

Darwin's Suicides

JOANNA ELEFThERIOU

IN SPRING 2020 WHEN THE world shut down, activities that had once given life pleasure—reading in cafés, strolling on beaches, chatting in offices, drinking in bars—suddenly stopped. In the new world of the virus, these sources of pleasure posed a threat. Before the rancor began, before we started to argue about masks and restaurants and closed schools and church, we spent about a month in stillness. My city went quiet. Those of us who got to keep our jobs performed them, whenever possible, from behind the shut doors of our homes. Each “family unit” shrank inside itself. Couples, mostly a woman and a man, sealed the borders of their property like hazmat suits. Partnered people, who had already been asking each other to fulfill almost all of their needs, found their worlds closing in around the nucleus of their family. And we, the unpaired, the unmated, the unchilded—Darwin's suicides—we got left alone.

That March, when the world shut down, I lived in a studio apartment and didn't have a partner. Already, I had just been getting by. When you are sin-



gle in a low-touch Western country, you come by what you need haphazardly. Sometimes, friends offer an intentional hug, but your needs are largely met by accident—a fellow shopper bumps into you, a bus passenger brushes awkwardly by, a stranger touches your arm to get your attention because you, with earbuds in, are in the way. Now, touching could cause death. I knew as soon as the virus emerged that I would have a harder time than before. Touch is one of the human needs less widely acknowledged than oxygen, sleep, water, and calories. While babies do die (or incur lifelong illness) when deprived of touch, adults live.

Alone in my box of an apartment, then, I lived. I lay on the hardwood floor, longing. Often, we humans don't know exactly what we're longing for, or what we need. Whether the deficiency is a nutrient or a stimulus like touch, we often register only vague unhappiness, dissatisfaction, or nonspecific pain. Though I didn't yet understand there was a science to it pre-pandemic, I had known that I would have to guard against a deficiency in a way that wouldn't be necessary if I had one of the romantic partnerships into which almost all of my friends had settled. I had built what I believed to be an all-right life for myself, and I had built it with labor and care. I'd concluded that a human being without a mate could, even in the West, meet her need for connection and community by caring for her friends. I figured that if I asked twenty people to give me one twentieth the love and attention they afforded their partners then, even as I was unpaired, I could be happy. I could get just enough love to keep myself alive.

But when the virus locked the world down, those same twenty people (who had each loved me just enough) could now touch only their children and their wives or their husbands. Across screens, we exchanged condolences: To my friends with kids I said, *I'm sorry your children are missing out on their education and their need for you is endless.* They said to me, *I'm sorry you are there, all by yourself.* I said to them, *I'm sorry you have not a moment alone.* They said to me, *I'm sorry you have not a moment when you are not alone.*

My students were all young, late teens and early twenties, and when the dorms closed in March, they mostly went to their parents' houses. Across screens from somewhere beyond the county line, they asked, *Dr. E., are you being careful?* And I said, *Yes, all my friends are responsible.* I joked that because of my advanced (compared to theirs) age, I had no one to be irresponsible *with*. The students, half my age, giggled at the impossible notion of having not a single friend reckless enough to break quarantine. I suspected that perhaps they still snuck off



and partied, hooked up and hugged, because for their age group, loneliness is even more of a destructive force—and the virus far less of a threat. Statistically speaking, young adults were far more likely than me to contract the virus and be none the wiser. There’s a reason why teenage brains tend toward danger; they think they are invincible because compared to other age groups, they are.

Somehow the students seemed at once cavalier and even more vulnerable than before. None of them lived alone. They had all the hugs they wanted. Yet their houses buzzed with uncertainty. Their friendships grew more tenuous and volatile than mine; I approached the relative level-headedness of middle age and felt secure in my relationships. Another thing I had going for me was being so very verbal—my favorite thing to do with friends is look right at them and talk for hours, coffee a mere pretext for conversation. Some people, especially children and men, require an activity to feel connected; they need to *do things*, shoulder to shoulder, in order to bond. Money, too, is a major worry even for upper middle class college kids now; while my parents had no money to contribute to tuition, I attended college at a time when the government covered my Ivy League education with grants. Being saddled with debt makes uncertainty (especially about that nebulous *the economy*) far harder to bear.

