

(based on Charlotte Selver's work)

17 SIMPLE CONTACT

Our classes are of no lasting value unless they inspire the student to continue sensing for himself. As one begins to feel the possibility of life's being an endless exploration, any moment can become a moment of being, full of its own significance. At such moments distractions are not needed, or even interpretations. The present experience is sufficient. Living is its own justification. This is why I have given so much space to the experiments in our classes which we do alone, and which the reader can equally try at home if he has the patience and interest.

Nevertheless, we do not live alone. Every glance, every tone of voice, every letter is a form of contact. Every figure in the supermarket or on the sidewalk is an energy field with which, willy-nilly, we come into some kind of relationship.

People come together, or hold themselves apart, in an infinite variety of ways, complex and simple. All this, one way or another, can be our study. But I should like to start at what seems to me to be the beginning.

Almost from the moment of birth, a baby's life falls into a certain rhythm of action and quiet, of which I suppose the most significant, and certainly the most variable, part is in connection with his mother. In the United States the actual connection may be very slight; in the Mexican countryside it may be constant, with the baby either nursing or resting in his mother's shawl against her breast all day long.

In our competitive culture, the experience of inactive, quiet connection is normally restricted to rare moments of falling or being in love, as when two lovers simply walk holding hands or lean against each other on a park bench. With or without

actual touch, such communion occurs more often in youth and in old age than in the "prime" of life. This is a phenomenon very well suited to our study. So I shall begin with the description of a class exploring *simple physical contact*.

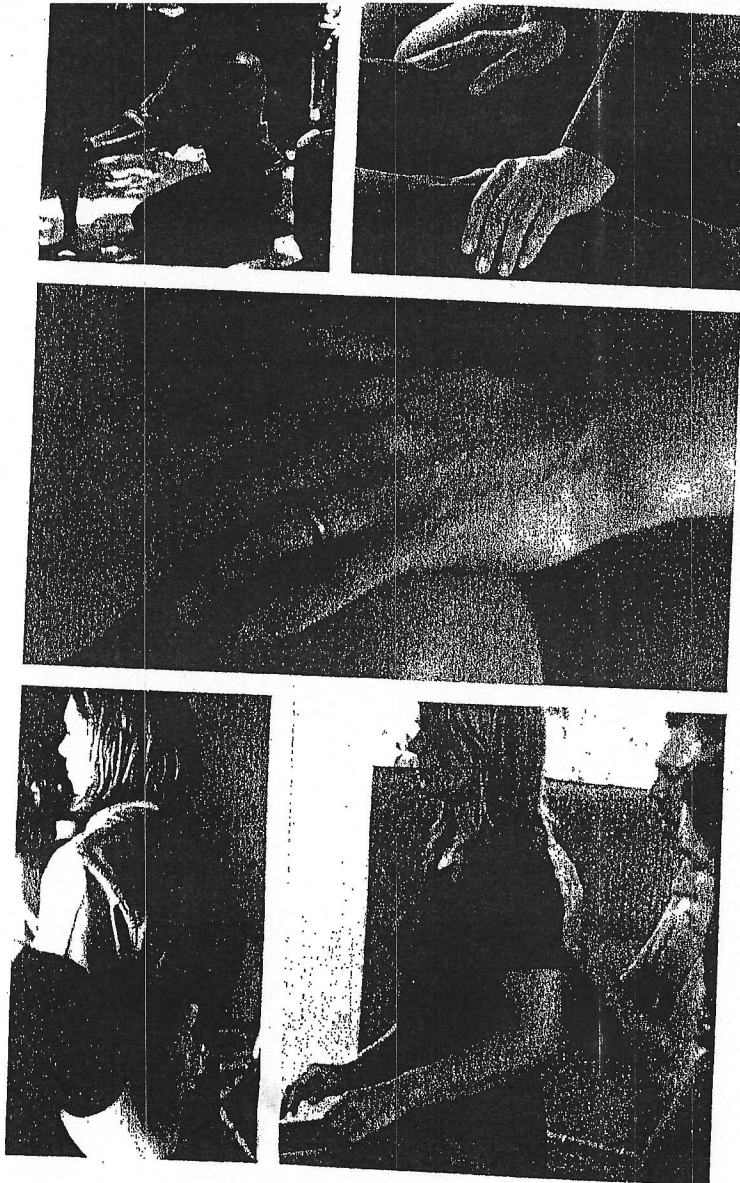
We may take a few moments at the start feeling out our standing. To come quietly to ourselves first is really a prerequisite for coming to another. Then we will take partners, preferably someone we don't know and do not choose. One now stands at the side of the other; and when the other signals that he has come to a quiet standing and is ready to be approached, the first person brings his hands somewhere to the other's front and back. Let us say one has come to the other's upper chest and to the back opposite, between the shoulder blades.

