

Touched by Touch

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A red eft is held in a child's hands. photo © Ben Conant

I'm standing on the edge of Cynthia's Pond, a beautiful swamp near the Harris Center. I have 12 kids with me, armed with nets, strainers, containers and rubber boots. On this day our buckets are teeming with our catch: dragonfly nymphs, water boatmen, an enormous giant water bug, and countless leeches.

It's a good day at the swamp. Three girls circle around one container, mesmerized by eastern newts slipping around inside. I love this: three sixth grade girls loving salamanders. As I come over, one asks, "Can we touch them?"

Can we touch them? Can we touch them? ... It's a question I hear all the time as a naturalist. Who knew this question could be so fraught with a moral struggle. I've wondered how being touched by three excited 12-year olds might impact the salamander. Do the girls have bug spray on their hands? Sun-block on those fingers? Hand soap under their nails? What will the salamander breathe in, and will the salamander be impaired by this chance meeting with these three girls?

Learning to Touch with Sensitivity and Gratitude

I've been out in the field with other naturalists who will not permit people to reach out and touch frogs, salamanders, caterpillars or any other living creature. This is like being observers at the museum of the life, reminding me of dusty antique shops where my mother kept a strangle hold on my curious little fingers.

Me, I'm the type of naturalist that will spread out my hand in the sign of peace and then I will slowly and gently help three girls pick up the salamanders. Carefully we'll hold them with wet hands, low to the ground in case they try to squiggle free. We'll touch them briefly and then return them to water. This chance meeting with the salamanders lets me share with the girls how to touch a living salamander with sensitivity and consideration, with kindness and gratitude.

In the end, the girls will have been more touched by the salamander than the salamander by them. They will have had the chance to feel this slight and slippery salamander in their hand. Their fingertips will feel the cool skin of the salamander slide across them. I'm banking that they will feel compassion and curiosity for this creature. I'm hoping that not only will they have touched the salamander, but that their hearts will have been touched, too.

There are, of course, some creatures in the wild that should not be touched. Porcupines and skunks come to mind, as do northern water snakes. When I'm in the field with people, I am actively modeling how to touch with the least impact, and what to touch and not touch. Having children hold amphibians with leaves as a thin barrier between hand and creature prevents these skin-breathing creatures from inhaling too much of us. But I guess I'm a life-long toucher. Even in the winter, when out tracking with groups, I'm thrilled to find the track of a red fox. I'll whip off my mitten and place my fingers in the frozen paw print. We will kneel down and press our fingers in the track, stirring to the idea that our hand, our fingers, are one foot step away from a wild red fox

The Importance of Touch

Lately we and our children live in a remote world where screens intercept our chances to engage one another face-to-face. Children touch their phones, texting instead of hanging out with one another. We can connect to old friends on Facebook, but how many of us have shaken our neighbor's hand lately, or reached out to hug a friend we see every day?

The farther away we travel from using both hands and minds together to explore our world, the farther we move from bonding and connecting to our world, to its people and its other animals. To feel the heartbeat of another creature, to hold it close and share a breath with it, to feel how fragile and different it is from us, is to ultimately discover how the same strands of life connect us all.

So when I'm asked, "Can I touch this?" I will continue to put my hand out, together with my students, and share how to touch a wild creature with respect, gentleness and gratitude. We will be quiet and calm holding snakes or frogs or salamanders. We will even feel the soft brush of the wooly bear caterpillar across our cheek. And if I'm quiet enough, I might just see a salamander share a breath with a 12-year-old. 🐾



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