

Touching Water

A study of touch, movement and relationships

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Abstract

Touching Water was inspired by Saint John Paul II's Theology of the Body, Contact Improvisation and Continuum Movement. It is a study of theology, movement, touch and water and how they are integral to our relationships with others.

The research on touch is in its infancy. A deeper interest in this sense began developing in the 1970's/1980's, the same timeframe that Contact Improvisation (1972) and Theology of the Body (1979-1984) were introduced into the world. What did a post-modern dance technique and a series of lectures by the Pope have in common? *The importance of the connection between bodies.*

Emilie Conrad's Continuum Movement can be used to further unite theology and dance. Through her immersion into the undulating movements of Haitian prayer, she discovered "God is not elsewhere, but is moving through our cells and in every part of us with its undulating message." She compares the "movement of God within us" to the "fluid nature of ourselves", an analogy also reflected in Theology of the Body.

Touching Water applies the principles of Continuum Movement to Contact Improvisation; through movement and touch we create a physical dialogue between couples, enriching their bond. Weaving arts and sciences with theology and relationships, we aim to connect the physical body to our deepest desire, our oneness with God - from a universal human level, to our intimate partners, to ourselves.

"Is LOVE an art? Then it requires **knowledge** and **effort**."

Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*ⁱ

Introduction

Imagine a college student layered in tights, leotard, and sweats sitting in her Philosophy of Dance class. Her professor leans against the edge of the trash can as he lectures and she cringes, picturing the germs. The question being discussed – what is dance? The same question every class and the definition seems to broaden and she fears she will never get an answer. As this realization sets in, the professor catches her eye and a satisfied grin spreads. He knows she now gets it – at the end of the semester she will still not have a concrete answer to – what is dance? She sighs and slouches in her seat as the futility settles in.

Frustration is a great motivator. What *IS* dance?

It has taken me thirteen years to stumble upon this answer and fourteen more months to write it down. Dance is rooted in movement. Sometimes grand, sometimes subtle, sometimes nothing more than stillness. We say we know dance when we see it. Yet, despite its variances, there is one word repeatedly used to describe dancers - graceful. Translation: Full of grace. There is such momentous power and responsibility embedded in this word. Grace is a free gift – a gift to respond to God's call, and as humans we are called to love, nothing more, nothing less.

There is a dancer in each of us, rushing through us as a torrent of waves, crashing and also gently ebbing. A constant current of peacefulness and passion. Sorrow and joy. Suffering and compassion. Love.

Saint John Paul II redefined for our modern era our thirst for love. He revealed that the thirst of our physical body reflects our soul's thirst for unity. Through a series of lectures entitled Theology of the Body, he challenged the world to clearly see the divine design of ourselves, a wisdom we may have once known, but most of us have since forgotten. His reminder is invaluable. Writer, speaker and Theology of the Body expert Christopher West summarizes, "...our bodies are not mere shells in which our true 'spiritual selves' live. We are a profound unity of body and soul, matter and spirit. In a very real way, we are our bodies."ⁱⁱ As Theology of the Body asserts "our bodies make visible the invisible" we begin to understand that our bodies give love a physical form. Can it then bare truth that the art of movement cannot be separated from the art of love? If so, then simply put, dance *is* love.

I. The Knowledge

We say we know dance when we see it. Will we know love when we feel it?

When we hear the words dance and love, we may envision a couple's first dance at their wedding or the strong passion of the Argentine tango. Maybe we laughingly think of the clever quip of the horizontal mambo. Can we discuss all three in the same vein? Absolutely. The common thread in these images, the cornerstone that bears the weight, is the connection to another person. An additional beautiful example is Contact Improvisation.

Reflecting on a recent Contact Improvisation class, appropriately titled the *Athletics of Intimacy*, I was reminded again how lucky we are as dancers to be given the gift to physically connect with other people. In this style of dance it is crucial to understand the touch, weight and vulnerability of the bodies of others. Through this medium we learn the importance of the connection between bodies - how to be in tune with one another, how to trust one another, how to be the support and how to be held. My head and heart were bombarded; if strangers can feel this connectedness and relatedness in the safe sphere of a dance class, there is a definite and obvious need for this to translate to personal relationships as well, especially within marriage.

In relationships we need to find and embrace the little moments of contact throughout the day, and also train ourselves to connect our energy when we are apart. The strength of these connections is vital to sustain us when the moments of physical and emotional distance enter our lives. Let's take the principles of Contact Improvisation and teach them to couples, so the world can reap the benefits of this incredible art.

