

Life is to be lived. Felt. But increasingly, it takes place virtually, in cyberspace. Chronic internet use, for example, is a key factor in Daphne Simeon's *Feeling Unreal: Depersonalization and the Loss of the Self* (2023).

A great distancing is rapidly taking place. At base it has to do with the withering of our primary sense, touch. There is no actual closeness without touch; it is the opposite of mediation, its antithesis. This first and most proximate of the senses is at the same time the most ignored and under-rated sense.

What do we mean by touch? For one thing, "to be in touch" is not really accomplished virtually. The promotion of humans' (and others') well-being is found in the primacy of touch. It is well known that the mere act of touching another living being can be greatly beneficial.

The skin houses the body's most ancient sense, touch. One is "thin-skinned," "thick-skinned." You get "under my skin." "Saving one's skin," "beauty is only skin-deep," "jumped out of my skin," etc. The benefits of "laying on of hands" have been known for millennia, as has the everyday health-giving touch afforded from infancy to end of life. Ill health and lack of development befall those who are deprived of touch as they grow. Studies of neglected children and other primates who don't receive contact consistently bear this out. Being held as a baby is widely recognized as a, if not the foundation of future health and sense of security. Sadly, the trend in modern, industrialized countries over the last century is to reduce the amount of touching, especially mother-infant contact.

It isn't often that touch gets the limelight. Michaelangelo's "Creation of Adam" on the Sistine chapel ceiling, depicting God's finger reaching Adam's, certainly qualifies. In 18th century philosopher George Berkeley's "Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision," the sense of touch is clearly primary. The

other senses have as their objects mere qualities, aspects of reality, whereas touch has as its proper object a deeper target. Thus Berkeley predates Husserl's quest for "the things themselves."

In fact, until around 1800 at least, touch remained one of the master senses, a solidifying dimension at the heart of our experience of ourselves. During the 19th century, the sense were demoted within culture. Africa, for instance, became the realm of "skin culture," definitely not a part of "high culture."

"You can't turn off touch. It never goes away," said neurobiologist David Linden. What can be said for the individual is also valid at large. A literary tribute to the enduring value of touch can be found in Melville's classic 19th century novel *Moby Dick*. Chapter 94 describes Ishmael physically rubbing whale blubber to extract valuable sperm oil. Pablo Maurette's *The Forgotten Sense* (2018) provides the moral key to this sensuous activity: "Love, fraternity, and equality among human beings are possible only in close proximity, where there is contact and immediacy."

20th century psychologist John Watson expressed a very different orientation and values, rejecting closeness with children out of fear that it would leave them ill-prepared for the harsh real world!

In *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), David Abrams opposed Watson's "real world," and bemoaned our loss of connection with the non-human sphere and sensual openness. But he concluded that we are closed off from that realm, and any hope of healing the rupture surely is "not a matter of going back."

Another failure is Derrida's *On Touching*—Jean Luc Nancy (2005), which addresses his philosopher friend JLN's obsession with the so-called paradox of touch. That is, the idea that contact, human and otherwise, is impossible because physics

disallows it: the electrons involved repel each other. Derrida and Nancy are each indicted by taking seriously this “paradox,” which is on the level of the liar paradox (“This sentence is a lie”), instead of examining reality.

Americans are among the world’s least tactile, and most technological people. We would do well to ponder Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*; the gift of touch two hours before Ilych’s death transforms him from isolation and despair. Touch makes survival possible, makes life meaningful.

But now there’s artificial touch, maybe even quantum touch. Who needs the limits of sensual humanness? Haptic tech may redraw the borders of reality. The feel of the new product bids fair to even improve touch! Virtual objects in computer simulation in the Brave New World.

There are those who choose a different path, who aren’t interested in succumbing to the Machine. Recent scholarship includes those who point to the deepening of our sensual connections, rather than to their abandonment. New studies have shed light on the surprising possible reach of our senses. See *What I’m Saying: the Extraordinary Powers of Our Five Senses*, by Lawrence D. Rosenblum (2010) and *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: the Astonishing New Science of the Senses*, by Maureen Seaberg (2023) testify to our true sensory natures. And they reveal our usually hidden perceptual possibilities, such as the ability to feel the difference of a single molecule of thickness on a smooth surface.

To enjoy life on a deeper level, or ever greater dependency on technology? Increasing connection and intimacy with the world and each other, or further mediation and the synthetic? Which direction offers more authenticity, grace, vividness?