



EUDAEMONIA **Touch, with Richard Kearney**

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Kim Forrester 0:00

In our fast paced digital world, we are overwhelmingly compelled to live in our minds. But how much more fulfilling would life be if we took time to also celebrate the aliveness in our body, become more present in our environment, and connect with the world and others more intimately? You're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. I'm Kim Forrester, and today we're going to discuss the importance of incarnation and tender touch.

Intro 0:34

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness, as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life, with your host Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester 0:53

Professor Richard Kearney holds the Charles V. Seelig chair of philosophy at Boston College, and he has served as visiting professor at a variety of universities worldwide. Richard has presented five series on culture and philosophy for Irish and British television, is currently International Co-Director of the Guestbook Project which promotes peace through storytelling, and he is the author of over 25 books on European philosophy and literature, including his latest title, *Touch: Recovering our most vital sense*. It's an honour to be chatting with Richard today to discuss the power of touch, and to explore how we can flourish in life by consciously embracing embodiment and physical connection. Professor Richard Kearney, it is just such a delight to have you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. Thank you for joining me today.

Richard Kearney 1:48

A pleasure and an honour.

Kim Forrester 1:49

Let's start with the simple question. Can you explain to my listeners what makes touch so special? How does touch differ from the other physical senses?

Richard Kearney 2:01

Right, well touch is the only sense, of all our senses, that is double. In the sense that it is a double sensation of touching and being touched at the same time. You can see without being seen, you can hear without being heard, you can taste without being tasted, you can smell without being smelled. But when you touch, you have a proximate relationship with that which is being touched, which in turn makes you tangible and tactile, and therefore, open to the other, to that which is different from you. You are not in complete control, as it were - or certainly in dominant control - in

touch, by its nature, to the extent that you are vulnerable. You know, we're covered by 22 square metres of skin, which is our largest organ in a normal adult. And that makes us extremely susceptible and sensible and, as I say, vulnerable to otherness. Now we can close ourselves off, we can isolate ourselves. We can ... in the case of COVID, we were, we had to socially distance. So there are all kinds of ways of rendering ourselves more invulnerable. But that's sort of going against our nature. We can also use touch, and through physical violence or sexual violence, physical abuse, violence, we can make touch unilateral. That is one way rather than double and reciprocal. But that is, as I say, a betrayal of touch. Whereas the natural mode of embodiment for human beings, from the moment we're born to the moment we die, is one of reciprocity and mutuality. Vis-à-vis, are touching and being touched. And this is true of the infant who's born. First thing the infant does is to reach out for touch, and if it's not touched, and if it isn't allowed to touch, it suffers greatly, physically and mentally. There are all kinds of statistics which prove this. And as we saw during the pandemic, the last thing people do when they're dying - and this was very tragic, and so many of us witnessed it, on the national and international TV screens - people were hungry for touch with their loved ones. And of course, it was the caretakers, the doctors, were there to hold them at those last minutes. But they were reaching out to touch and be touched.

Kim Forrester 4:37

Let's go back to that sense of us being isolated from each other during the pandemic. I think most people on the planet felt the void that was created when we couldn't choose to touch other people. Obviously, there is some kind of biological need or there was a calling there for us to want to touch and be touched, and be in touch, with with others around us. What does science tell us about the benefits of tender touch on our health and well being? What do we gain from being tactile human beings?

Richard Kearney 5:12

Well, it's very, very fundamental, and it's very basic. Touch affects our blood pressure, it affects our heart rate, it affects our digestion, it affects our sleep, it affects our mood, anxiety, or calm. At so many levels, touch is absolutely fundamental to human beings. I mean, the relationship between the mother and the child is an obvious case in point. The hormones and so on that are secreted, oxytocin and so on, in the early infant-mother relationship are fundamental to bonding, and can recur later in life. And it's through touch that this occurs. It's the first sensation in the womb. So it's actually fundamental to, and indispensable to, our well being and health in the world. Absolutely fundamental. And I would say that's true biologically. In fact, there are very interesting animal experiments done - done with apes and chimpanzees, and all kinds of animals - and even during the pandemic, a lot of therapy for people suffering from loneliness, and isolation, and distance, was very often with animals. Canine therapy, equine therapy with horses, dolphin therapy, for those who were lucky to, to be able to experience it. So there was a huge run on animal pets as well. You couldn't find a dog on Pet Finder in North America, because people just had this incredible need to have tactile company. And if human beings weren't available, then animals were. So it's part of our animal nature in the best sense of that term. And I think a lot of us were reminded of just how interconnected we are at a visceral, incarnate, embodied level, you know. It brought us back to our most basic mode of being the word biologically and ontologically. That is to say, you know, our being as such, our way of surviving biologically, and physiologically, but also our ontological needs for contact and connection.

