



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Caring Through Touch

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During my coursework training for ministry, in Berkeley, CA, I learned that there are two things you have to make a point of doing while in seminary because otherwise they won't happen. The first is that when you're on break, you have to read a lot of fiction – because while school's in session it's all non-fiction, a lot of academic theology, and you don't have time to read novels and short stories. The second thing you have to do is make sure you get out of the Ivory Tower – preparation for ministry can be incredibly intellectual, and if you're not careful, you lose sight of the real world, where most of the people are.

I figured all this out after my first semester ended. I wanted to do something that addressed the suffering in the world; I wanted to help people. I decided to take a two-week course during the January Intersession at the Care Through Touch Institute – I would learn how to massage homeless people in San Francisco.

Before my course started, I *was* reading lots of fiction on my break, and I came across a local author named Joe Cohen, who wrote a novella called "Oakland Glimmer." In it, the main character Jake has a friend Mason who comes up with a practical way to help ease tensions in society. Here is an excerpt:

I asked Mason what was going on with the Human Is First movement.

"Well, I decided it's time to take it from the theoretical to the practical and put it on the street."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's very simple. We can save the world with handholding."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It would work like this: People would take the hands of strangers and walk with them for a bit."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"What if the strangers don't want their hands held?"

"They would shake 'no' and there would be no hard feelings. Here's the thing, Jake, it would ease the collective pain of humankind, the distrust, the isolation, the fear of The Other. You see an uptight business man coming down the street, a bleary old lady, a despondent teenager – anyone, actually, you hold their hand and walk with them a block or so. No words, just human contact. That's it."

"So how do you get this started?"

"I'm going before the Oakland City Council next week to ask them to proclaim a 'Hold a Stranger's Hand Day,' for a beginning."

"Mason, excuse the disrespect and all, but I think you may be nuts."

"I may be nuts, Jake, but that doesn't mean I'm wrong."

As you may imagine, the city council did think Mason was nuts, and gave him a resounding “NO” to his idea. But as I learned at the Care Through Touch Institute, Mason is truly on to something. Before I tell you about what I learned there, first let us ponder the concept of touching.

None of us get enough of it. I’m talking about the kind of touching Mason is talking about – touching that is neither sexual nor violent. It is particularly true that marginalized people suffer from a lack of neutral, peaceful, non-sexual, non-violent contact with other human beings, but the average person with a roof over their head also suffers from this lack. In his book, Touching, Ashley Montagu says this in the preface:

“We in the Western world are beginning to discover our neglected senses. This growing awareness represents something of an overdue insurgency against the painful deprivation of sensory experience we have suffered in our technologized world . . . Above all else [he writes], it seems to me that it is our role as human beings always to join learning to loving-kindness. Learning to learn, learning to love, and to be kind are so closely interconnected and so profoundly interwoven, especially with the sense of touch. It would greatly help toward our rehumanization if we would pay closer attention to the need we *all* have for tactual experience.”

It was in this spirit that I decided to become a Care Through Touch practitioner. The purpose of the institute is to train people who want to care for the homeless through massage and touch. When I told people I was going to do this, many of them had the same reaction Jake had to Mason. “Are you nuts? I wouldn’t want to do that.” Or, “Hey, Hannah, when does that ‘Rubbing Bums’ course start?” Are the homeless really bums? Who are the homeless?

The profile of the homeless will vary from city to city, but not a whole lot. When Ronald Reagan was governor, he reduced the state-funded beds for the mentally ill from 30,000 to 3,000, and as they say, as CA goes, so goes the nation. But the faces of the homeless are diverse. The homeless and extremely poor are comprised of seven groups of people, the categories often overlapping. They are: recent immigrants, the mentally ill, the addictively ill, seniors, war vets, single parents and their children who often live in their cars, and one of the fastest growing groups, the newly poor – regular folks who have fallen through the cracks of the recent economic upheaval.

No matter who the people living on the streets are, they all have two things in common: they have been beaten up by life and their network of family and friends is weak at best. Most of the homeless once led lives what were very similar to yours or mine. Many of them are well-educated, and were once lawyers, preachers, computer programmers, professional athletes, models, authors, you name it. Each of them was powerful in his or her own way and time; yet, for a variety of reasons, they have become homeless. Realizing this myself for the first time, I see how false my own sense of security in life really is. Most people are only a few catastrophes away from homelessness.

So what is it like to touch “the least among us?” I expected it would be a moving experience. I did not expect that it would change the way I feel about myself, the way I look at life, or my religious views, but it did. Mary Anne Finch, the creator of the institute, actually worked with Mother Theresa in India. “This is radical work,” Mary Anne says. During the training, we not only learned anatomy and massage skills, but half the time was also devoted to spiritual practices and meditation, with an emphasis on Buddhism and Christianity. Mary Anne says:

“I don’t talk to people about God, that is not what this spirituality is about. For me God is not an entity. It is a way of being. The Buddha, the Christ, I don’t see them as figures, they are our hearts. It’s about embodying spirit, it’s about feeling. God is not a thought. We can think thoughts, but that’s not going to get us to God. We have to *embody* those thoughts.”

In Caring Through Touch, embodying the holy is inevitable. For it is not only radical work, it is timeless work, in all senses of the word, timeless. Homeless people are constantly being told by others what to do, where to be, and when to be there. It is difficult to keep appointments without a calendar or alarm clock. They are asked questions by social workers, doctors, government bureaucrats, or told to move by store-owners or police. Many of the people they see for help only have a few minutes to spare. It is difficult to live in a present space of time that is so often uncomfortable and scary.

