

Aging Hands by S David Nathanson

My Lithuanian grandmother, her face furrowed like the autumn fields, hands creased like old parchment, and eyes that sparkled with the clarity of morning frost, wore her years with undaunted pride. Despite having no formal schooling she oozed a deep peasant wisdom learned through emigration from her birthplace, marriage to an angry man, raising eight children, coupled with heartbreak, poverty, sadness, laughter, and an instinct for survival. Bent by age but unbroken, nurtured by her stubborn Baltic origins she observed the silent language of the body.

It was in her kitchen, with the sweet scent of rising bread and the golden dust of flour dancing in the light, that I first became aware of the poetry of hands. I was curious about her habit of reaching for my small fingers, tracing their lines with her own weathered thumb.

"These are fine hands, David," she would say, her accent thick with memory. "Strong hands. They tell me much about you."

Sometimes she would laugh and shake her head, as though the world's mysteries condensed into the space between my knuckles, the dirt under my nails, the lines on my palms, the strength in my grip. "Your hands, they do not lie. They carry the story of who you are. The hands show everything. The stories you cannot say are written here."

I watched her greet visitors with a ritual both simple and profound. She would reach for their hands, turning them over with a practiced tenderness, running her thumb along calluses, knuckles, and the lines etched by time and toil. Sometimes she would pause, pressing her palm gently to the backs of theirs, as if she could divine secrets through the warmth, the damp, the tremor of their skin.

As I grew into the long-legged awkwardness of adolescence and then into the tentative surety of a young man my hands grew larger, steadier, and more capable. I learned how to tie knots, use a saw to cut wood, mend small machines, write cursive with a fountain pen, draw figures with charcoal, and coax music from the upright piano in the living room. Each new skill etched itself into the flesh and memory of my palms.

In medical school, where the days became a blur of lectures, the grand old anatomy dissection hall, late nights, and the sharp scent of formaldehyde, I met the detailed scientific hand, a marvel of human biology. I learned the complex Latin names: flexor digitorum profundus,

extensor pollicis longus, lumbricals and interossei. I dissected the shimmering web of nerves, arteries, veins, tendons, fasciae, and bones, and imagined the way tendons and ligaments worked in concert to create movement.

Years later, as a newly minted doctor, I stepped into the sterile corridors of a modern hospital ready to train in general surgery. Every time I encountered a patient I focused on the protocols and procedures required for me to become board certified. But my grandma's words about hands echoed in my mind. While I paid attention to the complaints, past history, current medications, allergies, and a complete examination, I always began with the hands.

I cradled the patient's fingers, turning their hands palm up, then gently over, my eyes attentive to the landscape of veins, the hue of the nail beds, the texture of the skin. Were the hands dry as a desert wind, or clammy with hidden anxiety? Did they tremble with fatigue, or hold steady with resilience? Were they ink-stained, soil-caked, or soft with the privilege of idleness? Were they warm or cold? What subtle clues lay beneath the surface, clues that might speak of fever, circulatory trouble, or quiet distress. I made connections between symptoms that my colleagues missed, drew conclusions not yet mapped in any algorithm, and caught warning signs that eluded my peers.

My hands, guided by the memory of my grandmother's love and curiosity, had become a true diagnostic tool. I saw in each patient not just a set of symptoms and signs, but a tapestry of experience: the seamstress whose swollen joints betrayed years of delicate labor, the farmer whose cracked skin spoke of endless harvests, the musician whose fingertips trembled with more than mere fatigue, the young mother whose swallowing issue I diagnosed as scleroderma just by feeling the rigid skin overlying the middle phalanx.

There were sad times when I examined hands grown cold with illness or trembling with fear. Yet, even in those experiences I found purpose. The patient often sensed my empathy for their suffering when I held their hands. By honoring the story in each hand, I offered a kind of healing too often lost in modern practice.

I saw changes in the skin of the hand related to aging. Old peoples' skin was dry, thinner, less elastic, wrinkled, more fragile with decreased volume, discolored with age spots, and the veins and tendons were more visible.

Meanwhile, even though I carefully washed my hands many times a day during my five decades of operating on patients, I had not paid close attention to their appearance, much like the

cobbler who fixes his customers shoes but walks around with holes in his own shoes. One day I was shocked when I used my hand diagnostic skills on my own hands. On the morning of my eightieth birthday I looked at my face in the mirror and thought I looked younger than eighty. As I reached out to pick up my toothbrush I was devastated when I saw the hands of an old man. One crazy thought led to another as I realized that I had quietly ignored all the other physical signs of aging in my body, assuring myself that they were minor and acceptable. At this point, as someone experienced in hand diagnosis, I recognized that my hands had reached a stage indicating it may be prudent not to plan vacations too far ahead. I had to accept the truth that had been staring at me in the eye that I could no longer deny.

In the year since my discovery I look every day with careful diagnostic accuracy at my hands as stark reality continues to unfold; there is no place for me to hide as they remind me of an inconvenient truth. I must accept the reality of my age and rejoice in the fact that my mind, body, and hands have chronicled a vast array of diagnostic dilemmas through the simple wisdom of a peasant grandmother who taught me to love hands. In the lives I have changed, the hands I have held, her legacy endured. My hands may be old, but I can hold them aloft with pride.

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### **A word about me:**

I'm a board certified academic surgical oncologist who trained in Johannesburg, Los Angeles (UCLA), and Sacramento (UC Davis) after graduating medical school at Wits. I still work part time in Detroit, Michigan, but have stopped operating. I teach medical students (Wayne State Medical School; Michigan State Medical School) and surgical residents and fellows (Henry Ford Health). I ran a research lab for 25 years and have published over three hundred scientific papers, mostly about how melanomas and breast cancers metastasize to lymph nodes. I am one of the pioneers of the sentinel node biopsy having produced a mouse model of lymph node metastasis in the 1980's; that work was translated into clinical use in the 1990s and has become the standard all over the world. I am passionate about writing and have published two memoirs, one textbook, a non-fiction book on the feelings and emotions of women treated for breast cancer, and just finished another book which is almost ready for publication. I have four children and four grandchildren.