

THE TROUBLE WITH DOING A MASSAGE by Matthew J. van der Giessen

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I have a confession to make. I have never liked the word "do" when referring to massage. It's a word that has always grated on my nerves whenever I've heard it. I have tried to rationalize my reaction. I would tell myself that I was being too picky, a dilettante of language, that I was taking my ear for the semantics of language to the ridiculous. Yet, as much as I have encouraged others to listen to their bodies, in the end I have had to listen to mine and respect the reality that, like the response to fingernails going down a chalk board, a certain shudder has gone through my body whenever I heard the word "do" used in reference to massage.

I'm sure you've all heard it many times before. "How many did you "do" today? I am going to "do" him tomorrow." I imagine we all say these things. And despite my avowed dislike for the word, to my discomfort, even I would catch myself talking about "doing" a massage. So what's my problem? What's wrong with a word that's so ingrained in our language being used to describe a massage? To tell the truth I didn't know. But something was wrong. And I have learned to trust those responses that speak out through the body enough to know that I wanted to find out.

In my work, words are important. I have learned to pay as much attention to the words my clients use as to the tension patterns in their bodies. Through listening carefully to the language we use to describe body experience, I have discovered that there is a richness to the images that are expressed and insight in the meanings they portray. Learning to hear our own voice speak the experience of the body is often the first step in learning to value the truth of our body experience. When we open a receptive ear, we discover a depth to the spoken language of the body that leads us inward towards a sense of ownership and self-empowerment that is rooted deep in the ground of our own being. Body language, when expressed, becomes a powerful force for self-awareness.

So what do we "do" when we massage the body? I began an exploration of the underground roots of the word, moving through that lush undergrowth of interconnecting meanings that feed the vitality of language as an imagination of our relationship with the world. First, I discovered that "do" comes from an ancient Indo-European root-stalk "dhe", meaning "to set or put". In other words, an action or enactment is occurring. A deed is being done.

This is pretty simple, something is being done when we do a massage; we knew this already. But wait, there is more. Of course, mostly we use massage as a noun, a description of something we do. But it is interesting that when we massage someone, something much more intimate happens that doesn't occur in other therapies. The noun becomes a verb, the act itself. We come for a massage, but we also get massaged. It

seems to me that this is a direct comment on the potentialities in massage that don't exist in other therapies. We don't "physiotherapy" someone, we don't "psychology" them, and we certainly don't "medicine" someone back to health. Yet, massage doesn't lose the potency that many words do in their development from their origin as things experienced and enacted - verbs - to things we look at or know about - nouns. When someone comes for a massage, we massage them. Massage is enacted, and moves from being something "over there" to something we experience as an interaction between two people. Amongst all the therapies, in the touch of massage we have a hint that something very potent is going on.

When we move away from using massage as a verb, or the word for what we are doing, something of that potency is lost. It's not just in your head, you can feel it in your body. Try it yourself. Feel what it's like to say this sequence: I massage you; I do a massage on you; I do you.

With each sentence, our whole concept of the experience changes. A distance develops between the two people present. "Something is done. I do it to you. I have it done to me." When we move from verbs to nouns in word usage we become involved in what Russell Lockhart has called "separatist language". We distance ourselves from relationship and the experience of what we are doing. Eventually, we become so removed that the potential in what we are doing disappears from consciousness; we just do.

All this talk about doing leaves me with a distinct sense of a one-way street. I do, and I do it to you. Now I notice I have one more body experience: a rather bad taste in my mouth.

We all know that at its best massage is nothing like this at all. Rather, there is an experience of mutuality. "Give a massage and get a massage" is more the quality of the experience. Massage is not just the masculine act of doing, it is the feminine art of receiving and responding. Something is happening to us too. Because we feel the body and being of the person we work with, we are moved to respond with the right touch. Or so it should go.

Yet often, because we feel too fragile to bear the invasion of **feeling** our touch, we remove ourselves from it. As Marion Woodman describes it, we cannot bear the act of penetrating consciously because it would mean bearing the conscious penetration of our own being. And in those moments, we cease to massage and begin to do a massage.

Some of us don't survive this shift so well. In massage school students can feel so ambushed by the sensory intensity that comes with the prolonged touching of massage that they aren't able to continue. Others of us struggle continually with strain-related problems in our shoulders, arms and hands as the conflicting messages of "touch but don't feel" are played out in our bodies. Or we may be more subtle and remove ourselves from empathic involvement with our clients, eventually discovering to

our dismay that we have slipped into the shadow world of talking with colleagues about our clients with distant and callous disparagement. The "feel" of relationship is gone.

Of course, one way to avoid being touched by the touch we do is to become more objectively professional. We may move to a view that sees therapy in the body as only physical and champions the cause that only values massage as a physical therapy.

In all of this we are supported by our clients. The more pain our clients are in, the more likely we will be asked to fix the client, to "do" the act of healing. As Guggenbuhl-Craig says, "It is almost impossible for [the therapist] *just to be there* with the patient".

I am reminded of a story a psychotherapist once told me about a patient who had her puzzled. The patient would tell the psychotherapist in great detail how her chiropractor would forcefully twist her body every which way to manipulate it, yet in the psychologist's office, the woman was afraid to simply lie down on a mat and breathe - she felt too vulnerable. Often our clients will ask us for abusive touch because that is the only touch they've known. They know how to prepare themselves to have someone "dig right in there", but to lie quietly and breathe up to meet the soft touch of another may leave them feeling vulnerable. It is a touch that is unknown, too dangerous, too invasive.

Yet it's exactly at this point of meeting that true healing can be done. By engaging with another at the boundary of our being, we move away from the power dynamic that so easily exists between client and therapist. Instead, we support the discovery of self-empowerment that emerges when touch participates in a true relationship. This is a kind of touch that Fritz Smith has called "donkey touch". In the same way that two donkeys will lean into each other while walking on a narrow path, we engage in touch that is mutually supportive, that "meets with" the other. With this kind of touch we truly connect. We are engaged in what Smith calls interfacing, where the identity of each human being is strengthened by touch that is neither too soft or too strong. Rather, it is a touch whose sole intention is to support the boundary of our identity and the integrity of our being.

It is here, at the place of just the "right" touch that the potency of massage truly comes into its own. In this environment where nothing is being "done", we can feel what it is to be met with a responsive regard. With support, with an honoring of the sanctity of our being, the artificial boundaries we call muscle tensions can release, and our wounds can begin to heal.