Meditation on Touch with reflections by Hazel

This reflection and meditation can be done without the Youtube video (recommend the use of Youtube if you can). For those who struggle with hearing, the text below can also be used to support the video. Our Youtube presentation is an invitation to spiritually join regular meditators at Wisdom Centre (presently isolated and meditating in their own homes). The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

The text is on the screen with narration. Music and a count down timer are part of the presentation. For technical reasons, the reflection has some disruption to the sound quality. To overcome this, a transcript is below.

Begins with usual opening prayers and introductions (Audio Visual or follow using text below)

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition with Fi Jenvey (narrator).

Opening Prayer: Through Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, by whose breath our souls are raised to life. We, in meditation in this time of crisis pray with all others, as one community and one world to One God, we unite with our brothers and sisters of all world traditions

With God are Wisdom and understanding. May our ears be attentive, may the meditation of our hearts be for understanding. Through Christ, may we seek and find you, acting only according to Your will. May we follow His teaching, also seeking, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we commit to love of earth, faithfulness, community, stability, peace and justice making.

Letting go of all else, in contemplation we surrender in love to you. Let our sacred word be a symbol of our consent to your loving presence and healing. May we be faithful to this word so that it rises in our hearts, awakening that sense of Your presence. **Amen**

Reflections on Touch by Hazel.

[1.] It is now just over two months from the beginning of 'lockdown' due to Covid-19 in the UK. As people continue to be asked to stay within their own household groups (which might mean living alone for some), and with ongoing social distancing if meeting other people, the prolonged loss of human-to-human touch among family and friends, is unprecedented. Even healthcare workers touch patients through gloves, and are sometimes having to replace the presence and touch of loved ones. Of course there can also be fear of touch by those living in abusive situations, and this brings another dimension. We have never had to be so aware of touch, both refraining from the desire to touch and embrace, and fearing contact with that which might harm us.

How do we respond when so much touch between humans is being denied us? Perhaps we might start by exploring the significance of touch and the experience of its absence.

[2.] There are many reference to touch in the Christian gospel stories. These are frequently in the context of some form of healing, with people reaching out to touch Jesus in the faith that he will heal them, or Jesus touching others to heal them, showing humility, compassion, unconditional love and acceptance. For example:

> (Matthew 9:21) *She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed*."
>
> (Matthew 8:15) [Jesus] *touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him.*
>
> (Luke 5:13).*Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him*.
>
> (John 13:6) [Jesus] *poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

[3.] Touch is so important for our wellbeing throughout life, from cradling the new born baby, to a touch of care and reassurance for a dying loved one.

Poet Harry Baker captures the current anguish felt by so many in his poem 'When this is over' (recited on YouTube). He expresses the value of a hug when feeling low, and concludes 'when this is over', 'I will no longer take for granted any chances to connect'.

[4.] The word 'touch' has many definitions, but the core element is a contact between separate objects or people. In his 'Blessing for the Senses' John O'Donohue begins with the sense of touch: 'May the touch of your skin register the beauty of the otherness that surrounds you.' Contact expands our consciousness of the presence of the 'other'.

In his book 'Eternal Echoes: exploring our hunger to belong', O'Donohue examines the relationships between absence and presence:

> 'The ebb and flow of presence is a current that runs through the whole of life. It seems that absence is impossible without presence. Absence is a sister of presence. The opposite of presence is not absence but vacancy: where there is absence there is still energy, engagement and longing. Vacancy is neutral and indifferent space. It is a space without energy. It remains blank and inane, untextured by any ripple of longing or desire. By contrast absence is vital and alert. The word absent has its roots in Latin '*ab-esse*' which means to be elsewhere. To be away from a person or place. Whatever or whoever is absent has departed from somewhere they belong. Yet their distance is not indifferent to the place or the person they have left. Though now elsewhere, they are still missed, desired and longed for. Absence seems to hold the echo of some fractured intimacy.

[5.] How often in the past have we been in a state of 'vacancy', not feeling gratitude for the gift of presence? We can be physically close to someone whilst emotionally distant, and emotionally close whilst physically distant. By following our sense of absence, or our longing

for embrace if we meet a loved one at a 2 meter distance, might we perhaps become more awakened to Divine Presence in others and also in our surroundings?

