

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Have we lost touch with our most important sense?

Featuring Richard Kearney with Stanton Wortham (host) and Colleen Griffith (commentator)

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Stanton Wortham 0:08

Welcome to Pulled Up Short. This is a podcast that's devoted to a particular kind of activity, where we're told some new perspectives on things that cause us to stop, to be pulled up short, and think a little bit about something that we believed but which turns out not to be true, or at least that we need to reconsider based on some new information that we've been given. This is an important thing to do. It requires that we recognize deeply held presuppositions, that we entertain the possibility that our typical ways of understanding are incomplete or distorting. We need to be open to questions and alternative formulations of basic issues that we tend to take for granted. We have to be willing to consider alternative ways of thinking. This requires a commitment to imagination, to seeing the world in new ways, a commitment to systematically inquiring based on evidence and reason, wherever it leads, a commitment to being open, to moving beyond dogmatism, and considering alternative beliefs and practices, or commitment to conversation to listening deeply to others and inquiring jointly.

So in each episode, we're going to hear from someone who has an insight or something we don't typically think about that requires us to be pulled up short, to rethink something that we tend to take for granted. And we hope that you'll enjoy.

Welcome to another episode of Pulled Up Short. We're very happy today to have with us Richard Kearney, Professor of Philosophy at Boston College, who has just written a wonderful new book, and he's going to share with us insights from it. We also have Colleen Griffith, also from Boston College, a Professor in the School of Theology and Ministry. We're grateful to them for joining us today.

So Richard, I'm excited to learn about your new book, *Touch: Recovering our most vital sense*. What's remarkable to me about it is that you write about how important touch is for humans and how it's been neglected. And I've discovered that you wrote the book before the pandemic. So we're all a bit more aware of the importance of touch since we haven't been able to touch people in the last year. But tell me a little bit about how you came to it even before the pandemic.

Richard Kearney 2:26

Well, before the pandemic, I was already fascinated by the philosophical beginnings of our understanding of touch with the Greeks. And I can say a word about the original primacy of sight over touch, and then how that has developed in our contemporary culture into what I call "a digital age of excarnation," where we become more and more disembodied as we become more interconnected virtually.

Let us start with Plato who, at the origin of Western philosophy, made the point that the definition of man (*anthropos*) referred to the act of standing erect and gazing up at the sky, at intellectual ideas, at the light. So doing, humans removed themselves from the earth, from the common life with four legged creatures, which for Plato was too exposed to material confusion and proximity. So by rising up and becoming *homo erectus*, and gazing at the transcendental ideas, we suddenly took control of our existence. We saw things objectively from a distance, with a certain intellectual and contemplative detachment. This was already the birth of the reign of the eye. We call that today 'optocentrism,' the centrism of sight.

Aristotle, his disciple, had somewhat of a contrary view. He contested this primacy of sight and said, "No Plato, you're forgetting something fundamental and that is touch," which he said is actually the most important of the senses because it has a double sensation. You can see without being seen, hear without being heard, or smell without being smelled, but you cannot touch without being exposed to touch, without being tangible. And so that doubling, that recursive, reciprocal touching and being touched was, for Aristotle, the very basis of what he called philosophical sensibility and human sensitivity -- that you're not just imposing or projecting your own ideas, you are, at the same time, exposed to and vulnerable to difference. He says, "touch knows difference." And this (Greek *krinein*) has a discerning, discriminating ability to tell between different kinds of touch. And so for Aristotle, this was the beginning of philosophy because it was the encounter with what is different from ourselves, what is other and strange, what comes to us in a certain receptivity. If we are attentive and open to questioning. And so we ask why is there this rather than that, why is there something rather than nothing? We become aware of surprise, novelty, difference, otherness. And this he says it's the reason why touch is the most philosophical of the senses.

However, to put it shortly, Plato won the debate - or Platonism - because Plato is a very complex creature: for everything Plato says you can find something in the dialogues where he says the opposite. But his optocentrism became a standard orthodoxy, where sight reigns supreme and the other senses, and particularly touch, are placed at the bottom of the ladder.