Marriage is a union of bodies. Sex consummates the marriage as two bodies become one, the ultimate sign of love. But, do we fully *get* what it means to be "one flesh"? The beauty of this unity is revealed over and over again in our daily lives, and we must be attuned to it to see it. Catholic Psychologist Dr. Gregory Bottaro expounded, **any touch between spouses** is tied to their conjugal life together. If two bodies become one in marriage then the other person becomes our body as well. As we are intimately aware of ourselves, we must be sensitive to all the moments of contact with our partner and to the emotional connection when we are apart.

We are body and soul, matter and spirit. Our presence, how we choose to move with and touch one another, is prayer. In the simplicity of being present to each other, our bodies pray and no words are needed. Our physical and spiritual natures become entwined when we move together, when we dance.

Dance/Movement

From basic observation, I think it's safe to say that couples who are emotionally distant are also physically distant from each other. However, there is also truth in the fact that our **physical bodies can affect our internal feelings**. The basics of how we touch each other throughout the day - how we physically lean on one another, accept another's weight, and listen and move with one another - must become a cornerstone of marriage. It is my conjecture that simple, safe connections can become a bridge during conflict or when trust has been breached, and even strengthen the bond before it breaks. Conflict is unavoidable in relationships, and I believe the physicality of touch can shape or reshape our feelings during these moments of tension.

The "facial feedback hypothesis"ⁱⁱⁱ argues that our brain pays attention to the muscles in our face and in turn affects our emotions. If we smile, we will then feel happy. If we frown, we will feel sad. This theory has been broadened to embrace the entire body as well. The second most viewed TED talk avers "Your body language shapes who you are"^{iv}. Amy Cuddy has become the go-to expert on power poses due to her viral TED talk on the subject. Her stance, if you will, asserts that creating a physically imposing posture with your body – a power pose – increases your testosterone and decreases the stress hormone cortisol, boosting your confidence. The external affects the internal. You fake it 'til you make it. Or as Ms. Cuddy prefers, "*Fake it 'til you become it.*" An interesting note: Ms. Cuddy has had extensive ballet training. Could this background in dance have influenced her field of research?

While it can be difficult to control our emotions, it is easier to control our muscles. Can we bridge gaps caused by tension or conflict through the physicality of our bodies? Can we help heal our internal with the physical, instead of compounding the hurt by withholding touch?

Touch

“The experience of touch is basic to discovering who we are and who is other and how we dance this life together...”

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen^v

The simplest of touch can make a difference. Even a high five. In the 2010 New York Times article, “Evidence That Little Touches Do Mean So Much”^{vi}, Michael W. Kraus analyzed the number of touches between teammates during NBA games, every bump, hug and high five.

“Good teams tended to be touchier than bad ones.”

“Players who made contact with teammates most consistently and longest tended to rate highest on measures of performance, and the teams with those players seemed to get the most out of their talent.”

“. . . The body interprets a supportive touch as ‘I’ll share the load.’”

What a parallel to husband and wife as a team! In the same article the results of a separate study conducted by Dr. Christopher Oveis of Harvard seemed to support this assertion as he recorded the frequency and length of touching each couple engaged in while discussing difficult periods in their relationship. Results were preliminary, **“but it looks so far like the couples who touch more are reporting more satisfaction in the relationship.”**

There is a universal longing for touch and now even an app for it. A recent New York Times op-ed piece accurately asked and answered its own question – [*Who Needs a Cuddle Buddy? Everyone, It Turns Out.*](#)^{vii} Cuddlr was launched by Charlie Williams with the intent to help individuals find someone to cuddle. Mr. Williams believes “we don’t get enough touch in our daily lives”. I think most would agree with him. He is also very clear that Cuddlr isn’t meant for dates or hookups, the aim is to get people thinking about physical touch. The goal of this app seems to be pointed in the right direction. However, the irony is ripe that to satisfy this precious desire, we have to first touch the *screen* of our smart phone to physically connect to another person.

In contrast, going directly to the source, Blessed Mother Teresa beautifully exemplified the power of touch through her life’s mission. She brought dignity to the poor and dying – dignity to humanity – through the gift of her hands. She reached out and held the sick and destitute in the slums, those who were considered untouchable. It wasn’t “natural” for her, she wasn’t a “touchy” person, but she knew the significance of this sense. To touch someone is a prayer, something each of us has felt in the squeeze of a hand or a consoling hug. When Saint John Paul II met Mother Teresa in Kolkata, India, he entered into the slums where she was caring for the sick and dying. Mother Teresa walked over to him, took his hands and laid them on the suffering. He later remarked during his visit that this place “bears witness to the primacy of love.”^{viii}

The importance of human contact at the end of life is just as important as when we draw our first breath. Touch is our first primal sense, how we first greet the world, how a mother bonds with her newborn child. Numerous studies have concluded the crucial effects of touch on the body and mind, especially with babies. In the 1980's, research was discovering that the neurochemical effects of skin-to-skin contact were critical to the health and development of infants. The parents' presence was important, but could not replace touch itself. "Research by Theodore Wacks, a psychologist at Purdue, showed that infants who experienced more skin-to-skin contact had an advantage in mental development in the first six months of life."^{ix}

