



Changing
the World
With Your
Bare
Hands

“Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth.”

—Margaret Atwood,
The Blind Assassin

by jane wurwand

When you brush past someone in a crowded restaurant or accidentally nudge a person in a hallway or on an elevator, you say “I’m sorry” or “Pardon me” because, in American culture, their private space has been violated. The fact that this split second of harmless, casual social physical contact is considered a transgression significant enough to require an apology—no matter how perfunctory—reveals that something truly is wrong with life in the big city.

I am a skin therapist, and 2006 marks my third decade in the profession. For me, the past 30 years have been jam-packed with learning, and I believe that the most important professional quality for any skin care professional should be a commitment to gathering knowledge. Throughout my education, I have been fortunate enough to learn about a myriad of products, techniques and technologies—everything from the use of nightingale droppings to the role of galvanic current in skin care. During this lifetime of learning, one thing never has been clearer than it is now: Skin care is all about touch and human hands.

Cocooning

Go back to that crowded elevator, where you tuck in your feet, hips, elbows and shoulders to prevent the slightest incidental contact with fellow travelers, and it is clear that touch has become demonized in our society. The roots of this mistrust of the body reach back to America’s Puritan past and are combined with modern-day xenophobia—the fear of foreign things. Commonly, people fear the unknown.

Undeniably, these are uncertain, alienated times during

which it would make sense to seek solace and comfort in humanity. Instead, you retreat into your own isolated, insular world where social touching virtually is eliminated—what pop culture commentator Faith Popcorn called “cocooning” in the early 1990s.

Today, teachers shrink from touching their students, fearful even of applying sunscreen to their faces before a field trip. Co-workers hesitate to offer a gentle hug or pat on the shoulder to a colleague, dreading the threat of sexual harassment charges.

What is left of life on Earth? I am convinced that finding the way back to our humanity won’t happen with politics or with law. It will happen through the alchemy of human skin touching skin.

Satisfying skin hunger

I am not referring to sexual touching, which often is used as a shortcut to satisfying what I call “skin hunger.” Although sex has its delights, it is not the entire story of the skin, and sexual touching is not what you crave most deeply as a sentient creature. The overemphasis on sexuality in today’s culture is evidenced in phenomena as wide-ranging as sexual dysfunction (rampant), the gluttonous abundance of cyberporn (empty) and preteens having their first sexual experiences at increasingly younger ages (scary).

Sexuality has become twisted precisely because humans are starved for a nonsexual connection. Because you can’t touch casually and in a purely friendly manner, all of it becomes sexualized. This is a problem when humans yearn to touch people for whom they have no flicker of sexual interest, but would like to hug and squeeze anyway—the

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spouse of a good friend, children, a kind neighbor or that sweet grandmother who sells organic tomatoes at the farmer's market. Because you cannot touch these people in a socially accepted manner, you feel that your desire to connect must be somehow naughty, dirty or tainted.

For decades, research has indicated that touch-deprived infants—as well as the young offspring of all mammals—experience mental, physical and social retardation, even if they receive adequate nourishment in other areas. The lack of physical contact is an acknowledged factor in hastening the deaths of elderly people who reside in hospitals and nursing homes. It is not an accident that society's most reviled criminals are kept in solitary confinement, and prison administrators report that inmates housed in this fashion often request that they be executed rather than endure the loneliness of living in their own skin without contact. Isolation kills, but to be branded officially as untouchable is a fate worse than death.

Some people confuse skin hunger with sexual desire. Others attempt to satisfy it with food, drugs and drink, entertainment and insatiable consumerism—shopping and spending, hours of anesthetizing television-watching and numbing workaholism. In my opinion, the American obesity epidemic has as much to do with the loss of socially acceptable casual physical touching between family members, peers and friends as it does



with wolfing down pounds of the newly supersized M&M's while surfing the Internet. All of these phenomena spring from losing touch, both literally and figuratively, with the wisdom and rhythm of the body.

Touch is truthful

The skin is hungry, and people will find a way to feed it any way they can. Think about it—you ask friends to “keep in touch,” and you promise to “touch base.” You talk about feeling “warm fuzzies,” as well as “stroking” someone’s ego. You say that someone “rubs you the wrong way.” A challenging situation is called “sticky” or “high-pressure,” forcing you to “get a grip.” You describe conflict as “friction.” Someone may be called “smooth” or “slick”

or, in the extreme, “slimy.” A person on the opposite end of the spectrum may be “dry” or “rough around the edges.” High praise for something may involve referring to it as “hot” or “cool.” These tactile conversational references are plentiful in the English language and are moored in an unspoken understanding that touch always is straightforward.

