

Small things that have no words

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Sep. 14, 2010



(Newscom/Design Pics/Steve Nagy)

My mother claws at her chin. The skin is red and raw. Sometimes it bleeds. If a protective scab forms over the wound, my mother scrapes it off.

The gerontology nurse tells us this behavior is typical of senile dementia. There is nothing to be done, except, perhaps, to ?give her something else to do with her hands.?

My mother has a tremor. When her mother had this tremor, we called it ?the palsy.? My mother?s hands are never still, the constant movements involuntary. These movements cannot be directed towards a useful ?something else.? Her hands wander to her chin; they worry the skin there as if the chin itself were alien and unwanted, as if beneath the loose flesh is something she needs, or seeks, or is.

She has the palsy. She will have it until she dies.

If I say, ?Mother, you need to leave your chin alone,? she looks at me, sometimes embarrassed and sometimes angry. She drops her hands into her lap for a moment. I look away. I do not like scolding her as I would scold a child. When I look back, her crabbed fingers are at work, excavating her papery skin.

My granddaughter, Lucy, is 9 months old. She has less control of her movements than my mother. She flaps her arms when she sees something she wants: my glasses, a block, a fallen leaf, a morsel of peach. Sometimes she can command her hands to reach out and grab, scrabbling her fingers out and over whatever she desires. Sometimes she can even bring it to her mouth. But sometimes, and more often, Lucy?s hand opens -- always a surprise -- and the treasure falls back to the floor.

My mother is more reliable with a fork than Lucy is with a spoon.

Lucy?s mother tries to keep her nails short, but sometimes we pick her up from the crib to find that she has scratched and cut her face. All of this is wondrous to us, and sweet: the fallings, the scratchings, the clutchings, the constant reaching and attempting that are Lucy?s waking hours. We applaud her efforts to grab and grasp, even as I laugh and say, kissing her, ?You can?t have my glasses.?

We fetch the piece of peach for her when Lucy fails to get it to her mouth.

My mother's gestures, as involuntary and as pure as Lucy's, make me sad and anxious. I want to get away. I do not want to look. I want her to stop.

My mother, who loves Estée Lauder perfumes and lotions and powders, now bears the sharper odor of incontinence beneath her floral fragrances. I flinch from the smell, even as I swing Lucy into my arms, and hold her close, not caring that her diapers are dirty, not caring that she smells. No one describes a baby as "incontinent." No baby is ashamed of wetting her pants. No one feels ashamed on her behalf.

We are at the store. My mother has purchased her groceries and it is time to sign the debit card slip. She writes "Betty" slowly, legible only to one who already knows her name. She stops, confused. Says, "What's the rest of it?"

It has been a long time since my mother knew her phone number. She forgets familiar words. She has lost the names of some grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I have, for a couple of years now, been intercepting her letters to friends and family so that I can add the proper digits to addresses without numbers, correct the spellings of city names and include a zip code. I know what my mother has forgotten, that a letter sent to "Elaine Bennett, Hondo, Texas," will be returned, even if the same letter would have been safely delivered in 1932.

But this is the first time I have known her to forget her own name.

Lucy is just learning her name. We call out, "Lucy!" and try to get her attention.

We ask, "Where is Lucy's nose?" and are charmed when she gets it, charmed when she pokes her finger into her eye or mouth instead.

That Lucy would not reliably know her name is, in the word we use only for the very young, "precious." It is great fun to ask her questions again and again, to speak to her, to teach her. We are patient and encouraging.

I try to mask my impatience with my mother but that is not the same as being patient. Not at all. And I am discouraged by all her losses and lacks.

I sit with my mother and think of Thérèse of Lisieux and her "Little Way of Love," and I wonder if she was joking. "Jesus has no need of our works," Thérèse writes, "but only of our love." But love, when it is the care of an elderly woman, *is* "works." It looks and feels a lot like housework, with all of housework's attendant perks, pay and privileges.

The "little way" is long and hard, like digging a foundation with a teaspoon. It is not little. It is steep, and I know I have not touched the bottom. Indeed, I have no idea how far down I will have to dig before I can begin to climb up, and out.

My mother is losing her words, a name, a phrase at a time. "Oh, you know what I'm talkin' about," she'll say. Or, "What's the word for that?" Or, "What am I tryin' to say?"

My mother is losing her words. She is losing her name. She, who named the world for me, is increasingly a stranger there.

Lucy is learning words: *mama, papa, dog, hat, baby, cat*. If we agree to use "dog" or "baby" as verbs, rather than nouns, she has a whole sentence, perhaps a complete paragraph, at her command.

We are naming the world for her and she is exploring it with confidence and joy.

I cannot be with Thérèse just now. The adjective "little" mocks me.

I turn, instead, to a poem I recited to my own children when they were babies. It is a poem I recite to my grandchildren. It is a prayer, and now it is a prayer for my mother as well.

Dear Father, hear and bless,
Thy beasts and singing birds.
And guard with tenderness,
Small things that have no words.

[Melissa Nussbaum is coauthor, with Jana Bennett, of *Free to Stay, Free to Leave: Fruits of the Spirit and Church Choice*.]

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