

PERFECT TOUCH:
USING TOUCH TO HEAL TRAUMA AND
NEGLECT

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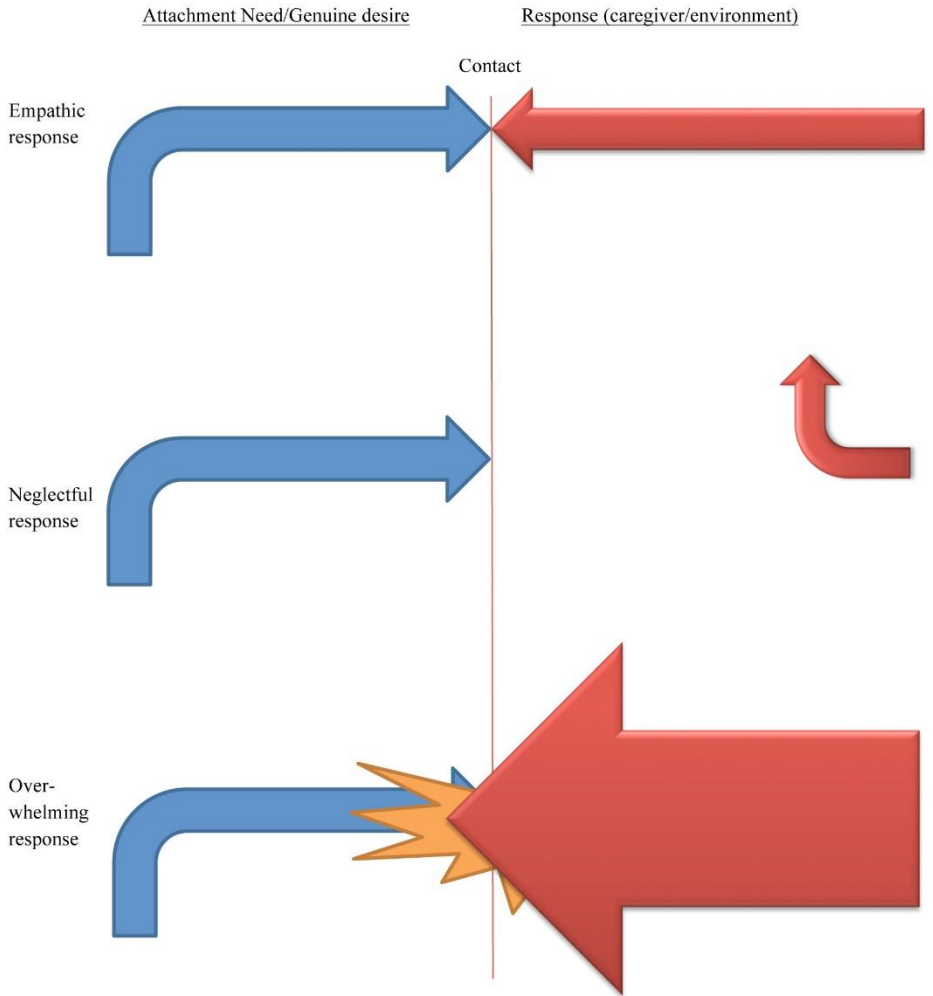
Personal and Political Rationales for Touch

We are born with an innate desire to live. But we are born dependent on those implicitly charged with our care so that we can realize our potential and grow into complete human beings. Once in relationship with our caregivers, the desire to live translates into the need to be seen, heard, held, the need to feel special, important, the need to belong and to matter to someone in this world.

But these desires and needs are not always met perfectly. As a matter of fact we are more often than not faced with incomplete responses at best and other times with negatively overwhelming responses. These latter responses are those violating, abusive, traumatizing experiences that many of us are familiar with. But there is an even worse response that often does not get noticed purely by the very fact that it is an absence of response; when the caregiver does not see, hold, or acknowledge the desire in the child; in other words, when the child is neglected. Although neglect can have many forms and layers, here I primarily refer to emotional neglect; a form of parenting that creates a sense of abandonment, extreme loneliness, in the person.

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The following diagram illustrates these three forms of response by the caregivers to the child.



