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REFLECTIONS
ON TOUCH IN A
DISTANCED WORLD
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Reflections On Touch In A Distanced World

WHAT I'VE LEARNED (SO FAR) FROM COVID

By David M. Lobenstine

I haven't given

a massage in more than nine months. On Friday, March 13, I saw seven clients, gathered my laundry, and put away my supplies. I knew I probably wouldn't return the next week, but I had no concept of what was actually about to happen.

Earlier on that last day, my most regular, and adamant, client—an 80-something-year-old butcher who came every Friday at 11:15 a.m. for nearly 10 years—scoffed when I said I might have to shutter my practice for a while. “David,” he said, holding my eye contact, “*I’ll see you next week.*” His determination was so basic, so profound—something we were all trying to muster back in March. *This isn’t a big deal. We are going to keep on doing what we need to do. This will just go away.*

I knew his insistence was false pride, that deep-set human trait that gets us into so much trouble. The stubborn insistence that, with enough will, we can just *make* things stay the same—the belief that life tomorrow will look pretty much like life today. The inability to imagine how quickly and radically our world can change.

I knew he was wrong, but I did not know how wrong. I locked the door of my office, walked down the dark street of New York City’s wholesale district, and got on my bike thinking *I’ll probably just need to close for a few weeks.*

THE UNFREEDOM OF NOT WORKING

Nine months. I have been a massage therapist for more than 15 years and have been in private practice for the past decade. I set my own schedule. I no longer need to find a sub to take my shifts at the spa when I want a vacation. I can decide to see a client at 6:00 a.m., 9:00 p.m., or not at all. I delight in this freedom. But now I have too much of it. It turns out that enforced freedom is no freedom at all.

There was one summer a few years ago when I didn't see clients for three weeks in a row. I counted each day, almost in disbelief, as if I had cheated somehow to gain this much time away from my busy schedule. I was jubilant. My body felt floppy and unburdened, my fingers and forearms light. The time away felt like a great blessing.

Now, the time away feels like a burden. My body feels untethered. To be sure, I am fortunate. Amid global upheaval and vast heartache, I am very fortunate. My family has food and shelter and health—and the joys of this moment have been many. I sat with my daughter as her brain and hand made the astonishing link that enables us to write letters. The “S” is still a perpetual frustration, but she has mastered nearly all the rest. And I have watched my son navigate online learning, graduate from elementary school, and start middle school—all with an astounding grace amid the almost-overnight disruption of everything he has known. In short, I am endlessly grateful to have endless hours with my family, to have day after day after day to be with them instead of my clients.

And yet, these joys do not alleviate that untethered feeling. Our COVID era has made me realize, like never before, that massage is my anchor. Massage is both what grounds me in the moment and what propels me forward.

To say that I miss massage feels inadequate. Missing doesn't even feel like the right word. I *yearn* for massage. I am guessing you have your own yearnings. Here are some of mine:

- I yearn for my bottle of coconut oil, and the smooth quarter turn of the nozzle that would open it at the start of each day and bring my work to a close at day's end.
- I yearn for the flapping sound the sheet makes as I flip each one in the air, unfurling it over my massage table.
- I yearn for the steady chunks of color in my calendar, red with slivers of white in between, one after the other after the other, denoting a full day of clients ahead. My calendar is bare these days; my children don't make appointments.
- I yearn for the moment of pause before beginning each session, my slow, effortless exhale, the feeling of my bare feet on the wood floor.
- I yearn for those transcendent moments in a session, where there is no need to accomplish anything, no need to finish the stroke or transition to the next

part of the body or watch the clock, where there is just the seemingly endless and unencumbered present moment, just your body and your client's body, each settling into a greater sense of ease.

I do not know when I will see clients again. The mysteries of this virus are many, and the few things we do know—that the aerosol particles can linger in a room, that it seems to cause horrific blood clots in certain patients, that asymptomatic spread is pervasive—all caution me against returning to my practice any time soon. I understand the need to work and the desire to get back to normal, and I have no judgment against those of you who are already back at your wellness center or chiropractor's office or spa. I intend this essay not to discourage anyone from seeing clients again but rather as an exploration of what we might take from this unprecedented moment.

FINDING GROUND IN UNCERTAINTY

It feels crass to use a virus that has killed hundreds of thousands of people as an excuse for career reflection, and yet, such is a fundamental element of being human: we take lemons and make lemonade. Within the darkness we still, inevitably, search for the light. So, the question I've been asking myself a great deal is this: What can we learn about our work when we are unable to do it? The answer is a lot, and here are my thoughts.

We All Benefit

The spread of COVID has exposed how the most basic elements of life are the most vital. Social distancing—along with masks and handwashing and all the other recommendations of our hardworking scientific community—is incredibly necessary, and will continue to be for quite a while. But social distancing is awful. It is really hard to not touch each other. These sacrifices are essential but profoundly unhealthy.