I argue in my recent book *Touch* that our modern age of digital technology is ultimately the triumph of optocentrism, where the screen rules our experience. Hence the paradox that when we touch the touch screen, we exit from our incarnate, embodied, tactile existence, into a world of hyper-connectivity, where at one level, we're all connected virtually, but in fact, physically, carnally, empirically, biologically, actually, we're all on our separate screens – disembodied and separate. This is the digital paradox: hyperconnectivity leads to isolation. And indeed, even before the pandemic, there were many studies being done about the rise of anxiety and loneliness in the younger generations who are spending six to eight hours on social media per day. Americans check their iPhones a billion times per day, as the *Time* headline put it, and that this digitalized existence was causing great suffering. This is not to deny, of course, that the digital age brings huge advantages, including our ability to communicate on zoom and skype and multiple social media platforms, including our ability as teachers to hold classes online with our students which we couldn't otherwise, and to become aware of so much that's going on in the rest of the world. So it does bring people together, but as the philosophical adage goes, if technology overcomes distance, it does not bring nearness. So this is the challenge today: how can we combine the carnal and the digital? How do we move beyond the Platonic 'anthropocene' to a new 'symbiocene' where we can actually coexist as tactile and virtual beings. It's not an either/or, it's both/and, but it's a real challenge.

Stanton Wortham 7:35

This is fascinating. I want to start with this double nature of touch as you describe it. I had not thought about it this way before, but it really is true that I can see others without them seeing me. But touch: if you're touching a living being, it is always reciprocal in this sense. And the other senses don't have that doubled nature. So tell me a little more about the implications of that. It means that there's something about touch that allows us to connect in a way or you said be vulnerable in a way that the other senses don't?

Richard Kearney 8:07

Yes touch is the double sensation of touching and being touched. But tactility is not confined to touch alone. It actually traverses all the other senses too, making them more fully alive, turning them from unliteral sensations into reversible ones. I'll give you an example. When my mother used to take us to swim in the summer - we were seven children in the back of the car - we'd all sing a song: "I see the sea, and the sea sees me." We knew somehow that the real sea was not just something we saw but was something that saw us; it was not just something we touched when we swam but something that touched and surrounded us and buoyed us up. When we truly sense we sense doubly, mutually, actively and passively. And this is potentially so for all the senses. Sight and hearing and tasting can also become reversible in so far as they are synesthetically traversed by touch. True sight is tactful sight or insight - a seeing that has the experience of being seen when it sees. And, following Aristotle, contemporary phenomenology (especially Merleau-Ponty) makes the point our senses are at their best - most vital and alive - when they are *tactful* forms of double sensation. Tact comes from the Latin word to touch, *tango tangere, tactum*. And this is true of hearing too, for example. You can hear without being heard, just as you can see without being seen. But true hearing is the sense that you are also being heard, that you are resonating with a sound higher and deeper than yourself. Great musicians talk about this. Great singers talk about it too. It's not just us singing, it's also our being sung. The German poet Rilke speaks of poetry as 'the song of existence'. Being is singing itself through each one of us. So all of the senses synthetically can be traversed by touch when they become tactful and tactile, when they become fully sensitive and sensible. Fully human.

This goes back to Aristotle's basic phenomenological discovery that it's our vulnerability to the other that makes us human. Our biggest organ is skin. 2.2 square meters for most adults. And its medium of sensitivity is flesh (*sarx*). Apart from our nails and our hair, which we can cut without screaming, the rest of this is "on." Even when we're asleep, we are "on" because we are tactile and tangible. So what constitutes us as human - from the moment we are born to the moment we die - is this reversible, recursive, mutual, reciprocal relationship between touching and being touched.