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Despite the recently renewed interest in the effects of overwhelming experiences causing trauma (e.g. war, disasters, rape, abuse, etc.) psychological research shows that neglect has in fact an even worse outcome than traumatic events. Often it is impossible for the victims of emotional neglect to see how they were damaged by their caregivers because there was no specific incident that one can point to as the cause the source of current and chronic challenges.

It is only in recent decades that trauma research has evolved to expand the definition of trauma from the single incident that can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to the yet-to-be-accepted-by-the-psychiatric-elite (i.e. those who design and define labels for all *abnormal behaviours*), Complex or Developmental Trauma. And the impact of such prolonged and hideously negative experiences is being shown to include severe challenges in interpersonal relationships, in self-regulation of emotions, and in self-concepts. In fact it has taken over a century of intermittent research, on-again off-again interest in effects of trauma, and frequent admissions by the mental health practitioners of ineffectiveness in treating chronic mental health challenges to finally come to terms with what might be at the root of many emotional, mental, somatic, and social issues: chronic forms of maltreatment by caregivers in early life.

The fictional, wishful, and misguided thinking of the mainstream medical establishment (psychiatry and psychology), with added support and pressure from the profit-seeking pharmaceutical industry, has suppressed the true knowledge of the nature of mental and emotional challenges and has reduced them to a simple mechanical concept of *chemical imbalance*. In this model, people have been reduced to simple machines that can be fixed by putting certain chemicals into their bodies. The fact that this approach can reduce the symptoms of only a minority of *patients* has been shaking the belief in the efficacy of such a reductivist and inhumane approach.

The new movement in psychotherapy has taken up millennia-old practices of mindfulness and attention to the sensations, and the body, and has re-interpreted and explained it in terms of the recent discoveries of neuroscience. We are slowly moving towards an understanding of ourselves that goes beyond the simple interaction of chemicals in our veins. The brave proponents of the new paradigm are champions of the adventurous and compassionate approach to the long-dismissed sufferers of inadequate caregiving. These brave souls

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aim to bring the practice of psychology out of the elite ivory towers back into the hands of common people by bringing attention to the neglected parts of us, our bodies. They are bringing us back to our senses.

Perfect Touch and Re-creation of Safety

The practice of *Perfect Touch* that I am developing in my work with clients aligns itself with this new paradigm. It uses the fundamental sense of touch, the first sense activated in the newborn who feels for the mother's breast moments after birth. Touch is a portal to access the unmet or overwhelmed desires of the person. The purpose of using touch to heal trauma is to correct the violating or abandoning experiences that occurred so early in life that the person cannot find words for, experiences that have been stored in the body, in every organ and joint and muscle, and in every inch of the skin.

An empathic response in touch occurs when the need in the other is seen and understood and responded to with exactly as much pressure and intensity, as is desired by the body. The energy invested in the response must be equal to the energy rising from the body to the surface of the skin. The practitioner of *Perfect Touch* (i.e. a trauma therapist trained in client-directed bodywork) fully considers the location, pace, pressure, texture, direction, intention, and temperature of the touch. The pleasure arising from the feeling of the desire met by the world moves the body forward toward the next step, the next desire to be met.

This is not an endless hedonistic trip. The authentic desires of the body are not *a bottomless pit* as Freud wrote to his rebellious protégé Ferencszi to discourage him from using touch with his clients. This process of call and response between the person's body and the giver of touch is the natural process of the Self developing into completion. Trauma, neglect, abandonment, and fear stand in the way of that completion.

Chronic trauma and neglect (Developmental or Complex trauma) shrink the container of safety in the person's life and the body. Only smaller and smaller places are left where the person can feel safe, let go, and enjoy pleasure. And sometimes there is no place left. The practice of *Perfect Touch* softens, stretches, and expands that container so the person and the body can move towards pleasure again and stay open, more and more, to receiving pleasure. The goal is to trust the

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response of the environment, trusting that the response would match the desire, that the boundaries will be seen, attuned to, and responded to without conditions. This response takes the form of touch (contact), or gaze (witnessing), or words (verbal reflection or affirmations).

