

## The Healing Intimacy of Touch



*“This story about scleroderma should be read by anyone with an autoimmune disorder from MS, RA, to whatever. The average medical visit lasts 13 minutes, not nearly enough time to address complex issues.*

*Treating this patient, and particularly during the treatment I describe in this story, is one of the more poignant memories I have of helping a patient who is in great pain.”*

### ***The Healing Intimacy of Touch***

“Scleroderma is, I believe, one of the crueler disorders I have treated. In Greek mythology, Medusa was a monster who was generally described as a winged human female, her hair an undulating mass of living venomous snakes. Those who looked upon her face would turn to stone. This could be the fate of individuals afflicted with scleroderma. Their bodies literally harden into stone.

Scleroderma is one of the officially listed autoimmune disorders and as such it has no known medical cure. Please note I said medical. Scleroderma literally means hardened skin and it is a connective tissue disorder that turns skin into scar and calcified tissue.

It does not, however, only effect the skin. In some patients it effects the vital organs attacking and hardening the GI tract, lung's, kidney's and the heart. If not, effectively treated scleroderma can lead to organ failure and develop into a terminal illness.

When I first met Eve, it was difficult for me to determine which was worse her physical symptoms and scarred appearance or her emotional symptoms of fear, anger, resentment, and bitterness. Eve's heart had been hardened by the actions of those she loved and by her disease.

Prior to scleroderma, Eve described her life as idyllic. She had a fairytale wedding which was followed by a happy life living on an upper-class street in East Grand Rapids, Michigan in what many would have classified as a mansion.

Eve had been a physically beautiful woman but scarring and tightening of her skin was slowly turning her face into a mask. Eve was no longer married. Her husband had admitted to her he found her repulsive and unattractive. He left her quickly after her initial diagnosis, seeking and winning custody of their daughter largely because Eve, due to the severity, progressive and perhaps terminal nature of her illness, was unable to support herself and care for her daughter.

There is no single pill, capsule, or treatment program for scleroderma or for that matter the over 80 known autoimmune disorders. For many of them, and because the medical profession recognizes there is an inflammatory component to conditions as varied as Addison's disease, Crohn's disease, lupus, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, vitiligo, steroid or a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory and/or immune suppressant medications are prescribed, along with potent pain relievers.

This is a potential toxic cocktail that does not address the root causes of these diseases. This is not the practice of safe or effective medicine. All three types of medication have their nasty side effects, but large doses of steroids were causing Eve to experience terrible side effects including increased pain.

It is a fundamental scientific truth that anti-inflammatory medications increase inflammation and pain medications increase pain. This is due to the Newton's 3rd law which states, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction" and it explains why the medical establishment has had to develop stronger and stronger pain and anti-inflammatory medications.

A pain medication will cause more pain resulting in the need for a stronger medication and an anti-inflammatory drug will cause more inflammation leading to the need for a stronger anti-inflammatory medication, and so on and so. It is only herbal medicine, based upon natural concepts of low bio-identical doses that avoids this action/reaction effect. Therefore, the chronic use of drugs will never be effective in the treatment of chronic progressive disorders.

When I began treating Eve she was experiencing extreme pain, mainly in her skin but generally all over her body, from inside to out. Her pain was unrelenting, and I came to describe it as exquisite, but not in a good way. The combination of drugs her doctor had her on along with her level of pain, which was not affected by her narcotic pain medication, shifted her mind to hallucinogenic levels.

I clearly remember one very hot July afternoon when Eve came to my office for her manual therapy appointment. By appearance she was on fire, by affect she was literally flying and barely aware of her surroundings. This day the description of exquisite pain was an apt one.

While I was positioning Eve on the treatment table and positioning the surgical draping for her treatment it became apparent she could barely tolerate the weight of the draping on her skin.

She certainly could not endure the pressure of manual therapy. What was I to do?

I felt deep empathy for her and an acute awareness of the totality of her tragic circumstances.

Please do not think scleroderma is strictly a physical disorder. I think of it rather as an emotional condition with physical manifestations. Eve's emotional pain was as great or greater than her physical pain and both aspects of this affliction needed to be addressed.

Perhaps it was both my sense of empathy for Eve and my sense of inadequacy in being able to treat her that day that led me to a solution.

In a flash I had an idea. Excusing myself from Eve, I went into the small kitchen that was part of my clinical suite and opened the refrigerator and took out a glass bottle of aloe vera gel. In the cabinets above the small refrigerator was a bottle of witch hazel and another bottle of alcohol. I mixed these three liquids together in equal amounts to form a "medical liniment". I had never thought of using this combination before.

If you remember, this was a very hot day in July and Eve was suffering from terrible inflammatory symptoms. When I said she arrived at my office looking like she was on fire, she did, she was highly flushed, and her skin was intensely hot to the touch. Alcohol was used in the past, can be used, to remove heat from the body surface. Nurses used to perform alcohol rubs on patients to evaporate caloric heat from the skin and to reduce their fever. This was one of the qualities I was looking for.

The bark and leaves of witch Hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*, were used by Native American herbalists, and later my Puritan ancestors who came here on the Mayflower voyages and learned its use from them. Witch hazel is a cooling agent, astringent, vaso-constrictive, and anti-inflammatory. These are also qualities I needed.

The next ingredient in my formula was aloe vera gel, *Aloe barbadensis*. Aloe has long been valued for its soothing effect on the skin, as well as, its ability to remove the sting of a sunburn or other burns on the skin. Many people have an aloe plant in their kitchen ready for use in case of a burned finger.

I then gathered the softest cloths I had in the office and returned to the treatment room. The treatment consisted of me very carefully, beginning at Eve's feet, applying the liniment in gentle strokes. As the treatment progressed I was able to apply the liniment to most of Eve's body and as that was accomplished her pain, redness, and distress steadily decreased.

While I was administering the topical liniment and her pain began to subside Eve slowly began to talk about her relationship with her ex-husband and her disappointment in, and anger at him, her pain over her inability to have custody of and care for her daughter, and all the emotions she felt. This office visit led to the most intimate and honest conversation she and I had had regarding the injustice of what happened to her and her fear of a future alone and sick.

The healing intimacy of touch is a humbling process to behold. I teach my students it is alright to love your patients if you do not cross boundaries and LOVE your patients.

On this day, in the midst of crisis, Eve touched upon true depth of her pain and suffering, the sting of its flames was quenched, and her hardened heart – softened.

This day, this treatment, for the first time, Eve left my office with no pain. Now the true healing could begin.”

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