And this is why it's so important, for example, that children are held and touched when they're born. The first thing the newly born do is reach out to be touched. And if they're not touched, as we know from various experiments (e.g. the orphans in Ceaușescu's Romania or in post-war Vienna treated by Dr René Spitz in the late 1940s), infants that are not held and touched suffer greatly, both psychically and physically. Certain medical experiments to protect children from germs by placing them in incubators had a very disabling and deleterious impact upon the children. By not touching them in order to keep them safe hygienically, they were actually being deprived of their ontological connection with the world through touch. And if that's the first thing we reach out for as children, to touch and be touched, it's also our last gesture when we die. And we saw this very tragically and

dramatically during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the earlier months when people were in hospitals, deprived of their loved ones and family because of social distancing. They were reaching out to touch, and the caretakers and doctors spoke very movingly about this, that all they could do in those final hours was to take the hands of their patients who were dying. So you know, we come naked into the world and naked we depart, as the biblical phrase goes. Our nakedness constitutes us as flesh from beginning to end. And that's basically the root of our sensitivity - and Aristotle would say, our human intelligence.

We testify to this in our everyday language, when we say, for example, that we find somebody 'very touching,' or that 'something touches us.' Or when we use the term 'touché,' meaning "You got it there, you really hit the mark." Or when we say 'keep in touch,' when saying goodbye to somebody. The colloquial phrase betrays our instinct for touch, our 'touch hunger' as the phenomenon is now called. And we also use the phrase to 'have the touch.' To say of somebody 'they have the touch' - as healers, cooks, artists, lovers - is to say that have a special way with the world, they have savvy, flair, insight. And that's how touch traverses the other senses, bringing taste to fulfillment as savvy (from *savoir, savourer, sapere, sapientia* – wisdom as *tasting*), bringing smell to fulfillment as flair, bringing sight to fulfillment as vision or insight: each a form of double sensation. But if we deprive the other senses of that tactile reversibility, then sight can become optocentric in the sense of one-way domination and dominion over the outside universe and nature. And the other senses follow suit: as seeing becomes blind to the other, hearing becomes deaf to the other, taste becomes gluttony and consumption etc. The senses lose their tact and become mere contact. They lose their bilateral synesthesia and symbiosis and become unliteral impositions on the world.

So the rediscovery of touch as our most vital sense in the pandemic pulled us all up short. Up until then we took it for granted, we ignored the fact that it is our most fundamental way of relating to the world. For every 20 studies of sight there was only one on touch. We neglected it. And then suddenly, when we were no longer allowed to hug our loved ones, or shake hands with our friends, or turn a public door handle without sanitizing it (because we realized that dozens of other people had touched the same door) suddenly, we became aware of what was broken. As Heidegger famously remarks in *Being and Time*, it is only when the hammer breaks that you recognize the being of the hammer. Before that, you're just so intent upon hammering a nail onto the wall, you don't appreciate the fundamental essence of hammer. Ditto for a car breaking down. Suddenly you say, "My gosh, I really do need and appreciate this car." But until it breaks down, you're just heading in one direction, going to your destination, oblivious to the thing that is taking you there. The same goes for our lives. Until we break down, until the pandemic takes touch away from us, we are blind to touch. As Joni Mitchell says, 'You don't know what you've got 'till it's gone.'

I think philosophy begins with the awareness of the possibility of our non-being, of our breakdown, of our finitude, that something can be lost and taken away from us, i.e. our lives. And this very recognition makes us philosophical beings because we ask the question: What does it mean to be or not be? Why is there something rather than nothing? I think with the eclipse of touch with the pandemic, we became acutely aware that touch is an absolutely vital sense, not just for our relationship with others, but for our own very health. Touch is essential to our well-being. It lowers blood pressure, helps with sleep and digestion, lessens our anxiety. It's absolutely crucial.

During the pandemic some people tried to replace contact with humans with animals. You couldn't buy a dog because everyone suddenly wanted a pet for tactile company. And this is not just true of the pandemic. It's true of those who suffer from anxiety, isolation and depression – the need to with

animals and nature. To move from digital incarnation to living forms of incarnation. Here again the tactile is so important. And as the statistics of Netflix and Amazon Prime showed, the movies that everybody wanted to watch during the lockdown were films and series on animals, nature, romance. It was all about getting 'back in touch.' So I think we learned a lot in the pandemic - when we lost touch we realized the indispensable importance of touch.

