

Perfume for my father: A lavish gift

Feature

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Of all the presents I've ever given my father—the lavish art books, the magnificent antique easel we bought together for his studio, the cashmere, and the classical music—it was the small bottle of fragrant bath essence I gave him last Christmas that may be the most important gift of all. In his nursing home, where Parkinson's and dementia compete as likely causes of his demise, kind staff occasionally take him to the bathroom, lift his painfully thin frame into the warm water, and leave him and Mum in private so that she can help him bathe.

They live separately, and Dad's passivity and tiredness and frailty mean that there are always people, appliances, and medicines around them and interrupting them. The bath time is the most intimate time and touch possible for them. After 50 years of marriage my dad's hands—which once painted stunning pictures and caressed his wife—are so translucent that you can see all their workings. He draws in the air with them sometimes now. He has a tremor. Bath time allows him gentle, distant echoes of the power of his youthful touch. It's my parents' least mediated, least frustrating communication. It's a place where Mum can be wife instead of caregiver.

So a little fragrant extravagance seemed the most important gift I could give. It is likely to be his last Christmas gift. Such a transient gift admits that we are letting him go. We are preparing him and ourselves for his burial.

Even earlier in life, beautiful scent suggests human frailty, and eventual decay. Its fleeting beauty highlights both our aliveness and our brevity. In that sense, perfume is always rather beautifully about death. After Lazarus is raised from the dead, Mary, immeasurably grateful for the gift of her brother's life, kneels at Jesus' feet for a third time. Earlier she sat listening to Jesus teach while Martha cooked. Then her brother died, and she fell at Jesus' feet in angry sorrow. Now she kneels again, this time to anoint him with daring, scandalous sensuality. Whether her judgment is unwise is hardly the point. She has shown attentiveness on ordinary days, on tragic days, and now on a celebratory day. Jesus is grateful for the rich relationship.

We might contrast Mary with Nicodemus, who talked furtively by night with Jesus, but only came with the tender affirmation of perfume when it was too late, after Jesus had died. Many of us have had that stomach-sinking feeling of being too late. Too often we miss the chance to tell someone that he or she is loved or admired.

Mary makes the most of each moment. She doesn't waste a chance to be connected to Jesus, to honor him and to learn from him. She doesn't wait until it's too late, but admits with her tears and fragrance that Jesus' life is all too fleeting.

There's a radical political aspect to an extravagant act like Mary's. While the world throws ugly things at us, peddling fear and cynicism, Mary firmly asserts the overwhelming priority of relationship with Jesus. As she breaks the jar, she breaks the power of Rome over her heart and mind.

Of course, her extravagance raises resentment. Many, like Judas, will make desperate claims. What about the poor? he asks. Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you," then highlights Judas's deep cynicism: you feign care about the poor because you are jealous of Mary's tenderness. You are jealous of her depth of feeling, trapped as you are in your isolated cynical little life.

The world is in desperate need of such lavish attentiveness as Mary shows with its admission of frailty and celebration of human beauty. Let's not wait to follow her example. Whether it's a day that brings regret, like Nicodemus coming too late with perfume, or a gloriously uncomplicated day of thanks, the fragrance of our gratitude for each other's gifts can banish meanness and jealousy from our neighborhood, our political conversation, our homes, and our relationships.