

## “Just Touch Them”

by  
Anais Salibian

In June of 1995, I had an experience that radically changed my life. I was attending a week-long workshop on Rosen Method Bodywork and, after three years of training, I finally experienced this mysterious thing my teachers had been talking about: landing in my body. I remember getting off the massage table and finding the world transformed from black-and-white to full color, myself grounded and whole, full of joy. I walked around amazed, and still do, sixteen years later. I didn't know then that I had just recovered from my lifelong symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

I found my way home through a particular kind of touch. Since I've been a practitioner of that touch, every day holds a healing story.

“Just touch them,” Marion Rosen once said when she was leading a training session. From her inflection on “touch,” I knew there were volumes in that single word. It took me years to learn it, yet it's so simple. To be able to “just touch them,” I had to discover a new state of being.

Marion Rosen was a physical therapist when she got curious about her patients. Why did some of them repeatedly injure themselves and come to her for treatment? Why did others get better and, incidentally, have other aspects of their lives change? She realized that the ones who talked to her and relaxed while she had her hands on them were the ones who healed. She put together her knowledge of the body, her involvement with the sensory awareness movement, and her observations of dancers to treat people in a different way. The Rosen Method, a way to access the unconscious through touch, was born. Soon some of her patients asked to be taught what she did.

Not knowing exactly how to teach it, she began to show her students what she did. Somehow they learned, and learned how to teach it. The Rosen Institute was founded in Berkeley and branched out to many training centers in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Russia and elsewhere.

In the 1980s, as a massage therapist and teacher of peer counseling, I wanted two things. I wanted my work to be easier on my body. Even more, I knew my hands-on work and my verbal work with people belonged together somehow, but I couldn't make it happen. I finally searched for a method and tried many modalities that purported to be mindbody techniques. None of them really addressed the body and the psyche as one and the same. I finally chose to attend the Rosen Center East because what went on there felt so unpretentious and honest.

Early in my training, one of my teachers did a demonstration with me as the client. Here's my memory of it:

*She keeps asking, “Where are you, Anais?” Hands on my feet, “Can you come to your feet?” Hands on my back, “Where are you?”*

*Finally, lying on my back with her hands on my chest, I grow frustrated and angry. “What do you mean? I'm right here on the table!” I tell her what I feel, hear, see, think. I tell her about the fleeting emotions in my heart. I give her the sum total of my experience.*

*Touching me over my heart, she says, “Anais, you are not your sensations. You are not your perceptions. You are not your thoughts. You are not your emotions. Where are you?”*

*I lie there stunned, thinking, “I'm not? If I'm not all those things, what am I?”*

*That's when the mysterious thing happens It's as if something previously unnoticed by me comes*

*in. It moves from next to the table to my right about five feet off the ground into my body. In that instant, the teacher says, "Ah, there you are!" and I burst into tears.*

*"What just happened?" I ask.*

*"You showed up."*

What did she mean? And how did she know?

I didn't know at the time that my disembodied state was one of my many P.T.S.D. symptoms. I didn't even know that I, with a Master's in English Literature, a leader in my counseling community, a Licensed Massage Therapist, would be unable to learn to touch in that Rosen way until I came home to my own body.

It happened in stages.

*I watch as the teacher "works" on a woman with a kyphosis, a hump in her upper back. Her hands are at the lower back, not doing anything as far as I can see, other than staying in rhythm with the client's breath. Soon, I can't believe my eyes. The dome in the client's upper back begins to flatten out. The teacher's hands haven't changed position or manipulated anything—not muscle, not bone, not connective tissue, not energy. And there is something else astounding me.*

*"Am I seeing her back straighten?" I ask.*

*"Yes, you are."*

*"Am I seeing her come down into her body from beyond her head into her back?"*

*"Yes, you are."*

How? What is that? What's going on?

Now that I've done similar demonstrations myself, I am still in awe of how profound this simple touch is. My hands learned it before I could speak about it. My hands "listen" rather than "do something to." They take in information about muscle tension, temperature, flexibility, response. They know when the flesh I'm touching is filled with a live presence and when it's not. They "look" in deep: how many layers down can I sense? Where's the breath? What is it like to be the person I'm touching?

Whatever is going on in the client's mind, her body knows that I'm listening. We start a wordless conversation. My touch says, "I'm simply here with you, noticing, not judging." Her body's relaxation says, "Ah, I'm safe now. I can let go." Sometimes my hands suggest: there's room here for more breath, and the breath expands easily; life comes into inert areas. Other times, I'm touching muscles that feel like rock. I try to match the pressure in them, saying, "This is what you're doing here." Often I say it out loud, and people are shocked to find themselves that rigid, working that hard. If they haven't been in pain, they've gone numb.