Stanton Wortham 16:15

I'm very interested by this notion that there's something fundamental about touch because of the reciprocity, or ideally the mutuality, that it provides when we exercise it. And you're making an argument that we've gotten too focused on vision. I was struck by an example you gave earlier. You said that it's possible to use the other senses in a way that includes that mutuality. So vision, for example, it is possible to see and be seen at the same time, in sort of a special case of seeing, when you're gazing into another person's eyes. So you're saying that touch is like that more fundamentally, that in your metaphor, vision can be more touch-like, it can be more tactile. And that raises these questions for me about... I know that our typical way of thinking about human nature is very optocentric, as you put it. We tend to imagine that a human being fundamentally is a being that knows, that has some distance. And you're saying we could reorient our vision of who we are. Whoops, I used the word vision, I apologize. I could reorient our account of who we are, of what human nature fundamentally is, using touch as the fundamental metaphor and not vision. Could you tell me a little more about what that would be? How would we imagine ourselves as humans, if touch were central, instead of vision?

Richard Kearney 17:40

We would recognize our radical nature as interconnected, as a part in a whole, as inter-being (as Thich Nhat Hanh the Buddhist teacher puts it); or as the Christian gospels put it, we're all part of a mystical body. We're all branches of vines in a vineyard. You know, every wisdom tradition – Abrahamic, Eastern, indigenous - has its particular metaphor for this fundamental insight (insight as tactful vision) into our interdependency, our interspecies being. This is fundamental, for example, in the Buddhist tradition where all sentient beings are connected to all other sentient beings. And we find it in the Acts of the Apostles, where Peter has the vision of a white sheet coming down from heaven full of different kinds of animals. And this is when the Christians were going out and talking to people in other lands and cultures, teaching that we are all interconnected, that we're all part of a living, vibrant biosphere and ecosphere.

So I come back to the wake-up call of the pandemic -- about recovering and rediscovering the centrality of touch as a mutual, reciprocal way of being with others, an 'I-Thou' way of being with others, rather than an 'I-It' objectification of things. A pulling up short which is accompanied by the extraordinary, almost apocalyptic awareness that our planet might come to an end, because we have dominated it, technologically and optocentrically. And it is time to acknowledge that it's not about us doing things to the universe, it's about the universe doing things to us. We don't host the universe; the universe hosts us. It's a mutual hosting and if we abuse our host as ungrateful and unmindful guests we do so at our peril. There's a growing ecological awareness as a recent UNESCO poll showed, when it asked people from the age of 15 to 50 what was the most important moral question for our century? And 80% said, "The environment." Pulled up short by the double crisis of the climate and Covid-19, we are rediscovering that we live in mutual dependency with the environment, and that if we don't do something about it, we will die. It is, I would suggest, our tactility as reversible double sensation, which makes us not just more sensitive to other human beings in all our

relations - affective, sexual, psychic - but also in our relationship with the animal and the elemental, ecological world.

Stanton Wortham 20:35

So given the importance of recentering our attention on touch, using it both literally as something we do more and as a metaphor in how we think of ourselves, you mentioned that we're in a technological world. We're not going to eliminate technology, and you wouldn't advocate for that. How would you recommend that we go about regaining touch, that we regain it as an actual set of actions but also as a way of thinking, given all the new technologies and the distance that we've been pushed into?

Richard Kearney 21:05

Well, as I say at the very end of the book, it's a 'both/and'. We can read books online, and we can read books in the hand. And the two experiences can actually collaborate and complement each other. Just as online teaching, which many of us were doing during the pandemic, can supplement in-person teaching. I'm doing an in-person class and an online class this semester. And I reckon in the future, it probably won't just be one or the other, it will be a 'both/and.' So I think it's a question of just not jumping completely on board the digital at the expense of the tactile, but always finding the time (in the midst of digital reading and writing) to still buy a book in a bookshop and read it - turning the pages and marking the margins and having your little index at the back and putting it down on your lap as you pause for a moment to breathe. It's a different quality of reading and writing. Research shows it is actually more effective for learning and memory. And yet none of us want to dispense with the extraordinary advantages of the internet - Wikipedia and Google search and reading books online? So it's really not an either/or. But the important thing is that we realize that the tactile that can run through all the senses and even the digital, up to a point, is about learning to see, to hear, to smell, to taste reciprocally, bilaterally, *humanly*.

