



## Human Touch

By Wendy Marks  
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About a year ago, my then 92-year-old mother moved to the Boston area to live near me after 45 years in Florida. She had been independent her whole life, even after my father died, and remained in her house for seven years, after which time she moved to an independent apartment for another four years. After suffering a few falls, followed by increasing mobility issues, she felt it was time to be near her daughter for support. I agreed. I'd been lobbying for this for years.



Mom had never been a "toucher." Even if I was leaving after a visit and wouldn't be seeing her for months to come, a peck on the cheek was her preferred form of physical connection. When I asked her about it, as I did regularly over the years, she said, "I'm not like you, your father and brother. I don't like to be touched." It's true that my brother, father and I would be very happy if someone would come and massage us every day; we were all very touch-based and when deprived of touch became cranky, or at least I did. My father, who with his varied experience had learned several types of massage, taught both his children, and it became a nightly ritual to rub Dad's head and feet. (I can't say we liked it, but the walking-on-his-back massage was great fun as a kid.)

For a long time I thought there were folks who didn't like or need touch. I didn't understand that touch is a basic human, animal, and perhaps even plant need, essential for proper mental and physical development and health. Numerous studies over the years have shown this to be true. Touch is one of the first ways a baby learns about the world. It is the basis for all other senses and essential to understanding the environment— hot, cold, wet, dry, soft, rough. Feelings, textures and shapes define our world around us. We need touch to navigate the world and to be comforted.

We have come a long way in understanding the need for touch. There are now professional cuddlers (I'm sure they have a fancy name) who go into infant intensive care units and provide personal contact to sick babies. Lots of folks volunteer in animal shelters to handle abandoned cats, dogs and other pets. We are becoming aware of this essential need. There is even an app called Cuddlr that links you to people in your area for nonsexual touching sessions. This app surely came about because there are times in our lives when we cannot easily access nonsexual touch. I'm not advocating it, it's just interesting that it exists. And more of us are living alone: not in a relationship, or our kids are gone.

So back to my mother. She moved to Massachusetts, settled into her new apartment, and we got into our routine of a weekly Sunday visit when I would pay her bills, discuss family and local events, make her dinner and go home. But I realized that something was different. She was unsettled and asking me to do tasks that I normally would not need to do for her, like help her with her shoes, or put oil on her arms. One night driving back home I got it. She was needing touch— and was much too proud to ask for it. So how was I going to get a person who said she never needed touch to allow it?

Actually, it was easy. Mom loved to receive Reiki, a healing mode which often involves gentle touch, but does not require it. So on our next visit I said, "Let's try something new each time: before I do tasks and we chat, let's do some Reiki. It will help you get stronger." Over the following weeks as I included touch in our sessions, Mom became more relaxed. In fact when I got there the first thing she often did was take off her shoes and lie down ready for her session. I would spend an hour working on her and could feel the tension leaving her body. When she sat up she said she felt wonderful. I felt pretty good too for figuring out what she really needed.

And that was the point. It took me about a month to realize what I know from my work every day, that lack of touch was a problem for Mom. I felt a bit foolish that it hadn't occurred to me, but nonetheless pleased to have eventually figured it out.

Mom died recently. It was a good death and she was in a great place mentally and emotionally. When my kids came home for the funeral they asked what I needed. Yes, I needed help with packing boxes and emptying the apartment, but what I mostly needed was touch. Mom had taught me her last lesson. . . What makes us human is our need for each other. And touch is a great part of that need.

Namaste,  
Wendy