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## Essay/Personal Reflection

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“Sometimes, the most efficacious intervention is the most nonclinical.”  
A refrain of many a wise physician

Robert sits in a hard slant struggling to breathe, as if each breath catches on a rib. He is bone skinny, with a pale face and sunken eyes. His lips are rounded into a grimace.

“Doctor, my right hand won’t work. It’s been like this for three months, ever since they cut a tumor out of my lung. The doctors tell me it’s fine, to forget about it, but it ain’t, and I can’t.” He motions for me to examine his hand. I lean over the bed and have him squeeze my index fingers. He struggles with the right hand; it is noticeably weak. “I can’t do what I used to; it’s making me depressed. I know cancer’s gonna kill me, but sitting around doing nothing makes it worse.”

“What did you do that you can’t do now?”

“Well, I pattered around in the garage working on the lawn mower, or the vacuum cleaner, or whatever my wife needed fixed. I still do those things, it just takes me a lot longer as I can only use my left hand, but there is one thing I can’t do at all anymore. And it means a lot to me.” He opens the drawer on the overbed table and pulls out a yellowed, dog-eared photo. He hands it to me. Six young men dressed in tight suits, thin ties, and Beatle boots surround a drum inscribed The Touchstones.

“Who are these men?” I ask.

“That’s me on the far right. It’s the band I’ve played in for most of my life. It’s a photo from our early years.” A sob rolls up from his belly. “I play — I mean I used to play — piano and organ.”

I glance at his hand, then the photo.

Coda: Lamentably, physicians often slight patient complaints as unimportant, particularly when contrasted to the underlying consequences of a life-threatening disease; yet, these concerns are quality-of-life issues. Robert never played the piano or organ again. I visited five times prior to his death, each time offering an empathic presence. And each time he bemoaned his inability to play the piano or organ. However, Robert knew his hand would not improve; he simply needed a witness to his suffering. My modest presence served as that witness.

**Conflict of interest.** The author has no conflicts of interest.