Stanton Wortham 24:12

Well, this is very provocative. Having talked about this with you, I now understand that you're not just arguing that we need more touch, like everybody should hug more. And you're not just arguing that we should use a different metaphor for thinking about ourselves more tactile, less optocentric. You're arguing for reorientation of all our senses, of our way of being in the world, to be more mutual, more vulnerable in this way that you've articulated very nicely. So that's definitely pulled me up short. I'd love to now turn to Professor Griffith and ask her if she'd be willing to come in and ask a couple of questions and have a conversation.

Colleen Griffith 24:50

Yes, thanks Dean Stanton and Professor Kearney. It really is a delight to join you. This has been a rich conversation thus far. So some things that I've been thinking about in listening to you, Richard... I appreciate your emphasis on tact, and the way you talk about tactful touch. And I realized that there's something reverential about tactful touch. You know, it seems to kind of emanate from bodily felt sense, and keen self awareness is necessary to stay sensitive to the other through it all. And there's beauty in it. I might even suggest there's something spiritual about it. And when I think about persons who I recognize as very authentic, and integrated, and even holy people living common lives, these seem to be people who have this finely tuned tactile sensibility about what you speak in spades. And I'm wondering if you find this to be so as well? And also, is it true that we all have this basic ability for the kind of reciprocity and the kind of tactical touch that you're

describing? And yet we can also mature in it. We can also deepen in it. And if that's the case, do you have any ideas about practices, perhaps, that enable us to cultivate more refined, tactile sensibility?

Richard Kearney 26:24

You're asking how might we recover our senses by recovering our most vital sense of touch? And I think a lot of that is just waking up to what we already are, to what is already there. In our every carnal existence in the world and in our cultural and social practices. I mean, in medicine, it's what we call the bedside manner. My grandfather was a dispensary doctor in West Cork (Ireland), and he was called the French doctor because he always shook hands with people. And my brother, Michael, who works in palliative medicine says that actually being present to people, being in a tactile presence with people as you are helping them to die, or preparing them for surgery, is a huge part of taking care, of *healing* their suffering in the moment, even if you cannot *cure* them (there is no cure for death). This is in keeping with what Professor Dominique Meyniel writes in Code 10 of his medical best practice for his students – I quote: "It is forbidden for nurses, medical interns and students not to touch aging patients in addition to clinically examining them. They should hold their hands for long periods" ... and so on. These are very simple things, but they're extraordinarily important. And with the rise of digital imaging and teledocoring technologies in contemporary medicine and insurance companies - where you see your doctor and tests and diagnostics on a screen - the actual, physical relationship of doctor to patient is becoming, for all kinds of practical reasons, smaller and smaller. Interhuman proximity is being replaced by digital proxy.

So does this mean going back in time? No. But what it means is having it both ways. It's a question of balance and degree. Rather than turning our backs on technology and declaring it a bad thing because it leads to 'excarnation', what we need is a new balance between what I call a 'commons of the body' and the World Wide Web. Ideally we should be able to experience both human proximity and communication across distance.

You ask about how we might get back to the body? Even digital technology now – AR (alternative reality) and VR (virtual reality) experiments – are trying to bring in haptics, what's called tele-haptics, where people can actually experience a tactile hug at a distance, even thousands of miles away, by wearing 'haptic vests' and audio-visual headgear. Now, this is still at a very early age, but for me what's important, whether they succeed in these experiments or not, is the recognition of touch hunger, that any communication you can have virtually with somebody seems to miss touch, that the optical alone is not enough. We've all seen unilateral e-warfare on TV through drone footage and smart bombs. We see violence inflicted but are not vulnerable or exposed to suffering violence in return. Digital war is one-way war. Similarly much of sexual experience for young people today is lived vicariously and voyeuristically, through the screen, whether its dating sites or pornography or gaming or social media. Pornography is now a 60 billion a year industry. It's one-way sex. The amount of time spent virtually in disembodied, disincarnate, simulated experience is extraordinary. So once again, it's not a question of rejecting technology as such (there is so much to gain) but of getting the right balance between the carnal and the virtual, between the digital as fingerprint and the digital as code.

