

Essay/Personal Reflection

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Author for correspondence:

Allan Kellehear,
Department of Nursing,
University of Vermont College of Nursing
and Health Sciences, Burlington,
VT 05405, USA.
E-mail: allan.kellehear@uvm.edu

My mother and I seldom touched each other. It was not for want of mutual care or empathy. Rather, it was a Japanese thing. My mother was very traditional in her ways despite migrating from Japan to Australia in her early years and giving birth to me, her mixed-race child. When I left for school each day we bid our farewells verbally — no embrace, no kiss, not even a hand-shake. When I returned from school each day, we enjoyed the same routine except that sometimes she would press a warm, hand-made rice ball into my hands as I breezed through her kitchen. This hands-off childhood was eventually adapted to fit a more Western lifestyle with others. I learned to handshake but was rarely comfortable with an embrace. Mostly, I would stand there like a dead tree against anyone who imposed a hug on me.

After graduation, I worked in palliative care. Many dying people would reach for my hand and I learned to squeeze the return. The bereaved — family members of patients, or colleagues with involvement with those people — would sometimes throw their arms around me for support and I would commiserate in kind. But my daily life in palliative care was left at the door when I went to see mother. I looked forward to the rice ball instead. Some years ago, after my mother's dementia had worsened, she entered a care home. At the time, I was working 9,000 miles away in England. I visited her every year and when she turned 93 the care home phoned me to say that mum had suddenly become comatose, after a bout of pneumonia. She was not expected to live more than a few days. I jumped on the next plane to Oz. By the time I arrived, she had roused and was weakly responsive. But I knew time was short.

This would be the last time we would spend time together. Remarkably, we had one day when she was like her old self, and we flipped through old photos and stories and joked and laughed as we had always done. That was a lovely day for us. But the time came when I had to return to my work and there was — as is often the case for those in advanced age — no way of telling how long this stay in decline would last. In my few remaining minutes with her, I realized I didn't know what to do or say. Any insights I might have from my many years in palliative care went AWOL. It also suddenly dawned upon me that I had never encountered a Japanese person as patient or research participant, or in any case, that my mother had never been *my* patient or research participant. But now here we were, at this final time, and not a rice ball within reach.

I leaned into the small body on the bed before me, and while hugging her tightly I kissed her forehead, finally resting my head against her own. "Good-bye ma", I said, as she raised her arms and rested her hands on my shoulders. We looked at each other silently for a moment, and then I rose and left. It's not clear to me how or why I departed from a lifetime arrangement of mutual, touchless love at that very last minute. This was especially mysterious since my mother and I, like many migrant families, had perfected the divided life between public and private rules of conduct. I didn't know what mother would make of it, and neither her eyes nor her polite reciprocal embrace during my departure gave any sure indication. She died a month later.

Work and family quickly repossessed the time and tide of my life and a year soon passed. One morning, while waking from my night's sleep, I had a last dream. Everything became startlingly bright, like someone had suddenly drawn the curtains to let sunshine flood across my face. In the seconds before I could wake, I found myself in a cavernous but elegant, white room. Inside that room was a long table with a woman sitting at the end of it with her back to me. As she turned to face me, I saw that it was mother. Her demeanor lit up and she looked at me with an uncharacteristic air of extroversion, surprise, and delight. I was equally surprised, even taken aback by this unexpected and realistic feel of events. She was about to come towards me, but then inexplicably I awoke. If I am not mistaken, I think she was about to embrace me.

I often wonder if I was right in that impression. Was it a clue perhaps, or was it wishful thinking? I'm not sure that we will ever have a way to decide. Perhaps *more* importantly, an answer to this question would make little difference to the impression it made in my heart. For in that space, I can tell you how cherished the interaction became to me. The experience of the encounter itself seemed to be embracing, closing a circle of memories in the creation of this final one. In that recollection, mum remained a connection to me in the style and consistency that characterized our relationship in life — a loving dream that embraced without touching. This was a deeply familiar message to me, stitching those precious few moments into the longer life we had enjoyed. In this persistent thread that ran through our life together, that simple dream became a final and enduring memory of the last time I saw mother.