

Being Present

AnDrea Hayes on the gift of presence to each other and God's presence to us.



Life moves in cycles we rarely notice while we are living them. Children grow almost overnight. Parents age in ways we never quite expect. Somehow we find ourselves standing between beginnings and endings at the very same time. Birthdays have a way of sharpening that awareness. They invite us to look back with gratitude and forward with hope. They remind us that life keeps moving, even when we wish it would slow down. This birthday began with an early

morning phone call from Beaumont Hospital, just as my husband and children gathered around me with handmade cards, birthday hugs and the kind of love that asks for nothing except your presence. The call was to tell me that my mam, Marie, who is living with Lewy body dementia and metastatic cancer, had suffered another fall overnight while in the hospital. For a moment, I felt that familiar tightening in my chest. The quiet collision between fear and re-

sponsibility. Between wanting to fall apart and needing to stay steady. Yet there I was, standing in my kitchen with little arms wrapped around me and children smiling up at me. Life was asking me to be present to what was right in front of me.

So I took a breath, held back the tears, finished the phone call and received those birthday hugs with gratitude. After the school run, I made the familiar journey to the hospital. Mam has now spent almost six weeks there. Between sisters travelling from the UK and the rhythm of our own family lives, one of us has managed to sit beside her every single day. Love, even when it is tired, keeps showing up.

As someone who has spent my own fair share of time as a patient in hospitals, I know being in the environment has a way of stripping life back to what really matters. Sitting beside Mam's bed, listening to the sounds of nurses in the corridor and watching the morning light fall gently across her bed, I found myself paying attention in a different way. Today, on my birthday, I was holding the hand of the woman who first held mine. I watched her sleep. I reassured her when she woke confused. I reminded her that she was safe, loved and not alone. It struck me that accompanying someone through suffering is one of the quietest and most profound expressions of love we can offer another person.

So much of life pulls us away from moments like these. We hurry from one thing to the next. We reach for our phones without thinking. We convince ourselves that life will begin properly when work settles down,

The Camino Companions are made up of spiritual guides and directors, or counsellors who understand the notion of 'holding space' and the importance of 'active listening'.

when the children are older, when things become easier. But life is only ever present in the here and now. Our tomorrow isn't certain. It is here in hospital rooms or in cups of coffee gone cold. In difficult phone calls. In birthday hugs. In sitting quietly beside someone you love. It is in our pain. Watching a parent become vulnerable is one of life's hardest experiences. Dementia, especially, teaches families to grieve slowly. It asks us to let go in small pieces, long before we are ready. Yet somewhere beneath the sadness I have discovered something unexpected.

St Ignatius invites us to notice where God is present in the ordinary moments of our lives. Sitting beside Mam, I realised that God's presence is often found not in having answers but in staying close. In paying attention. In choosing not to look away. Perhaps that is the invitation for all of us. Not to have perfect faith, but to become more attentive to the people and moments entrusted to us each day. If there is one gift this birthday has given me, it is this. Do not wait for a different life before you begin paying attention. Tell people you love them. Sit a little longer. Make that visit or make that call. Notice the sunlight. Stay present and grateful, even when your heart is breaking.