

**H**er name was Emily. The first time I met her, she was bed ridden - had been so for a number of years. There was little to no cognition or response any time I visited her. I would take that long, usually quiet walk down the nursing home hallway twice a month, bringing communion and healing oil with me. Sometimes Emily would take the slice of wafer, dipped in wine, barely opening her eyes – almost like a reflex response – most times she did not. On those latter occasions I would pray, sit with her for while, anoint her, and then leave.

About six months into my visiting, Emily's bed disappeared, the staff having placed the mattress on the floor. I never got a complete explanation for the reason behind that change, but it was about the time they also put her on hospice care. So, instead of pulling a chair next to the bed, I started kneeling on the floor next to Emily on those visits. For the next four to six months after that, Emily hung on, although her caregivers didn't know how it was possible...and she rarely opened her eyes...I was walking down the long nursing home hallway one day in this time period, when I heard a voice, loud and insistent, saying over and over again: *What the hell is going on?* The voice grew louder and louder as I moved down that hallway, until I reached Emily's room, finding the voice to be hers. The aide in her room looked at me as I walked in, looked back at Emily, then back at me and said, "Oh good!" And got up, and quickly left the room.

Emily's eyes were open, although there was no recognition or cognition there, and they were fixed on her bookshelf at the foot of her floor-lying-mattress, where there were multiple pictures of her nieces and nephews and grand-nieces/nephews. I knelt down next to her and started talking to her, quietly, saying I don't know what. Her steady, and loud, voice kept on repeating *What the hell is going on?*...I reached out my hand and covered hers that was lying on the mattress. And her voice stopped, her eyes shifted to me, and there was something there in those foggy blue eyes, some resonance of recognition, perhaps of my collar, and she said, "*That's nice,*" and she closed her eyes and fell asleep. Emily died about two weeks later.

A gentle, seemingly inconsequential, physical touch reached some deep place within Emily...That experience has always stayed with me. That encounter has always reminded me of how gentle *God's touch* can be on us: like a soft whisper of a breath behind one of our ears...just a whisper, a gentle touch of breath, barely noticeable but resonant at some deep place within us.

We see that gentle touch, that breath of God's touch, in the interaction between Jesus and Peter's mother-in-law. He takes her by the hand and raises her up, healing her. We see that in his curing of all those who came to Peter's house at sundown. We see that gentleness in the self-care of going out to a deserted place to pray. And we see it in the directness of his knowing that his place is not there in Capernaum – comfortable, known, respected – but out there, away from those he knows, proclaiming the message he was sent to deliver.

Where do *we* feel that gentle touch of breath on our ear? How do we allow ourselves time to recognize that, be open to feeling that, presence? We see in the Gospel a rhythm of work, rest and prayer – work, rest and then prayer. Finding that time to work and rest, most of us do that quite well. That third one, that prayer-part, can be more difficult for us to allow the time for, to put the effort into, be open to the vulnerability we place ourselves in, when we are brave enough to pray. But pray we must. Open ourselves we must. Allow ourselves to be vulnerable to God’s gentle breath whispering past our ear....From those moments of quiet reflection – of granting ourselves the gift of being set apart from the hurly-whirly-pace of our everyday life – we can find our own breath – gain our own focus on how we can be that Body of Christ in the world today.

Keeping busy, occupying all of our time until we are exhausted, can rob us of the opportunity of feeling that gentle breath behind our ear. Working hard, being dedicated is laudable and important, but those attributes cannot be all that we are, cannot define all of who we are. Working on our spiritual-side – being brave enough to listen for that soft breath behind our ear – is just as important, for by doing so we are allowing God into our life, we are acknowledging God’s involvement in all that we do, and all that we are. By giving ourselves that gift of quiet time, we can enrich, and make more full, all of our life experiences.

Falling into the habit of not praying, of not setting apart quiet, separate time, to open ourselves, make ourselves aware of all that is around us, is so easy to do. But centering ourselves, giving ourselves the chance to feel that gentle touch of breath, can and will change how we feel about the world – bring more into focus that which is important, and then help us to shift our priorities and focus on those things that should take priority in life.

All of us need to give ourselves that gift of time....we can get up ten minutes earlier...we can turn on the television fifteen minutes later...we can light a candle, making a habit of marking that “separate time” as special...and we can make an effort to empty our self, our cares, burdens, worries, and offer them to God...We can try climbing the stairs to our balcony and sit in our meditation space, lighting a candle and letting go.

We need to watch for, be aware of those odd gentle breaths of air across our ear...God is right here with us, touching, resonating somewhere deep at the center of our being. All we have to do is give ourselves some space to recognize that presence. Life is so much richer when we give ourselves that time of self-care. And we, like Emily, can say, *That’s nice.* Amen.

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