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Janice Hughes
jhughes@messiah.edu

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I Would Give This Day a Twenty: Encountering Finitude

JANICE HUGHES

It was an extraordinary Father's Day. "On a scale of one to ten, I would give this day a twenty!" I exclaimed to Richard midway through the lovely summer afternoon. It began in a small inn nestled in a tiny village on a narrow peninsula sandwiched between Green Bay and Lake Michigan. We were vacationing in Fish Creek, Door County, Wisconsin. After a hearty breakfast at the Cookery, a charming local eatery, we headed up the wooded peninsula to a little country church clothed in white clapboard, sitting high on a hill overlooking the sleepy village of Ephraim and the sparkling waters of Green Bay.

After worship and a leisurely *al fresco* lunch in the village, we meandered up and down country lanes, absorbing the gifts of a landscape dotted with cherry trees laden with almost-ripened fruit. Our only agenda was to respond to the unfolding geography, following our noses instead of a map. We turned onto a narrow lane that promised a craft cottage, but gave us a clock turned back to the simple beauty of hollyhocks, quaint garden sheds, and an airy cottage garden.

A small group of middle-aged women, friends since high school, but now scattered all over the country, chattered around us in the joy of reunion. Without our even asking, they volunteered to take our picture together—Richard and Jan on a small log bench. We remarked about how few photographs we have of the two of us together. One or the other seems always to be the eye behind the camera. Yes, this was our picture together on a perfect afternoon. A twenty indeed!

Little did we know then the new paths that lay before us, virtually uncharted territory. After making a few small purchases in the shop, we retraced our steps to Fish Creek on a narrow winding road. We chose to spend the last hours of the afternoon sitting with open books on the porch of the little cottage we had rented behind the historic White Gull Inn. We relaxed, soaking up the quietness of the surrounding woods. We felt safe and secure in this space bordered by a timeworn stone wall that marked the boundary of a small parish churchyard. We were content just to be—to be quiet, to be observers of nature, to read, to be together. Yes, this day was easily a twenty.

Late in the afternoon, we walked down a deeply rutted lane to the bay. We were not alone on this lovely June evening. Young children played simple games on the grass. Teenagers perched on the boulders that lined the water's edge. Families and friends mixed and mingled, laughed and talked, and took the time to wait for what proved to be a magnificent, brilliantly lit sunset sky—a fitting benediction for the day. In the twilight, we strolled up and down the village streets, dropped by the Cookery for a late supper, and then headed back to our cottage for the night. What an absolutely perfect day!

Ten minutes later, the trajectory of our lives suddenly changed. What had seemed to be a perfect day became a very long night, a very long week. Finitude struck. Without warning, without trumpets, half a continent away from home and family, Richard, my dear Richard, suffered crushing pain in his chest and down his right arm. Thanks to a state that had carefully constructed a network of cardiac care that reached out even to its remotest rural areas, an emergency response team staffed with well-trained volunteers reached

Richard within minutes of our call. A fully-equipped cardiac care unit whisked him away from me in the last hours of Father's Day and took him to Door County Hospital some forty-five minutes away in Sturgeon Bay.

Serious illness and even death had touched several of our contemporaries in the preceding months, but Richard and I seemed to have escaped the relentless reminders of finitude that had demanded the full and immediate attention of our friends. But now, at last, we too had been forced to look death squarely in the face. We had been touched as well.

As I drove alone along the deserted country road to Sturgeon Bay, I felt a sure sense of God's presence and care. I was not naive, but I was at peace. I thought about our day, a perfect day with no regrets. I thought about our life together—almost thirty-five years—again, with absolutely no regrets, nothing that I would change. I prayed aloud with gratitude for the life we had shared. And I was at peace.

The words of Julian of Norwich, a godly woman whose life preceded mine by five centuries, kept ringing in my ears:

And all shall be well,
and all shall be well,
and all manner of thing shall be well.

These were not words born out of naiveté. Fourteenth-century Norwich and the surrounding English countryside had been ravaged by three waves of bubonic plague. Death was a familiar companion. Though Julian escaped the plague, at the age of thirty she suffered from what seemed to be a life-threatening illness. Her encounter with death proved to be the prism through which she spent the rest of her life contemplating the presence of God. The words she used to describe this experience, perhaps the earliest writing in the English language by a woman, were words of surety, of allegiance, of orientation.¹ "And all manner of thing shall be well."

And I remembered also the words of the poet Conrad Aiken, words that had comforted Madeleine L'Engle² after the death of her husband:

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread.³

Those words comforted me too as I drove alone in the midnight hours, trying to keep pace with the ambulance as it sped over miles and miles of darkened terrain, a land unfamiliar to me. My own heart was overflowing with prayers of thanksgiving for the sheer gift of this good and gentle man in my life.

After emergency room care in Sturgeon Bay, the doctors recommended that Richard be transferred to Bellin Hospital in Green Bay, one of three cardiac centers in Wisconsin. There they confirmed the preliminary diagnosis we had already received. Richard had indeed suffered a heart attack, actually a mild right-sided heart attack. But the response of his heart was not mild. His heart just lay there in his chest, wounded, unresponsive. It barely beat and showed little pressure. Richard was in the throes of congestive heart failure and would need to be stabilized before they could attempt any repair of his heart. And so Bellin Hospital, Coronary Intensive Care became our address for the next week. There would be no more quaint country inns and romantic walks. Instead we were in a glass-walled room filled with monitors and wires and care—tender, loving care, medicine as it was meant to be practiced. Medicine for healing.

Eight days later, with an angioplasty and two clogged arteries cleaned and kept open with stents—tiny little metal tunnels designed to keep life's precious blood flowing freely—we left Bellin Hospital. We had been given a repaired heart, touchingly personal professional care, the support of an unbelievable network of family and friends from across the country, and the blessed assurance of God's comfort and healing.

And now, four years later, with glowing medical reports, we feel grateful for all the blessings that have brought us to this day. But we also feel an incredible vulnerability. We *have* been touched. We have not

escaped the forces of finitude, and in fact, two years after Richard's heart attack, he was assaulted by a new foe: prostate cancer. Early detection was our ally, and once again, we felt a renewed gratitude for the gift of life, for expert medical care, and for the sustaining response of family and friends. But before recovery was complete, pulmonary emboli unleashed their suffocating power and threatened literally to smother the life that the surgery had saved. And for the third time in two years, the abyss opened—but once again life prevailed.

Yes, we have been touched. Once, twice, three times our attention has been powerfully riveted by the forces of finitude, to the possibility of death, and to the absolute reality that God is with us. We can say with increasing certainty, "And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." We know that God has blessed all of the days of our lives, and we believe that he will in all circumstances continue to sustain us in his perfect peace. Every day of life with such a hope is easily a twenty.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life,
 neither angels nor demons,
 neither the present nor the future,
 nor any powers,
 neither height nor depth,
 nor anything else in all creation,
 will be able to separate us from the love of God
 that is in Christ Jesus
 our Lord. (Rom 8:38–39, NIV)

JANICE HUGHES

Mrs. Hughes resides in Malibu, California and worships with the University Church of Christ.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Julian, *Julian of Norwich—Showings*, tr. and ed. by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988).
- 2 Madeleine L'Engle, *Two-Part Invention: The Story of a Marriage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 232.
- 3 Conrad Aiken, "Music I Heard" from *Collected Poems, 1916–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