The key is the gentleness of just showing up without trying to change anything. People feel seen and met for the first time. Out loud, they say things like, "My body felt heard by you." "It feels as if your hand is touching my soul."

Hands that make contact without an agenda, hands that invite people to experience, help. They help the client feel safe, focus, wonder what is happening, and open to the reality of their experience. Most of us believe we have to work hard to accomplish anything, even our healing. We have to figure it out, push against our limitations, overcome our resistance. We think we have to visualize the positive, say affirmations, act like our image of who we want to be. And we need practitioners who will do something to us to make us better. No.

We just have to arrive where we are and name it. Touch, the way Marion Rosen means it, helps us find ourselves, access the unconscious, and become aware of whatever is residing in our bodies that

we have not acknowledged. From there, there is nothing else to do but follow the moment, because the healing process inherent in each of us unfolds by itself. Our minds don't know how to do it; our bodies do. I as the practitioner don't know what's next, but I do know how to follow the truth. And I've created enough safety that my client can start to trust there is an unknown part of him who can heal him.

"Follow the truth" may sound like a mysterious, abstract activity, but it is quite concrete. It's in what the touch is telling me, for the body relaxes when truth is spoken. Our minds can make up all kinds of stories and explanations, but our bodies respond to what is actual.

*A client comes in with a hard lump of muscle giving her pain near her right shoulder blade. She is willing to do as I suggest: be curious as my hands reflect the tension. After a moment of asking herself, what is this?, she says, "It feels like cancer!"*

*Nothing changes in her body, so I tell her her body hasn't responded. "Keep listening," I say.*

*Soon, she sounds relieved and excited. "It's like a seed!"*

*That would be nice, but still no change. "Nope. Try again."*

*After a while of active attention, she says quietly, "I don't know what it is."*

*Much to my surprise, the lump immediately softens and disappears, her entire back relaxes, and her breath expands.*

*"Then we'd better stay with I don't know," I say. I would never have come up with that idea without feedback from her body.*

*"Oh no, that's the one thing I can't tolerate," she replies.*

*"How does your back feel?"*

*"The pain is gone. Oh!"*

*Staying with "I don't know" elicits a story she has told many times in therapy, about the terror of undergoing a tonsillectomy as a small child without forewarning. Later, after she's dressed, she says, "You mean, this is why I drive my husband nuts having to plan every detail of our weekends and vacations?" Then she asks, as if it's a separate issue, "Well, what can I do to help prevent my shoulder pain from returning?"*

*"Do an experiment. Let yourself not know what's going to happen this weekend and see if you're okay."*

*"What a novel idea!"*

Knowing the cause of her emotional pattern did not solve it or prevent it from distorting her back. Touching the place where it lived and letting be what was there opened the way for new possibilities.

The truth is a pleasant surprise more often than people expect, and sometimes I don't know how we would ever discover it without touch.

*I've been seeing this client for nearly a year. As a teenager, she was severely burned in a backyard barbecue accident. Her face was spared, but most of the rest of her is covered with scar tissue. In our work together, she's had some victories. She can now shake hands without feeling like "a freak." She shows up at the pool in a swimsuit without expecting people to react with horror, pity or rejection. Communication with her husband has improved. She feels like a normal human being, almost.*

*In today's session, I'm touching her leg, and she's crying. I ask what is bringing the tears. She says it hurts. I remember when she told me about being in the hospital having her dead tissue removed. A more intense agony than debriding is barely imaginable. She screamed and the doctor told her to shut up. She has been numb to herself for decades.*

*Now she's sobbing and saying how much it hurts. If I were a verbal therapist, I might be convinced. I might tell myself she's retrieving her lost sensations and emotions and working them through, that she's healing from her past trauma. But I'm touching her; I'm watching how her diaphragm moves, and I just don't buy it. I'm feeling and seeing the signs of a body in well-being.*

*"Your leg hurts?" I ask.*

*"Yes."*

*"Really? Try something. Ask yourself what you really feel right now, where my hands are."*

*She stops to pay attention. "Oh my gosh, I feel good!" A deep breath happens, a signal that she's just told the truth. "I feel wonderful." She's laughing now. "I can't believe it."*

*"I just couldn't get that you were in pain."*

*"I thought that's what I had to do to heal."*

*"Not if you don't have to."*

That was close to her last session. To this day, I marvel at how convincing her "pain" and crying would have looked if I hadn't been touching her. And how fooled we can be by our own minds.