Colleen Griffith 30:21

Yeah, I appreciate that, and balance is to be striven for. I almost feel we need redress, though first. And because we're a bit off... we've tilted the scale a bit too much in that excarnation direction. Another thing I wondered, Richard, is about all of the sociocultural inscriptions that are placed on

on touch and and gendered dimensions of it as well. How do we sort through those inscriptions in order to cultivate this richer, tactile sensibility?

Richard Kearney 30:58

Yes, Well that's a huge question and a very important one. You know, there's enabling touch and there's disabling touch. There's creative touch and there's destructive touch. We know all about the latter – rape and torture, combat and violence, physical and sexual abuse going on for centuries and now coming to the public eye. That too is a wake up call to the importance of touch - how touch can be used and abused. A cogent reminder that touch is not always on the side of the angels. When touch is abused, it loses its vital role as mutual sensation and becomes willful imposition. Abusive touch is touch betrayed – turned away (*per-vertire*) from its natural function as reversible sensing. Sexual or tactile violation means imposing one's force unilaterally on the other's body. It is the refusal to be exposed to the pain of another person, to the needs and sensitivities of the other person. So whether it's sexual pedagogy, or any form of human relationship with other living beings, we need this wake up call, this 'redress' as you say, to actually come back to a situation where we ask the question, "Am I being touched as I am touching? Am I as aware, as attentive, as sensitive to where the other person is, as I am to myself?" And that's where the reversible and recursive nature of tactility is crucial.

Colleen Griffith 32:43

And do you think that certain cultures are more "natural" regarding this? And are women seen still to be more capable of this? What are your thoughts about some of those inscriptions?

Richard Kearney 33:05

I think the answer is yes, while always wanting to be wary, as I know you are in your work, of any kind of essentialism – of the sort 'women have touch and men have sight.' We're all a mix, but I think traditionally, culturally, patriarchal cultures were more geared towards the domination of sight, and female cultures were more open to the preservation of this somatic, tactful, tactile, reciprocity with the other. With all the social prejudice that could go with gender differences - not to sentimentalize or romanticize things, you know, the mother-child relationship in the home and all that. But I think there is some truth in that, and the aim I suppose is to bring the imaginaries of touch and sight together in some way.

A very important point implied in your question is when touch is appropriate or inappropriate. Or when touch is sometimes best served by not (literally) touching. Being proximate to someone without actual physical contact can still be a form of tactile expression. Think of Yahweh and Adam reaching out in Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel – their fingers are reaching towards each other, but they don't actually touch. And yet it is a deeply tactful relationship – full of touch hunger! Right? Because we have tactility too at a distance. I mean, in all our five senses we are constantly picking up vibrations, motions. Pheromones. Flavors. Light waves. Sound waves. We're receiving all these carnal signals tactilely, on our eyes and skin, on our tympanum and nose buds. So we are always in a mutual - or potentially mutual - tactile relationship with others. But we can equally block off our senses and make them unilateral out of fear, anger, anxiety, or basic will to power. Or sheer trauma, when it is all too much. When we don't want to feel what others feel, to experience how people are suffering in India or Syria or Somalia at the moment. We want to numb ourselves, block off the other's pain, and have a purely subjective knowing, a one-way relationship with the world. So the question of acknowledging the moments when we should not actually physically touch

- even though we are in a tactile presence in proximity to somebody - is as important as knowing when it is right to touch, when the other person is ready and is fully reciprocal. Touch is all about tact in the end.

Stanton Wortham 35:56

This has been really great. I very much appreciate the rich conversation that you both have brought. So I just want to thank you, Professor Richard Kearney, great new book on touch. We really appreciate your sharing the insights with you. It has pulled me up short for sure. And Professor Coleen Griffith, thank you very much for your contributions as well.

So that was a wonderful episode with Richard Kearney and Colleen Griffith. We're grateful to all of you for listening to this, which was our final episode of the first season of Pulled Up Short. I hope that you've enjoyed these episodes. We're going to take a break over the summer, and we hope that you'll subscribe so you'll be notified when we come back in the fall with a second season.