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Essay by Julie Evans

What Remains When the Mind Is Gone



I begin by massaging the tattoo on the top of his left forearm. I press my thumb on the upside-down V that precedes the number 72362. Over the years, I've secretly jotted these numbers down a dozen times so they won't be forgotten. Through his stories, I see this man as the thin, pale fourteen-year-old Belgian boy he was the day he and his father were hauled away to Auschwitz. The story lives in his bones and his tissues. I read it with my touch every time I massage him.

It's 2016, more than twenty years since I met Jacob. In his late sixties then, he had suffered a stroke that impaired his right shoulder, memory, and balance. Now, he's close to ninety, a tiny man— 4 feet, 9 inches tall—his feet so small (size 4) that his wife buys his shoes in the children's department. Still, he has the head of a grown man, a diplomat's face, mustached, bearded and well lined.

His wife Hannah tells me she was born with "terrible bones," which according to Jacob, were made more crooked because nuns hid her from the Nazis in an unyielding wooden box. (I've changed both their names.) The first time I

laid hands on her, she was 58 and had already had two knee replacements, two hip replacements, three cervical vertebrae fused, and an ankle fusion. She's bent and twisted, always in pain. I wish I could do what she asks: "Julie, just say *abracadabra* and make the pain go away." Abracadabra, my mantra now.

These days, Jacob and Hannah have me come once a week to massage them in their mountainside home just outside Woodstock, New York. She lives with scoliosis and osteoporosis and a husband with Alzheimer's. I have a new traveling table, heavier than the old one, so heavy I can hardly get it through my house, out the front porch, into the back of my truck, and into their house. It seems to weigh a million pounds. I'm sixty and sometimes think, "I'm too old for this." And then I remember what they've been through, and I lug my table up their cement steps, clutching the wrought iron rail.

I've always begun by placing my hand over Jacob's tattoo as a silent prayer to honor what he's endured. Then I maneuver my fingers between his, willing the hard, stiff tendons to release so his hand will open all the way. Hannah begs me to get his fingers to straighten so he can once again do what he loves to do—tooling soft leather into high-priced handbags. I fight with his tiny feet to point and his toes to bend, so he'll have more agility to help keep his balance.

As my hands move through the massage, my soul moves through the story the body carries. I learn something new, and he can shuffle about a bit easier at least. He used to shower right after, but Hannah has him convinced its best to leave on the oils and balms. For years, after the massage, the two of them wrapped in their comfy robes, would putter around to make me an espresso, kissing each other like teenagers.

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I've been massaging people since I was little, and now I've been a professional massage therapist for forty years. I grew up in Rochester, Minnesota, the home of the Mayo Clinic, where people from all over the world (and every relative I had, it seemed) would go for help. My parents were ill when I was a child—my mother an alcoholic, my father with severe emphysema—and being raised around pain and sickness taught me there's always something that can alleviate suffering. My dad used to say, "Leave a place better than you found it." I carry that notion with me everywhere. I take that thought with me when I visit the sick or care for the dying.

My parents died when I was seventeen, and they both died alone. I'm still sorry I wasn't there for them, but that sorrow became a calling two years later when I got a job as a nursing assistant in a cancer hospital at the University of Minnesota. When people are sick, it's hard to think clearly and make good decisions. I learned by doing how to step in and get people the help or the love—or the touch—they need. I studied dying by taking care of dying people. I learned about death when I held the hand of so many as they took their final breath.

I'm a born-again Christian, a deacon in a vibrant country church, yet with Jacob, I don't know what to say to soften his resistance to hope. I have trouble finding words to encourage a man who watched as his father was executed. He can still describe seeing bodies stacked like firewood.

Once, when I asked Jacob if he prayed, he said, "To whom would I pray?"

I knew I was on thin ice. "How about God?"

"There is no God."

Those four words knocked the breath out of me—not because I'm so sure of what others should believe, but because without faith, I'm not sure how anyone survives.

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The other day, Hannah waited for me in her blue chenille housecoat. She's so crippled now that she walks on the inside of her ankle bones. She's lost four inches from the scoliosis since I first met her. Her hair is white, and she's also lost too much weight.

"How has he been?" I hug her bony body into mine.

"Not good. It is never good. It breaks my heart to think of the man that he was." She has a thick Belgian accent.

