



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT & WORLD AIDS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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One person can make a difference. Will you be that one person?

I. A Touching Biography

“Touch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies. The culture of touch involves all of a culture.”¹ Clara McBride Hale of Harlem had a gifted sense of the vitality that touch brings to babies in need of nurture.

Hale had been a widowed mother of two since the sudden death of her husband when she was only thirty-three. When she died at eighty-seven, she had become known as “Mother Hale,” not for the biological children she had reared, but for the tens of children she had cared for first as a giving and resourceful neighbor then as a foster parent beginning in 1940.¹ At her death in 1992, Mrs. Hale had been praised by an American president and feted by fifteen colleges and

universities. She was a nurturer to the babies of substance addicted mothers and still later to HIV infected infants.

The start of Mother Hale's public service was unintentionally initiated by her own daughter, Lorraine, in 1969.² Lorraine met a drug addicted mother with a young infant on the streets of Harlem. Seeing that she needed help, Lorraine provided the mother with her own mother's address and suggested that the mother take her baby and go there for help. She did.³ When Mrs. Hale left momentarily, the mother left her baby behind. Without contact information, Mrs. Hale cared for the child whose mother eventually returned. At the age of sixty-four, Mrs. Hale was taking in the infants of other drug addicted mothers.⁴

During the urban crack crisis of the 1980s, Mrs. Hale's children joined her in her work and it continued to grow. Mother Hale gained local philanthropic support. An early donor was fellow New Yorker and ex-Beatle, John Lennon.⁵ Local officials began to provide policy waivers to allow her group home for babies. Later came national television coverage. Her care for abandoned, crack addicted infants brought the attention of President Ronald Reagan during the 1985 State of the Union Address. In the 1990s, orphans came to Hale House. They were left behind by an unnamed disease that had taken the lives of their parents. The disease came to be called AIDS.

Mother Hale was estimated to have cared for nearly 1,000 children and infants.⁶ Her goal was to reunite the children with their families of origin whenever possible. She had a simple philosophy for treating babies who had become addicted to heroin and crack or who had contracted AIDS transmitted during their mothers' pregnancy. Mrs. Hale, volunteers, and staff cuddled the babies, often holding them through the painful period of detoxification withdrawal. While they waited to be able to reunite children with their families, Mrs. Hale lived by these words: "We hold them and touch them. They love you to tell them how great they are, how good they are. Somehow, even at a young age, they understand that. They're happy, and they turn out well."⁷

Our lesson from the testimony of Mother Hale's life is that the care of one individual can make a difference. And it can become contagious. Her desire to simply love children left a legacy that today is Hale House, a child development center that also provides transitional housing. Without the proof of an expert's education and scientific studies, Mother Hale intuitively knew that loving touch provides the reassurance that helps a child to survive the most difficult of beginnings. What a great lesson for those who work with struggling children. What a great lesson for those of us who want to make a difference in the global fight against HIV/AIDS. We can reach out physically to those in our communities and financially to those in countries such as Africa that are so devastated by the AIDS crisis. **One person can make a difference. Will you be that one person?**

II. Three Songs that Speak to the Moments

Advent is the promise of the coming Savior that suggests God's openness to love all humanity. Our response is to offer the same to others in a word of encouragement, with a smile, or with a touch.

Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates

Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates;
Behold the King of glory waits;
The King of kings is drawing near;
The Savior of the world is here!

Fling wide the portals of your heart;
Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Redeemer, come, with us abide;
Our hearts to thee we open wide;
Let us thy inner presence feel;
They grace and love in us reveal.

Thy Holy Spirit lead us on
Until our glorious goal is won;
Eternal praise, eternal fame
Be offered Savior to thy name!⁸

When HIV/AIDS was first discovered, the mystery of its origins and mode of transmission caused early patients to be disconnected from humanity, in large part because they went without touch from other humans. Today, persons living with AIDS still need to be touched as do others in our congregations. These choruses from popular songs remind us of the power of touch from Jesus himself as well as the sense of the same from those around us.

He Touched Me

Shackled by a heavy burden,
'Neath a load of guilt and shame.
Then the hand of Jesus touched me,
And now I am no longer the same.

He touched me, Oh He touched me,
And oh the joy that floods my soul!
Something happened and now I know,
He touched me and made me whole.

Since I met this blessed Savior,
Since He cleansed and made me whole,
I will never cease to praise Him,
I'll shout it while eternity rolls.

