

I hold your feet in my hands

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Bernie's 85-year-old feet spent a youth sweating through hockey skates as a competitive young athlete in the Prairies. After a sudden stroke, I gave one final massage to a stilled left foot and a right foot with a little spunk yet remaining. Bernie smiled a last crooked smile as my sister-in-law and I quietly sang *Won't you Come Home, Bill Bailey* to her while I rubbed her feet.

Rather than visit family or friends in hospital with scented flowers in hand, I usually bring along a bottle of lotion and the offer of a foot-rub. After my 60-year-old big brother had heart surgery and lay unconscious in a hospital bed, I rubbed his feet. The simple act comforted me while I was afraid that he might die. It gave me something to do, as I felt helpless.

"You don't have to finish your dinner," I told my eight-year-old niece, "but if you decide not to, there will be no foot-rub before bed tonight." She ate. Foot rubs are a good behaviour-modification tool for tired and cranky kids.

I have always been the family foot-rubber.

A few years ago I signed up for a foot reflexology certification course offered by the Reflexology Association of Canada. I use the skill for family and friends and as a volunteer on the Victoria Hospice Unit. One afternoon a week, I give foot-rubs to terminally ill patients and their family members who sit in vigil.

The hospice environment culture-shocked me after spending almost 25 years in offices working mostly as a systems analyst and program manager for the provincial government.

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I step into a room and ask a woman if she wants a foot rub.

(Unless someone at the hospice asks, I don't bother explaining the theory behind reflexology. Most of us know the relaxing value of having our feet rubbed.)

She nods yes. I place my little black carrying chair by the bed, and pull out the witch hazel, cotton pads and unscented lotion. I smile and lightly remind her that I have no sense of smell and am well-suited to the job. I lift the blankets of her hospice bed and look at her slightly turned-in and wilting feet. I can see clearly that these feet will never walk again. The chart says the thin, pale woman is in her 50s. She has a mane of dark hair and I think she must have been quite beautiful when she was younger.

"I haven't always been like this," she whispers, embarrassed by her physical decline. "I know," I nod and look into her eyes and then continue my work. I lift her cool foot and hold it in my warm hands. Mauve toenails are the work of her sister, who has sat by the bedside every day for three weeks, far away from her own family life in England.

I listen, and learn that the feet in my hands have travelled far and carried an accomplished fashion designer, artist, and mother of two beautiful children.

Volunteering as a reflexologist offers a chance to share some respectful intimacy with strangers without being invasive. Being with each new patient and family is like having a small role in a captivating play. The end-of-life ambience is ironically life-affirming, as bullshit is rare at this stage of the game.

Rubbing the feet of people who are dying is teaching me to listen carefully. People speak truths when their feet are being rubbed. I imagine if I were a judge and could give George Bush a community sentence for his role in creating war, I would make him rub the feet of a thousand Iraqi children. I wonder if he could then learn to listen.

Even my teenaged nephew knows that, if he keeps talking, I will keep massaging the 7,000 nerve endings in his feet. I listen while he informs his old aunt about life as a Canadian teenager in 2006.

Through their feet, I have come to hear rich details about the life of a Vancouver Island farmer, a horticulturalist, a psychology professor, a musician, a civil servant who had just

retired, and a beautiful young man of 14 who really liked Harry Potter . . . and a couple of hundred other people, all in the last days of their lives.

Patients' family members are sometimes reluctant to receive a foot-rub. "I'm okay," they say. Or: "I would feel guilty with Dad lying here so ill."

"It will be good for your Dad to sense that you are relaxed," I encourage the tired relatives. I can usually get them to agree.

So many people tell me they are embarrassed and apologize for their feet. "Please excuse the horrible bunions," they say. "My feet are a mess."

"I have always hated my feet; they're so ugly."

I hear these comments all the time.

From where I sit, feet are feet and aside from a few webbed toes, they all look pretty much alike. Considering they support our bodies throughout our lives and are our two points of contact with the Earth, our hard-working feet are often under-appreciated.

Feet aren't ugly.

Thelma Fayle lives in Victoria, B.C., and is the 2006 recipient of the Reflexology of Canada Association's Ollie Bailey Award for her volunteer work.