So when we give a person a massage, the idea is not only to soothe and comfort and release some tension, it is also to say, "this time is all for you. I will not tell you what to do, or how you should be, I will not interrogate you. I will simply allow you to be."

But the amazing discovery is that this works both ways. In order to give someone a moment that is truly present, the giver must also be present inside herself. It's not only that the power and healing of touch is timeless – that is a given. It's that when the touching begins, time really does stop and loses its relevance. It is this timelessness that is holy and becomes a divine gift to both giver and receiver.

Cynthia, a seasoned Care Through Touch practitioner, puts it this way in a spiritual essay she wrote:

"I have come to believe that under this in-your-face presence lies a hidden divine purpose; there is more going on here than homelessness and the need for a hand-out. I propose that the homeless are actually *offering* something of great value: they are God's invitation to spiritual initiation . . . Being fully present to one or two people acknowledges that their dignity is worthy of our attention. We acknowledge that our attention has long been distracted . . . we admit that, until this moment, our sight had been impaired, and we neither saw nor remembered the divinity in each human person . . . Marginalized people symbolize the antithesis of money and abusive power. It is possible, therefore, that they are *important* for us, to be approached in reverence and awe."

Growing up UU, and during my young adult years before Seminary, I always wondered, what is the big deal about Jesus? "Blessed are the least among us," is one of his most basic teachings. And until I actually embodied the work that Jesus did, I had no idea what he was talking about. How can the poor be blessed when they have so little? Is it because all they really have is the naked truth of humanity? I don't know. But I do know that the hearts of the homeless people I encounter are enormous. They seem to have a deeper understanding of the human condition, of what is true, and knowing great need themselves, they are familiar with what compassion really is.

Here is a snapshot. This was Anita's experience; Anita was a fellow student at a Christian Seminary:

Paul and Tommy were seated on Market Street in front of a rose colored building with "JB" on the front in gold lettering. It was obvious from the first exchange of conversation that Paul was a gay boy and I fell in love with him immediately. He said he had a partner for twenty years who left him two years ago. Paul talked about his mental illness, about depression and stress, and his cats.

He said he feels unloved except that Tommy loves him. At that point he turned to Tommy and said, "I love you Tommy" and Tommy turned to him and said, "I love you too, Honey." Paul looked at me and said, "Did you hear how he said that? He really does love me." The whole encounter was both heartbreaking and touching. I talked to Paul a lot about his cats and at his encouragement massaged one he had with him named Mutt.

When I finally got around to massaging Paul all he could do was cry the entire time. He said how unloved he felt but that the massage made him feel cared for. He made incoherent statements about Jesus and how Jesus loved him. It was apparent that Paul's depression was a huge part of his mental illness. At the end of our time together we hugged and Paul hung on for a long time sobbing and thanking me for stopping, and begging me to stop and talk with him another time. He said he was always in front of the "James Bond" building.

Putting the ideas of Buddhist mindfulness and Christian compassion into action is inspiring to my Unitarian Universalist identity. Because, if anything, what this service work is about is divine, universal, love. We are all one people. We acknowledge this when we look a destitute person in the eye and we say to ourselves, "you are me and I am you." Physical connection affirms this without the burden of expectations.

U.U.s, for certain, are great proponents of justice, and I am quite proud of this. However, we are sometimes too much in our heads, and not enough in our hearts and hands. Ideas sometimes lose their way between thought and action. We want to make a change, yes, we want to see *results* for our labors. But here is a kind of social action that produces no lasting results and fixes nothing. It is simply a holy act of compassion that says, we are all part of the same soul.

There is something else Mary Anne says we learn from this work. We are inclined in this world of strictly defined values to constantly contrast the good from the bad, or separate things into categories. This is ugly, while this is pretty, or this is evil but this is holy. In this kind of work, it may be as close as you can get to just being with the good and the bad, and being okay with the fact that they both exist. To let go of *all* your judgements, your strife, your sadness, even your gladness, and JUST BE with both the good and the bad is a religious moment. And if you can carry this awareness for many moments, it turns into a religious experience.

I did this service work all through seminary, and at the first church I served, I taught others how to do it. I'm so pleased that, in a few weeks, a course will begin that I'm offering here, that will teach some of you how to do it. There is no shortage of nearby homeless drop-in centers we can visit to offer our 20-minute, fully-clothed chair massage. I'll tell you one story of my own, from when I first began massaging the homeless.

I was massaging a fairly drunk African American man on the sidewalk, who was talkative. I was a little nervous since he was intoxicated, but I focused my energy on slowly massaging his shoulders and arms. At one point he started flirting with me, and said, "this sure is turning me on." I felt a quick surge of disgust, and paused, but I didn't let go of him. I thought, maybe he's testing me to see if that would frighten me away. A moment later he said, "I'm sorry. That was rude of me. I apologize for my rudeness." I said, "I accept your apology." And we moved on.

He told me he wasn't used to people touching him this way, and then he told me about his kids and what he likes to drink, and some other details of his life, and as his back loosened and softened he became more quiet. When I was nearly finished, he said, "If I had this done to me everyday, I wouldn't be this." "What would you be?" I asked. And he simply said, "the voices would stop."

I learned that day, since I didn't place any value judgement on it, that I was able to give something to this man who could really use it: a moment of peace.

Here's an old Jewish tale I will depart with. A rabbi poses the question: how do you know when it is day and no longer night? Someone answers, is it when, in the distance, you can tell a sheep from a dog? No. Another answers, is it when you can tell a peach tree from a fig tree? No, the rabbi says. You know it is day when you can see the light on the face of another person, and see that that person is your sister or brother.