One cultural half-truth is that women want to cuddle in bed, while men simply want to hit the target, so to speak. These roles and expectations find at least some reality in the fact that they are reinforced culturally. But when it comes to a need for nonsexual touching, check out the big, burly bearhugs, high-fives, joyful chest-bumping and appreciative bottom-patting that take place between National Football

League or National Basketball Association players after scoring points. Here are some of society’s most lionized examples of masculinity showing each other respect with intimate, affectionate physical contact. During these moments, where touch is safe and permitted even among macho guys, they’re being about as cuddly as sweaty, adrenaline-buzzed 250-pound men possibly can get! Clearly, free-flowing testosterone and nonviolent, nonsexual touching are not mutually exclusive.

Touch and oxytocin

Phyllis Davis talks about this concept in relation to the release of oxytocin through touch in her book, *The Power of Touch* (Hay House, 1999). Oxytocin, which is a body chemical that is secreted

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by the posterior pituitary gland in the brain, sometimes informally is referred to as “the hormone of love” or “the cuddle hormone.” Although, among humans, it may be released into the bloodstream during orgasm, along with other activities, the net effect is not sexual—oxytocin is more about getting cozy than simply getting busy. Current studies at the University of California, San Francisco link the presence of this chemical in mammals with pair-bonding, nest-building and pup-retrieval—which includes remembering to pick up the kids after soccer practice—in many varieties of animals, including humans.

Today, synthetic oxytocin is used widely in obstetric practices to help begin or continue labor in childbirth, to control bleeding following delivery and to trigger lactation. Remarkably, spray-on formulas labeled “Trust in a Bottle” and “Liquid Trust” are being marketed that promise to give the wearer an edge in business and romance.

Your role in liberating touch

Professional skin care must play a crucial role in the liberation of human touch. Take a close look at

this profession. Why do clients come to you—because they want their skin to look younger? Yes, most definitely. Because they want to correct topical problems, such as acne outbreaks or hyperpigmentation? Of course. These are the most literal and circumstantial reasons for the existence of the skin care profession. But there is another reason: skin hunger.

I have had the following experience many times and am positive that you, as a skin care professional, have had similar ones, as well. A client—usually a woman—walks into your spa and asks if she can have a treatment. You check the schedule and see that your day is full. You apologize about not being able to fit her in today and offer to reschedule her for tomorrow or the next day. The woman chews her lip and asks if there is an opening for a massage. There isn't. How about a manicure and pedicure? A blow-out? Maybe a makeup application? A lip wax, even? You explain that there is a huge wedding party here today, and everyone on the team is booked. She reads the menu over and over, asking about each service—even the obscure ones that *nobody* ever requests. She doesn't want to leave and seems desperate because she is: desperate to be touched in a nurturing, nonthreatening way.

The tide is turning, and more and more people are realizing that skin care,



energy work and body work are not treats, indulgences or pampering, but truly are tools for survival in these touch-phobic times.

As a skin therapist, you must step up to your role as a cultural healer. It is not too grand a mission. You can do it. In fact, you *must* do it because you are among some of the last people on Earth who are trusted to touch others without facing criminal charges.

It is perfectly fine to be interested in the latest products and the newest technologies. Curiosity is part of being passionate, and you always must seek out what is new in order to understand it and to decide whether it is best for your clientele. But, as the front line in the cultural revolution to make touch safe again, never underestimate your own hands. More than any peptide, enzyme or piece of high-tech hardware, your two hands are wonder-workers. Even in the most secular sense, the “laying on of hands” is a deeply healing experience. The effects go beyond the release of oxytocin to something more mysterious and, ultimately, more important than mere chemistry.

The cultural revolution

Unlike most of the industrial world, straining so as not to innocently bump into or graze the sleeve of a stranger in passing, skin therapists do not have to apologize for touching another person’s skin with their bare hands. In fact, you are paid to touch them. Your clients sigh. Some drowse blissfully under your touch. Some giggle with nervousness, perhaps because they are not touched often or because it has been a long time since they have been. Occasionally, some weep with cathartic relief and release. And they all thank you. ✂