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GOOD TOUCH

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My wife and I recently attended a home and gardening expo. It was quite good. People were inspiring in the imaginative ways that they constructed their thematic garden displays. They creatively used gravel, paving, different grasses, rustic iron and an array of flowering plants as the basis for their designs.

Inside the main pavilion there was an almost breathtaking display of home related products. You could re-roof your house, install a spa that seemed to have its design origins in some long forgotten NASA programme, and devise your ideal, virtual kitchen. Then there were the financial spruikers. People who offered everything from the best interest rates in town, through to sure fire investment schemes that promised to transform even the most ordinary of punters into property tycoons.

How fortunate we were to be at such an event.

As we moved through the giant pavilion we came across numerous stalls offering an impressive variety of lounge suites and individual recliners. Nestled among each of these displays were a selection of space age, and yet unnervingly “electric chair” like massaging seats. Each, with varying degrees of sophistication contoured itself around the settee, with a disturbingly complex computer screen attached to an armature that extended from the seat, akin to a triffid like tendril.

I had seen such furniture before, but I had never approached nor tested one. I was afraid of damaging the intriguing device and so be responsible for meeting its majestic price tag.

But this was to be my day. With an uncharacteristic rush of adventurous blood to my head I decided to test run the chair. And so I backed in.

One does not sit, as I was to find out, upon such a chair. No! One manoeuvres into it. Such is the precision required for this action that one not only requires eyes in the back of one’s head, but eyes more gluteally located would also be of great advantage. That is to say, one would also require eyes in one’s bottom.

I made it.

There I sat, surrounded by the chair. Escape and even thoughts of it would be futile.

I moved to stage two of the operation: Activation! I swung the computer console across in front of me and with complete puzzlement I began the intuitive process of deciding which button I would need to push to rouse the behemoth. Intuitive reasoning would prove to be of no advantage – chaos would rule this day. I pushed every button.

Initially nothing happened. No surprises there. But then I began to sense a faint rumbling coming from somewhere around my precariously exposed neckline. Not being sure at what stage my life was supposed to commence its flashing before my eyes, my whole body began to tense with the rigor that usually only accompanies the recently dead. Was this what it was like to feel relaxed and soothed? I don’t think so!

To my short lived relief things began to change. The activity around my neck began to descend my spinal column with all of the refined delicacy of a combine harvester. This was a mechanical process and there was no confusing it with any form of human touch.

By the time the operation had reached my lower back the pummelling had become so vigorous that I was certain that my kidneys were about to be bruised. While the chair may have been programmed to follow the mechanics of massage, it certainly had no understanding of the touch of massage. The therapeutic touch that I believe can only come from another human being.

I've got nothing against massaging chairs, nor anything against a person who may be contemplating the purchase of one. What disturbs me is that we think that we can mechanically replicate touch, when simple, human touch should always be accessible.

As human beings we crave and are nourished by the touch of another human being. Sure, sometimes certain sick individuals exploit our need for their own perverse appetites. We would all agree that there's no excuse for such truly awful behaviour. Be that as it may, all of us still need to be touched and to touch. Touch nourishes and heals us in some hard to explain way, in a way that we only become aware of when we've been starved of it or cheated out of it by a mechanical sup planter or by some truly sad life event that leaves us alone. It's surely no coincidence that in Jesus' miracle stories healing came through his touch. Jesus' touch was healthy and effective because it always came from a pure, deep and incomprehensible love and it was always in response to the need of the other person. When Jesus himself was compassionately touched by a woman preparing his body for burial his automaton, soulless disciples scolded, criticized and demeaned her. But Jesus had none of their behaviour and he set them in their place. He recognized the genuineness of her touch and he received it with grace. Is it even possible that as his darkest hour approached Jesus enjoyed peace and even healing through her touch?

In another instance a young woman who was gravely ill solicited help from Jesus through a plaintive touch. She reached out to him at the cost of discretion. But rather than scold her, her cry from emptiness was fulfilled. Jesus healed her.

Touch can be a cry for help, touch can bring healing and comfort, touch can be reassuring, touch can be glad and thankful, and touch can build community. But touch must also always be careful, truthfully directed always toward the need of the other rather than finding any motivation in our own grave and dark selfishness.

A mechanical chair is no substitute for the embrace of my four year old son. It provides no therapeutic benefit beyond stimulating the blood flow to my muscles and that tingling is all too quickly gone.

The embrace of my four year old son is no substitute for the touch of Jesus. It's a touch that opens up God's unconditional and life changing love for me that leaves me feeling much better and hopeful than the experience of having the living daylight's pounded out of my kidneys by some clever but soulless contraption.

Jesus' follower St. Paul said on many occasions to the people in his care, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (Romans 16:16). I wonder what that would be like?