He touched me, Oh He touched me,
And oh the joy that floods my soul!
Something happened and now I know,

He touched me and made me whole.⁹

Reach Out and Touch

Reach out and touch
Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place
If you can
Reach out and touch
Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place
If you can

(Just try)
Take a little time out of your busy day
To give encouragement
To someone who's lost the way
(Just try)
Or would I be talking to a stone
If I asked you
To share a problem that's not your own
We can change things if we start giving
Why don't you

Reach out and touch
Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place
If you can
Reach out and touch
Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place
If you can

(Just try)
If you see an old friend on the street
And he's down
Remember his shoes could fit your feet

(Just try)
Try a little kindness you'll see
It's something that comes very naturally
We can change things if we start giving

Why don't you
Reach out and touch
Why don't you (Why don't you)
Reach out and touch somebody's hand

Reach out and touch
Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place
If you can
Reach out and touch
Somebody's hand
Make this world a better place
If you can.¹⁰

III. Memorable Learning Moment

A friend who was accustomed to a more stoic form of worship than the lively worship at my “down home,” traditional African American Baptist church admitted that one of her favorite reasons for attending our worship service was the welcoming of the visitors. Dedicated to urban ministry and located in the inner city where homeless persons regularly walked in off the streets, the pastor instructed us to “Make sure everyone gets a hug.” At the end of, our version of the ritual passing of the peace, he asked for assurance: “Did anybody NOT get a hug?” If anyone had to admit to being overlooked, the pastor and members of the congregation had another opportunity to correct our collective error of omission.

For any number of reasons, too often we do not wish to risk sending an unintended message, so we may choose to eliminate touch—even within the faith community. To be sure, sometimes a person who may be touch-starved¹¹ or who associates touch only as related to sexual activity, may occasionally reach out inappropriately. But how are they to be taught without instruction? Some schools no longer allow teachers to touch primary grade children.¹² Instead, children are taught about “bad touch.” Good defense, yes. But it is not the only sort of touch they can learn to experience.

The importance of touch in the lives of humans at all ages has been the subject of child development literature at least as long ago as the nineteenth century. Tiffany Field, director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine, provides an overview of the benefits of touch. Being touched can help to reduce stress, pain, and anxiety. It can positively impact breathing, facilitate growth and development in preterm infants and older children, and stimulate blood flow and an active, protecting immune system.¹³

Restore touch in the life of your faith community and explain its importance as a measure for surviving and thriving for children and adults. Remind the congregation of the healing power of touch in Jesus’ ministry. Focus on touch as an imitation of the Christ. Encourage occasional handholding during corporate prayer or at the benediction or in the exchange of a hug between Sunday school classmates where relationships have an opportunity to become more intimate, especially in a large congregation. Contemporize understanding. Touch is too often associated with violence and is overused to operate technology rather than to connect people to each other.¹⁴ Take the taboo out of touch. Also, importantly, remember those around the world suffering with AIDS who can be healed if we will touch them with our financial generosity and advocacy for global AIDS policies that uplift the most down trodden. This year, for World AIDS Day, why

not fight for something instead of against so much—fight to touch others from your corner in the world.

IV. Additional Resources

- Balm in Gilead, Inc. (<http://www.balmingilead.org>) is an ecumenical faith community not-for-profit that seeks to reduce the incidence of HIV and AIDS in the African Diaspora.
- The Black AIDS Institute (<http://www.blackaids.org/>) is an HIV/AIDS policy center that aims to reduce the epidemic of the HIV/AIDS health disparity. Their motto describes a commitment to self-preservation: "Our People, Our Problem, Our Solution."
- The Centers for Disease Control (<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/BlackHIVAIDSAwareness/>) offers health statistics, health information, and strategies to educate people about HIV and AIDS in the United States.

These additional links provide information for African American faith communities:

- HIV and AIDS statistics for African American communities
<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa/index.htm>
- Locate an HIV/AIDS testing center near you: <http://www.hivtest.org/>
- AIDS.gov: Minority Communities: <http://aids.gov/populations/minority/index.html> provides lists of HIV and AIDS advocacy resources, housing, and social service agencies in your local area

Notes

1. Classen, Constance. "Fingerprints: Writing about Touch." The Book of Touch. Ed. Constance Classen, Oxford: Berg, 2005. p. 1.
2. "Hale House: About Mother Clara Hale." Halehouse.org. Hale House Center. Online location: <http://www.halehouse.org/aboutmch> accessed 8 August 2009
3. "Clara Hale." Encyclopedia of World Biography. 2004. Encyclopedia.com. Online location: <http://www.encyclopedia.com> accessed 9 August 2009
4. "Hale House: About Mother Clara Hale." Online location: <http://www.halehouse.org/aboutmch> accessed 8 August 2009
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Lambert, Bruce. "Clara Hale, 87, Who Aided Addicts' Babies, Dies." New York Times. 12 Dec. 1992. Online location: <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/20/us/clara-hale-87-who-aided-addicts-babies-dies.html?pagewanted=> accessed 8 August 2009
8. Weissel, Georg. The United Methodist Hymnal. Third Edition. Trans. Catherine Winkworth. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989. #213

9. Gaither, William J. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publication, Inc., 2001. #273
10. Ashford, Nickolas, and Valerie Simpson. "Reach Out and Touch Somebody's Hand."
11. Field, Tiffany. Touch. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001. Field describes the notion of "touch hunger." By referring to touch starved, I am extending the severity of her concept.
12. Ibid., 2.
13. Ibid., p. ix.
14. Ibid., p. 13. See Figure 1.6.