"You're a good wife," I say, even though I sometimes have to scold her about yelling at her husband. She gets mad at him for not knowing to leave his walker in the doorway when he has to pee. She gets mad when he's confused and forgets what his sister's name is or where the kitchen is or how to drink a glass of water.

On my last visit, I noticed the bruises around her right wrist where she wears her Lifeline bracelet. "We fight," she said then. "He wants to get out of the house, and we fight."

Today, I massage her first, while Jacob lies on the couch near the fireplace, alternately watching us and dozing. When it comes to his turn, he's practically catatonic.

"He is gone," she says. "There is nothing we can do when he gets like this."

"I'll just massage him here."

I gather my creams and remedies, kneeling beside him. Hannah is right. He's gone. He doesn't respond in a way I can understand, but I hope that my touch will reach him. I start with the tattoo on his left arm and work my way from there. Alzheimer's may have taken his memory, but we can still connect in this way.

After years of touching the dying even when they can't hear or see me, I have to believe they still feel love through my hands. Touch transcends the other senses, especially when the dying have lost their mental moorings and themselves. For me, touch is sacred.

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On my next visit, Hannah's arm is bruised and torn open. She says it's from her Lifeline bracelet digging into her during a fall, but I can see it's a bite mark. I put my hands on her shoulders and look her in the eyes. Her irises are a faded light blue; she looks so tired. She goes to check on Jacob, as I pull my massage table into the living room.

Hannah screams. "Come, Julie, he has fallen! I can't get him up."

It isn't a dramatic fall; he simply crumpled between an ottoman and a chair. But Jacob looks at me and says, "No!"

I'm struck stupid by this collapse. In hospitals and my private practice, I've seen many frightening things, and yet the image of this little man on the floor overwhelms me. Suddenly, I don't know how to be brave. Hannah has no balance or strength to help and just clucks like a nervous hen, staring at me, waiting, showing her complete faith in my choices. But for a moment, I don't have faith in me or in my ability to make a difference.

He weighs seventy pounds, the same weight Jacob said he was when he walked out of Auschwitz. His 87th birthday is just days away. I shimmy behind him, careful not to roll the leather ottoman into the huge TV. He's furious and clamps his armpits shut so I can't slide my hands under his arms. I'm stuck between a big leather chair and a fallen man with Alzheimer's. There is no give between his arms and the sides of his body, so I slide my hands under his diapered rump and heave him back onto the chair. He growls, "No!" again, trying to pinch me.

Good Lord, I realize. This is Hannah's every day.

Ten minutes later—though it felt like an eternity—Hannah unzips her thin housecoat and lets it fall to the floor, preparing for her massage. She grips my arm for balance. She stands crooked and naked in front of me, her body covered in bruises and scars. I unclasp the diamond-encrusted, heart-shaped necklace she wears. She releases the heavy watch from her narrow wrist and places it in a crystal ashtray on the end table.

She turns and looks me in the eye, shaking her head from side to side. “Oh, Julie. When I think of the man he was.”

Her words move through me like heat. I don’t say a word, but I do know the man that he was, as if it were coded in my hands.

For the hour I’m massaging Hannah, Jacob seems to be asleep in the big chair where I put him. Only once does he call out *Chou*, the nickname they have for each other. French for cabbage. He seems so alone, in a world neither of us can enter. Halfway through the massage, she confesses that Jacob bit her and she went stumbling into the kitchen counter. It’s surprising she didn’t break anything, but as I look into her tear-filled eyes, I see that something did break.

As Hannah rests, I go into the den to massage Jacob. I recount stories about his life that I’ve heard. I tell him how beautiful his home is and how well he takes care of his wife and son and two grandchildren. I brag about his huge success in the handbag industry. I laugh as I tell him how he and I both love to ride horses, but I never got to see him ride, that was before we met. His expression never changes.

But Jacob reaches out his hand to me. I take it. His eyes remain closed. He brings my hand to his lips and kisses it.

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When I stop by to see Jacob a few days later, on a Sunday, he looks wonderful. The skin on his face is translucent; without his dentures, with his lips riding his gum line, he looks refreshed, as if he’s facing something with new resolve.

