

The Family Is a Living Body

THE FAMILY IS A LIVING BODY. It is the incubator and channeller of excitement and feeling. It is survival and sexually oriented. Streamers of excitement connect the family members as they breathe together in a common ocean of blood and place. The family—whether of traditional structure: father, mother and children; or of an extended kind: many mothers and fathers and uncles; or just a couple—is a living organism. We cannot live alone. We cannot survive and take care of our needs alone. We cannot even love alone. We humans desire others. We crave company, we gather in bands. Only the mythic hero does without others, cuts himself off from family.

The mother-child bodily interaction, and then the family's physicality, are the bases for how we use our

own bodies and how we interact physically with others. How the family relates to being touched by the stimuli of the world of nature makes the world concrete and cohesive. The patterns of behavior, our physicality given us by our families, are meant to ensure survival through proper action with others and in obtaining food and shelter. Families teach about the public world, but present-day families leave us destitute about how to live with our private bodies.

Our life in the womb—with its pulsating fluids and flesh, its rhythms of blood and breath—is meant to be continued after birth in the closeness of skin contact, skin touching as in breast feeding, in being held and carressed, pressed to the warm body of the mother, and of the family, and in sharing sleeping space and bathing. This continuum of contact—the rhythms, the river of breathing with its sounds, the stimulation of the senses of sight, sound and smell, the taste of others' bodies, their pressure and heat as well as their gestures and expressions—is the ocean of our environment outside the womb. The ocean's solids, liquids, gasses form electric currents that filter through membranes, nourishing living. Sensations and feelings also pass through membranes, connecting the social world with the cellular existence.

This ocean is spread thin when we do not encourage bodily contact, holding, touching, rocking and playing, breast feeding; when we breast feed dressed so that the child's lips touch only the nipple, when we isolate children in separate rooms, or when we bathe them alone. Sleeping, bathing, playing, working to-

gether, touching and emoting sustain the interacting currents of feeling that organize our space and time, our existence. This strongly interactive kind of contact keeps people and objects close, does away with the feeling of alienation and the sense that the world is alien and out there.

To reach out, to touch, overcomes distance. To push away, expel, creates distance. To taste, to smell, to hold creates familiarity. To sustain our ocean, our atmosphere of living, creates our connection to others, our universe. To touch ourselves and others incites the imagination. To be held with fear, at a distance, to be forced to withdraw, makes the world unfamiliar, fearful, sterile.

Excitement, pleasure and satisfaction connect the bodies that have played and worked together. Pleasurable bodily experiences humanize us, they communicate bodily messages that extend our social actions, our interactions with other human beings. This social outreaching encourages the development of active and receptive contact, the willingness to be aroused and to arouse. Think of animals grooming each other, playing with each other, hunting together, foraging together.

The maintaining of family or clan closeness, the encouragement of skin and feeling contact, does not have to be carried to the extreme where one's privacy is undermined or destroyed—just as the telling of dreams or fears to one's family does not make the whole of one's psyche public. The loss of family bodiliness, in fact, results in the need for group nudity and

exhibitionism, the curiosity to see and the urge to be seen, as well as leading to the excessive fear of exposure. The hunger to be touched and to touch drives many people to see doctors and to dream up injuries for physiotherapists. The inhibited need to cry results in the formation of substitute crying, like complaining.

The natural consequence of closeness is the desire for distance, just as distance craves closeness. Contact is pulsatory: it contracts and expands. Feeling has its curve of up and down. Having physical and psychological contact available gives us the option to form our own pattern of privacy instead of being driven to a person. The way we teach our children to be individuals emotionally and socially is wrong. It's too extreme. The extremeness—the teaching of the ability to bear human distance and to solve problems alone—works, when successful, to produce a people who think only for themselves, not with others or cooperatively. They tend toward being unemotional and unpleasuring, reasoners and loners. Being alone, standing in one's crib wailing for contact without a response from another, certainly increases one's feeling of oneself. But it's a cold self-reliance. A friend gave me this clipping:

“Solitary trees if they grow at all grow strong; and a boy deprived of a father's care often develops, if he escapes the period of youth, an independence and vigour of thought which may restore in after life the heavy loss of early days.”
The River War
 Winston Churchill

When it fails, we see the type of dependency and

unsureness that turns people into followers. We see crippling through excessive need for contact and approval, inability and unwillingness to act alone or differently.

Ashley Montagu says touching completes the nervous system. I say touching completes the feeling process. The family, the emotional clan or tribe, is our extended uterus. In the Christian world we are linked by ideas, not feeling. That is why Montagu can make the above statement, but I say touching completes the feeling process.

