

By Ourselves Together

2020 April 5

Don't go to work. Don't see your friends. Don't visit your grandmother in the nursing home. Don't bring food to your sister who works at a hospital. Don't hold your partner's hand while she gives birth. Don't play together. Don't pray together. Don't hug.

The rules rain down from everywhere now. It's amazing how quickly the most unnatural behavior becomes a habit, almost but not quite, instinctive, as if we've always done it this way. This particular list is from a writer this week in the [Washington Post](#). She says, *Of the many cruelties of the coronavirus pandemic, this is one of the hardest to accept: In a time when all we want is to be close to the people we care about, closeness is the one thing we can't have. Six feet has never felt further away.* And yet we're doing it – thank God, we're doing it – millions of people, with selflessness and imagination and resilience and grace, some with children in the house, some with others to care for in the house, some with stressful jobs to go to, even if your commute now is just a short walk to the basement, some with no jobs at all. You're doing it – keeping apart, and it isn't easy. Technology is beautiful, but it is not the same as presence or touch; it brings us into lovely spaces, and also lonely spaces, painful spaces, toxic spaces. We're learning together and teaching each other how to travel safely and sanely in this digital landscape, how to stay bright and alert, how to help each other, and remind each other a few times a day, to step back from screen and just breathe. Be in your body again.

Psychologists *are talking about the long-term effects of our new, socially-distant reality*, wondering now not only how we'll survive the virus when it comes, but how we can survive and thrive in isolation. For the one, we need the best science that our international community can gather. We need to muster our best minds. For the other, this question of how to stay human apart from humanity, for that question, we need to muster our best hearts.

In the poem that Sara shared, Leslea Newman names part of what we're missing, such a precious, sacred, simple thing:

*Thousands of years ago, a man stuck out his right hand
to show a stranger he had no weapon.
The stranger took his hand and shook it
to make sure he had nothing up his sleeve.
And that is how it began.*

It reminds me of something one of you said on March 8, the last Sunday we were here all together. She came out of the sanctuary after the service like this [*arms across her chest*] and said, "I can't trust myself not to shake hands. I know I'm going to start hugging somebody. I don't know how else to go to church." It's old in us, embodied love.

*I remember hairy hands and freckled hands,
young smooth hands and old wrinkled hands,
red polished fingernails and bitten jagged fingernails,
stained hands of hairdressers who had spent all day dying,*

dirty hands of gardeners who dug down deep into the good earth.

*I remember high fives
and how we'd laugh when we missed
and then do a do-over.*

*I remember tapping a stranger
on the shoulder and saying,
"Your tag is showing.
Do you mind if I tuck it in?"
She didn't mind. I tucked it in.*

*I remember the joy of offering
my index finger to a new baby
who wrapped it in her fist
as we gazed at each other in wonder.*

*I remember sitting with a mourner
at a funeral, not saying a word,
simply taking her hand.*

We know that we are built to be together. Even introverts like me know in our bones, literally, that we evolved in such a way that we rest easy in company. Our defenses soften, our heart rates quiet down; blood pressure, blood sugar, our immuno-defense systems, all settle more when we feel safe among others than when we're alone. Deep in our cellular memory, we trust our companions will help us pick berries, staunch our wounds, share their blankets, and chase back the saber-tooth tigers. But when we're alone for too long (not in chosen solitude, but lonely), old hormones awaken the old lizard brain, tensing us, testing us, preparing us to fight or flee or freeze. Left on our own, we are mentally and physically at risk.

Sarah Kaplan, in her piece in the [Washington Post](#), says there's plenty of evidence suggesting that a wave across the driveway makes a difference. Phone calls, Facetime, even Zoom, even Zoom webinars, make a difference. Kindness makes a seismic difference. It's hard to believe that a handful of such "touches" could actually contribute to the status of national health, but it's true. Imagine ten "touches" a week: a phone call (very old-fashioned) to someone you know lives by themselves, so they will hear your human voice, your breath, your friendliness; a shout across the alley; an emailed poem; a brief response to your Care Convener here at church (*Thank you, I'm fine. And most importantly: how are you?*); a card in the mail (also old-fashioned); a note slipped under the door of your neighbor; a smiley face on your tax return, because somebody - some body - opens those envelopes; a Facebook post that shares your very favorite secret recipe, guarded with your life all these years till now, because you know *we* need to know how to make those cookies, and you know *you* need to see our responses, our likes and our hearts and our thanks and our faces.

Ten "touches," at least, in a week.

This is our work now, our most important work. We are learning, and teaching each other, how to be by ourselves all together, how to touch without touching, hand to hand, heart to heart.

We are holding so much on our own, in our houses, in our heads: confusion, shock, disbelief, fear for our health and our financial future, fear for everyone we love and everybody else; we're holding grief (and that's not too strong a word) for the familiar patterns and rhythms and tiny details – so many – that were fabric of our days, now all unraveled; and we are holding in our bodies, if not yet our minds, the tremors, the spasms of anticipatory grief for losses we really cannot yet imagine. That's a lot to hold on your own. Even if your house is full of people, it's a lot to hold without other people in your day, diluting the intensity – all those anonymous ones who used to bustle all around you, sometimes annoying. You'd give anything to brush up against them now.

