

“An Uncommon Sense”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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“Just use your common sense,” my Mother used to say. And I’d look at her with a blank stare. I guess I was supposed to know what that meant. My common sense. What *did* she mean? Was this something I was supposed to carry around with me like a tissue for a runny nose or a safety pin for a popped button? I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t think it was smart to press the issue. I was supposed to know already – or worse, figure it out for myself.

I’m still not sure I have a full grasp of common sense, and I’m a skeptic when it comes to how common good sense is, but this I do know. Most of us are gifted with at least five forms of sense. When my now aged mother vents her frustration about the macular degeneration that has caused her to lose the better part of one of those five, I’m reminded of how precious a gift it is to see, let alone to see clearly. When I came back from a Caribbean vacation a few years ago with an ear infection that seriously affected my hearing for the better part of a month, it came home to me how much I take for granted that sense that allows me to listen to everyday speech and music and the sounds of the morning. When I walk across the Common on Thursday afternoon and head right to the arugula bin atop Holly Hill Farm’s tables, anticipating the salads to follow – with a sigh of gratitude in the direction of my husband for tolerating my addiction to this slightly offbeat green, I’m reminded how much pleasure I derive from what lands on my palette. When I fill my nostrils with the smoky scent of almost-autumn air, nostalgia veritably floods me as I bid farewell to summer and lean reluctantly into autumn all in one single instance of smelling.

When I contemplated this week what exactly I would do when I stand up later this afternoon at a colleague’s ordination and preside over the ancient rite called the “laying on of hands,” I’m reminded that this fifth sense we possess is underrated. I’m almost sure that it wasn’t what my Mother was referring to when she told me to just use my common sense or what most of us refer to when we consider our common senses. Yet, this fifth sense carries a power that each of us holds in the palm of our hands and across the largest organ of our bodies, our skin.

May each one among us have skin that longs to touch
other skin: fingertips that long for other fingertips
or whole hands and even arms; bodies that
want to stand next to other bodies, not alone,

ring the words of poet Nancy Shaffer.

We speak of being touched by something, someone. We are thus moved, inspired, called to a higher level of being. The power of touch is both literal and metaphorical. We speak of the healing touch to mean both. We speak of being held to mean both. In the spirit of preacher Max Coots, we pray to a nonphysical God who “holds us in the hollow of his hands,” who “holds us in the curve of her arms.” We pray to a God with no skin “whose touch is the touch of life and the touch of death.”

We are touched. We are moved. Yes, touch can also indicate the unethical crossing of boundaries. There is inappropriate touch, violent touch; but this morning I’m holding up an uncommon sense that affirms presence, that comforts and reassures, that helps and heals and makes whole.

Take a moment to look at them, your hands. I don’t want to assume that everyone has two. Just the other evening I met a man with one. Some in our world have none. So let’s

concentrate for a moment on what we do have – our arms, our hand, our hands, the extensions of our body with which we reach out to another. If it's your hands, turn them over in your lap. They hold your history. They hold each moment that has brought you to this moment. Are they the hands of a child? Your child hands are still there, just transformed by a few more gnarls, a few more lines, a more telling texture. Perhaps they're ornamented – rings given and received in love and memory. In their completeness, you are held in the hollow of your hands, the curve of your arms. Your spirit is as much there as it is anywhere.

Ponder for a while the stories told by what rests in your lap. (Silence) Are yours the hands of a few decades? Each year, each moment is there, revealed, felt. Are they the hands of the better part of a century? How many lives have you touched, how profoundly, how lovingly, how sometimes in ways that you want to forget about, how in other ways you cannot hold closely enough? (Silence)

What uncommon sense we hold in our hands.

After today's service, I'm heading to New York City to participate in the ordination of that friend I mentioned earlier, leading the segment of the service called "the laying on of hands." Two weeks from now, I hope you'll join me at Second Parish in Hingham, when I'm presiding over the laying on of hands at the ordination and installation of Rev. Paul Sprecher. So I have cause to wonder at this sense of touch. What an underrated sense it is. Yet it holds the stature of an ancient religious rite.