We never outgrow our need for touching and holding. Our skin is an extension of our feelings. The surface of our body teaches our brain about the world. The brain learns from how we respond emotionally. There is an inevitable experience and feeling that results from touch or no-touch—an experience that paints for us a picture of a friendly or unfriendly world. The discouragement of bodily contact, be it the substitution of words for touching or through expressions of dislike, through isolation or making a child be alone too long too early, produces not only intense longing for contact and painful self-experience but feelings of helplessness, shame and self-hate (“I hate myself for wanting,” or “I feel shame when I need to be held”). This undermines the bodily self which is the very basis of self-esteem.

There is often a double message in a family. “I love you, I care for you; I just reject the touching of your body. I love you as long as you do not bother me.” This stiffens us, leads us to stifle our screams,

and makes us subject to unexplained rages. Our body rejection is the betrayal of ourselves.

A family crisis can be defined as an increase in excitation that demands more than the ordinary responses. If this response is forthcoming, the crisis brings emotional and instinctual as well as social satisfaction. In my work with people, trying to undo their inhibitions and taboos, to soften their feelings of somatic rejection, I and others have found that heavy musculature or weak musculature are expressions of the time in our lives that we have met crisis. Deprivation during the first two to three years generally creates underdeveloped muscles and weak skin tone. After that the response to crisis is usually a stiffening of body form or deep withdrawal, like a sunken chest or a pulled-in abdomen. Therefore, when through the psychological/physical process there is an increase in excitement, the fears that emerge are ones of being helpless, not knowing what to do with the excitement or how to respond, fears of the unknown and of punishment. The response can reveal the family history as well as the history of the individual.

We promise our growing young that when they reach the proper age, they can again live in close physical contact with another, that they can sleep together and touch intimately. At the same time, we train the youngsters to be alone, to learn to be lonely and endure it, to do without physical contact, to weaken the bonds of bodily pleasure and to strengthen the bonds of morality. We continually ask children to bear separation, less and less physical

touch and shared feeling—and then we want to know why intimacy and trust is disappearing in the family, why the family is breaking down. By bodily denial, we preach privacy and shame, forced independence.

The family links the individual to its past and future through the preservation of myth and the transmission of experience. Experiencing an atmosphere of mistrust and little intimacy, the child absorbs the myths of fear and aggression. Denied sexual knowing and approval, he learns to distrust his bodily responses and chooses an economic, idealized life.

A person's body reflects the family's history and the values that have been perpetuated. All families form the bodies that express their emotional and moral values. For example, I recall a family that had a strong powerful father, six feet tall, muscular and successful in business, with a strong will and deep religious belief. He had a ramrod spine, was prudish, and was married to a bubbly wife with seductive girl-like behavior. They raised three children, two boys and a girl. The boys, raised for success in the business, failed. One son resisted his father, imitating him with a ramrod spine. He would blanch and fade away when his father was around. He could barely earn a living; his father supported him. His brother, meanwhile, rebelled, responding with a collapsed chest and hunched shoulders to the pressure of his father and the seductive placating of his mother. The girl also had a crushed-in chest and low self-esteem, but a sexy pelvis; she'd been reared to be seductive and submissive. Excitement was not tolerated in this family, only

obedience to orders. All had to pay homage to the king, so all had to go out and win, but not to unseat or displease papa in the process.

All people are born with their own rhythmical pulsations, with their own peristaltic movements formed as they leave the birth canal. These peristaltic waves are the movement of life, are in tune with the mother, and are the basis of the child's life as it establishes them in the post-uterine world. These waves reach out toward the mother, to nestle, to suck, etc. Our pulsations are sexual, are the self, are emotional survival.

How the family regulates its life in relation to these rhythms of pulsation and streaming helps determine how the child relates to the family. It writes the rules of this living unit. When the family teaches the child to diminish excitation—to be quiet, reserved, to regulate itself according to the parents and not to affect the vibrations of the others—we see depressiveness, or the weakening of the bonds of bodily contact that inhibit reaching out, that discourage intuitive connections, that encourage placating, submissiveness, resentment, dependency. If the rule is to exaggerate the bodily rhythms—if the family pushes the child to be overactive, if they over-demand of it and behave seductively with it, or if they don't interact at all and continually let it have its way—we find defiance, rebellion, blaming, accusing, impulsiveness, self-centeredness.

There is no survival without a family of one sort or another, if not of blood then of emotional bonds. If

there is no herding, no group to give emotional contact, support and sharing, we have schizophrenia.

A mother told me that she and her husband had decided to let their six-month old child cry for 10-15 minutes before going to her. I pointed out that this was a way of teaching her to be alone, rather than a way of teaching her to be independent. They were sending her a double message: We love you . . . but stop needing us. Learn to bear the isolation, start tolerating the roots of what we call individuality. Stop needing us as a baby and start growing up.