I had already been thinking about how neoliberalism compounded anxiety over grades: life becoming a perpetual self-improvement task requiring we “get ahead” lest we become some of the not-fittest that don’t—according to a crude interpretation of social Darwinism—survive. Fear of imperfection, fear of coming up short (height is what we’re selected for, right?), fear of debt, were all suffocating my Gen Z students, who were now living with parents that wanted to hug them tight and take away the fears that only a real social safety net could properly address. Robust unemployment insurance cannot be replaced with hugs. Their well-warranted fears made me wish I could use the pandemic as an excuse to only offer praise and good grades. I wished to award everyone an A, not for effort but for being a human being, valued equally regardless of intelligence or labor. I wanted to be back in the classroom, to hold space for them as I helped their writing grow. I missed the way with my face, my real face in the room, with my eyes, I could hold their fear for them.

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Friends too, even those who were very well employed, struggled. Like many couples that included healthcare workers, one of my friends separated from her



husband. He went to the basement and slept there upon returning from the COVID ward. Living only yards below his family, the physician nevertheless had to communicate with them by telephone. Their daughter cradled the phone and said goodnight to her father after his long shifts treating the infected. When my friend lost her job, that news, too, traveled over the phone. *The worst part*, she said, *was having no one to hug.*

Medicine hasn't yet incorporated neurological findings about human touch into its literature or into its best practices. Laced up as it is with the money system, medicine focuses on keeping hearts beating, livers detoxing, and lungs breathing. Our dualistic medical epistemology struggles with problems like touch starvation, which the West has named "psychosomatic" to bridge the mind-body divide, a divide that we ourselves have manufactured. New knowledge, though, seems to be inching the medical establishment closer and closer to confronting the imagined nature of dualism and accepting the reality that nothing is ever *just* in our heads.

It's only in the last few decades that brain scientists have figured out the mechanism behind why touching feels so good, is so restorative and so much more necessary than a call. Apparently, we have one set of nerves that conveys the basics: A-group nerve fibers indicate pressure, temperature, and location. Being heavily myelinated (i.e. insulated), A-group fibers act like an express lane and allow the crucial information to travel quickly. A-group fibers allow you to immediately remove your hand if you touch something too hot or too sharp. The C-group, a slower set of nerve fibers, uninsulated or unmyelinated (i.e. not the express lane), delivers the less urgent information about how the touch will make us feel—think about the second or two delay before you feel pain because you got burned.

And it's not just anger at a stubbed toe or shock at a pinprick that travels along C-group fibers ("C tactile afferents" to be exact). The fibers carry pleasure, too, from touch imbued with meanings that we like (see "Tactile C fibers and their contributions to pleasant sensations" in *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*). According to lab experiments, the exact speed at which our friends or lovers tend to stroke us when expressing affection or soothing us also happens to be the exact velocity of stroking needed to prompt an anxiolytic (anxiety-reducing) effect. And whereas (according to the data) the nerves that detect pressure fire *more* the harder the pressure (graphed as a straight line), these C tactile



afferents actually fire less if the velocity gets too fast *or* too slow. The graph is indeed a parabola for those who recall their algebra and quadratic equations. Any faster *or* slower than what humans like to pet each other at, and the C tactile afferents fire less. As recently as 2014, the journal *Neuron* published new discoveries about emotionally oriented neurons: “We propose,” wrote researchers, “that a class of low-threshold mechanosensitive C fibers that innervate the hairy skin represent the neurobiological substrate for the affective and rewarding properties of touch.” They’d always known that touching was about affect and reward, but now scientists could use CT-afferents to help explain why.