In the Hebrew Scripture, referred to in Christian tradition as the Old Testament, the laying on of hands communicates a personal blessing. Jacob, in his final days, blessed his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, by crossing his hands upon their heads. He placed his right hand – symbolically conveying the greater blessing – upon Ephraim's head and his left hand upon Manasseh's. Their father Joseph noted this and urged his father to switch hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn. Jacob refused, explaining to Joseph that Ephraim would be the greater and that his descendants would become "a multitude of nations," even though Manasseh would also thrive through *his* descendants. Hands held power and transmitted power. (Genesis 48:15-20)

Other biblical instances recount the laying of hands on the heads of animals before they were sacrificed to appease God for the sins of the people. Not such a healing touch, but just as powerful. And the hand of God is surely the most powerful of all, as the psalmist exclaims in his song of how profoundly God knows him:

"Even before a word is on my tongue,
lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.
Thou dost beset me behind and before,
and layest thy hand upon me." (Psalm 139: 4-5)

How frequently we read in the Gospels of the healing touch of Jesus and his followers. I love the story told in the Gospel of Mark of the blind man of Bethsaida. Some locals brought to Jesus a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. Jesus first spit on his eyes – we try not to do that anymore! – and then laid his hands on him. The man reported seeing shadows. So Jesus touched his eyes, and the man saw clearly. (Mark 8:22-26)

In the Book of Acts, the laying on of hands by Peter and John seems to complete baptism and ensure that those who are so touched receive the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:14-17) I know, most Unitarian Universalists would call this hocus pocus, but it surely conveys the weight attached to that simple and profound act of mindful touch, healing touch, touch that affirms and makes whole.

In the laying on of hands that we practice in our Unitarian Universalist ministerial rites of passage and for that matter in our child dedications, when we use a flower as intermediary to bless our children and dedicate them to a full and good life, we tap into this precious capacity to touch and transmit spiritual gifts. In the laying on of hands that I will practice this afternoon, ministers form a network around the one being ordained, an arm to arm hand to hand transmission of blessing in which the spiritual resonates through the power of touch. It is the same power spoken of in Paul's second letter to Timothy:

“Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands;” (II Timothy 1:6)

Such laying on of hands and touch itself affirm, reassure, and confirm that one is not alone, however alone we sometimes feel, however singular we often think we are. Some of us saw that deliciously quirky film, “Little Miss Sunshine.” There's a character in the film – actually there are several characters in that film – but the one who comes to mind is a teenage boy, Dwayne, played by Paul Dano. Dwayne has pledged a vow of silence until he's accepted to flight school. Atop this dubious commitment, he's simply sullen. On a rollicking trip to an even more rollicking beauty pageant, Dwayne discovers something about himself that crushes his dream. He's devastated, and he shows it. The family van comes to a screeching halt, and Dwayne runs off. His little sister, Olive, played by Abigail Breslin, is called upon to lend comfort and coax Dwayne to join the family again. Why not, in this deliciously dysfunctional family that somehow works? In this moment of trauma, a seven-year-old will do just fine. So little Olive clammers down a steep hill in her red cowgirl boots in the direction of Dwayne. Without a word, she squats down beside her brother, leans gently into his side, raises an arm, rests it on his shoulder, and waits. Without a word Dwayne rises, takes Olive by the hand, helps her back up the hill, and rejoins the family. It's my favorite part of the movie.

We hold each other in the hollow of our hands and the curve of our arms. We can each say with no words at all, “I'm here. I'm here with you. You're not alone.” In this extended family of faith, in this sacred space and time, we are each and all in good hands.

And I'm trying hard, Mom, I really am, to use some common sense, with some uncommon sense too. Amen.

Sources

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