Shame and Trust

The Self requires a safe body to develop. To the extent that one's natural desires are not met, the body fills with shame and becomes an unsafe place to house the self. The process of *Perfect Touch* is to make the body a safe place again so that the natural development of the Self can get back on track and for the person as a whole to move towards self-realization. This process is one in which the effect of unwanted and uninvited touch is undone, and is replaced with the invited, self-guided and desired touch. In this way, the body learns to not only trust the world to respond according to the body's desires, but also to trust its own voice and expression to ask for what exactly is desired and to put a stop to what is not. Since the process of direct touch occurs at the fundamental level of sensory experience, it bypasses the mental and cognitive processes. This is a much more direct, effective, and efficient way to access and treat trauma than most other common therapeutic practices.

Early trauma (e.g. incest) occurs at a foundational sense level (e.g. touch of the rejecting parent, smell of the offender, etc.) and it is registered on a sensory level. So it only appeals to reason to address the healing response primarily to the sensory level in order to facilitate access to the body memory and then to responsibly integrate the unresolved fragments of the experience into a coherent whole that can then be understood, managed, and mastered by the conscious self-aware ego. Once the touch occurs, the ensuing sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts, and memories, are brought to the conscious level and gradually integrated.

All this takes place in the clearly defined container of one-way touch. This is not a sexual *exchange*. This is not a mutual relationship. The therapist gives touch to the client according to the client's directions for the purpose of serving the client in exploration of desires, memories, emotions, and beliefs.

In order to counter the shame brought on by trauma and neglect, we must not only acknowledge the shame but explore and dissect it in its every manifestation within the relationship in order to undo the

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shame habit in its physiological structure and the way in which it manifests in the therapeutic relationship. It is only through mindful observation of the shame in the body that we can gradually rid ourselves of shame. This shame is the destructive energy caused by trauma which creates a deficient state in the body and undermines efforts to move forward, to move with purpose, and to express one's truth. This shame is the foundation of oppression: personal, cultural, and political. This shame is what holds us back from feeling and acting complete.

Giving clear information about the body is one way to undo the shame habit. Shame silences the voice. Clear voice breaks the cycle of shame. So encouraging the voice to speak about the body and its true desires is a direct and effective path to undoing shame. The client is continuously encouraged to give voice to the desires and processes of the body moment-by-moment. In other words, the client is a translator of the body's processes for the therapist and the therapist speaks to and interacts with the body through the client.

Client-Centered Practice

The client is guided to turn inward and let attention descend into the body while keeping a *conscious observer* aspect of themselves fully active so it can report on what is seen and felt. This use of "conscious trance" is the core process in *Perfect Touch*. It requires a complete attunement on the part of the therapist to the client and on the part of the client to the body. The therapist invites the client to tune into the body and to report on whatever is observed and then asks if the observed event or sensation requires a touch, or if it needs to be witnessed, or if the person needs to hear an affirmation that will counter the negativity arising from the sensation. This is very important since not all body desires require actual skin-to-skin touch. The therapist's loving presence and exquisite attention is sometimes all that is required and in fact it is a form of contact. We can touch with our gaze.

It is important to invite the client to explore what the specifically observed internal event desires: direct touch, witnessing, sounds or words. This brings attention to the minutiae of the subtle body sensations which went unnoticed long ago and were eventually lost due to overwhelm or neglect. So we are going back to the beginning, to the very small voices in the body that ask for an empathic response and

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rebuild the new structure from there, one sensation at a time.

Pleasure and Healing

Once the body receives what it asks for, no more and no less, it begins to feel safe. The sensory experience can enter a flow of call and response cycles between the body and the therapist. It is essential to note that this way of touch practice, as intimate as it can be, is far from a so-called 'happy ending' erotic massage. We need to be clear that there are many obstacles in the way to truly authentic joy. In order to reach our true happy ending, that blissful full body experience of peace and oneness, we sometimes must charge through painful, frightening, shameful, or rageful passages. In the erotic temples of Khajuraho in central India, there are ancient temples covered with exquisitely carved statues of common and noble people in all kinds of sexual positions and interactions. But every now and then there are also carved images of individuals wrestling with dragons. I interpret these as the hard struggles in the process of reaching ultimate bliss, that sweet union with the *Beloved*.

