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We are living in a moment where touch and proximity are at their most stigmatized. A pandemic has caused the world to close itself off from the importance of connection and intimacy. Several weeks before the start of the quarantine and the genesis of the phrase “social distancing,” I was talking with a friend about the taboo nature of touch. She told me that her subway ride home one day was marked by the salient aversion to human connection. She noticed folks avoiding eye contact or changing to seats as far away from others as possible. She posited that people fear connection because they do not ask themselves what their relationship to touch is. As the pandemic felt like it was approaching more rapidly, I noticed this fear of others and the unknown grow colossally.

In the present, we have had a year to consider the importance of touch in our lives, since its absence has been so sustained. I made the decision within this last year to attend the massage therapy program at Pacific College so I can dive into the importance of touch and healing in our newly fractured world. I used to perceive massage the way many do as a form of self-care that needed to be earned. ‘Massage’ meant a treat which could demonstrate to me the ways I have charged my body and, with another’s dexterous touch, help me make amends. An hour later, I could leave, sleep heavily, and immediately wake restored to return to the taxation of my flesh. In this sense, massage is an escape as a form of healing.

Recently, my partner and I went out to celebrate his birthday. We worked to be as safe as possible: wearing multiple masks, maintaining distance from strangers as best as we could while still enjoying the occasion. As we headed home from this strange new form of festivity, he

acknowledged a social anxiety he had not yet experienced. Being near many others in a public space was uncomfortable and worrisome. I realized then that massage does not only have to be an escape from pain, but a powerful means of re-entry into collectiveness.

I know from my past few terms at Pacific that massage is effective at treating people with anxiety and depression, but what I think is most magical is that it does this through closeness, the very quality that causes this social discomfort. There is a particular alchemy in being able to detoxify a poison and turn it into medicine. Massage therapists use communicative and adept touch and closeness to dissolve tension, ease anxiety, relieve elements of trauma, and encourage recovery. These skills are paramount as the end of the pandemic begins to enter our view. It is my sincerest hope that we as massage therapists can emphasize and strategize with our community how to continue this approach to massage, one that encourages all to invite touch to heal from our fears and anxieties surrounding others.