Jacob is dying. It may be the only way relief can come. I’ve seen this look before in other patients, this temporary scrubbing away of misery. Sometimes, I’m the only one in the room holding somebody’s hand when they exhale their last breath, but with Jacob, I probably won’t be here. Just as I wasn’t with my mom when she died of alcohol poisoning during our vacation in Greece, because the doctors had insisted I leave the room. Or when my dad died from pneumonia less than a year later, after battling lung cancer, because I’d left his side for a moment to use the restroom. Their sudden deaths—that permanent, gaping hole—nearly felled me as a teenager. Not being in the room when they died compelled me over the years to be there for anyone I could, although I’ve since realized I don’t have to be the one physically sitting there. After decades, I’ve let myself off the hook.

The next morning, I can’t get the image of Jacob out of my mind. I’m washing dishes, looking out my kitchen window at a deer standing in the lush field where my goats and little mountain pony used to romp and play. The doe stares at me the way she does every morning, after gobbling up all the bread I toss out for the birds.

I think of Jacob’s cold, stiff feet. I uncovered them the day before, because that’s what my preacher said he did for the dying. I’ve heard nurses on cancer wards say it, too. If you uncover the feet and crack open a window, the dying person’s spirit can leave more easily.

On that last visit, when I tried to warm his feet, Hannah came into the bedroom with another visitor. There were already three other guests sitting in the living room, paying their final respects to the man who’d once been able to fix anything, ride a horse, wheel and deal, speak French—a man who loved oysters, martinis, the Mets, Belgian chocolate, fine wine. While I held his feet in my hands, Hannah and the woman approached his low bed.

They ignored me and murmured in French, clucking their tongues and shaking their heads. Jacob looked like a sculpture of himself, all bones and streamlined muscles. The skin on his face looked smooth, unwrinkled. He was curled on his side with full down pillows all about him. His hair had been freshly trimmed. I thought Jacob seemed like a young boy, maybe just before he was taken to Auschwitz, but Hannah said he looked awful.

The new visitor had big eyes and was about the same age as Hannah, maybe in her seventies, maybe more. She was obviously European with well-coiffed hair and stylish clothes. She also seemed a little terrified. I suggested that we leave Jacob’s feet uncovered, but Hannah insisted he was cold.

I wanted to find him a pair of warm socks, but instead I went into the kitchen. I busied myself slicing the thick chocolate torte I’d brought. I put out small dessert plates. Hannah came in and showed me where she kept the silver dessert

forks. I fanned out five napkins beside the plates and put them in front of the other guests, who were now seated around the large dining room table.

I was ready to leave, but the big-eyed woman reached for my hand.

"It's lovely that you could come," I told her. "It's a sacred time."

"No," she said in her French accent. "It is horrible. How could God let something like this happen to Jacob after all he has been through?"

"God didn't do this to Jacob." I tightened my grip on her hand. "Evil exists, but so does love, and love wins."

She didn't believe me, I could feel it through her fingers, but I didn't let go. I wanted to tell her that God is among us, working through us, that I feel goodness pour out of me when I lay my hands on people, and it doesn't come from me. Love is bigger than we know. It has to be bigger than Alzheimer's or the Holocaust. It has to.

I squeezed her hand a final time, said my goodbyes, and headed home.

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This morning, as I stare at the deer, I call Hannah to see how Jacob is. I picture her picking up the phone in the bedroom, standing next to his bed.

"The same," she starts to say. Then she screams, "Oh, he is leaving now! Oh, Julie. He is going. Oh, Julie, my *chouki* is going."

And the phone clatters to the floor, and I hear her weep, and I weep with her. I feel the holiness of love creep into my bones. I hang up and watch the deer, who looks back at me one last time before leaping over the fence and disappearing into the woods.

Art Information

- Photo of Holocaust Tattoo © Marvin Lynchard, Department of Defense; public domain.



Julie Evans is a licensed massage therapist, ordained deacon, and freelance writer. In addition to her regular column for *Healthy You* magazine, her work has been published in the *Woodstock Times*, *Healthy Hudson Valley*, *Pulse*, *Fictionique*, and NPR's *The Roundtable*. She's also written a memoir, *Joy Road: My Journey from Addiction to Recovery* (Woodstock Arts). Julie believes that words and touch are among our best medicines.

For more information, visit [Writing by Julie Evans](#) [5].

Sacred Touch

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