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Dear Colleague:

Who will attend to "that dread level of nothing but life itself"? Women used to. Hugh Macdiarmid's poem "Two Parents" conveys the idea.

I love my little son, and yet when he was ill
I could not confine myself to his bedside.
I was impatient of his squalid little needs,
His laboured breathing and the fretful way he cried
And longed for my wide range of interest again,
Whereas his mother sank without another care
To that dread level of nothing but life itself
And stayed day and night, till he was better, there.

Who will be with us in our last hours in the hospital? Very likely not the male doctor, and perhaps not even our own family who have to attend to the business of living, but rather the nurse--a young woman, perhaps still in her teens. She will feel the pulse to make sure that the patient has really died and then pull the curtain around the bed. "I try to straighten them up a bit," Melanie said, "in case the relatives want to see them...And I would lay the patient out. It would be wrong to say that I like this part of the job, but I feel it is a privilege. It is the last thing I can do for that particular patient, and I always feel great reverence while I am doing it... It's a dreadful moment when the porter comes and takes the patient off to the morgue" (A. N. Wilson, "Last Things" in Penfriends from Porlock, p. 276).

Are these pictures out of date? Fathers are now more able to bear with "the squalid needs" of their sick child. And I assume that more and more male nurses now close the eyes of the dead--"lay them out" reverentially.

We are reminded of our common humanity when, in sickness or at the approach of death, our frail bodies are disencumbered of the bubbles of culture that serve to isolate, differentiate and console us so much in life. On the other hand, we may also find our common humanity in the empyrean sphere of the intellectualizing mind, which will be my theme in the next letter.

Best wishes,