What does each feel between the enclosing hands? Time will be needed to come to enough quiet so one can really tell. Does anything change under the touch? If there are signs of life between his hands, does the toucher touch in such a way as not to disturb what he feels living there, yet without diminishing his connection to it?

In actual working, if such questions are asked, long pauses are allowed after each so that everyone has time to let an answer come in its own way. Is it possible to give oneself to sensing without thoughts? Can one feel the difference when now and then thinking is given up—as well as the effort not to think?

After a while we may move. We may come to the lower chest or to the diaphragm; to opposite sides of the head; to the belly, in front and back or at the sides—resting in between and renewing our standing, so that we may be fresh for each experience.

It has been made clear that one partner will bring his hands to the other but *will not manipulate him*. This may not be easy. One may understand that the hands are not to be active: for instance, that we are not to stroke or massage. But simply to come into full, permissive contact with another person is something many of us have been conditioned against since early childhood. We have been taught that we must be in control of ourselves and of our contact with the other—even if only



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through trying to convey the message that we like or dislike him. Unconsciously, we may control our contact and in so doing interfere with our own sensations and direct the other's. Although unconscious, this is already manipulation.

We are actually working when we touch one another—working to try out our hands not as agents of our will but as organs of perception. For this all their native sensitivity and flexibility must be gradually rediscovered.

Even when we have gained freedom to find and adjust ourselves to the structure of the other, it may not be easy to sense and adjust to his balance. If we come to him rigidly, the fine nuances of balance are lost. If we come openly and sensitively, it may help him to a release in which his balance changes, which we must then follow. There is constant change, for this is no mechanical equilibration but the ever-renewed coming into equilibrium of living beings.

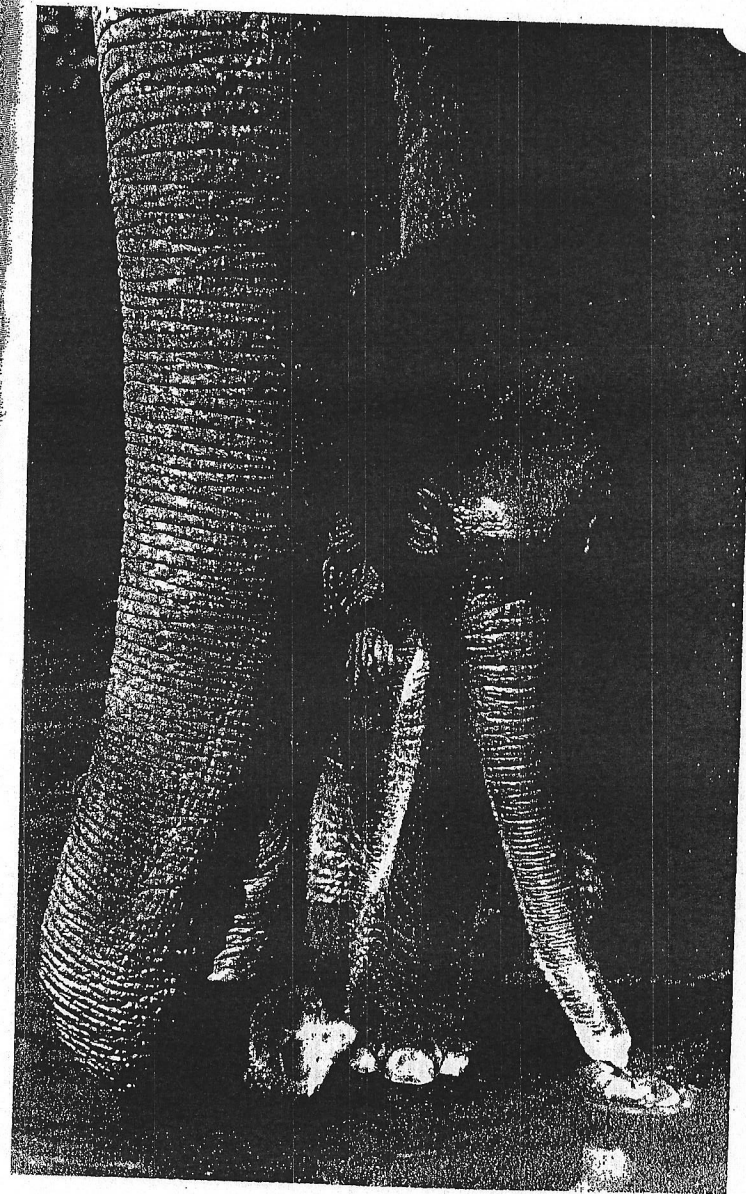
Indeed, however we touch him, we may somewhat disturb our partner's freedom. Our hands may feel hard to him, or heavy, or light and fluttery. He may feel "handled," restrained, pressed, or—sometimes a very disappointing experience—not really touched at all. Accordingly, one might expect such contacts to be often unsatisfying, if not downright inhibitive. But in a great majority of cases it is just the opposite. The mere fact that one comes to the other quietly and without overt manipulation is normally very moving to the person touched. He feels cared for and respected. And the one who touches, if he is really present in what he does, is apt to feel something of the wonder of conscious contact with the involuntary, subtle movement of living tissue.