Kim Forrester 7:16

Reading your book, I came to understand just how inherent touch is in our life, and how vital it is to our existence. And yet it is one of those things I think that we have taken for granted. It is so ubiquitous in our life that we forget it's even there. You were talking there about how we've become very hungry for touch, as we were forced into isolation and social distancing. What are the signs, do you think, that we should look out for in ourselves - as the world opens up, and we're free to roam again - what are the signs that we should look for in ourselves that we are hungry for touch; that we are longing for greater embodiment, and physical connection?

Richard Kearney 8:01

One of the signs that this is a basic hunger, as fundamental and elementary as the hunger for food, is that we suffer greatly when we don't have it. I mean, again, the statistics, scientific evidence has shown that the Z generation and the millennials suffer hugely from loneliness and depression, in more or less direct proportion as to the amount of time they spent on social media. And communicating virtually now, at one level, we're all delighted to have virtual communications and digital technology. We probably wouldn't be having this conversation without it, and I wouldn't have been able to teach my students during the pandemic without it. So we're all incredibly grateful for that in terms of news, media, and information, and so on. But that hyperconnectivity at the virtual level can actually produce incredible isolation at the ontological and biological level, so that the more hyperconnected we are digitally, the more lonely and isolated we feel in so-called real life. And that's a curious paradox. You know, one of the great existentialists said, "Technology overcomes distance, but it doesn't bring nearness." And we have a need for nearness; for that double, reciprocal, mutual relationship of touching and being touched. And without it, people literally die or become incredibly anxious and lonely.

Kim Forrester 9:39

That sense of reciprocal touch - the fact that you cannot touch something or someone else without also giving a part of yourself away - it is incredibly vulnerable. As you mentioned earlier on, it is incredibly intimate, and it does remind me of the New Zealand Māori greeting, called the hongi. And traditionally Māori, when they meet strangers or friends, they lay nose and forehead against each other and they take a few moments to breathe in each other's breath. They breathe in the lifeforce, the mauri, of the person that they are greeting. An incredibly intimate, truly connected way to greet someone. And I do wonder if we've lost that same sense of intimacy in Western society. Or perhaps, Richard, it's something that we are increasingly afraid of. Do you feel that could be true? And if so, how is that lack of intimacy or that fear of connection affecting us?

Richard Kearney 10:44

Well, it's a very interesting question. And, you know, maybe the jury's out in terms of the casualties of, not only the pandemic, but digital technology generally, which produces what I call a sense of exarnation. Whereas our normal mode of being is incarnation, there has been a tendency, indeed, in western civilization - can't blame it all on modern technology you know, which has advantages and disadvantages. But it goes, in fact, back to Plato. That the beginning of Western metaphysics and philosophy was predicated upon a certain priority given to sight over the other senses, and particularly touch. And I think with the pandemic, and indeed, with the kind of crisis of digital communications, we've gained a new awareness where there's been a wake up call that we can't actually live properly as human beings, as exarnate beings, beings living outside of our flesh. We

need to incarnate or reincarnate or recarnate, come back to the body. And we're discovering this in therapy as well, the importance, you know, in so many, so much of new embodied therapy. And thinking of Van der Kolk, working here in Boston, who wrote a wonderful book called *The Body Keeps The Score*, our traumas, our sufferings, our hearts, are stored in the body. When the mind cannot register the pain, the horror, the shock, the evil, it's the body that keeps the score. And by the same token, while talking cures are important, and psychoanalysis has taught us that, they're not always sufficient. It's important to get back to the body. And whether it's walking meditation or some kind of contact with animals, or just, you know, holding and being held, as human beings. And most important of all, the hug, the handshake. The handshake being the origin of civilization. You know, when in the Greek tale of the Iliad, the two rival tribal heroes, Glaukos and Diomedes, they throw away their spears and they shake hands. And civilization begins with that hand to hand, open palm to open palm touch of vulnerability. So that hasn't gone away. And today, you know, we know the culture is the Russians and the Slavs kiss. Even men kiss each other on the mouth. It's a greeting, to come back to your, wonderful example of the Māori embrace. And then, of course, there's the handshake, which is so important in the Anglo-Saxon world, and the hug in the Latin world. And all that disappeared, of course, with social distance that, you know, affected the entire world. So each culture came back in its own way to a greater awareness of just how fundamental touches to our lives, although we take it for granted.

