



“I Love Them Very Much”



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The young girl in Chaim Potok’s novel *Davita’s Harp* is the child of a nonbelieving Jew from Poland and a nonbelieving Christian from Maine. She is thus denied the rich spiritual heritage of both parents. Her father and Jakob Daw, a close family friend in poor health, are correspondents in the thick of the brutality and bloodshed of the Spanish Civil War. Newspapers and newsreels in New York regularly assault Davita’s hypersensitive soul with the horrible images of the war. Deathly afraid for both father and friend, she longs to pray but doesn’t know what to say or to whom to say it. Finally she says simply, “Please protect my father and my Uncle Jakob. Please. Please. My name is Ilana Davita Chandal. Please protect them. I love them very much.”

This is the confession of a secondary sufferer, the sufferer whose agony is born not of her own afflicted body or endangered life, but of the affliction and danger of someone deeply loved. What follows are the confessions of that kind of sufferer. For Ilana Davita Chandal, the primary sufferers were her father and her Uncle Jakob; for me, the primary sufferer was Paul, a twenty-year-old son who battled a terminal cancer for two and a half years.

Because my confessions are responses to what happened, be warned that they may well be more personal than profound, more honest than orthodox. Some of them, I think, are very true; others may be less so. I set them down here, not because they are right or wrong, but because for me they simply are. Perhaps some part of them will also simply be for you.



Confessions About Prayer

From the moment of grim diagnosis and grimmer prognosis, intercessory prayer became a constant companion. In time, stammering petitions were joined by personal appropriations of Jesus' encounters with secondary sufferers. Mark 5:23 became "My son is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on him, so that he may be made well, and live." Matthew 20:30-33 was reduced to "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David! . . . Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David! Lord, let our son be healed."

Within days of diagnosis, Paul's left leg was amputated two-thirds above the knee by specialists of the Mayo Clinic, and with that came an unexpected crisis. In the recovery room, for reasons that remain unknown, his kidneys ceased to function. Accumulating fluids quickly put strain on the heart, and Paul was rushed to the coronary intensive care unit. For twenty-four hours he hovered between life and death without predictable outcome. During those hours the apostle's words to the Romans about prayer and the Spirit took on existential meaning. At times we really do not know how to pray as we ought. Because as long as there is life there is hope, I

thought, ought I to pray that Paul live through this crisis? Or in the face of a future haunted by more surgeries and more suffering, ought I to pray that he be spared all that by a quick and comparatively easy death? I simply did not know, and so took refuge in “sighs too deep for words,” trusting the Spirit to intercede with petitions I could neither find nor frame.

The Spirit prayed. Paul lived. My prayers returned to the feared progress of the deadly cancer. “O God, may the tumor removal have been in time. Let there be no metastasis to the lungs!” Within six months of the amputation, however, metastasis had occurred and demanded scheduling of the first of six lung surgeries over a two-year period. As we settled into a heart-wrenching routine of CAT scans and surgeries in Rochester, Minnesota, of two- and three-week confinements at St. Mary’s Hospital, something began to happen to my prayers. Constant exposure there to so many other primary and secondary sufferers made it increasingly difficult to maintain a feeling of having been singled out in some special way. Recurring membership in the company of waiters outside the intensive care unit, a community that gathered in early morning and parted in late evening, pressed perspective on our anxiety and grief. Every person in the waiting room was a secondary sufferer. Each occupant was linked by love to parent or spouse, daughter or son, brother or sister, and prayed

for their recovery. Was there really any reason for God to heed my prayers more than theirs? Did my lifelong Christian faith, my ordination, my academic degrees merit special attention and action from God? Had I the right to ask God to save my sufferer while theirs wasted away and died? And if God should do that, could any of us stand my joy?