I have noticed that the lack of physical contact in our world has created a vicious cycle. We must protect ourselves and our loved ones, but this diligence comes at a cost. Now we instinctively withdraw when an eager toddler wanders too close. We gauge our fellow humans suspiciously—on the sidewalk and ahead of us in line. We wonder who is asymptomatic. We avoid anyone who even snuffles. An errant cough draws dirty looks and disgust. It is a terrible thing to constantly be wondering if our neighbors will make us sick. The borders guarding our personal space have expanded and grown rigid. In other



words, the virus seems to stoke our sympathetic nervous system. We live in a fight-or-flight world these days.

No surprise then that our collective tempers are shorter. We fight about stupid things. We fight about everything. Many of us refuse to wear masks even though masks are one of the few things that can help us. We live in a world of vitriol and aggression, our bodies both charged up for a fight and exhausted from the strain.

But the discord of this era is a reminder that this is not the way human beings are meant to function. We are meant to touch each other. And not just the people in our pod. The huge realm of seemingly meaningless human contact—shaking hands and high fives and getting jostled together on a crowded subway—is actually vital to creating community and sustaining our well-being. I have never longed for a crowded subway like I do now.

But our current moment of touch deprivation is also a reminder of how fortunate we are in our choice of profession. Because we get paid to create human contact! We have created careers out of offering

something that every human requires, alongside food and water and shelter and purpose. And our bodies benefit too. Every time we give a massage, we are touched ourselves. In other words, we massage therapists are saturated by touch. Our work is both a giving and a receiving of this essential element of existence.

Work Creates Purpose

It seems to me that the most common pastime of many massage therapists is to complain about being massage therapists. Crappy tips. Needy clients. Salt scrubs. The list goes on. Perhaps the most abundant topic of complaint is our own bodies. The way many of us describe it, we are perpetually on the verge of falling apart—rife with aches and pains and tingling and numbness.

But nine months without practicing, I can say with confidence that the alternative is no better. These days, it feels like my body has no purpose. I have certainly gotten spoiled by all the extra time with my kids—extra time to run with them and wrestle with them

and tickle and be tickled. My body is certainly busy these days. And yet it does not feel fully alive. When I am giving massages, my body thrums with purpose.

I think this great benefit of our profession is easy to overlook. After all, the aches and pains that too often come with our work are much easier to locate—pain always makes itself known. Purpose is far more subtle. And yet, in its absence, I feel its value acutely.

Like many of us, I have grown a little softer during COVID. I have gained a few pounds. My iliotibial bands ache a bit more. But that's just the surface stuff. What I am talking about is something deeper. When I am massaging, I have a vivid sense of the capacity of my body to offer something good to the world. I know that an hour from now, that person on my table will have a different understanding of what it can feel like to be in their own skin. And that is a gift that my body can offer to their body.

The details of our days are often defined by distraction. This was true before the pandemic and is even more true now. Much of what we do we only half experience and only partially feel, as we try to do something else at the same time, as we rush to do the next thing. But during a massage, we have the chance for the opposite: an experience that is unmediated and undivided. That uninterrupted moment is surely a small thing in the grand scale of the world's problems, and yet it is a precious possibility we can offer. When you are giving a great massage, your body—every little bone and joint and muscle—comes together in some kind of synchrony and alters the experience of another body. That sense of purpose enlivens us and makes all the difficulties of our profession worth it. And that absence of purpose is an ache in me these days. But I feel lucky knowing that at some point—hopefully before too long—I will once again know the feeling in my bones, and manifest it hour after hour, stroke after stroke.

We Are Knowledge

Quite by coincidence, the pandemic has been productive in one way—I am about to publish a book. Many months ago, one of my mentors, Carole Osborne, asked me and another therapist and teacher, Michele Kolakowski, to help her create a new edition of her foundational text, *Pre- and Perinatal Massage Therapy*. We have spent much of this COVID era on Zoom calls across three time zones; finding new research; revising and re-revising our arguments; and then working with our publisher to design the book, clarify the images, and make the hugely complex enterprise of effectively contacting the pregnant body into a clear and useful guide for others.

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To say that writing a book is humbling is an understatement, and yet the affirmations brought by this process have been many. As I try to make sense of the growing tide of research that involves massage therapy, and as I try to merge my understanding of the research with the understanding of my hands, I have realized how centrally located we as massage therapists are in the unending human attempt to understand our own bodies and the bodies of those we care for. This position is not one any of us should take for granted.

Even if your anatomy and physiology classes feel like they were a lifetime ago, and even if you couldn't wait for the neurology final exam to be over so you never had to explain ever again what the vagus nerve does, you still know an awful lot about the human body. And just as important, no matter where you are in your career, and no matter how burnt out you might be feeling these days, you care a lot about the human body.