It is probably on the basis of these experiences more than of any others that "sensory awareness" has swept the country in the last few years. A nation of doers, who seldom touch one another without a specific purpose in mind, and whose touch, if not simply careless, is first consciously and then, as it becomes habitual, unconsciously controlled, are asked to come together just to experience. They are not slapping each other's backs to give reassurance or to show approval, not furtively feeling the other to seek reassurance themselves, not trying to

correct or relieve the other, or punish or seduce him, or touching symbolically as in kiss and handshake. They have come together only to experience the other, to permit contact in which, even through their clothes, an exchange of vitality occurs simply because we are all alive and give off energy and have the senses and consciousness to perceive aliveness whenever we arrive at the degree of quiet that makes this possible. When even a little of our usual purposiveness is given up, so much aliveness comes through that we are all affected by it.

To permit simple contact is to permit, and necessarily to experience, the natural reinforcement that the living has for the living. It is the experience of mother and infant after breast feeding, when she perhaps rocks him quietly in her arms. It is the shared experience of two survivors of a catastrophe; the experience of peace after a sexual connection that was not maneuvered. It is the experience of just stepping from the inanimate world of the indoors into the living world of a garden. Now, perhaps for the first time, it is asked of one specifically, as simply as one would ask another for a glass of water. No wonder almost everyone is "touched," in fact "moved"; and no wonder we can and do work at this for years, gradually finding a freer opening of those intricate inner passages which inhibit or permit the flow of experience.

It may at any point be helpful, during such experiments, to make time for an interlude of exploring our own hands, or the hands of another, exactly as we explored our feet in an earlier chapter. Though we have not kept our hands packaged all day, as we have our feet, but may have been constantly using them, we have tended to use them over the years in ever more characteristic ways, so that we can often tell one another by our handshakes almost as by our tones of voice. But if our hands are really to find their way to the shapes they come to, they must begin to give up this acquired character and regain their natural potential. For this, a thorough digging into their structure and kneading through of the musculature can be very helpful. The pleasure that attends rediscovery of one's native mobility is a powerful antidote to the habit that is always tending to diminish it. Then, when we come back to seeking the



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contours of our partner, there is the added interest in feeling our own yielding.

Any number of variations are possible on the basic experiment I have just described. It can be a great joy to let one's hands come fully and feelingly to another's head. So much sensation is latent in the contour of a forehead, or in the complex joining of bone and muscle where neck meets skull. Here, where so many headaches have their seat and so much misery may lodge, is also tissue that rejoices in contact, as every mother knows who has supported the heavy head of her baby or laid a quiet hand on his brow when he had fever. Every owner of a dog or cat knows these spots also, and every lover of a horse. Our habit, of course, is to stroke or scratch or pat, and certainly much of our reward is the animal's active response. But if we would try just coming into contact with the same care and interest that we work toward in the classes, bearing in mind that our pet's sense of time and rhythm is very different from our own, we might find an astonishing new depth of relationship and an unfamiliar equality.

There may be an equal richness in holding another's feet or enclosing his knees. Then one may learn why photography can never replace sculpture. For with flexible and quiet hands a dimension enters consciousness which the eyes alone cannot provide, no matter how deep their gaze or how fine their focus.

Contact may equally be explored when two touch each other: for example, in standing, with each bringing his hands to the hands of the other, or to the other's shoulders. The eyes may be closed, or our gaze may be lowered, so that we see only our partner's form and breathing.¹ Conscious to permit our own breathing, we may compare the way we come to the other with the way we come to the floor, heedful of the question: are such comparisons made with a critical mind and eye, as we have been taught, or just through sensing?