Kim Forrester 13:36

Let's step back to Plato, and to the Abrahamic religions - and there are other religions around the world as well - that champion the idea that transcendence, that evolution of the self or the soul, takes a step beyond the body. What I'm saying is that, overwhelmingly, historically, we're taught that embodiment is actually the lesser form of being. They literally talk in some religious texts about the sins of the flesh. So we're taught that wisdom, enlightenment, transcendence, can only come through elevation outside of and beyond the body, through prayer, meditation, intellectual exploration. Do you feel that it's just as possible for us to connect with something divine - with something greater than ourselves or perhaps, with a more profound part of ourselves - through embodiment and through touch?

Richard Kearney 14:45

Yes, I do. And, you know, it's not an either-or. I mean, I'm not saying let's get rid of sight and just live a tactile existence. We need both, just as we need the digital world of technology. It's absolutely indispensable to us and there's so much to celebrate and admire, but not at the expense of the carnal and the embodied. We need both. But if you go back to even the Western foundational wisdom traditions, the Abrahamic and the Greek, there is actually a very incarnational message. I mean, Abraham is revealed, as the father of Judaism, of the Abrahamic religion, at a moment when he receives with Sarah, his wife, three strangers into his tent in Mamre. This is in Genesis. And what do they do? Well, the three strangers could be killed, because they're enemies, they don't belong to the tribe. But they're welcomed of Abraham and Sarah, who gives them food. And in the sharing of the food and in the handshake, they become God; the three become one, and are revealed as God. And then, when they're leaving after the meal, which is a very embodied exchange, they say to Sarah, "We will come back in a year, and you will have conceived a child." And she laughs, because she says, "That's impossible." She's barren, and Abraham is 600. She laughs, and of course, the word for Isaac is laughter in Hebrew. The impossible becomes possible through touch, through taste, through the sharing of an embodied meal. And this recurs throughout the Abrahamic tradition - in Christianity and Islam also. So, you know, this is the basic message. It's a very incarnate, tactile, gustatory message; that peace and hospitality and understanding actually come through the body.

And it's true of the Greeks too. I won't go into a long discourse on this. But in the healing tradition of the Greeks, Asclepius was the one who cured by - and I have a chapter on this - by laying on of hands, by bringing people into an embodied relationship with their being. And that's the way he healed - with herbs and music and dance, and incubation in the earth. It was a return to the earth, and he was a wounded healer. The idea was, you experienced your pain and transform it by touching others and healing others. And when they are touched by a wounded healer, they in turn, become healed and become wounded healers, who go on. So it's pretty basic to all of the wisdom traditions. And I forgot Islam, but of course, Islam, the feast of hospitality and the annual, you know, rituals of pilgrimage that end in feasting. It's absolutely fundamental, the hospitality of food to the stranger. So and I'm sure if you looked into your Māori traditions, you know, and the Aboriginal traditions in Australia, and the indigenous traditions, the Navajo, and the Wampanoag, your North American, so on, the Iroquois, you'll find something very similar, where the tactile and the gustatory - touching and sharing food - are absolutely fundamental to peace.

Kim Forrester 17:59

Let's go back to that whole idea of healing. Overwhelmingly, there is a concept throughout religious texts, throughout folklore, throughout literature, that healing can come through touch. The laying on of hands. And I do believe that touch is something that you actually used to help heal yourself. From your experience, can we pay attention to the gentleness with which we lay our hands upon ourselves? Can we better use touch to heal ourselves?

