

*This essay is a draft version of a chapter for the forthcoming book, *Worlding Bodies: Improvisers in Action*, a book about improvisation written by seasoned improvisers.*

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### **Human beings are wired to touch and be touched.**

No matter what the color of our skin, hair, eyes, no matter what our religion, country of origin or belief, we all crave touch, thrive on touch and know how to touch. Touch is one of the most important aspects of our shared humanity that connects us to each other and to everything. We make sense of our world through touch, which comes in infinite variety. We experience the shape, texture, temperature, the quality of everything that surrounds us through touch. We see when light touches our retina, hear when sound waves touch and vibrate our eardrum, taste when food touches our tongue, smell and recall memories when odor molecules touch sensory neurons within our nasal cavity. Through touch we define our boundaries, we understand where we end and others begin.

The intention underlying our touch is crucial in determining its outcome. Past and present joys and trauma are embedded in our cellular structure, our body memory. Somewhere in our collective history we have all endured bloodshed and suffering, pain and sorrow as well as pleasure, delight and ecstasy. When we touch consciously and with care, touch can reveal the humane capacities in all of us. In this way, touch can become a personal and political act, an ethical practice. Touch can prime us to perceive and comprehend together that the most profound form of power is the power we have to meet each other with generosity. To stand and understand that we are movement connected to the movement of everything and everyone is both humbling and empowering. To touch and let ourselves be touched reminds us of our shared vulnerability, and within that, our personal and collective strength.

### **The ability and the need to touch and be touched resides within all human beings**

From the moment of fertilization, when one sperm touches the membrane of one egg, when egg softens and yields and allows this sperm to slip through, the embryo, and then the developing fetus is bathed and caressed by amniotic fluid. Touch is the first sense we develop. Grown large enough to fill the mother's belly, the fetus encounters resistance when pressing against the womb's inner walls. Birth is a passage from liquid touch to the touch of the material world and air. Babies who aren't touched enough languish. Our skin, one of our largest sense organs, enables us to explore and understand the world through our body – mouth, hands, feet - its vast landscape that contains us, protection and sensory antenna towards our surroundings.

Settling myself into the curved back of the armchair, I reach my left hand across my chest and rest it on my right shoulder. I feel the slight coarseness of my freshly washed shirt, its seams and creases tracing lines across my fingers and palm. My attention shifts to my breathing. I notice the coolness of air as it enters my nostrils and streams along its two membranous passages to flow deep into my body. My lungs and ribs expand. I observe the moment of pause, before this in-breath turns to become this out-breath; and now, air warmed by my body, flows out. The movement I notice is one of softening. I linger with this sensation before taking my next in-breath. My next out-breath emerges as a long, deep sigh.

*This is the armchair in which my mother loved to sit and read. It's big and it envelops me, the way my mother's body contained me when she took me in her lap and stroked my arm. She told me stories of her childhood. Her voice touched me in places buried deep inside my consciousness. Her laughter still echoes far back in my earliest memories. Her body is my first experience of touch.*

Dear reader, before you move on, take a few moments to pause. Settle yourself into the back of your chair, and place a hand on your chest or belly. This simple act of touching can bring you into this very moment and how you're inhabiting it. Feel the texture of your clothing touch your fingers and palm. Let your attention shift to your breathing. Notice the coolness of air as it enters your nostrils, observe the way your lungs and ribs expand, the moment of pause, before this in-breath turns to become out-breath, and warmed by your body, flows out. Linger with this sensation before taking your next in-breath. Let your next out-breath emerge as a long, deep sigh. Let this be the beginning, and spend time journeying into your present moment sensations of inner movement. Allow yourself to be touched by thoughts or memories. Allow yourself to be touched.

### **All human beings have the ability to touch and be touched.**

The tactile world that surrounds us is abundant with stimuli. Touch enables us to perceive its richness. We can meet it through touching with skin, and with voice, with our listening, with our eyes. When we give touch, we receive touch in return – a reciprocal exchange of information from body to body. Reciprocity. From me to the myriad forms that exist around me, and their response.

I return my attention to my hand, and the way it rises and falls with each breath I take. I'm reminded that breath is an ocean – waves of breath enter and leave our body from the first breath we take, to our last out-breath when we die. The touch of my hand brings me into relationship with this ebb and flow. I let my hand float on the ocean of my breathing ... rising and falling.

