

The grace of holding my dying father's hand during the pandemic

The word *contagion* comes from the Latin words for “with” and “touch.”

by [Debra Dean Murphy](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



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My father died on May 15 last year, his mother's birthday, at the age of 80. As anyone who has lost a loved one during the pandemic knows, sickness and dying and grieving—the realities themselves and the rituals by which we mark them—have been fundamentally altered. Death had other cruel tricks up its sleeve this year, and we probably shouldn't have been surprised.

I was with my father when he died. The nursing home where he was a patient suspended the ban on visitors for me for those last hours—a dubious decision, perhaps, given the strict protocols, but as compassionate an act of health care as I have ever received. Or was it heart care? A little more than a year later—how has it been a year already?—I think about those hours in that small room where I sang, prayed, whispered, and wept as my father entered death's dark door.

I remember his body—how small he became in death. I remember his hands, and how I held them in those hours, kissed them, pressed them to my cheek. And now I think of his hands in life—expertly shuffling a deck of cards, resting on my sons’ shoulders in gestures of affection and encouragement, rough and weathered from decades of plowing, planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting a bounteous garden that was his deep delight.

“The earth seemed to trust your hands / As they tilled the soil, put in the seed, / Gathered together the lonely stones.”

These lines from Irish poet John O’Donohue describe my father’s relationship to the land he loved and his monastic-like ways of caring for it. *Ora et labora*, prayer and work, are entwined in the Benedictine tradition such that one flows seamlessly into the other. Prayer (acts of attention before the divine mystery) and work (an aspect of the image of God in each of us) can be, for those who are wise to it, an integrated whole, a way simply to be in this world. Prayer and work were indistinguishable in my father’s daily rhythm from spring till early fall, and his devotion bore witness and much fruit—the fruit of the earth and of the work of human hands.

The word *contagion* comes from the Latin words for “with” and “touch.” It is no small irony that one of the things we crave most, need most as human beings—the knowing touch of another on our skin—can also convey disease and death. But this is the wild, risky world we live in—have always lived in—where a global pandemic suddenly, rudely forces the question: What does the sustained lack of human touch do to us? I think we don’t yet know the answer, even as we can’t quite yet imagine a full-on return to the myriad ways human touch, given and received, spontaneously or with great deliberation, can convey healing and life.

At my father’s deathbed, I felt the gift and responsibility of being listened to as never before.

But I know of other contagions. How, for instance, my father’s ways through the years conferred blessings we hardly knew we needed and the unwavering love and acceptance we didn’t know to ask for. In the process of receiving those gifts, we were shown, without explanation or fanfare, how to offer them to others.

“The quiet constancy of your gentleness / Drew no attention to itself.”

In the last hours of his life, I spoke many things to my father. The nurse who tended to him that day—God, the practical saintliness of nurses—assured me that he could hear my voice even though he could make no sounds or motions of comprehension. There had never been a moment of division or alienation between us, but my failure through the years to tell him how much I admired him was a weight that in those hours his listening ears lifted from me, even as his body was failing him. I felt the gift and responsibility and freedom of being listened to in a way I never had before. Have you ever been listened into being, even as another's beingness in this world was slipping away? It is a holy thing.

My father's deepest sorrow in life is also my own: the death of his daughter, my sister, in a car accident 34 years ago. I did not see my sister's body in death. I was told it would be too upsetting to see her bruised and shattered. These many years later I am sure that it would have been, yet I wish I had done it. For being with my father as life left his weary, worn, familiar body felt like a most necessary thing: the accompaniment we offer those who accompanied us on our journey, however fleeting, however long.

"The longer we live, / The more of your presence / We find, laid down, / Weave upon weave / Within our lives."

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