

Just the human touch

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In their article on artificial intelligence in this issue of the *Southwest Journal of Medicine*, Peterson and Rosqvist analyze the potential effect AI could have on the medical profession. They emphasize the importance of the human factor in the doctor/patient relationship and point out that human vulnerability “is the heart of what is irreproducible by AI.”¹ As an example, they discuss a narrative painting by James Tissot (1836–1902) in which the artist depicts a moment of human vulnerability. In *L’hémorroïsse* or *The Woman with an Issue of Blood*, a woman who has been suffering from heavy bleeding for twelve years seeks healing from Jesus as He walks among a throng of people in a narrow street.²

As described in Mark 5:25–34,³ the woman has consulted many physicians to no avail, and according to Jewish law has been religiously isolated as “ceremonially unclean.” Her quality of life has no doubt been affected physically, psychologically, and socially by her affliction. It is no wonder that since her own doctors have failed her that she sees Jesus as a last resort. Tissot conveys a feeling of distress and claustrophobia as many men, women, and children surround and press upon a white cloaked Jesus in a narrow passageway between tall looming buildings. The artist paints Jesus with His back turned to the viewer as He reaches toward His supplicants—a man of the people.

Almost unnoticed is a kneeling woman in the foreground whose face is obscured but whose right hand is reaching up toward the fringe hanging over Jesus’s right shoulder. There is nothing significant to distinguish her from any of the other figures in the scene, and if the viewer did not know the Biblical reference, her entreaty would not be distinctive. According to the

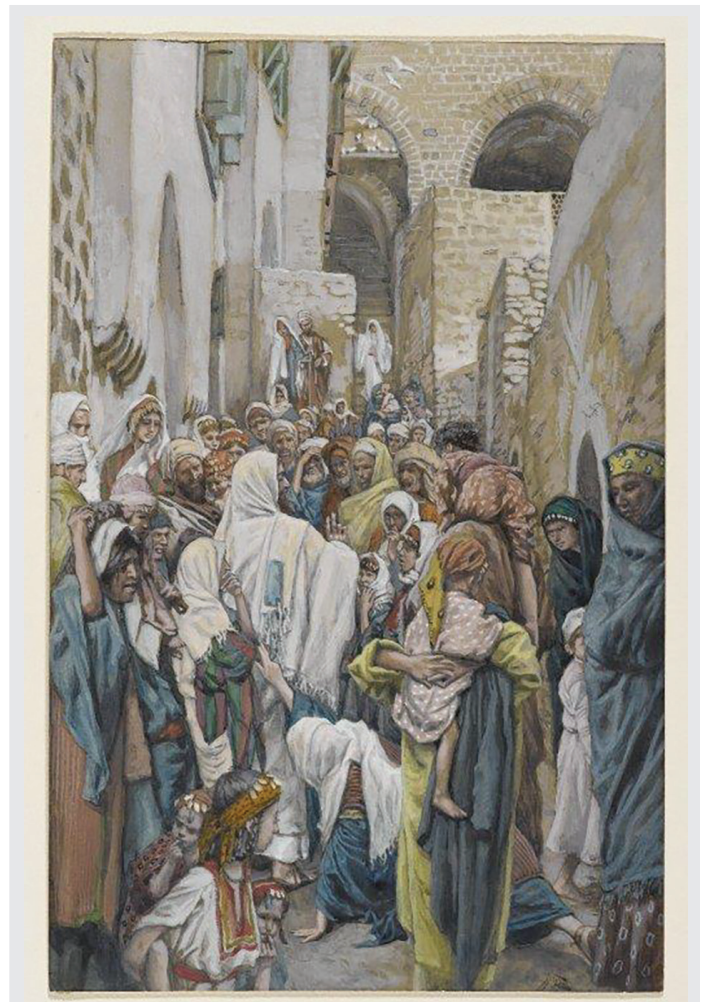


Figure 1. James Tissot. *The Woman with an Issue with Blood*. (*L’hémorroïsse*). 1886–1896. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art.

verses in Mark, as she touches the fringe on Jesus’s robe her blood loss stops and she immediately feels relief. Although the painting illustrates many people crowding and no doubt touching Jesus in the street, He feels a difference in her touch and questions her. Hearing her story, Jesus is filled with compassion and heals her permanently.

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Tissot understood that Jesus, although divine, recognizes His own humanity as He faces the imploring expressions on the people who yearn for his attention. Peterson and Rosqvist suggest that the relationship between Jesus and the woman resembles the relationship between a modern doctor and a vulnerable patient. The patient appeals to the doctor for help; the doctor provides the human touch. They conclude that “generative AI is impressive, useful, and even daunting, though it is neither infallible nor incorruptible. And most of all, it is not *human*.”¹

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