Blood [of my blood]

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I’d like to read a poem by June Jordan as an opening prayer:

These poems  
they are things that I do  
in the dark  
reaching for you  
whoever you are  
and  
are you ready?

These words  
they are stones in the water  
running away

These skeletal lines  
they are desperate arms for my longing and love.

I am a stranger  
learning to worship the strangers  
around me

**whoever you are**  
**whoever I may become.**

My friend Eric once said, while getting his blood drawn at the doctor’s office, “Oh good! I’m still alive!”

I tell the chatty phlebotomist this because I feel tired, and like I don’t have much to talk about today.

I work as a caregiver in an intentional community called L’Arche, which many of you may be familiar with. In my role, I support eight of my friends with disabilities who live at our homes in Arlington, Virginia. I also support the assistants who do this work alongside me. It’s beautiful work, and worth it, and sometimes hard, because that is what bodies are. Beautiful, and worth it, and sometimes, hard.

I am here, at the Red Cross blood donation center in Fairfax, because eight weeks ago I gave blood and made this appointment. And today, I will make another appointment for eight weeks from now, when the nice high school volunteer comes over with the iPad as I try not to feel woozy at the snack table.

The other “because,” is my dear friend Anna, and her husband, Brandon. Brandon is twenty-seven and has leukemia. He entered hospice care at the beginning of July, and will die of leukemia, likely not very long from now. Even just saying that out loud hurts, feels like a punch to the gut, or like a squeeze to the heart. I’d really love if we could pause here, for a moment, and hold space for the two of them for a moment in silence.

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After a harrowing and devastating year, Anna is so tired, and so scared. And she’s in Michigan, which means most of the time, I can’t bring her any soup. All I want to do is bring my tired and scared friends some soup! Instead, I talk to her when I’m waiting in the plastic chairs at the Red Cross.

On this day she says, “Thank you for donating,” as if I could ship my blood directly to Brandon. As if that would help. After we talk, I take a moment to pray, my prayers sounding like they mostly do these days. Nothing coherent or profound, just me closing my eyes at the table with my friends in L’Arche or at a red light or in the shower or in my bed at three a.m. and saying “Please, please, please, please, please.”

But a wise teacher once told me to pray with my feet, and what I think she meant was that sometimes it helps to pray by doing instead of praying by saying. Like how it feels good to yank up invasive plants when you feel scared about climate change, because at least you’re *doing* something with your body. There were many years when I couldn’t give blood because of recent surgeries or travel. There are many people, many of whom I love, who are excluded from giving blood because of how they have sex. Or because of a pre-existing condition. Or because they were in England in the 80’s and might have Mad Cow Disease. (That one’s my mom.) I may have started giving because of one person, but now it just makes sense. I can, so I should.

It’s also true that the world taught me, taught many of us who live with marginalities of gender or race or disability, that our bodies are only good or useful when they are doing something for other people. The narrative of “your body is only good when it’s doing things for other people” makes me feel really, really bad when my body can’t do things for other people. Which it can’t, sometimes.

And also, it reminds me of the truth: that all bodies are good bodies. The bodies that give blood and the bodies that need blood and the bodies who can’t give blood and the bodies who just don’t.

“This is flesh I’m talking about here,” Baby Suggs, Holy, says. “Flesh that needs to be loved.”

But why? Why love our flesh? Mine or yours?

Could it be because the divine goodness of our universe loved it first?

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written  
all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed.

Our bodies could have been made only to be machines, little vessels carrying our very important souls around. They could have been perfect, and efficient, and even immortal. But God tells us that she made our bodies in her image, knit them together in the depths of the earth, in the dark, dark insides of other bodies. Why?

Could it have been an act of love? The first one we ever receive? The divine goodness of the universe gifting us these good, good bodies. These bodies that grow and decay, these bodies that breathe and cry, that laugh and dance, that hum with life…until they don’t, anymore.

Ursula K Le Guin says that “god is change,” and today, in this moment, I believe that’s true, because the surest I’ve ever been of the presence of the divine has been in the presence of bodies. Mine, others. “Wonderful are your works; that I know very well,” the psalmist writes. And bodies are nothing but change.

Giving blood helps me remember how each of our bodies may go from giving to receiving help in the blink of an eye. How we are all only here because of the care we have received from other bodies, are receiving from other bodies. How we will all need help from other bodies one day if we don’t already. I revisit this thought when I try not to think about the way the needle feels going into my arm, or other times, when care work looks like cleaning up a body fluid, or entering a scary doctor’s appointment alongside my friend, or giving hard feedback or giving a life-saving medication, or holding space for someone to feel a feeling that feels bigger than our bodies can hold. Or even holding space for someone to transition from this life to the next one, as impossible and inevitable as that is.