*We trudge through thigh-deep snow in the middle of the night, fleeing Hungary, a country that's once again reeling from oppression, violence and revolution. Carried by my mother on her back, I feel her fear seeping straight into my heart. I am told not to make a sound, yet it's the strength and conviction in my father's voice that touches me, as he quietly urges us to keep moving, keep stepping, keep going ... until we reach the town on the other side of no-man's-land. We sail for 6 weeks, sometimes under blue skies and a hot sun, sometimes tipping and sliding as we're tossed by enormous waves, before we arrive in Australia and our feet at last touch land. I am an immigrant child, open to ridicule for the strange language I speak, odd clothes I wear, different ways of life I know. The loss of family I love affects me deeply. I grow up on the east coast of this new and enormous country, on the coast washed by the vast Pacific Ocean, and develop an intimate relationship with seemingly infinite space and inexhaustible movement. Home is close enough to the beach that it's a short walk to reach the rocks at its southern end. My passion is clambering to the top, placing hands and feet into footholds, just so, touching the soft crumbling or firm strength of stone that had withstood the passing of time. Then, sitting on the topmost, sun-warmed or wind-cooled stone, feel of salt-water air stroking or buffeting my body, I can watch the endless movement of water, as it crashes into sprays of sparkling light, then recedes, in order to return again and again, a never-ending cycle of birth and re-birth. When the sea is very rough, salty droplets land on my bare skin - face, arms, feet - touch so light, almost imperceptible, yet with the ability to jolt me awake in wonder.*

### **Human beings are all born with the ability and the need to touch and be touched.**

Touch not only communicates information about our physical body. It can also lead us into areas of inner listening and inner knowing that lie beyond language, to then emerge as thought and feeling made visible through sound, movement, writing, making. Its richness and variety can open spaces for imaginative wanderings. The wellspring of touch can draw our attention from deep inside the body to the surface and call forth immediate, appropriate response. Touch can also take our attention from skin to depth, generating well-being that emerges when we take time to listen and allow space for our own needs. The many layers of potential that a human being is capable of includes not only the power to destroy, but also the ability to create and be more caring in the ways we interact with ourselves and the world. Through the simple act of touching, we can experience how power can be generosity. Our skin and minds can begin to hold us less tightly as we experience the pleasure we derive from connectedness.

Continuing to observe my breathing, I follow the movement of my breath, as it fills and empties my lungs, moves my ribs, and begins to float my shoulder girdle under my hand. I'm thinking about my lungs, how they reach way up high into the opening made by my shoulder girdle, even a tiny bit higher than the first circle of my ribs. That's very high, I think. As my diaphragm pulls down, my shoulder girdle floats higher – the deeper I descend, the higher I rise. And I continue, simply breathing, following the rising and the falling, the expanding and the softening.

*My mother's grandmother was a bone-setter, a skill as ancient as injury and healing. If anyone in her village - woman, man or child - broke a bone or pulled a muscle, it was my great-grandmother's help they sought. She also touched the earth. Whenever she let soft, fertile soil run between her fingers, she was, she told my mother, intoxicated by its scent and feel, by a richness, fertilized, my mother would say, by the blood of the fallen, conquered and conqueror, as they swept from east to west and west to east across the plains of Central Europe. There are better ways to fertilize the earth, she'd add. My father's grandmother was a midwife. Her hands were the first to touch and hold each newborn she helped birth. Breath rising and falling, coming and going – the cycle of birth and death, and birth and death again, and again and again ...*

### **All human beings are born with the ability and the need to touch and be touched.**

Whether touch gives rise to a positive or a negative outcome depends on many things, among them, personal and collective history, context, intention. Although our capacity for conflict is deeply embedded in our cells and consciousness, deeply embedded also is our facility to touch and to receive touch in considerate and caring ways. We need to acknowledge the negative side of touch adequately, but by recognizing that we have agency to not dwell on the undesirable, we open ourselves to space, lightness and ease. Physically and creatively, our bodies can soften and become receptive, and our minds can extend wider. Through touch we can meet ourselves and our environment – people, nature, the material world, and our own bodies - with curiosity and respect. Touch can set in motion our capacity for physical, emotional and imaginative play.

My hand continues to rest on my shoulder, and I'm still following my breathing. As my shoulder floats upward on each in-breath I take, I notice how it rises into the curve of my hand and touches and fills my palm. I can feel this support, that my hand receives, rising from below, and like breath, it is full of movement. As the effort of holding releases, my hand suddenly becomes light as a feather. I begin to let myself expand into the space and ease this now makes available for me.

