantly released only when it is time to go.

The need for touch is a universal one. Babies and children understand it and seek the comfort of touch unselfconsciously. We might have had it our whole adult lives, then lose it in our last years. If many of our needs become more childlike when we are nearing the time of our deaths, why not this need as well?

One of the greatest rewards of my work is visiting my dying patients, whether in their own homes or in hospital. The fortunate ones, in their last days, are surrounded by people who truly care about them. Families often feel helpless in the face of this final time of waiting. They ask me, "What can we do to make it easier for her?"

I tell them, "Talk to her. Hold her hand. Stroke her cheek." The wisest among them do not need to be told—they are already showing their love through touch. 🌿

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Competing interests
None declared

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