Spirituality
Soul Seeing



Mike and Vickie share a morning hug on Dec. 2, 2021. (Cencia Jean Charles)

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Sometimes I'm so happy I just want to hug everybody. Sometimes I'm so sad I just want somebody to hug me. Anybody.

It's been more than a year since my wife, Vickie, went to heaven. More than 20 years since I've experienced physical intimacy. Early onset Alzheimer's does that. I long for the sacrament of touch.

It's not that I'm horny (well, there's some of that, too, such as it is at 83), but mostly it's just that I yearn for an embodiment of intimacy that includes but is not limited to emotional caring or spiritual friendship. I'm already blessed with the latter two, with women as well as men.

I am also friends with widowers and widows like me who are well beyond the age of unbridled sexual passion but who still ache for kisses, caresses and long comforting cuddles. There's even a name for it: "widow's fire." More than 15 million of us in the U.S. are members of this unenviable club. I asked a friend my age if he still thought about sex, and he answered, "More than ever."

You know what I think about when I think about physical intimacy? I think not about intercourse but about those affectionate moments leading up to it and that tender time afterward when her head rests on your chest and you both are silent or talk with the utmost vulnerability about love.

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I have a woman friend who has been a widow for as long as I have been a widower and who shares the same longings. Her dog Charlie sleeps at the foot of her bed. She loves it when he snuggles up next to her in the middle of the night. "I pet him even more than I petted him when Richard was alive," she told me. "The thing is, I want so much to be petted."

In the last two years of our Alzheimer's experience, I had Vickie sleep in the great big recliner in the living room to keep her from rubbing her heels on the bed and getting bedsores. I'd check on her at night, and in the morning would position myself on the recliner with my knees outside hers, and grab her limp arms and put them around me in the semblance of a hug. One of her arms always slipped back down and I'd wrap it around me again, lay my head on her chest and then, when everything was in place, put my arms around her in a real hug. I'd squeeze her with love for as long as I could. I couldn't see her face so I had no idea if she knew what I was doing.

Then one day, our caregiver Cencia let herself in at 8 a.m. as usual, and without my knowing it, took a picture of us on her phone. Tears came to my eyes when she showed it to me. Vickie had a beatific smile that the angels in heaven would envy.

The sacrament of touch, the grace of embrace, was not less than but more than emotional or spiritual intimacy, and more powerful than the grip of Alzheimer's disease. For both of us.

"I wanna be held by you," sang Eric Clapton and B.B. King. "I wanna be touched by you. I wanna be loved by you." Not just in words. But for real.

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Isn't loving physical intimacy a tintype of our relationship with God, with Love Itself? Isn't God, as Solomon tells us in the Song of Songs, the Lover and we, his Beloved? If each of us is a manifestation of divine Love, then isn't a loving sensual relationship an expression of Love giving Love back to Love? A kiss is not just a kiss, it is "love that is sweeter than wine" (Song of Songs 4:10).

Oh, how we Catholics have been taught to fear and flee our sexual feelings! Some bishops are afraid to bless gay and lesbian couples for fear of scandalizing "the simple faithful."

There are no simple faithful, if there ever were. Nothing can scandalize a faith-filled Catholic more than a church that turns its back on those who love one another.

The institutional church to this day frowns on any kind of sexual intimacy between adults outside marriage, and shakes a finger at what Crash Davis (Kevin Costner)

celebrated in "Bull Durham," those "long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days." I was taught in eighth grade that more than 30 seconds was a sin.

What Crash Davis had to say makes a lot more sense to this 83-year-old widower, and no doubt to a whole lot of faithful Catholics, whether old, young, married, single or celibate, than a stopwatch does.

I don't know how many years I have left of what poet Mary Oliver calls this "one wild and precious life," or what I will make of it. Some brave choices and good surprises, I hope. I know that's what Vickie wants for me. She told me that from the other side. "Love," she said, "wants you to go on living."

Thank you, Sweetheart, it isn't easy but I'm trying.