And if the two partners come to movement, is there a movement possible in which neither one leads or urges, where eyes and mind are at rest, where the two become one living bridge

1. Students of Zen may readily see a connection between this attitude of the eyes and their own practice.



Are such comparisons made with a critical mind (compare brows) or just through sensing?

from the floor beneath the feet of one to the floor beneath the other?

But do our eyes not meet? Do we avoid this consummation of contact? In any such class as I describe, certain people will find it extremely uncomfortable to forgo looking the other in the eye. In this age of encounter, the reader may well wonder why I suggest deliberately keeping the eyes closed or lowered.

Furthermore, when I suggest a nonvisual or semivisual human connection—especially one that may come into semi-voluntary or even involuntary movement—does not so fully sensory a contact lead to the sexual? I feel I should end this chapter with a few words of personal opinion about ocular and genital contact—the two modes which seem to me the most all-pervasive in one sense, and the most highly focused and vivid in another. In these modes, too, the distinction between simple and complex is relevant.

Like our sexuality, I believe the use of our eyes has become compulsive. Impatient with the fears and hesitations implicit in so many of our childhood backgrounds, we seek *break-throughs* rather than feel our way with quiet and forbearance into more natural organismic paths. In our modern American belief that there is a shortcut to everything, there is a very widespread tendency to try to achieve deeper contact through direct use of the eyes—a sort of cutting of the Gordian knot. It is true that this may have powerful, often immediate, effects. But it is not sensing. To gaze into another's eyes, except in love or in long-tested friendship (when it is sometimes, but rarely, needed as reproach or as reassurance), results in a suspension of sensing, not a deepening of it. To gaze so is more often to declare oneself to another than to perceive him, and to challenge rather than invite the other's response—not to speak of those many occasions when one simply tries to outstare the other. For we Americans seldom have the eyes we had as young children, innocent of competition or intent. We have not the simple fierce, friendly, or evasive eyes of simpler cultures, or the open, inquiring eyes of animals. We can work toward this most natural of all modes of contact, but I do not think we can hurry it. In our classes, when we have gained the courage to feel it is

not *evasive* to avoid the other's eyes, we may venture a glimpse of them as we might venture a glimpse of the sun, adjusting the shutter speed of our camera to the energy that can pour instantly through these apertures on a clear day and more slowly on an overcast one. In my feeling, more than that is not generally useful for this study—at least not until very advanced stages of it. "Eyeballing," however useful it may seem as a technique in the field of encounter, calls for a different film from the one we use: an emotional rather than a sensory one. On ours, the result is less likely to be a clear image than plain overexposure.

The eyes were once called the "windows of the soul." When we have worked with ourselves as totalities to the point where we can let our eyes be open to the eyes of another as windows open to the comings and goings of the air, without inhibition to our heartbeat or to our breathing, or to that of the other, then and then only, I should say, can we see with our eyes as true organs of perception and not as instruments of interaction.² This, too, we could call "simple contact."³

It might seem a similar evasiveness when I say that this work with quiet and reciprocity between partners is neither sexual nor nonsexual. Surely it could be fundamental for love as it could be for friendship, or for dancing, or for a multitude of practical work situations, such as paddling a canoe or moving a piano or setting rafters in a roof—to name a few of which I have experience. But just as we can work over the long haul toward recovery of our innate capacity for a free meeting of the

2. Cf. the extraordinary technique, in Castaneda's books, of scanning a terrain with crossed eyes to perceive differences unnoticeable in normal looking.

3. Our friend Ann Dreyfuss once invited Charlotte and me to the zoo where she worked with disturbed children, encouraging them to come into contact with young animals. It was dusk when she let us in among her animal friends. They showed no signs of fear. Rather, I felt only an intensity and totality of silent presence in the waning light, which in memory I can compare to no other experience. Though the aliveness seemed everywhere, its purest flow seemed to come to me through their alerted heads and especially through their eyes. I have no doubt the actual contact with these animals—even their mere presence—had a therapeutic effect on the children not unlike that which the presence of the Zen master has for his students.

eyes, so our work with simple contact leads ultimately toward an equal and parallel freedom in that other prime facility for relationship, our sexuality.

In a culture where sexuality, like *watching*, has been sharply isolated for the child from the rest of organismic functioning—usually first prohibited and later urgently required—it cannot so easily find its rightful place. But among people who have come to regard orgasm, like a full meeting of the eyes, as something not to be permitted but to be *achieved*, the study of simplicity in contact can be revolutionary.