Of course, there is present-time pain. One client had been receiving injections into her spine and was about to have back surgery to relieve her excruciating pain. By following her body's responses, we discovered the connection between her back pain and her inability to say "no" to people—her employers, her family, and her friends. She'd been overloaded with back-breaking obligations. When her behavior changed, her pain was relieved.

Relieving emotional pain is not the province of physicians, yet that is why many of their patients have physical pain.

*An older woman comes in because her shoulder hurts. She injured herself falling down the stairs to her basement and received successful treatment. Her doctor and her physical therapist have both told her that her shoulder has healed and there is no reason for her pain.*

*As she lies on her back, I hold her shoulder between my hands and ask, "What did you feel as you were falling?"*

*"I thought, 'there I go. I'm falling,'" she replies.*

*"Yes. And what did you feel?"*

*"I told myself, 'I'm falling now.'"*

*"That's what you thought. What did you feel?"*

*"I felt I was falling."*

*I pause for a breath. I know I'm not on the right track. Finally I say, "I'm not talking to you," as I lean toward her head. "I'm talking to you," I say to the shoulder I'm holding.*

*Instantly, she says, "I'm SCARED!" and starts to cry. Her body shakes and sweats while she cries and repeats, "I'm so scared." This lasts for about five minutes. Then she starts to laugh. "The pain is gone," she says.*

I've learned to be open-minded about what can physically heal; more of our symptoms and conditions are connected to constriction that I ever realized. It's not only muscles that contract, but tendons, ligaments, connective tissue. When they relax, a variety of healing happens. One asthmatic client stopped using her inhaler after grieving over a daughter's death. I've seen clients physically let go and become free of arthritis, depression, anxiety and other conditions. But one really surprised me, for I didn't expect any change in a difficulty connected with a congenital hip deformity.

*This client walks with a limp, her body tilted from her pelvis up. When she's lying on the table,*

*I notice she breathes in her upper chest; the rest of her is still. I tell her I notice the air moving only near her collarbones and invite her to come down in her body. Soon her ribcage starts to move and she's pinker, smiling. To her surprise, she can sense she has a torso, an abdomen.*

*I put my hands around her pelvis, cradling her hip joint. "Can you come here? I ask.*

*She's scared to. She's never done that. This is when I hear about the surgery, the year-long hospitalization when she was two, the body cast. Then the sexual abuse.*

*I don't think I can fix anything about all this, but I keep inviting her into her pelvis. And finally it happens—I can feel the effects of her breath in her hips and thighs. Her pelvis fills and empties like her belly and her chest. I no longer feel as if I'm touching an inert object. I feel met and touched back by a human being. I'm a bit surprised that this could happen in one session, but I believe she has participated in other healing modalities for years and is thus able to come to this moment.*

*She says, "Wow! Wow, I've never been there before. I didn't think I could do that."*

*Afterward, when she's standing, both of us widen our eyes in amazement. She laughs, saying, "I'm taller than you now."*

*She's standing straight and has therefore gained some inches. She walks out without a limp. And I didn't "do" anything. Neither did she, other than showing up inside herself.*

Just touch them. My hands can't do magic, but they know how to be with someone. One of the hardest lessons for me to learn was that that was enough. Actually, it's all I can do. I show up and invite my clients to do the same. For a while, I'm the one who holds the conviction that we can trust that. I've learned to trust everything and anything that comes up. There is nothing inside us with which to be at war.

*"I don't trust you," one client says, and her body relaxes because she told the truth. I agree with her. "What a relief to just say it," she says. Now she's safe because she's allowed to be the way she is. She doesn't have to strive to obey her mind, which tells her she should feel safe. Now she can take her next step.*

*"I feel nothing," another client says as I hold her shoulders or touch her upper chest. "There's nothing there. Empty."*

*It's true. Touching her there, I feel no life at all, nothing interior. "So let's stay with empty, because that's what's there."*

*"Boring, who wants to stay with that?"*

*We stay with empty, and pretty soon we discover anger, rage, an infant's sense of entitlement to something that is not being provided. Entitlement is not something this adult is used to feeling. She gets off the table gratified at what she has found.*

*A man comes in to see me simply because a relative gave him a gift certificate. I explain how Rosen sessions aren't like massages, and if there is no particular issue he wants to work on, her can simply use the session for self-inquiry. "I'm open," he says. And he is.*

*As I touch his back, he brings up the issue of overeating. Not that he's particularly overweight, but he keeps looking for food long after he's full. I, of course, have no idea what I'm supposed to do about this until I notice his shoulders get tenser and tenser as he speaks about growing up in a home where food was equated with love. I have him turn over, hold his shoulders, and ask what he feels there. What are his shoulders saying?*