“One day, someone will take care of me this way, and it will keep me alive,” I think, and it matters.

And what a gift, that my body can turn lasagna or lentils or homemade from-the-box brownies into red blood cells, that the lasagna and lentils and homemade from-the-box brownies I ate eight weeks ago became something that can keep someone alive long enough to eat something delicious, to smile at themselves in the mirror, to hear a song they love when they are least expecting it. To caress their cheeks and dance, twisted hip or broken heart and all.

It feels like a spiritual practice to me because it means doing one of the things my body can do, right now, today, with these specific cells that she has made and that are constantly dying and being reborn, again and again. It means humbling myself to the reality that I am made of matter, just like every body, just like every thing.

It means having hope that this world that flays bodies, that breaks bodies, that imprisons them in systems of violence, that treats bodies like things and not like people, that this world, the one that holds all of our bodies, could be a little bit better. Hope that we in this room can learn that we have *got* to love our bodies because even if the violence of our systems has taught us that they aren’t worthy of love, our bodies have taught us that they are. That *we* are.

My spinal fusion surgery, eight years ago this weekend, was planned a long time in advance. So about two months before, I went to the Red Cross in my hometown where I’d once done babysitting training, and I gave a directed donation. To myself. The doctors and nurses gave my blood back to me while I was in surgery.

“Love your flesh,” Baby Suggs Holy said. “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me” the psalmist sings.

I wonder if the little blood cells looked at each other and thought, “Oh, there you are. We missed you.” My body took care of my body, kept her alive. She does that every day, keeps herself alive, keeps other people alive, but I forget, sometimes. That story helps me remember.

They also gave me my sister’s blood, and yes, sure, we were already biologically related, and red blood cells don’t live that long, but it makes me glad to know that a little piece of her is flowing through me. That those little blood cells maybe recognized their own kin, blood of their own blood. She would give anything to keep me alive, because she is my big sister and she loves me. To be loved that way is a gift.

A stranger also donated blood for me. (My dad has a different blood type. My mom has the same, but, remember? Mad Cow Disease.) I won’t ever know their name, but they gave me the same gift my sister did, and the same gift I gave myself, and the same gift I see all of us giving each other, all the time, in so many different acts of care.

Those red blood cells must have found their kin, too, because how could we be strangers if your blood flows through my very veins? If your blood can be something that saves my life? Or mine yours? I hope that that almost-stranger got to rest the day after they did something that kept me alive. I hope someone brought them something sugary and delicious.

I hope they know I try not to take their gift for granted.

Because it is a gift, one we can give each other, for free. An act of care that is just one of many, because if I had to name all the people who had kept me alive, who I owe this life to, I’d have to start at the minute I was born, and I would probably spend the rest of my life trying to thank each one of them. I’d get lost trying to remember every teacher and doctor and nurse and caregiver and friend and family member and chosen family member, every school bus driver and crossing guard and maintenance worker and kind stranger. Every person who ever had a hand in the growth of every food on every plate and all the people who’ve stitched together the clothes that have kept me warm or put up all the power lines and water pipes in every place I’ve ever lived and that’s not even the half of it.

This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. And oh, how it has been loved, in so many ways that I can never comprehend. Or rather, that I can only comprehend when I love this body, too, when my love spills out into love for your body, too. Blood of my blood.

This body, with her wimpy veins and bone marrow that is making new cells *right now,* this body with her love and sorrow for her friends, with her hands that can care for the people she loves,this body who can give away a pint of blood every eight weeks, who can be split open at seventeen and *survive,* this body gets to go on the list of people who have kept people alive, in more ways than one.

And so does yours. I know some of the names of the life savers, the life givers, the people who have lived us into living and loved us into loving — you probably do too. We get to love some of them and be loved in return. But it is a little magical, and a little wonderful, and a little incomprehensible that some of the people who are here because we were here, perhaps most of them, we’ll never know. Nor will we know most of the people who have made a world possible for us.

It’s almost like what God has done by giving us these good, loving, dying bodies is teach us that the strangers around us are holy, are worthy of our worship, even though we may never know them, because we are bodies on the same earth at the same time, and that makes us kin to one another. That makes us belong to one another.

It’s almost like what God has done by giving us these imperfect, beautiful, holy bodies is to teach us to remember that we’re flesh and we’re kin, to caress one another’s deeply loved flesh until the all the bodies around us know their flesh to be deeply loved, until the world we create is one where we can encounter one another and ever so fondly say, “Look. We’re keeping each other alive.”