

Healing Touches

I once worked at a local hospital as a volunteer chaplain. One day I walked into a room and saw a woman with her skin drawn tightly over her face. I stared for a minute. I recognized her condition as an advanced case of scleroderma.

“Don’t be afraid to touch me,” she said. Then I did an impulsive thing. I hugged her – very gently. She smiled and said, “I don’t remember the last time someone did that.”

We’ve long recognized that patients need physical touch. They call it skin hunger – a need for another human being to touch our skin. We have an inborn need for touch. These days, we’re learning to touch the sick, especially the long-term sick, as a way of saying, “You’re alive and I recognize it.” There is healing in that touch – the connection that says, “You’re a real person and I care about you.”

(Here, the writer “shifts gears” and is now talking about someone else.)

Dianna said that she makes it a practice to hold her father’s hand when she talks to the semi-paralyzed man. “I often share my news of the day with him. I sit directly across from him, take his hand, and look into his eyes when I talk.”

She added, “You know, it’s strange, but somehow my taking his hand and focusing on him has bonded us as never before. Dad and I got along all right before, but nothing was special between us. Since I started holding his hand, I’ve felt connected to him in a way I never felt before. *He needs that, and I discovered that I need it too.*”

Caregivers also need that healing touch. They need to have their skin hunger satisfied as well. Some people shy from hugs or touching, and we need to be careful not to violate their boundaries. Yet many of those who give long-term care need someone to touch them – just a pat on the shoulder, anything to make human contact.

When talking with Dianna about touch, she said, “You know what I’ve thought about doing? I’m too shy, but I’d like to print a big sign by the front door for visitors. In foot-high capital letters it would read: HUG ME! I LIKE IT!”

Although I doubt that most caregivers would resort to signs, it *might* be a good idea. (Dianna did buy herself a t-shirt with the words printed on it “I’m huggable.”)

“Some people never got the message, of course, but some did.” She also said that she used to be rather shy around people. “Now I’ve learned to reach out to people for hugs. I’ve even asked them.” She laughed. “No one has turned me down yet!”