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## UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

I walk through the entry to the Nursing Home and look around for the little lady I have been visiting for some 18 months.



Each week we sit together and I take her back to the days when she was young – a teenager, a bride, a young mother, her cooking expertise, and I can see her memory slowly forming the pictures in her mind of happier days when the whole world was there for her to take in her hands and use. But now she holds *my* hand and touches my face. If the weather is pleasant we can go for a short walk outdoors to look at and feel the texture of leaves on shrubs and touch the petals of flowers.

Now she is deteriorating, and the memories of youth have faded. She welcomes me with a smile but does not remember my name and as we sit together, she reaches for my hand, gazes at me continually and tells me she loves me, but cannot say anything else. She nurses a doll and constantly touches and cuddles it in her arms, the mothering instinct still being there, unbeknown to her. She cannot walk now. We cannot go outdoors to the beautiful garden, so I draw her eyes to the colours outside and speak of what I see.

Touch is so important to her. All humans need the touch of fellow travellers through this life and she is no exception: to brush the hair back from her forehead; to gently touch her face when she becomes distressed – probably with a fleeting elusive flash of memory that is gone before she can comprehend what it was; to simply hold hands and look into each other's face and be close for a short time. All these add up to answering the need to be lovingly touched, hugged, and reassured that where she is now in her stage of life, is right for her.

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When time comes for me to leave, she becomes upset, and holds both my hands and raises them to her lips. This simple loving gesture is so touching, and makes it hard to leave her, but by my directing her eyes back to her 'baby', I gently free my hands so she can pick up the doll from her lap and cradle it in her arms. This brings her comfort. I know that by the time I reach the door she will have forgotten I was ever there; but that is not important.

The time together and the beautiful moving gesture to me, creates a feeling that is indescribable. No matter how old, no matter what state of health we are in, no matter if we cannot communicate by speech, a sincere smile and touch means so much to my friend. I drive home, dwelling on these things and on the special moment of love given to me. I had gone just to be with her for a while, but she, with her debilitating illness and state of detachment from this world, has given me so much more in return. How blessed I am.

**Jan Lepherd**

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