*"No. Stop."*

*So we speak about being able to say no and still stay connected to his mother and grandmother.*

*Then he says, "By the way, I threw up everything for the first four years of my life."*

*"So you were hungry for four years!"*

*"That was long ago. How can that have anything to do with now?"*

*I tell him I'll give him articles to read about the physiology of it. Right now, let's pay attention to these two places that don't move: just below his sternum, and the center of his chest. I put my hands there and ask what he feels there.*

*He pays attention and says, surprised, "I feel a need." And even more surprised, "But it's not for food!"*

*"Can you sense what it's for?"*

*He tunes in for a moment and starts to sweat profusely. "I need to talk to them," he says.*

*"Before they die. I need to tell them I love them." He's grinning, but tears are sliding out of the corners of his eyes. The difficult one is, of course, his father, who barely says a word on the phone. When I ask what's the worst that could happen, he says his father will dismiss it as unimportant or have no reaction, and he couldn't stand it if that happened.*

*We have five minutes left. I say, "I have one more question before we end. Does your father love you?"*

*Immediately, he says, "Yes."*

*"How do you know?"*

*"I feel it."*

*"Where do you feel it?" I ask this because if the client can't locate the feeling or points to his head, I know it's a mental fantasy rather than a real experience. He points to his chest. "I feel it here." His chest is alive, so I believe him.*

*"So he has conveyed it to you without words."*

*Now his face lights up. "So, it's not about what he does; it's about what I do!"*

*If only every client were able to be this open to himself! Before he leaves, he asks, "How did we get from my overeating to telling my father I love him?"*

*"We followed your body."*

*"People don't want your success," a friend tells me. "They always either feel bad about themselves in comparison, or try to pull you down."*

*"That's not my experience," I say.*

*"It's mine. It has always been that way my whole life."*

*I get her on the Rosen table and discover that she can barely let herself just lie down. Her whole body is working to hold herself up. From her life stories, I can understand why.*

*"Can you feel the table under you?"*

*"Sort of."*

*"Can you feel my hands?"*

*"Barely."*

*"See if you can let them in. Let the table hold you."*

*Most of the rest of the hour is silent. I don't need to say anything because I feel her relaxing. I reach under her back and meet her with my fingers until even the deep, tight muscles along her spine let go. She says nothing and does nothing but soften and breathe. At the end, she says, "I surrendered."*

*Next month, she reports how many people in her life have offered her emotional and practical support to succeed in her new career venture. "It's a different world out there."*

*"Am I really feeling this?" This time the client is me. Half an hour ago, my doctor told me on the phone (not entirely correctly, it turns out) I have Stage II bladder cancer and may lose my bladder*

*and uterus. After I hung up, I burst into tears and cried hard for about five minutes. Now my friend, who is a Rosen practitioner, has offered me a session.*

*I'm lying on my back and she has her hands on my belly, near my diaphragm. Inside, I'm feeling—how can I describe it? Words come: “a peace that passeth understanding.” I feel so profoundly present that everything is okay. Everything. I trust my life. I trust my death. I trust everything in between.*

*But I don't quite trust my trust. I know the mind is a tricky thing. “Am I really feeling this?” I ask my friend. “What if I'm so scared I've gone into massive denial?”*

*“Your diaphragm is so loose I can practically push my hand through your body,” she replies.*

*And sure enough, I can feel that. I am not constricting in fear, I am opening to a state of being that is available when the diaphragm is free. Oh yeah, infinite blue sky. I've come home.*

The Rosen touch didn't save me from a tumor. Surgery (which, thank goodness, left me intact) did. But that one session changed my life because I will never forget that underlying sense of peace and bliss is available under the worst of circumstances. I don't always achieve it, of course, but I know it's there, that realm where thoughts end, awareness lives, and I am forever.

“Just touch them.” Daily, that's my teacher. I've learned that there are no enemies, nothing inside me or another person that isn't a door opening if we stay with it.

Imagine, if you will, hands touching you that demand nothing from you. Their touch bypasses your mind and speaks directly to your body, to you. This touch lets you know that it is there unconditionally and will stay with you no matter what comes up. You can sink into it, and therefore into yourself. Nothing in you is to be defeated or eliminated, but rather approached with curiosity. What do you dislike about yourself? What makes you suffer? You can ask what it's doing there, and it will reveal its wisdom. Pain becomes a guide to how to live. Resistance is the means to discovering your real needs. Rage is an assertion of self against injustice. “Nothing” holds the hidden treasures of your real feelings and experiences. When you are really met, despair is a memory.

You can come home.