Richard Kearney 18:36

I think it's absolutely fundamental to healing. And very often it's a mixture of the tactile and the non-tactile. For example, in therapy, there are certain forms of embodied therapy where it's very important. And massage, you know, deep tissue massage and other forms of embodied therapy, and sort of walking meditation, so on, and even breathing meditation. You mentioned prayer and meditation as ways of escaping from the body, but actually yoga and yoga meditation, potentially, was a way of getting back in touch with the body. And for many still today, centering prayer is breathing. It's becoming aware of our own breathing, as an inhalation and exhalation of being where, you know, when we breathe in, we're actually relating to the trees. You know, they exhale, we inhale and vice versa. And that sense of elemental immersion and participation in the natural world, in the natural environment where our transcendence is imminent. It's not that we want to get rid of transcendence, or the spirit or consciousness. Far from it. But the important thing is to realise we are body subjects, we're embodied consciousnesses. And that's not dualistic. It's actually a mutual, reciprocal relationship. And that seems to me to be very important. But you mentioned my own experience when I had a very bad depression about 25 years ago. I was ultimately healed - I was helped by talk therapy but I was ultimately healed - when my therapist suggested to me, back to nature. So I started planting trees, and I started swimming every day in the Irish Sea, which is kind of an electric shock in itself, given the temperature. My sister had a horse that I rode every day. And this was something that I had just kind of taken for granted. I became very aware bird life and the life of trees. And that ultimately, you know, made a huge difference. Also medication, you know, meditation and medication. And medication, if properly used, whether it's natural herbal medication, or medicinal pharmacology, psychopharmacology, can be very helpful, because that's also a reminder that we're very embodied.

Kim Forrester 20:54

I want to just turn our attention back to nature for a moment, because you often talk about your affinity for non-human animals and the benefits of actually being touched by the natural world. What do you feel we could learn from animals, Richard, about embracing embodiment for greater well being?

Richard Kearney 21:15

Yeah, well, I think we have so much to learn from animals and also from the animals in each other and in ourselves. You know, from whom we become estranged. We've become strangers to ourselves. And the psychoanalysts talk a lot about that in terms of the unconscious - you know, we are strangers to ourselves. We don't know what is going on around in our unconscious. But our unconscious is not just, as Freud sort of primarily thought, about childhood trauma and repressed desires. It's actually our repressed and our alienated animal nature. I don't know whether you've seen this wonderful film. I think it's from South Africa, called My Octopus Teacher, I think it's called.

Kim Forrester 21:54

Oh, yes, My Octopus Teacher. Absolutely, yes.

Richard Kearney 21:58

My Octopus Teacher. But that's an example, you know, of somebody who was going through an existential crisis and depression, almost suicidal. And then befriends, by accident, this octopus, and learns vulnerability and develops this friendship, which is extraordinary. And it's sort of a mutual apprivoisement, a mutual taming of each other. You know, coming together, these very, very different beings. So, he, the protagonist of the film, learns how to be fully human by befriending the octopus. And we've all seen films about people, you know, befriending horses and dogs. And Jane Goodall, and you know, the chimpanzees and the orangutans. The creatures who, in a certain sense, we fear just as we fear that part of ourselves. But until we come to terms with it and recognise that the animal in us is actually part and parcel of our humanity ... And humanity comes from humus, which is the earth. Humus is the earth. And humour comes from the same root, as does humility. And I think that's what we learn from the animals. We learn humour. We play with animals, and animals love to play, and children love to play, and that's their animal nature. So I think, in our digital optocentric universe, we're so much in control, we're so much masters and possessors of nature, that we actually have lost touch with the animal, or the hum-animal in ourselves. So yes, the end of the book, the end of Touch, is sort of a call to move beyond the Anthropocene, as it's called, of, you know, the domination of the anthropos - anthropology - the human, sort of the human centred world, the anthropocentric world, to what I call a Symbiocene from the word symbiosis, which is Greek for working together, working collaboratively with the you know, human and non-human. And I would say, you know, incarnate and digital. It's not a question of giving up on the digital. It's a question of humanising and maybe even animalising the digital. There's new experiments now that I quote at the end of the book in haptic technology, where they're trying to integrate touch into forms of digital communication, which would sort of lead one towards a greater sense of openness and vulnerability and respect for difference and strangeness.

Kim Forrester 24:29

Let me touch on that, because you do maintain that, if we regarded touch as the most vital of our senses, we could become a more peaceful world. You know, you talk about how a handshake is the embodied action that brings about peace. Do you feel that we can use that exact principle in our daily lives, Richard? If we're in a conflict, is it wisest for us as an individual to be brave, to step into the same space as someone else, and use proximity and touch to help resolve the issue? These days, I think it can be so easy to just get on the old phone and send a breakup message or get on the email and try to resolve any issue that way. If we get back to embodiment, if we get in the same space as someone, is it more beneficial at resolving conflict?

