

Hands

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When I first saw your hand, I was terrified. It caught me by surprise—a week, maybe two, after our first cuts into the confined field of the thorax. I was just gaining familiarity with the textures, smells, and mechanical forces of cadaver dissection.

Your hand slipped out from under the sheet.

My first thought was that you were reaching out to me. It is a universal human gesture—one person moving his hand toward



Illustration by Erica Aitken

another, conveying intentions, invitations, directions, pleas. We see it as communication before we even have a chance to ascribe conscious meaning to it.

So you might understand my fright.

At the time, any humanness seemed incompatible with what we were doing. We had committed part of our first year of medical school to the piecemeal, often inept, disassembly of your body. I had prepared for dissection by deliberately separating the person who you were from the body I was picking apart. There was personhood, soul, and human being—and then there was cadaver. I could cut apart the cadaver, apply this significant and irreversible force, only because it was so far removed from the person you were, and therefore from any true violence.

But then, your reaching out to me—your hand inevitably coming my way, with all the humanness that it could still carry. On what grounds was I making this convenient distinction between your humanness and your body, deciding that your specimen of anatomy came to me cleansed of lingering personhood, somehow washed out in the chemistry of embalming? Wasn't it facile—if not overtly self-serving—to resolve my hesitation to cut into you with some sort of binary between living human and dead matter? Your body, after death, could still emanate humanness.

Humanness is inscribed on the living body. I have scars that capture adventures, and mistakes, and places, and times. My insides bear marks too—like the souvenirs of that fateful spring when my brother and I both got tonsillectomies.

I have also learned that my body contains the accumulated humanness of my ancestors. Of other people long gone. I will never forget when I was with my *Tante* Hannerl—a beautiful, witty Bavarian woman who 50 years ago took care of her best friend as she was dying of cancer. She stopped me, put her time-worn hand on mine, and told me that my smile reminded her of my grandmother, the woman whose name I carry. I had never met my grandmother, but she was there, again, in me, next to her best friend, my *Tante*. Perhaps the humanness of many people can inhabit a single body.

Undeniably, much of that embodied humanness remains after death. Scars don't disappear. Staples from old surgeries stick around.

You are missing part of your finger, testament to some experience you had that I will never know. Did you have

grandkids who marveled openly at your hand, so different from all other hands they'd seen? Did you have a spouse who, through years of partnership, ceased to even notice your missing part, in the same way that your familiarity with your own body allowed you sometimes to forget?

Your humanness was before me each week, and once I realized it, I clung to it. I held your hand when we sawed, and ripped, and blindly poked around. Even after we'd thoroughly dissected your arms, I grasped your bones, and tendons, and slips of muscle while the bone saws squealed through crania all around us. I wanted to communicate back to you, to tell you that you would be all right. Because I held your hand, you would be all right.

And, of course, you would! It was I who needed reassurance. It was so clear that I was the one being held, by your hand, by your very intensely present humanness, the meaning of your gift, telling me that I would be all right, that I could find strength to do things that terrified me. Because you held my hand, I would be all right.

And you were right. Connected to you, I made it, though feeling scared, overwhelmed, and paralyzed by the new and intimate relationship I was gaining with the human form. I was all right.

Scared, overwhelmed, paralyzed. I know I will have these feelings again throughout my career as a doctor. That is certain. I will face emotional challenges I can't even anticipate—just as I could not have anticipated those of the dissection experience. Just as you gave me strength in the lab, you will give me strength in these future moments—in the memory of holding your hand, and the message that you communicated to me in your donation.

You believed I could do something good for other people. You asked me to take your body to learn as much as I could, so that I could someday take care of other bodies, other human beings.

You may no longer live, but your humanness still reaches me. And I am reaching back. I will never cease to hold onto it.

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