Somehow, in the early morning when the house is still; or on your walk at night when all that's noisy is the wind; or in the afternoon when the long day is heavy and you can't really say whether you're sad or bored or both; or at your job, where you're still working because your work is essential; somehow, every day, I hope you're finding ways, making ways, to listen to your spirit, to breathe deep and give thanks for breath, to listen for the still, small voice inside you, the same that sings from stars and bluebirds now, and tells you are not alone; this world is your home and together we're all right here and all breathing with you. *We are gathered here, on tiny planet earth, in one strong body. Hush – somebody's calling your name.*

Embodied as we are, we are.

There's a beautiful poem about Maundy Thursday, which falls in the Christian calendar in Holy Week, on the day before Good Friday. We observed it here in a Unitarian Universalist way in our Circle of Laments every year, as we will this coming Thursday. The Christian rite commemorates a poignant scene, when Jesus gathered his friends, his weary friends, and washed their feet – a most profoundly embodied act. Poet Nichola Torbett casts it in the present moment:

Maundy Thursday Realized (John 13:1-17)

*On that day
when they realized their salvation was at hand,
they gathered together.
Wealthy CEO's knelt before their assembly-line workers
abandoning smart phones for towels,
and white folks took the feet of
Asian immigrants from the nail salon
and cleaning women and childcare workers
tenderly in their hands, cupping the heels.*

*And we wanted nothing other than to hold one another
and eat good food that we
grew and cooked together.*

*On that day,
 people everywhere moved their bodies for joy
 rather than penance, and all people could dance.
 Women ran admiring hands over dimpled flesh
 and smiled into the mirror,
 and cosmetic surgeons' offices were shuttered.
 On that day, bodies ceased to be shameful,
 stopped being something other people had,
 something to be avoided or ignored,
 or shot down, or incarcerated, neutralized.
 Something surplus, or dangerous.
 Bodies were revered, for their many colors, differing abilities and shapes,
 scents-
 miracles of incarnation,
 the only way we have on this earth of knowing one another.*

The only way we have on this earth of knowing one another.

We are finding other ways, but every single one of them - every text and tweet, every call and every post - echoes what we knew first not in the mind and not on the screen, but in the flesh, the soft and tender flesh, aching to be touched.

In the old story, Jesus gathers his friends. He has an intuition, a premonition; he knows, without fully knowing, that something is coming, something mighty, something terrible and hard, something that will change the world. He knows it's not only about him. In the old story Jesus gathers his friends, with a sense that somehow maybe kindness, maybe touch, would be the right next thing. He sits them down, one by one, and takes off their filthy sandals, picks up their sweaty, stinking feet, caressing them, massaging all the little bones, the toes, the leathery and blistered soles. He soaks them in warm water, dries them, rubs them tenderly with scented oil. Their defenses soften, their heart rates quiet down; blood pressure, blood sugar, their immuno-defense systems, their reptile brains, all skitter and nervous, ready to pounce (or give up), all settle down. They know, if nothing else, they are beloved, worthy of love, though they doubt it, all the time. Skin on skin reminds them they're beloved.

How can we do this from six feet apart? Care for each other like this?

Start with the sacred vessel that is your own body. Start by cherishing. Run your hands over the flesh, the joints, the aching muscles. Drink your water. Eat your good food. Make sleep the most important thing you do all day. Connect with your people online, and then take a step back from the screen. Put down your phone. Go outside. Wash your hands. Fill your lungs with air, and breathe out your thanks.

And then – every day, at least once a day, hold in your heart, in your mind, in your generous spirit, the bodies of other human beings. People in hospitals, patients and workers, and workers in factories, post offices, stores. Consider where you're shopping now, where your food comes from, and all the stuff you need, or all the stuff you want. Place the needs of your body, its

desires, in proximity to the needs and desires of others. Does the order you're placing, the thing that you're buying, come from a store or a warehouse where workers have walked out, because it isn't safe to be there? Order something else, from somewhere else. Take the time. Or maybe order nothing for a while. Stand in solidarity, right beside those other bodies.

Before lunch, close your eyes, and place the hunger inside your own body in proximity to the hunger of somebody else. Does your local food shelf have the money it needs to meet the rising tide? Is there some way you could help? Send money? Drop off home-made face masks? Buy extra when you're shopping, even one can extra, and leave it by the door? There has to be a way.

In the evening, place the blessed safety that your body knows right now in proximity to the danger other bodies are feeling: the transgender teen stuck at home now with family who don't understand; the woman or child threatened by abuse. At night, in the dark, breathe gratitude, then place your sheltered body in proximity to the person with no safe home – and consider: do the shelters and hotlines have what they need? Is there any way, any tangible way, you can help? Surely, there is.

Think of that neighbor who lives by himself. Across the chasm of the driveway or the hallway in your building, place your very body in proximity to his loneliness now, and pick up the phone, or a pen, or a bag of bananas, and embrace him now, with all your heart.

Body and soul, we survive and we'll thrive apart, all together.

For just a moment, all by ourselves and never alone, we'll be silent together. I invite you to speak into the silence the names of those you're holding in your heart in love and prayer today, and to open your hands to catch the names that all the rest of us are speaking.

silence

May you be filled with loving kindness.
May you be well.
May you be peaceful and at ease.
May you and your people be whole.

AMEN