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**What I Have Learned From Hugging 7,000 People**

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I began my "hugging journey" in 2007. I was on the phone with my mother when she made a startling confession that she had not been hugged in months. I sat three states away, listening to her cry as she revealed how much she craved human touch. The next day, I spoke with a friend who was suicidal. She too, revealed that she had not been hugged in months. She was convinced that it was better to die than to live without the physical validation of love. Sensing her desperation, I drove 12 hours to give her a hug. As we stood folded in each other's arms, I could feel all the love return back into her body. I could feel this overwhelming rush of healing energy flow between us and restore her faith in humanity. She was loved, and she was ready to live again.

I was in awe. This simple act of kindness had the ability to restore life. How many others out there craved love in the form of a hug? How many longed for the touch of another, yet were denied this act of grace?

Thus the Love, Hugs and Inspiration campaign was born.

I printed up poetry booklets with words of inspiration. I passed out hugs and poetry at the Santa Monica Promenade. Every Saturday and Sunday, for five weeks, I stood holding a sign and a stack of books, beckoning people over with a smile and all the love energy I could muster. I was terrified of offering strangers hugs, and it was a personal challenge for me to overcome my own fear.

But once I overcame it, the rest was magic.

I have learned a lot about people through my hugs campaigns. I have learned to read people much the same as you would read a book. I started to identify who would be most likely to receive a hug, who would need some time to warm up before consenting to an embrace, and who would look at me with disgust while they hurriedly walked away as if I were giving them poison.

The stories people have shared are what is most important.

There was the man who had not been hugged since he was young. When his mother died, he hadn't been close to anyone and had let himself believe he was not worthy of affection. There was the gentleman who walked back and forth, staring at me first with disgust, then with interest, and then with fear. Upon the fifth time he passed my station, he finally walked slowly in my direction and stood waiting for me to meet him the rest of the way. I went in slowly to not scare him off, and I stretched my arms out hoping he would meet mine. He did. We stood in an awkward embrace, and then he rushed off, never looking backwards.

I met a woman who shared her story of neglect and abuse. I held her until her tears went away. There was a homeless man in a wheelchair who asked for a copy of my poetry but said I did not have to hug him, as he had not showered in some time. I told him that didn't matter. I watched his face widen in surprise, and he looked at me as if to say, "Really?" The world had been cruel, and he was used to being ignored and walked away from. I bent down and held him close and told him he was loved.

There were many men and women who were homeless, injured, abused and unloved. But there was joy too! There was a woman who had just come from yoga class who eagerly jumped into my arms and exclaimed with joy that she loved giving and receiving love. A man from Oslo was amused by an American offering hugs. An hour later, he would come back to express his admiration, for he had read some of my poetry and thanked me for being of service. There were many tourists who took pictures of me holding my sign, hugging people, and dancing on the street. I liked to dance in between the hugs.

There were children, too, who were more eager to hug a stranger than their parents were. Children were open and free in their affection. Young tots and babies in strollers joyously stretched out their arms.

There was the little girl who, upon seeing me dancing in the promenade, wrestled herself from her father's grasp and came to join me. She boogied her way right over and hugged me with all the zest of youth and innocence. She danced some more, delighting passersby and surprising her father, who could only stare in admiration, for his daughter expressed love in its purest form for all to see. There was the baby who stood and stared at me for long moments after we hugged, even when her parents tried to walk away.

Over the years, many people have come back. "You don't know how much I needed that!" is often heard.

People crave human touch, yet many do not get enough of it. Some are afraid of hugs, but I have learned that given the chance, many will seize the opportunity to be embraced. Those who walk away or are repulsed by the notion, I have learned, are just fearful of love. Perhaps there is another way to reach them?

As the years progressed, I have reached out to others around the world to write poetry and printed up a compilation of poems. Altogether, I have self-published 7,000 copies of these poetry booklets. In December 2013 I passed out the very last copy of my 2008 compilation.

I have hugged over 7,000 people.

On Valentine's Day I have been invited to pass out hugs on the ASU campus. My goal is that I will have hugged 10,000 people before the end of 2014. In the end, what I have learned most of all is that I am the one who needs the hugs most.