After I learned about the CT-afferents on the radio, I got much more concerned that I might be starving for touch. Suddenly the resilience of my happy-with-verbal-intimacy-with-no-activities female advantage might not cut it. I went to the internet for more information, and ended up watching multiple TED talks about the neurology of touch. They were, like most TED talks, a bit simplistic and a bit smug, and had titles like “The Science of Touching and Feeling”; “The Power of Touch” (multiple iterations); and “The Importance of Platonic Physical Affection.” Most repackage two well-known facts. One: In the 1960s, Henry Harlow proved that baby monkeys isolated from their mothers prefer a soft, terry-cloth surrogate over a wooden one that had food. Two: Around the time I was born, Ceaușescu taxed childless Romanian couples, so that many gave birth to infants they couldn’t afford to raise. The babies ended up in orphanages where they were untouched, and the physiological harm caused by the neglect altered the global understanding of attachment. A writer in *The Atlantic* explains why twentieth-century psychologists weren’t quite prepared for these findings: “In an era devoted to fighting malnutrition, injury, and infection, the idea that adequately fed and medically stable children could waste away because they missed their parents was hard to believe.”

I should have remembered that TED talks are self-help videos disguised as erudition, and that they would therefore inevitably present an idealistic, simplistic portrait of touch. They name oxytocin and cortisol to sound scientific, and suggest that by applying the science of touch, listeners can boost their happy hormones and—you guessed it—become more *productive*, thus undermining the entire project of prioritizing human connection over humans-as-transactional-producers.



Most TED talks idealize high-touch societies and suggest that America's depression epidemic would resolve if only we could imitate the French. Over Zoom, a friend laughed at the idea of snapping a few healthy habits into the larger template of American instant-gratification culture while ignoring the values at the center of that template. Even as I sometimes miss living in high-touch Greek society, as I did in my youth, and even as I recognize the benefit of incidental touching, the TED talks ignore the dangers of forced intimacy from strangers; I'd rather put up with being touch-starved than risk feeling violated. It reminds me, now, of the long-term drawbacks of oversanitizing (superbugs) and the various drawbacks of physical distancing and masks. None of these concerns hold a candle to getting coronavirus, so we ignore the risks of physical distancing—though debate and rethinking is always warranted when a cost-benefit analysis is at play. A clumsy article in *Psychology Today* (also titled “The Power of Touch”) goes on for about three-thousand words about the benefits of human touch, all of which I certainly received as a single woman surrounded by touchy Greeks.

To be frank, however, I like the way Americans ask permission to touch. I like the way most Americans refrain from employing the connective power of touch unless an intentional alliance is being forged. For good reasons, teachers don't give students hugs unless there is a crisis. “The Power of Touch” acknowledges that superiors probably shouldn't touch subordinates at work, further acknowledges that touch in the workplace is dicey overall, and ultimately ponders, “Still, leaving your humanity behind every time you leave home isn't very appealing.” What the clumsy article's authors don't see is how lost we are without the rules of old, well-structured societies, where most systems of reward – from eating to touching to sex – are highly regulated with rituals, rules, taboos, and firm conventions. It's back to the French – taking away rituals and the slow pace of food and all the problems of instant gratification start to look like as much of a disease as starvation.

We often think it's individual preference that causes us to like or dislike touch, but really, it's a whole system of reward, reinforcement, power and desire, cultural signals and social alliance. It seems like an overall loss to be offering less touch, but it's not true. The very power of touch is what makes inappropriate touch so damaging. Like all rules, rules against touching block some good outcomes but more bad ones, and even as I ache for more casual touch in my life as a



single person, I'm glad about the rules. The ache is easy to bear, and the ravages on the mind of aggressive, non-consensual touch are not.

The pandemic, though, ratcheted the “ache” up a notch too far for my nervous system to bear. Why would my body evolve to be this way? Of course we need food and water, but why do we *need* touch? I've discovered that we actually evolved to need touch. Why might an organism evolve to *need* what it doesn't require to respire? It might seem counterintuitive to those of us unused to thinking carefully about natural selection. Scientists discovered this largely through rat research, like they've figured out so much else about our brains (in *Nature*, Sophia Vrontou et al. report giving rodents a “massage” with paintbrushes to further the science on C tactile afferents).

The new technology of microneurography has recently allowed scientists to map the biology behind the evolutionary advantages of needing each other's touch. Before microneurography emerged, scientists speculated that CT-afferents, which they'd located in other animals, didn't exist in humans anymore, having disappeared along with our fur. Published some six or seven years before Coronavirus emerged, a paper in *The Journal of Neuroscience* states that “activation of the mouse CT equivalent has positively reinforcing, anxiolytic effects, suggesting a role in grooming.” We, too, have evolved to groom one another. Human C tactile afferents are highly concentrated in our backs. The one place you cannot stroke yourself. Why would organisms who feel a deficiency when not stroked by other organisms be more likely to pass on their genes? We simply aren't wired for individualism, it would appear.

