

PRACTICE POINTS

Touch is our language



Reclaiming sensibilities in an unsensible time

BY DON DILLON, RMT



It's impossible to estimate the full effects this pandemic will claim on national health and well-being. Early loss of life, economic loss with attendant personal financial stress, disruptions in social-cultural rituals and engagement, and resources diverted for urgent non-COVID cases were just the start of the impact to citizens' health and well-being. Over the longer term, interrupted care for chronic conditions, psychic trauma, mental illness, front-line worker burnout and prolonged economic injury can be expected to exact a terrible toll. In one estimate for British Columbia, if just 10% more people post-pandemic require mental health support than pre-pandemic, the health care system will be ill-equipped to handle the load.ⁱ

Massage therapists will be challenged by the depth and scope of care required in this lengthy pandemic era. We will be treating teenagers with anxiety, essential workers suffering the physiological effects of stress, the elderly and children who suffered in isolation, the unemployed who have lost so much. How can our profession respond adequately to our citizen populations in such complex and wretched period?

It turns out, the field of "somatics" – movement and bodywork – may be properly situated to not only respond to the needs of our patient populations, but return them to a biological and psychological inheritance vanquished long before this pandemic. Skilled and nurturing touch, a tenet of our vocation, may offer a component as part of a larger reform in our society to return individuals to their sensibilities.

In "Touched by the Goddess: The Physical, Psychological and Spiritual Powers of Bodywork," Deane Juhan posits how bodywork and movement in its various forms can contribute to broad sweeping societal healing. Perhaps best known as the author of "Job's Body: A Handbook for Bodywork," Juhan was educated at the University of Colorado,

University of Michigan and the University of California. An experience with bodywork at Esalen Institute in Big Sur profoundly changed his vocational direction. His publication may be a guidebook to set us right with our senses, and in our relations to self and others.

Chapter by chapter, Juhan effectively and poetically explores subjects fundamental to our field, at junction with the biological, psychological and social fabric of society. I believe his reflections, although written pre-pandemic, have something to offer us in evolving our professional identity, confronting chronic sticking points in our arguments, while finding creative ways to respond to a population assaulted by the pandemic fallout.

Juhan begins with the concept of touch as food. Soaring mortality rates in orphanages during the 19th century persisted until staff were added to provide touch and interaction beyond the biological needs of feeding and providing shelter. In the ignored orphans, bladder and bowel eruption was the common cause of death. "Without tactile stimulation, the autonomic reflexes are not initiated and established; without receiving sensation, the infants' nervous systems could not locate and operate crucial muscles."ⁱⁱ

At a slightly better level, children receiving more touch than in the orphanage but still insufficient would suffer "deprivation dwarfism," marked by stunted growth, misshapen skulls, crooked limbs and deformed rib cages, and severe cognitive and emotional difficulties. "The absence of touching actually subverts the successful expression of their genes,"ⁱⁱⁱ with impairments mimicking severe malnutrition.

We may consider these conditions largely of the past, or

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The “Goddess” Juhan refers to in his title references Hygieia, goddess of health in Greek and Roman mythology. She is the companion and daughter of Asclepius, god of medicine.

Modern medicine – representing the archetype of Asclepius – with its focus on pharmacology, surgery and technology commands authority, credibility and endorsement. Asclepius opposes the incursion and interruption of illness, relies on systematic analysis to identify noxious agents, plots a specific cure for a specific condition. Disease is clearly an unwanted, outside threat, and therapies are designed to intervene between the patient, acting as a “biological policeman,” and evoking the metaphor of war. Possessing knowledge, expertise, authority, Asclepius is powerful, and draws awe and endorsement in the form of health care dollars for his services.

However, there is a chink in the defenses of Asclepius. Modern medicine has been very successful in controlling diseases humans share with other mammals – germs, toxins, genetic anomalies and trauma. Yet against diseases specifically human – developmental, degenerative, chronic, psychosomatic, functional – its results are appalling.

Enter our need to resurrect Hygieia’s archetype in our approach to health and preventative measures. Hygieia reminds us “pathology is a relationship – as biographical as it is biological – and not merely the intrusion of the autonomous germ.”^{vii} Hers is a viewpoint of inclusion, not polarization, of laying the conditions for health rather than submitting to the agents of disease. Hers is “an educational and diplomatic – not a military – mission.” Hygieia emulates teacher, not authority. Social worker, not policeman. Nurturing simple principles and productive habits, she seeks to circumvent pathology by actively and intelligently engaging the agency and resourcefulness of the individual.

And what of bodywork’s implied allegiance with “woo woo” or anti-science without serious therapeutic merit? Juhan warns against such an association with an alternative archetype; the mystic. Espousing mayhem, superstition, esoteric claims and supernatural forces, Juhan maintains, “the profession is much better served if we can remember we are not engaged in an enterprise in any way unscientific, or opposed to simple and demonstrable axioms.” Juhan suggests bodywork and movement therapies can antidote in some measure rising health care costs and the epidemic of lifestyle diseases. “Hygieia is simply the other side of medical science, the side primarily concerned with examining and redirecting the behaviour of the host in the dis-eased relationship.”

In the next article, we examine Juhan’s perspective on biomechanics and pathology, muscles and emotions, and incorporating bodywork as a social force.

REFERENCES:

i <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/post-pandemic-support-1.5933269>

ii Juhan, D., *The Physical, Psychological & Spiritual Powers of Bodywork*, Barrytown/Station Hill, page 10

iii *ibid*

iv *Ibid*, page 12

v *Ibid*, page 15

vi *Ibid*, page 17

vii *Ibid*, page 5

in resource-poor countries, but there is evidence in our modern societies of touch deprivation. Consider cases where touch may have been conditional, ambivalent, violent or sexually violating. “Many of the chronic psychological problems and maladaptive behaviours evidenced by stressed lab animals are reminiscent of behaviours commonly observed in homes, schools, workplaces and communities. Children undernourished in this way tend to withdraw in isolation or become unruly to secure attention.... Such children tend to become adults with muted capacity for self-awareness, self-regulation, personal intimacy and generally adaptive responses to naturally changing conditions in their lives.”^{iv}

Juhan argues touch, so important to our development, is a form of language. “...We ignore to our impoverishment whole realms of information, negotiation strategies and adaptive solutions that are the lingua franca of the rest of the animal kingdom.”^v Promoting “Touch IQ,” Juhan states “bodywork puts us directly in touch with biological intelligence at work in a living creature, and places us in the midst of their processes of learning and adaptive change.”^{vi}

Juhan then sets his hand to addressing the maturation of the bodywork profession, with its struggle for identity and credibility. He acknowledges the unwanted associations with “touchy-feely,” “alternative,” “unproven,” and the sex-trade while confronting issues on the road to professionalism created by publicity, legislation, the implementation of standards and regulatory controls.

To guide us, Juhan turns to a discussion of archetypes – characters that represent universal patterns of human nature – to frame the potential of bodywork and value of wellbeing.