As a profession, we have a tricky relationship to scientific knowledge. Our training is minimal compared to doctors and nurses; it is easy to denigrate our own skills, to not take ourselves seriously as practitioners. Others of us go to the opposite extreme and insist with great certainty that we can get rid of trigger points in a single session, or that doctors are just pushing pills, and we instead know the real cures for all manner of ailment. Both of these extremes are common, but neither is ultimately beneficial—either to us or to our clients.

I believe that our great strength as a profession emerges when we both engage with the ever-unfolding body of scientific research, and we also are unabashedly

honest about all the things we don't know and aren't certain of. That sincere uncertainty can be a powerful tool for each client's own healing. When we share what we know and what we don't, and when we acknowledge that what works for one client might not work for another, we empower each person we contact to deepen their unfolding understanding of their own body.

That combination of knowledge and compassion and experience—of head and heart and hand—is a powerful thing that can manifest in so many different ways, whether you are seeing clients again, writing books or blog posts, conducting scientific research, or teaching self-massage over Zoom.

Stillness Soothes Us

My life before March 13 was busy. My wife and I were proud of that busyness. We wore it like a badge. We took our son to ballet class four days a week. Our freelance lives were a constant juggle of who would be where and when in order to fulfill the day's obligations. I scheduled clients until 10:00 p.m. at night just because I could. And then I got up at 5:00 a.m. the next morning so I could do it all over again.

And then, over the course of two days, everything stopped. I shuttered my practice and New York City closed its schools. Our calendars emptied by the end of that weekend. All that busyness was replaced by shock, grief, and fear. But then, slowly, cautiously, something else emerged. Stillness.

The busyness didn't end. If anything, our lives are busier now. My wife is finishing her current novel and thinking about the next one. I am fortunate to also work as a book editor, a carryover from my first career in publishing almost two decades ago. There is always work that needs to get done. The kids still have needs (and now we are surrounded by those needs every hour of the day). And yet, amid all this busyness, there has grown a stillness in the center of our lives.

We realize that the only thing we need is right here in front of us, in this moment. We don't need to be always racing to the next thing. What is right here is enough. This moment is rich. We just need to notice it.

I know, at some point, I will reopen my practice. My days will get busy again, my calendar will fill. Finding that stillness will be harder. But that eventuality is precisely why this moment is such a learning tool. We are reckoning with a pandemic that has upended daily life around the globe, exacerbated the already numerous divisions within the human community, and infused many of us with a daily unease, if not outright panic. And yet, at the same time, amid this shocking degree of tumult, in our daily lives there is—if we look hard enough—a

greater sense of quiet and stillness. If we can find the stillness now, we owe it to ourselves to continue to find it—and create it—in the future, when our greatest burden is not a global pandemic but an overbooked calendar.

Presence Is Paramount

We massage therapists like fancy techniques and advanced certifications. And yet, I worry that the more we know, the more we are blind to the most basic of truths. We train in ever more elaborate, scientifically reasoned massage techniques. We justify our work with ever more complex physiological mechanisms—*this technique facilitates the thixotropic response of fascia; that technique exploits the post-isometric relaxation response*. All these efforts are good and useful—and even necessary. We *must* continue to push our understanding forward, to experiment and study and deepen our sense of what is actually happening when we touch another body. More scientific knowledge, if used with heart, is always a good thing. And yet, our obsession with complexity can cause us to overlook what is really at the center of our work. Our presence.

From the way we massage therapists tout the benefits of getting massage, you would think the world would have fallen apart by now. After all, think about all the things we say massage can do. We tell our clients craniosacral can get rid of migraines, and this new proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation (PNF) technique I just learned will make your hamstrings longer, and if only I use the right amount of cross-fiber friction, I can make that knot in your upper traps disappear, and you should really get a massage every week . . . COVID has provided an involuntary case study of how massage impacts the body. Much of the world stopped massaging for a surprisingly long time; for many of us, that stoppage continues. And what happened?

As best I can tell, our bodies have not fallen apart. There are, I'm sure, a lot of people who hunger for their favorite therapist and a lot of bodies that are more stiff, more tense, or more achy than they otherwise would have been. And yes, there are likely a number of people reckoning with significant physical changes—be they cancer treatment, a particularly rough first pregnancy, or rehab from shoulder surgery—whose experiences would have been markedly improved by regular massage. And yet, for many, many people, life continued on, and the world kept on doing what it needed to do, even without



all of our eager hands to help. How do we explain the fact that the world hasn't fallen apart without us?

I have no doubt about the efficacy of our work, and the great things it does. But I also think we need to acknowledge a huge and often ignored part of why our clients love us: because of our *presence*. Yes, our techniques are great. But our presence may be just as important. Because we give each client our undivided attention in the midst of days that are nearly always divided. Because we listen. Because we care. That alone is a balm for the soul. That alone soothes aches.