The reason why we'd evolve this way reminds me of the band of Thebes, the group of 150 couples who survived in ancient battles because their support for one another was driven not by duty but by erotic love. The warriors of Thebes not only swore oaths but swapped caresses, and kisses, and a lot of touch. Their willingness to die for their lovers – for the others – led the group to prevail. Those who don't bond through social touch contribute less to the overall safety of the group, since individuals who share bonds will act more efficiently and effectively as a group. This is true of defense in sports too. Another study cited in almost every TED talk is a 2010 *Emotion* article about male basketball players and their high-fives; news articles report the findings with catchy headlines like “Teams that Touch the Most Win the Most.” Evolutionarily, it's better to let the health of non-bonders flag; nature selects for back rubs and high-fives. At least



that's what I gather from the scientific articles I've been reading as I live out this pandemic predicament.

A columnist at the *Daily Californian* said she had sex during the pandemic and still felt touch-starved. Her empirical evidence is backed up by science—if her sexual partners did not stroke her, or cuddle before and after, she would be left with unmet needs just like those many of us who have been pandemic-celibate. The emotional and hormonal effects of touch differ from those produced by sex. One experience can't stand in for the other, though it's unknown whether C tactile afferents are present on human genitalia. In response to a question on *researchgate.net* about why the question remains unanswered, Rachel Ackerley explains that microneurography requires the skin under scrutiny to be still for several hours. She goes on, “the technical and ethical limitations for a penis study are very high.” I'm still looking for answers about the clitoris.

What we do know for sure is that both sex and nonsexual touch improve our health because, for our species, it's been evolutionarily advantageous to afford longevity to the people who reproduce and who forge social bonds that are good for defense, both in basketball and battle.

The health benefits of hugging turn out to be far less difficult to probe than the neuronal makeup of human genitalia. A 2015 article titled, “Does hugging provide stress-buffering social support? A study of susceptibility to upper respiratory infection and illness” found that yes, hugging most definitely boosts immunity to the common cold. Dr. Asim Shah told *The Texas Medical Center News*, “touch starvation increases stress, depression and anxiety, triggering a cascade of negative physiological effects,” up to and including PTSD. Dr. Tiffany Field advises touch-starved people like me to “put a 10-pound bag of flour, rice, or an equally soft and weighted object on their chest.” The pressure from the bag of rice may stimulate the CT-afferents in my torso and trick my body into thinking it is loved.

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After two months alone in my studio apartment, I started looking at houses. From the inside. At first, none of them matched the life I was trying to imagine for myself, and I started complaining. Fingering other people's varnished banisters and testing windows to see if they worked or were sealed shut with paint, I said to my agent *I don't need all this space*. I said it over and over and yet I had



determined that what is called a “single family home” would be the most practical and affordable way to live, even without children or a spouse with whom I might share.

As I sought for myself a space where I might anchor down, I began to wrestle with the implications of becoming what Americans like to call a “homeowner.” It wasn’t just the status that I both feared and craved. It was the way I would, in so doing, buy into a very particular way of life. As I whizzed, alone, on my bicycle across “sketchy” neighborhoods and expensive ones, I observed the dogs people walked (pit bulls in some neighborhoods, golden retrievers in others) and the many lawn signs (the November 2020 election loomed) and American flags. I wondered how I might fit in, and reckoned with the way American neighborhoods organize space and in so doing determine the relationships people have with one another. I found myself drawn to large yards, expanses of green, tall trees, thick hedges, and privacy. A picket fence (fresh wood in parts, old splintering wood in others) circled the house I liked best. I liked the fence and the way it could shield me from being seen. I liked the way it would mark my *property*. I liked to imagine myself somehow sovereign, an owner, a queen.

