Columns
Spirituality



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The world needs a hug!

Before you think I've gone all 1960s "flower child," hear me out.

Generally speaking:

- 2022 has had more mass shootings (defined as more than four victims) in the United States than ever before, with some internationally noted being Topps Grocery, Robb Elementary and a July 4th parade. People doing everyday things, shot beyond recognition with military-style assault weapons.
- Russia has invaded Ukraine. Pictures of bombed-out cities and schools are unlike anything I've ever seen before.
- Public hearings are being held about the Jan. 6 insurrection in Washington D.C.
- The reception of Communion has become politicized, with some people being denied even though Pope Francis has asked priests not to do that.
- Coronavirus is still with us and new variants continue to emerge. Now it has been joined by monkeypox.
- The Amazon rainforest has reached a new record for deforestation, glaciers are breaking free and falling away, and the giant sequoias are in the midst of a roaring wildfire.

From a personal standpoint:

- I've completed a challenging teaching year. Students returned to in-person learning and everyone had to learn, or relearn, appropriate interaction and communication skills after two years of remote or hybrid learning.
- I've been trained in Narcan administration. Narcan is used for opioid overdose. It is another piece of my emergency first responder certification, added to first aid, CPR and defibrillator use. God forbid there is an incident somewhere I am, but I'm trained to run toward it instead of away.
- Neighbors and friends I've known for the dozen years I've lived here are moving away or dying. Of the 13 residences on my cul-de-sac, seven have new occupants. I've not yet met everyone.
- My homeroom students have taken to "schooling me" on things they think I should know, including evolving social media and the use of their pronouns. The most recent graduates picked out younger students to carry on what they started; I'm grateful and amused that they care enough to want me to know things.

These lists could go on, and I invite you to create your own. So why do I recommend a hug? I'm not really much of a hugger myself. I don't recoil like some do, but a hug isn't usually my first instinct either.

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Early in 2022, I participated in two online workshops, each one lasting several weeks. Those workshops joined my usual virtual prayer group meetings. All integrated somewhat formal prayer times into the shared online time.

I've gotten used to the online platforms, so praying in front of my computer camera doesn't faze me in the least. I know the "feet on the floor, sit up straight, close your eyes, rest your open hands in your lap" prayer posture. It wasn't working for me; and it took me awhile to figure out what was going on.

During each of those prayer experiences I found myself literally "curling up" and wrapping a blanket around my shoulders. It was totally unconscious and unplanned. I only became aware when someone online asked if I was OK, followed by "What are you doing?" through what they thought was a private chat. (In reality, that chat screen was public!)

I've now noticed myself leaning into the end of the pew in church. I'm not curling up into "Leave me alone, get away" but rather curling up as if being lovingly embraced.

Let's be honest, the world is kind of a scary place right now. So much is unknown and so many people are struggling with a wide range of emotions and mental health issues. There is usually a sense of safety in a hug regardless of whether it's "I'm so happy to see you" or "I'm scared, hold me" or "I don't know what to do." When we hug, our heart rate and breathing changes, we physically connect.

So I find myself coming to prayer in search of a hug — to strengthen me, to give me courage, to reassure me, to keep me grounded. Each time I receive a hug through prayer, I promise to offer a hug to our world that seems to need a hug too.