*Standing on grass outside the studio, I am surrounded by soft rolling hills of south-west England. The sweet and pungent odor of cow manure drifting in the air from nearby pastures tickles my nostrils. I am young, a dancer searching for something different from the regimented and hierarchical environment of many traditional dance companies, like the ones I had left behind. My breathing quickens as, mesmerized, I watch two men dance a duet of magnificent cooperation. It's my first meeting with such constantly moving negotiation of weight and momentum. This is serious play, and it inspires me. These movers' mutual touch deepens beneath their skin. As they lift or give each other their weight, they 'listen to' and 'read' each other with the earnestness demanded when the issue is a life and death matter. All parts of their bodies are called on to support, carry, give weight, offer footholds, handholds, body-holds, endless stimulus for momentum and invention. They move together with multi-directional awareness and animal-like sureness, their bodies responding to touch and impulse – contact ... improvisation. This experience helps set me on a path of listening and trusting the power of touch, within that pocket of the dance world where our aim is to be mindful, humane, tolerant and respectful of body and mind.*

### **To touch and be touched is a need all human beings have.**

Touching another, skin to skin, word to ear to heart, invites us to listen and respond with empathy. Touch can help our skin and flesh, our bones and joints, our organs and nerves, our blood and all our body fluids – the very cells we're made of to breathe more freely. The reality of the 'skin hunger' that many have experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic makes the power of touch palpably clear. Those of us who

engage with forms of dance where touch is an integral part of what we do and an approach we draw on for information and inspiration, can share our knowledge of touch to help others recognize that we all possess this innate skill, one that we can hone and use to awaken our senses and revitalize ourselves physically and emotionally. Whether it's our own touch, or the touch of others, touch can expand our awareness of both our inner and outer worlds, helping us experience ourselves and our environments anew, with fresh appreciation.

Now I let my hand slide down along my side until it reaches my lowest ribs. Here, the fabric of my shirt feels softer. As these ribs move, there is a deepening and widening. I feel the delicate curve of my ribs, each a long finger, like the fingers of my hand resting on them. On each in-breath, space opens between my ribs and between my fingers – each informing the other, speaking to each other, breathing together. Ribs become fingers, fingers become ribs. My inner space continues to expand.

*Sound of the big city filters through half-open window as length of my body lies along your length, skin to skin, breath to breath, my body rising and falling with the rhythm of your breathing. My fingers trace familiar contours of face and throat, sink into hair. I listen deeply as we slip into and envelop each other. Moisture mingles, our two breaths merge. Skin surfaces soften, divisions dissolve. Moving together as one, we allow ourselves to get lost in this moment, in the pleasure of this touch. Vibration rises, quickens, spreads and touches the whole of me.*

### **We can all touch and allow ourselves to be touched.**

Whether we're young and brought up with constant access to technology, or older, we rely more and more on our computers and phones for information, social interaction, work and play. It's easy to skim over the many facts, figures, images, sounds and ideas that bombard us constantly. A great many of us rarely have time to stop and reflect. The simple act of touching can bring us into this very moment and how we're inhabiting it. Touch provides us with opportunity to develop our own images, movement languages and practices anew, demonstrating palpable ways we can relate to each other. Through touching and listening, we can invite attentiveness, empathy, the healing strength of stillness and the intoxicating force of transformation. Through touch, we can imagine, experience and work towards a more balanced, reflective and considerate world.

Slowly, I slip my hand upward to cup my shoulder in the sling created by thumb and forefinger, and let my thoughts deepen into the dark hollow of my armpit. Even here, in this mysterious cavity full of possibilities, lungs are expanding and softening, creating movement. I feel and am listening to this movement of ribs and lungs. I'm listening, and letting my hand move with the upward rise of in-breath, so soft, so light, amplifying movement that's already happening. Listening, so this touch is generous and supportive, and can empower a small movement to grow into a larger, more expansive one. When I take the time to listen, I understand that tightness can give way to become space. I feel the barrier between the inside of me and the outside of me dissolve, as together, my hand, my body and my breath can find more space more lightness, more ease.

*I sit by my dying mother. For two days we know her death is coming. We speak softly. I stroke her arm as she, once, stroked mine. She remembers moments from her past, we let our thoughts alight on shared memory, we envision a future. I hold her hand as her breathing becomes more labored, then, seeing panic start to form in her eyes, place my hand over her heart. Her body eases. We gaze into each other's eyes as the light in hers dims and fades. My hand stays resting, quiet and still, on her heart.*

I am with my breathing. There's nothing I have to do. I'm allowing my breath to do what it does, I'm riding the waves of this ocean that flows in and out of my body. As I follow the movement of my shoulder, I notice how lightness begins to fill my whole arm. There's direction here – breath, lightness, movement traveling down along its whole length, into my hand, my fingers, and beyond. I don't have to do much. It is as though my arm is moving almost of its own accord. It happens as I allow it to happen. This movement is easy, internally fueled. My fingers dance as they communicate with air and space around me. I allow it to

happen. When I stand, my arm feels lighter and more weighted, hangs longer, my shoulder floats lighter, my whole side is softer, more spacious. As I continue to let my arm move, I feel my whole self becoming movement, beginning to fulfill potential that lies within me. Then, as the barrier between inside and outside continues to dissolve, when I reach out to you, I can allow you to become more you as I become more me.