The absence of our touch has not caused awful things to happen. And we therapists are not alone. In an interesting corollary, preliminary findings suggest that all those weeks when people were skipping regular doctor visits didn't have much negative impact on the

average person's health.¹ Yes, there are unfortunately some people who needed medical help that did not get it and have suffered or died as a result. But for the vast majority of relatively healthy people—in other words, for many of your clients—not going to the doctor for a while hasn't made life any worse. In my opinion, that doesn't make our work—or the work of doctors—any less valuable. But it does mean we need to complicate our understanding of how our work works.

The longer I practice, the more I am convinced that the reason my clients feel better after they get off my table is less because of what I *do* and more because of what I *offer*. I offer my presence. I offer my encouragement. I offer my belief that they *can* feel better. That they don't have to feel victim to their own aches and pains. That they can rewrite their own narrative of the experience of living inside their body. That they can find an exhale that is a little slower, longer, and easier. That by breathing a little easier, and

moving a little more, they can alter the most foundational workings of the body: they can encourage the activation of their parasympathetic nervous system, and diminish the (over)activation of their sympathetic nervous system.

All of what I offer, for sure, is richer and more satisfying if accompanied by touch. The combination of contact and presence is ever potent, a force that continues to surprise me in what it can accomplish. And yet, we can still accomplish a great deal without touch.

Or perhaps a better way to put it: the power of our touch is only truly useful when accompanied by the power of our presence. We already know this, even if we don't like to acknowledge it. If you race out the door after arguing with your partner at the breakfast table, that first massage you give is probably not going to be all that satisfying, for you or for your client. When we are bored or distracted or consumed by our own thoughts, the session feels like it drags on endlessly, and clients invariably seem more annoying and demanding and less easily satisfied. In other words, when we are not present, the session suffers, no matter how many advanced certifications we hold, no matter how many elaborate strokes we can offer.

Our COVID era has confirmed the power of presence because, in much of our lives right now, presence is all we have. We can't touch the wide world beyond our pod. But we can still care about that world. Phone calls are back in vogue. Rumor has it, people are writing letters again. Against a backdrop of vast suffering, we are more likely to actually take a moment and acknowledge the bounty of good all around us. Our bodies haven't fallen apart because we are more present for ourselves—and more present for each other. Touch is limited, but presence is not.

Our work is no less important now than it was before the world was consumed by the pandemic. If anything, your work—whenever you resume practicing—is more important as a result of these touch-starved months. But I believe this moment can also teach us what is truly essential about our work. To be our most effective selves, and to offer the most benefit to each client, we must acknowledge how humans heal. We don't heal because of fancy tricks and special techniques. We don't heal because someone drizzles oil all over us and pummels us with all their might. We heal when we are encouraged to inhabit our bodies with no expectations, when we have a place where there is nothing to do except experience the present moment, and when we are given the chance to find our way back to our own innate sense of ease.

KNOWING AND NOT KNOWING

I don't know what our profession will look like next week, let alone next year. But I do think that the awfulness of the world has given us an opportunity—one that we should not squander. We have struggled through weeks and months without massaging; for some of us, that struggle continues. For others, that struggle will likely emerge again with the next wave and next lockdowns. I find solace in searching for what COVID can offer us, even as it denies us so much.

I appreciate the mundane details of my work as I never have before. Never did I think I would feel nostalgic for refilling my oil bottle or folding my sheets. But beneath that simple nostalgia, there is something more. The human body is determined and enduring. It weathers storms. It surely needs our massages less than we would like to think. And yet, that is not a cause for disappointment but a cause for further celebration. The human community will outlast this virus, and the others still to come. Because of the ceaseless determination of the body, the endless capacity to find new ways to adapt and survive and thrive.

As massage therapists, we have the chance to further the body's determined spirit and to offer our presence to each body that finds its way to our table. I know now that each session is an honor bestowed upon us, a gift that each client gives us—the possibility to help that body function a little more effectively, to thrive with a little bit more ease in this bizarre world we all share. May we embrace that possibility as never before. **m&b**

Note

1. Sandeep Jauhar, "People Have Stopped Going to the Doctor. Most Seem Just Fine," *New York Times*, June 22, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/opinion/coronavirus-reopen-hospitals.html.

6 David M. Lobenstine has been a massage therapist, teacher, and writer for more than 15 years. He is a co-author, with Carole Osborne and Michele Kolakowski, of the forthcoming third edition of *Pre- and Perinatal Massage Therapy* (Handspring Publishing, February 2021). He teaches in person and online. His aim, with his clients and in his teaching and writing, is to enhance self-awareness, so therapists can do what they love with efficiency and ease. Find him at davidlobenstine@gmail.com and bodybrainbreath.com.