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On the internet, much debate arose during mid-2020 about whether and to what extent we, in the wealthy Western world, could really say that we were suffering. *We are lucky to have such space between us*, said the grateful. *But we are sad*, said the miserable. *What good is life without any people?* It is futile to measure and to compare suffering, but we do it anyway. It is good to remember that our relative comfort comes at the expense of those who make our new plastic stuff and take it back once we’ve turned it into waste. I think we can do that and feel our suffering at the same time.

As the days of quarantine dragged on and more and more people suffered layoffs and boredom, the internet raged also about the morality of staying (or not staying) at home. *How can you be so selfish as to go outside?* some cried. Others asked, *How can you permit the economy to suffer so?* The cautious yelled, *Stay home*. Those concerned about “the economy” bellowed, *Shop! Shop! Shop!* Those in favor of remaining indoors accused the others of putting pleasure over prudence. They demanded that everyone deny themselves the joy promised by summer, with its beach trips and barbecues, its bar hopping and concerts and picnics



and dates under the stars. From another point of view, staying indoors was the wrong sacrifice; others argued for an unfettered return to commerce. For these, “the economy” had to be “saved” by a return to work, the appropriate sacrifice being the inevitable deaths such a return would cause. Each faction of Americans begged their compatriots to join in their own particular form of self-abnegation. That is to say, every American agreed on one thing: that to deny pleasure could induce salvation.

I began to think of own my enclosure in sacrificial terms too. I was after some sort of relief or solipsistic self-righteousness, I guess. Feeling bereft, but not yet knowing the full weight of what I had lost, and seeking to attach some kind of meaning to this suffering, I came to believe that my very pain might drive into existence some hope, some relief, for the world and its catastrophe. Isn't that what sacrifice is, after all, to attach meaning to pain? Isn't that how we have always pleaded with the divine? As an Orthodox Christian, I've always fasted from meat and dairy before receiving Holy Communion. Fasting made me worthy of communion (maybe heaven) while kneeling on hard floors during prayer made my wishes feel closer to being granted. And so, I kept on keeping my distance, and I kept on wondering about the virus and what sort of sacrifice, really, was its due. I feared the way being unmarried could leave me vulnerable and destitute if the virus rendered me incapable of working, so that I'd lose my health insurance and access to any sort of care. I knew the state would not take care of me if I became sick and unable to *be productive*. So many of my compatriots fear the machinery of the state; Americans love their monsters as long as they are private rather than public; they adore their corporate masters.

Let us return for a moment from the debate about our private masters to the moral codes that govern our bodies, and to what we expect of men and of women with regard to their bodies. If reproducing is moral (if I am unchilded because of a moral failure, because I wish to devote my time and resources only to myself) is it not then moral, from the virus's point of view, to conduct its only activity (reproduction) at its maximum potential and in so doing, mow down hundreds of thousands of humans and leave them dead? From the point of view of this beast, was *infecting* not the moral thing to do? Is perpetuating the species moral only for humans? Are morals just for humans? When is a sacrifice for our own species' survival moral and when is a sacrifice *for the survival others* the more moral thing to do?



As spring approached, I tried out one new technology and then another. I Zoomed a lot, and FaceTimed. On Easter, a variety of blood relations lined my computer screen like the motley faces on a sheet of special-issue stamps I'd ordered from the troubled USPS. As spring turned into summer, I found myself holding my own hand and, at times, cupping with my palm my own face, as if to trick the CT-afferents into thinking we had gotten what we needed.

And life went on, oddly. I read that gratitude could assuage loneliness. I learned to give thanks for breathing, and for the friend who, once when she saw me in tears, coiled her face in a scarf and caught me in a brief, forbidden embrace. And after that, I didn't forget to give thanks again for every smile, every greeting from afar, and every single moment of connection.

