
Simple Contact

by Charles W.V. Brooks

Excerpt from the new book *Reclaiming Vitality and Presence*.

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.

To be part of the earth, to love it, to experience it, not as an object outside the self, but as the essence of what the self is, connected, intimate, vibrant, and alive, overflowing with life and with the essential kindness that is life's salient characteristic—to teach, explore, and demonstrate that in living: this was Charlotte and Charles' work

Norman Fischer

from the foreword to *Reclaiming Vitality and Presence*

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. 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.

[.....]

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". 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 help-

ful. 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 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.

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 breakthroughs 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. This, too, we could call "simple contact."

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 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.