In the 1990's, Kangaroo Care started gaining popularity in North America for premature babies in the NICU. This practice of placing the baby directly on the mother (or father's) chest, skin-to-skin, has incredible benefits for both parent and infant. Studies have found it stabilizes the baby's "heart and respiratory rates, improves oxygen saturation rates, better regulates an infant's body temperature, and conserves a baby's calories." The benefits to parents include: improved bonding, increased breast milk supply, increased confidence in ability to care for their babies, and an increased sense of control in one of the most life-changing moments of one's life.^x Kangaroo Care has since become a more common practice for full-term babies as well. Within the first minute of birth, before any measurements are taken, the baby is placed directly on the mother's chest, skin-to-skin.

This contact is also thought to help mother and child communicate. According to Kathryn Barnard, a professor of nursing at the University of Washington, "about 80 percent of a baby's communication is through its body movement. It's easier to read a baby's communication with skin-to-skin contact." "The more a mother holds her baby the more aware she is of the baby's needs."^{xi}

Although language is learned to help us communicate with the world more clearly, it may come as a surprise to learn that as adults the majority of communication still comes from body language – our movement. Only seven percent of a message comes from the actual words. Tone, pacing and inflection convey 38%, while a whopping 55% of the message is communicated through appearance and body language. If it's true for babies that the intimacy of skin helps mothers understand them, why would it not hold true later in life – for a married couple, when they are "one flesh"? It is forever reiterated that communication is the key to a healthy relationship. By reinforcing the importance of touch, can a couple learn to better tap into their primal sense to innately understand each others' needs?

One cannot discuss the wonders of touch and not bring up the hormone oxytocin. Truthfully, the more I learn about it, the more I fall in love with it. It cannot be overlooked or understated that in all the connections of love throughout one's life, oxytocin is there. It is released during birth – bonding mother and child. It is released during breastfeeding to deepen this connection. It is released in hugs and embraces with friends. It is released during sex – intimate love. During a recent Continuum Movement class, I learned the most oxytocin is released in our body at death - when we meet God, the perfect embodiment of love itself.

Oxytocin is dubbed the "love hormone", but researchers from the University of Bonn may have found a new nickname for it, the "fidelity hormone."^{xii} According to a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Neuroscience*, "men in committed relationships under the influence of oxytocin kept an even greater distance from attractive women." In an additional experiment "researchers concluded oxytocin may be responsible for monogamy in humans":

Another experiment was conducted during the same study where 40 heterosexual men were again given either a placebo or a nasal spray of oxytocin. They were then shown pictures of their partners and other women to compare the two based on their attractiveness. Their brain activities were monitored.

Researchers noted that when men under the influence of oxytocin looked at their partner's picture, the reward system in their brain was more active, suggesting they found their partner more attractive. This led researchers to conclude that oxytocin may be responsible for monogamy in humans, which is not common in other mammals.

If oxytocin is released through touch, it can be conjectured that being fully aware of and embracing all the moments of contact in a relationship will strengthen the bond, the fidelity between husband and wife.

Water

A quick human biology lesson. What is the only other hormone stored with oxytocin in the posterior pituitary before it is released into the body? ADH (antidiuretic hormone) - the hormone which regulates the water in our body.^{xiii}

Besides being the *only* hormones that basically “hang out” together in the posterior pituitary, they are also incredibly similar in structure – only two amino acids differ, and both are released to essentially quench our thirst. Oxytocin is released as we try to quench our thirst for love (for unity) and ADH is released to regulate the water levels in our body, to prevent our physical thirst. It is not a coincidence that they are so similar and reside next to each other in the brain.

Author and speaker Christopher West clearly explains the heart of Theology of the Body when describing our thirst. In our longing for union to fill our deepest desire to be with another, our body aches to become *one* with the other. Of the last seven words Jesus breathes on the cross he says, *I thirst*. Is he only expressing his utter physical depletion? Or is he telling us something deeper? He is man like us, and He feels what we feel, the thirst for oneness – the ultimate union with God. The physical thirst for water we feel mirrors the thirst of our soul to once again be with God, and this desire for oneness is manifested in our thirst to be with the other – to become one flesh.

Our bodies are about 60% water and we cannot survive without it. It has dictated the course of history throughout the world - floods, famines, droughts, ports, exploration, spas, relaxation...the list goes on and on. The power water has over our lives is limitless. French novelist, dramatist, essayist and Nobel Prize winner Romain Rolland coined the term “oceanic feeling” to describe the psychological feeling of limitlessness as it relates to religion.^{xiv} It is in a letter to his contemporary Sigmund Freud where we first see Rolland’s allusion to this oceanic sensation. As Rolland embraces this term to differentiate between “religious feeling” and religion, I believe his choice of words draws a deeper comparison to the Church than he realized. His metaphor supports the analogy of God’s presence in our lives as water. Jesus refers to Himself as the living water. As such, the wave of love that washes over us and flows between us can surely be described as an oceanic feeling.