Richard Kearney 25:26

I believe it is, I absolutely believe it is. Now sometimes, the first step in bringing people together can actually be digital. I run a thing called The Guestbook Project, where we invite young people in conflict zones to tell their story, listen to that of the enemy, and then co-create a third story together. And this very often starts with people, Palestinians and Israelis, Croats and Serbs and so on, they begin by making videos and by communicating virtually. And then they actually meet each other. You know, sometimes, there is such animosity, initially, that it's easier to tell your story to a screen and then exchange it and hear the other person, because it gives you a certain kind of distance. The ultimate end of peace is proximity. And we have so many stories with this as the case. I mean, just think of it in terms of just everyday ordinary experience. You can hate somebody and have very violent thoughts about them, and then you meet them and suddenly, you know, you realise they're not the monster you thought they were.

Kim Forrester 26:36

Richard, this is the point where I ask all of my guests for a morning reminder, a small practice that can enhance our well being on a daily basis. In your case, can you share some simple actions that we can take each day, to ensure that we sort of remain exquisitely embodied, and in touch with the world?

Richard Kearney 26:56

In my case, the first thing I do, before I reach for my iPhone, and my computer, or my radio - and I'm like everybody else in this digital world, I too have my attachments and my addictions, it's part and parcel of who we are - but I always take time to breathe. To breathe in and breathe out. And it's a form of prayer or meditation, but a very embodied one. And it's very simple. And it's just a breath of gratitude to be living again. And the word for life, you know, in most languages, spiritus anima, means breath. Pluma in Greek. It means breath. So to live is to breathe. And to breathe is not to dominate the world, but to breathe in the world and to breathe it out again. So we're in this inhalation and exhalation relationship of reciprocity and mutuality, which is what I call the double sensation. And the second thing I do is I go for a walk. If it's in the summer, I go for a swim. But in either case, with a swim, it's being in my element, so to speak. I'm in my element in the water, where, you know, where does the water end and the body begin? It's true of breathing. You know, oxygen runs through our body, so we are part of the air. Air moves and flows through our body - inhalation, exhale. And when we swim, we're aware of that, too. We're immersed in the element of water. Or for walking, our feet are bringing us back into touch with the earth. You know, if that's barefoot, that's even better. But you know, 99.9% of us are going to be wearing shoes, but it's still a reminder of our embodied, incarnate being in the world.

Kim Forrester 28:40

Some truly beautiful and simple ways to bring us back into our bodies and reconnect with the world. I must say if anyone's visited New Zealand, you'd understand that most people walk around barefoot, an awful lot of the time. Richard Kearney, it has just been such a delight to have you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. Your latest book is called Touch: Recovering our most vital sense. And it really is incredibly insightful and thought provoking. And it did help me, in the moment, want to come back more into my body and truly live in a physical sense in this world. If people want to learn more about you, your book, the work that you do, where can they find you?

Richard Kearney 29:26

Well, Richard Kearney, and I think if you just Google it, it'll come up. I have a website, Richard M. Kearney, www.richardmkearney.com. That's it. Richard Kearney will pull up a few websites and then you know, with my publications and some interviews and so on. And then there's the nonprofit, international nonprofit, I run on hospitality, which I mentioned earlier. And that's simply called www.guestbookproject.org. So you'll get, sort of, my sort of work on peace pedagogy there.

Kim Forrester 30:02

Well, obviously we've been connecting digitally across the planet so that I have been truly touched by your wisdom and your message. So thank you again, Richard for choosing to be a part of the Eudaemonia podcast.

Richard Kearney 30:14

A great pleasure. Thank you for having me, Kim.

Kim Forrester 30:17

As the poet Jane Hooper wrote, "Please come home. Please come home into your own body, your own vessel, your own Earth. Please come home into each and every cell and fully into the space that surrounds you." You've been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a flourishing life, please subscribe, check out eudaemoniapod.com for more inspiring episodes, or come join me on Instagram @iamkimforrester. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well, be kind to yourself and take time to truly touch the world.