A common 'happy ending', a sexual climax, is a physical release that momentarily interrupts the constant process of quest for bliss, for *Oneness* with all. There is a sweet feeling in that. But most people can get stuck in that and let go of the bigger journey. And even with that, for those of us who have been heaped upon with shame and fear, approaching an orgasm or even any simple sensory pleasure, can seem as impossible as wrestling dragons.

So this process is about noticing the subtle urges in the body and accepting all sensations for what they are: sensations. When the body's desire is met with attunement and as perfectly as possible, the body's sense of safety begins to be restored. The fundamental sense of safety, that implicit promise made at conception – that the world can and will meet our needs – is broken as a result of overwhelm or abandonment. Once the impact of those early experiences are undone on a foundational sensory level, the trust in the safety of the world can be rebuilt which in turn engenders hope and optimism and a motivation to move on.

Information in the research literature on tactile memory, to the extent that we explore in our trauma healing process, is still emerging. But there is plenty of practice-based evidence to show that touch can access memory, very specific traumatic memories, quite effectively.

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The practice of *Perfect Touch* is about a very slow exploration of traumatic memories through touch while balancing the hardship of this journey with pleasure, which is accessed through the caring and loving nature of the touch. So we build safety and capacity in the body as we move along the journey of integration of the fragments of the self: those floating bits of identity in the dark psyche that are too frightening and too shameful to bring to light. The *Perfect Touch* process allows for the integration of fragments and healing of trauma with pleasure.

In using *Perfect Touch*, disjointed fragments of trauma memories which are stored in the body become activated through touch. Whereas normally this activation of trauma memory would trigger a helpless freeze response (because in the original traumatic event the person's fight or flight response was made ineffective) in the safe container of *Perfect Touch*, the person can stay present (i.e. unfrozen) to the intense energy of the body memory and gradually modulate the internal response. This is made possible by slow and careful movement between two poles of suffering and pleasure. The therapist's exquisite attunement to the client's internal states facilitates the release of long held feelings of fear, sorrow, anger, and finally shame. Tears, angry sounds and words, and energetic movements are expected at this stage. At the end of the process, the client is able to simply accept the traumatic memories as stories of the past which have now lost their sharp and painful edges.

The traumatized person suffers among other things from a symptom that the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* calls anhedonia: absence of pleasure, or the inability to feel pleasure. The pursuit of pleasure is not something that conventional psychotherapy emphasises, at least hardly beyond encouraging the client to take part in support groups for social connection, or to go to the gym or for walks in the park.

The capacity for pleasure is something that we hold and practice from the moment we are born into this world. When the newborn baby is held firmly, touched softly, wrapped in warm and soft fabrics and fed the sweetest nourishing milk, when the baby is gazed at with adoration and rocked and sung to lovingly, and is welcomed in every encounter with wide eyes and excited voices, a capacity is built in the baby for pleasures of the senses, and a deepened desire for connection with others and therefore with the self. When this process of call and response, i.e. the baby's excitement to be in the world and to move

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towards connection with others, and the caregiver's almost perfect response, is disrupted by trauma or abandonment and neglect, then the natural journey towards pleasure is broken. It is possible nevertheless, through the healing process, to tune into that historic brokenness and to put back the pieces together through the process of pleasure, a process as natural to us as breathing. With every breath we can experience pleasure in every cell; the breath satisfies the cell's desire, and that is how we go on breathing.

There is much to be explored in the world of healing. We discover more as we shed the heavy veil of oppression, of secrecy, and of shame around our own bodies. For millennia we have had our bodies stand in for our shame, all the unwanted parts of ourselves, and we have buried our bodies under symbols and costumes, under sins and silence, in order to cover up that shame. I am proposing an unveiling and rediscovering of the body in a compassionate and ethical manner that would open the way to reconnecting with those parts of us which have been separated by trauma and kept away by oppression. This is a natural path towards the realization of our true potential for becoming complete.