We deliver this cultural message, and its double bind becomes the core of our family life. This is how we learn to live our civilized life of: be sociable but don't touch, be yourself but please us. The double message at its worst drives us to despair and into schizophrenic states. At best it makes us sensitive to abstractions and to hypocrisy.

We place value on children learning to be able to handle their upsets alone. They learn to be alone by deadening themselves, forming deep chronic muscular contractions. But it rarely works for long. Those who do not succeed live in dread of the desires of the flesh, or shamed by their weak submission to desire. Those who suppress the upsets well live with contempt for their novacained bodies, and contempt for others. When we are bodily awake, and our feelings are not allowed to connect with others, we often develop anxiety, because we want physical contact and others do not.

Feelings and needs find satisfaction—or are

inhibited—through muscular action. The excitement of hunger or the need to be touched can end in crying or masturbation, in fights or withdrawal. We can close off and not pay attention to our crying, or we can protest, be destructive. In an anti-feeling family situation, we have to do something to ourselves so that our excitation doesn't hurt. We deaden ourselves, we divert ourselves. This helps form our family shape.

Children want their parents to respond to them. Parents respond, on one level, to a child's needs. They're also responding to something in themselves that is being aroused by the child. Children say, "I must make you respond to me," first with crying, then with screams. And the parents stiffen up to ward off their own anger or fear, their desire to respond. Deep down they are having to squeeze their own fear of being alone. When the child finally gives up, and either stiffens against its own impulses or collapses, we have a family body that expresses, "Don't cry, don't want contact, learn to be alone," represented by individual bodies that are stiff or collapsed.

Reaching out is one phenomenon, whether in adults or children. Young children reach out to their parents, which is their world, and adults reach toward their world of other adults.

Children's excitation calls out universal mothering patterns—though there are women who are deeply inhibited and do not respond as mothers. Later on, as the child begins to have energy for its own innovative behavior, it will create situations that demand individual, not archetypal, responses. It will call out some-

thing more than the mothering pattern. The excitatory process will call out something new in the mother and father. In the whole family, something new will be evoked.

Excitation creates muscular action and emotional expression. Looking at somebody's emotional and muscular expression, we can see the body form developed as the child begins to ask his parents to respond to him as an individual person. For example, a woman named Sally whom I worked with told me about her sexual difficulties. She said she gets excited when making love, and then all of a sudden her excitement goes flat. It just dies on her. I pointed out that every time she gets into a confrontation that requires sustained self-assertiveness, she collapses. Her body slumps.

In her youth her excitement met her mother's stony religiousness and her father's playfully sadistic pokes which on a number of occasions did her physical harm. So her every assertive movement is accompanied by a shrinking slump. She sticks out her jaw and her chest collapses. She demands attention and her voice is flat. She raises her fist in anger and her lower body trembles. She gets excited sexually, and she fears to go forward to focus and climax her feeling. Her mother never raised her voice. So when she exercised her own assertiveness, she never evoked response that was affirmative—just disapproval or hurtful criticism. She was never permitted to do things her way. She was always corrected. Or when she reached to her parents with demand or anger, it was

deflected by being made fun of or reasoned with. No wonder her excitement went flat.

Sally was encouraged by her father to be excited and punished by her mother for it. She was encouraged to be pleasing and obedient and punished for being assertive. If she was sexual she was disapproved of. Yet her father aroused her, and her mother taught her to please by placating. If she pleased she was dooming herself. Damned if she did and damned if she did not. She couldn't be a woman or a child. The resolution was to be a perpetual girl. This was her slump.

Our family determines how we find our ground, how we form our territory. If we do not have plenty of touching and holding, we may never be sure of ourselves emotionally, of the ground we stand on, since we cannot trust others to hold us. It's been my experience, as well as others', that people who are not held enough have a fear of falling and hold themselves stiffly away from the earth. Those who feel shame for their sexuality and dislike for their bodily responses never really hold their ground with others. They are always proving themselves or shrinking from others. They are weak-kneed. All warm-blooded animals learn to play, learn to be excited and spontaneous, learn to laugh and do the unexpected, to come close and go far away. If our family does not encourage this natural function of contact and withdrawal, we lose the ability to jump, to get off the ground, to hop around. If our family is not comfortable with this we learn their heaviness.

We are conceived by others, we are nurtured by another, we are born with others, we live with others: clan, family, whatever. The consistent history of our lives is this in-touch-ness with others, this skin-to-skin-ness, this contact through sensations, feelings, needs, this connection through gestures and action, smell and sound, vision and vibration that gives rise to the currents of intuition and the waves of excitement that form the group body as well as our bodies. We thrive in this non-verbal continuum, in this world of the family as ourselves.

To be born is to be touched
To die is to be untouched
To touch is to learn
To hold is to behold
To have a family is to be free
To have no family is to search
all of one's life
for what is missing.

THE HUMAN GROUND