[6.] The 'beauty of the otherness' as O'Donohue describes it, may be experienced through our whole range of senses – seeing, hearing, gut and heart reactions, spoken and written word. We can be 'touched' by kindness and compassion, a friendly smile, or connection with another over a video call or telephone. In the beauty of this springtime, we may have been able to connect with nature in a more awakened way. John O'Donohue writes about presence in nature, and landscape:

> 'Presence is alive. You sense and feel presence; it comes towards you and engages you. Landscape has a vast depth and subtlety of presence. The more attentive you are and the longer you remain in a landscape, the more you will be embraced by its presence. Though you may be completely alone there, you know that you are not on your own. In our relentless quest for human contact, we have forgotten the solace and friendship of nature.' … 'you feel the presence of nature sometimes in great trees that stand like ancient totem spirits, night and day watching over a landscape for hundreds of years. Water also has a soothing presence and a seductive presence that draws us towards it. … Stone too has a powerful presence.'

[7.] The following pictures capture some possibilities of touch in nature. Examples might be: feeling the ground or grass with bare feet, leaning against a tree - feeling its endurance and sturdiness and the texture of its bark; touching a leaf against our cheek, the petals of a flower against our nose as we breathe in its scent. The texture and temperature of a stone, the intricacies of a shell, or the softness of an animal. Plants in our home, or fruits or vegetables, or other items might bring nature in to us if we cannot go out.

In the short silence that follows, you may like to reflect on your own experiences, or to move to touch an object that you feel drawn to, or choose something to hold during the meditation. A blanket around you, or a cushion, might bring a sense of holding and warmth.

A short period of silence.

[8.] In expanding our awareness to touch, we might notice the exploration itself - what draws us to touch; how does that feel? How does it feel to avoid touching; what if anything feels very present or very absent, and importantly, what is our attitude towards ourselves as we observe what we are drawn to touch, and or avoid touching? Touch can sometimes evoke powerful feelings, so always know that you can return to your breath or noticing touch in your hands or feet, or holding something meaningful to you, whichever feels right.

Preparing for Meditation

[9.] As we prepare for our meditation, you may wish to pay particular attention to your sense of touch today, or simply follow your normal practice. You might notice the touch of your feet on the floor, the contact of your body with the chair. We can sense any tension in our body, and choose to move or tense gently and release the muscles in those areas. You might notice the position of your hands. Perhaps take a pause and adjust or explore that a little. How does it feel when one hand touches the other? What is the sensation of stroking

one hand gently with the other, or bringing fingertips together to touch lightly. Sometimes it can be soothing to cross one hand over the other and place them gently against your heart, cultivating a sense of kindness.

Take time now to adjust your posture to a comfortable position. If you have a sacred word you might notice how it touches you emotionally. You may wish to pay particular attention to your breath, the sensations of the air coming in through your nose and into your lungs, the temperature of the in-breath and the out-breath, and the sense of depth and pace of breath. You might try taking a few calming deep breaths in through your nose, and slow breaths out through rounded lips, letting go fully, feeling the air on your lips. We begin the meditation now.

Bell Sounds…

20-minute meditations begins…Count down timer starts

Bell Sounds…Meditation ends

> [10.] **A Blessing - For Longing** by John O'Donohue
>
> Blessed be the longing that brought you here and quickens your soul with wonder.
> May you have the courage to befriend your eternal longing.
> May you enjoy the critical and creative companionship of the question: 'Who am I?' and may it brighten your longing.
> May a secret providence guide your thought and shelter your feelings.
> May your mind inhabit your life with the same sureness with which your body belongs in the world.
> May the sense of something absent enlarge your life.
> May your soul be as free as the ever-new waves of the sea.
> May you succumb to the danger of growth.
> May you live in the neighbourhood of wonder.
> May you belong to love with the wildness of dance.
> May you know that you are ever-embraced in the kind circle of God.

Ends with usual closing prayers: Through Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, by whose breath our souls are raised to life, we in meditation in this time of crisis pray with all others, as one community and one world to One God, we unite with our brothers and sisters around the world. Moments of your personal prayer follow**…Amen**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon

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