I saw that others (nurses, doctors, nurses' children, mail carriers, trash collectors, electricity workers, grocery cashiers, delivery drivers, EMTs) had made the real sacrifices. The platforms (Discord, Hangouts, Snapchat, Clubhouse, Messenger, Slack, Collaborate) would continue for a long time to spawn and multiply along with the virus. Our genes, our physiology, won't evolve within our lifetimes in order to protect us from COVID—or from the psychological effects of our somatic protections. But we know that while our bodies can't evolve to match our changed environment, our social, political, and financial systems can evolve. It will have to be enough. And corporations—those crafty beasts that permit corporeal beings to elude their corporeal limits—will continue to propagate virtual stand-ins for what we really need, which is (and always has been) one another's presence.



does one do with all those things except be continuously haunted? Still, as a way of seeing myself out of the burdens of the past, I wanted to repurpose the pain by repurposing language. I wanted to take a cliché phrase, to “bury the past,” and use anaphora to morph it into something else, the opposite of forgetfulness. In the same way, there’s a kind of haunting quality of religious language--the power of liturgy, of praying the hours. Often, all we have is that single word given to us that we keep praying until we make it to the other side.”

JOANNA ELEFTERIOU

I didn’t pray much as a child, only when told, or in church on Sundays and holidays. Still, a blueprint was laid. I don’t think I was more or less interested in religion than other curious kids. But I was wild to understand the universe, its spirit and its physicality, and as a teenager I grew more interested in both theology and science. Orthodoxy requires scary, face-to-face confession, not like Catholics with a screen so you can’t see the priest, but in an office, just like yours, wherein I had to say (starting at age 9) what I’d done wrong. The point is to be freed. I did often feel lighter afterwards, although I was terrified of encounters with a priest—of this existential discussion that cast me as bad. Yet the truth-telling demanded by this part of my religion had great allure. I read whatever theology I was given. I was 15 when my confessor gave me a book called *His Life is Mine*, and I began to pray in the manner described there, directly and insistently, with absolute concentration, no words but the repeated Jesus prayer, and an expectation that God would visit. I don’t remember how soon after this prayer began to bring with it states of ecstasy, elation and transcendence, but it did, pretty dependably, and it felt like I held in my grasp the most important secret of the universe. Soon, I could sense in other people when they had contact with whatever divine thing this was. When I would wait in line for confession, sometimes I would experience the inner lifting just before the person ahead of me emerged, as if the priest could communicate with me telepathically. I felt it in a few monks and nuns, like a simple handshake of the heart. I had absolute reverence for the sanctity of this gift—I didn’t consider it a feeling, but God himself. It is a sense of absolute connection to the universe, of tranquility, of joy, and even of knowledge – in this state, I felt that the Trinity



made sense, along with many other paradoxes of the world. I read more theology books as a teenager. I read literature, too, lots of it, and over time I grew to suspect that perhaps the deep, soul-wrenching honesty demanded of religion was the same truth-facing that ignited literature and made it real. In 2006, I told my spiritual father that I'd heard of a poet, a real poet, who was also Orthodox, and he said "go do a PhD under him." I thought it was preposterous that I'd leave the east coast and pursue another degree, but four years later, there I was, studying with Scott Cairns, and eleven years later, here I am, his student who has published a literary book, and daring to call myself, as he does, an Orthodox Christian writer.

EMMA FERGUSON

Compassion is inherent in any art. To write is to give your own thoughts and perceptions a place to rest in love and acceptance, to show how the world really is, without judging it and using that writing to say that this perception of the world is the only one, or the right one, or even the most messed up one needing the most sympathy. This compassion for ourselves is fundamental, or we risk sinking into both bad writing and unhelpful thinking. Literature asks us to write about good moments and bad moments in life with equal care.

If meditation slows us down and asks us to build awareness of what is, I think it is fair to say that poetry is a kind of meditation. I do in fact go to poetry as often as to meditation when I need focus, when I need to slow down, and pay attention. It is clearly a different act than meditating and is not the same kind of focus, but they are parallel in their effect on my sense of being in the world. Poems bring new connections between seemingly impossible words, thoughts, and perspectives and can make clear to us in a very short span of time a vast universal truth or insight about our own moment and ourselves. Poems remind me that every moment is worth investigating, and has magic to uncover, if we take the time to craft it. Moment by moment there is value in looking closely and investigating what is there, and more importantly, each voice has value in how it expresses that moment. There is no moment unworthy of pause and appreciation; there is no voice unworthy of pausing and expressing that investigation or appreciation.

Whether it is a current moment, a memory, or a history of long past mo-