Living water. Streams of undulating currents coursing through us, flowing, pulsing, inspiring our every movement. *Every* movement, you may ask? If I take the subway to work, and not a ferry or surfboard, does water really influence my commute?

Observe a typical subway car during rush hour, and you'll agree, yes, it does. Water moves by osmosis, it moves to create a balance. On a packed subway car, people cram in on top of each other. Everyone touching. At the next stop a lot of people exit the train. If the person smushed next to you doesn't leave, do you continue to stand pressed against him even though the car has emptied? No. You move to have more room around you, everyone spreads out again. The commuters have naturally recreated a balance within the space. They have moved like water.

Contrary to the stranger on the train, we do like to touch, to be right near the person we love. Enter cohesion! Water is cohesive – it's sticky. Water molecules like to stay close together and they stick together by cohesion. The chemical makeup of a water molecule (H₂O) creates a positive end and a negative end, which makes it ripe for hydrogen bonding to other water molecules via electrostatic attraction. In other words, chemistry and electricity! The same words we use to describe our attraction to one another, to explain our desire to move closer and snuggle next to our love.

To finish our biology lesson, we will now connect oxytocin and water through our body's largest organ, skin. As mentioned earlier, skin-to-skin contact is extremely important in bonding for mother and child, and for bonding in humans in general. Oxytocin is increased during this skin-to-skin contact. Besides being a vital receptor for the sense of touch, skin also plays an important role in the protection against the body's loss of water; essentially, helping to regulate the level of water in our body, similar to ADH. The organ which allows humans to physically connect with one another can be linked to both hormones designed to quench our spiritual and physical thirsts.

II. The Effort

We have touched upon what Fromm calls the *knowledge*, but how do we begin the next step – the *effort*? How can we put this into practice for couples?

If dance is love, and touch is prayer, and water reflects our deepest longing for union, wouldn't it be incredible if there was a way to wed the body and soul through water, movement and touch? It was my introduction to Continuum Movement in college that inspired and molded the way I now see the interplay between bodies, how I enter the medium of Contact Improvisation. It is a theory of movement, originated by Emilie Conrad, to engage the water within us to create a deeper connection to ourselves and to others. To quote Ms. Conrad, "**God is not elsewhere, but is moving through our cells and in every part of us with its undulating message.**"^{xv} This message is love.

To touch someone is a prayer - and if husband and wife are one - each time they touch they are essentially praying for each other and with each other. This deepens the level of their communication. As with a mother and child, the physical contact of spouses can only bring them closer together, to help them communicate more fully. Choreographer, dancer and teacher of Continuum Movement, Robin Becker describes it well^{xvi}:

All life has been shaped by the movement of water. From the formation of galaxies to the pulsing cells of the human body, all life forms share the fundamental movement motif of

spiraling fluid systems. From the waves of the air, the waters of the planet, the rays of the sun and the unfolding growth of plants-- all life is in movement. All exchange of information within the body and the larger world happens through the universal language of movement. Shaped by water and made primarily of water, our bodies are liquid crystalline structures designed to carry, receive and transmit vibration. Continuum offers a context in which we explore the fluid nature of the body, and how all life is connected through a dynamic resonating field of relationship.

Providing the knowledge that touch is essential to a couple's bond is the first step. The effort they must put forth to connect is what follows. Tailoring the principles of Continuum Movement to a Contact Improvisation workshop will allow partners to practice the physicality of touching, holding, surrendering and supporting one another. Movement and touch – the dance – can help to bridge the emotional and physical gaps life is guaranteed to bring. To quote one of the founders of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, "Does not [one] know that movements are as eloquent as words?"^{xvii}

Finding the moments at home is integral to their connection as one body. In translating this for couples, the beauty resides in the simplicity: it starts with presence, with breath, a moment of stillness to drink the other in and to listen to their needs. It can be a hug, a grasp of the hand, a kiss on the forehead. Close your eyes and feel their closeness. Lean a head on their shoulder. Give them your weight. Accept theirs. Spoon. Snuggle on the couch. Lay your hand on her back; lay your head on his chest. Brush against each other as you pass. Find all the small moments to connect...they're innumerable.

As an athlete, you must stay hydrated. But, sometimes you don't have time to sit and drink a bottle of water. In high school our coaches would tell us, every time you can, grab at least a sip from the water fountain – all those little sips add up and keep you hydrated.

All the little touches add up as well.

Breath is life and life is love and love is beauty and beauty is holy.

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