

The Poetry of Personal Care

I watched the Certified Nursing Assistant speak softly to the young man who was lying prone in his long, flat wheelchair. The CNA touched the young man's cheek, walked away and returned with a damp wash cloth. To many people the action may have been routine or even disgusting, but as I watched the CNA gently wipe away the crusted spittle on the young man's lips and talk softly to him, making eye contact as he cared for him, I knew I was witnessing more than routine work. It was the poetry of personal care and it sings its song within nursing homes, assisted living settings, private homes, and adult day services every day, every hour.

Many of the people-elderly, disabled, mentally ill- need total care. They need to be lifted onto the toilet. They need to be fed. They need to be touched, wiped, cleaned, and turned. And whenever it is done with love, it is more beautiful than a ballet, more passionate than an opera, more deeply touching than the most prized poetry.

Hands-on personal care given by a caregiver who sees the beauty and charm in the person being assisted is a poetry of interaction. It has a rhythm to it, a rhythm that repeats itself with the ebb and flow of the ordinary and plain and simple routines of life. A touch to the face is a dance step between two people. Arms around another, a lift from wheelchair to mat is a sway and a turn and a cadence of movement. To scoop food and gently feed another is a painting in time, more beautiful than a Monet.

There is art in personal care. It is poetry of touch, music passed from soul to soul, a slow dance of Athis is who we really are, each the same, each a part of one another. There is no hidden meaning in this art. It screams out its message with each wipe and turn and touch. To see it is to hear the message, we are here to love one another.

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Kathleen McGwin