

James L. Holly, M.D.

A Personal Perspective

By: James L. Holly

As I prepare this column, I am in Boston, Massachusetts attending a small group discussion on the future of medical records and the potential for electronic patient management to improve the quality of patient care, control the cost of that care and increase provider and patient satisfaction with the delivery of health care.

Yesterday, as my wife and I flew into Logan Airport, where two of the three ill-fated flights of September 11, 2001 originated, I realized the truth of what one of my personal heroes said. Jim Elliott was murdered in 1956 by the Auca Indians in Ecuador. He and his four companions were missionaries sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with that "stone aged" tribe in a Central American jungle.

In one of the reports of that tragedy, reported by Life Magazine, the following quote from Jim Elliott appeared; he said, "Make sure that when it comes time to die, all that you have to do is die." The reality is that most of us will be surprised by our death. Death will not come after long preparation, because even when death is the result of a debilitating illness, we will still be surprised by its arrival.

The events of September 11th certainly illustrate painfully and graphically the truth of Jim's maxim. As Carolyn and I fly home on Monday, September 9, 2002, from Logan Airport, I am acutely aware that I will be surprised by my own death when ever it come because I am the eternal optimist, always expecting and anticipating the best for myself, for those whom I love and for those I know.

While science and technology and medicine have come a long way, there are still many things which science, technology and medicine cannot do. They can replace a heart; they can repair a heart; they can treat heart disease, but they cannot heal a broken heart.

Fourteen years after the death of Jim Elliott and his four friends at the Quri River, a remarkable event took place. It was not as widely reported as Jim's death, but it was more significant. Nate Saint was the missionary pilot who flew Jim Elliot and his other three missionaries onto a little sandy beach alongside the Quri River in order to contact the Aucas. Nate Saint was buried in a common grave with three of his companions on that beach. The fifth body was never found.

In 1970, Nate's son was baptized in the Quri River, about 100 feet from his father's grave. He was baptized as a confession of his personal and active faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and as his Savior. While for him that event had tremendous consequences, it was probably not newsworthy and has little bearing on the events of September 11, 2001. But, when you learn that Nate Saint's son was baptized by the man who 14 years before had driven a spear through his father's heart in an act of homicide, the event becomes relevant.

Science, technology, medicine has no answer for that kind of forgiveness and that kind of redemption. Much of the world is driven on the fuel of hate and bitterness. Even much of man's religious experience is so motivated, whether that religious experience is Christian, Islamic, Buddhists or other. Sadly, hate has seemed to have been a much more powerful and resilient motivator of human behavior than love.

Numerous studies -- scientific, valid, reproducible studies -- have demonstrated the positive effects which the act of faith has on one's physical well being. Cynics would argue that that is simply because of a psychological placebo effect. But, those of us who exercise faith every day, realize it is much more than that.

And, while we each would affirm the unique validity of our own personal faith, in a pluralistic society, as social "libertarian" who wish for everyone, in every country, to pursue their faith, or no faith, without the encumbrance of coercion, force, threat or limitations of freedom of religion, expression or assembly, we can celebrate the acts of faith of those with whom we would have theological, philosophical, or religious differences.

Perhaps the greatest sadness to me, beyond the loss of human life and potential, of September 11, 2001, is that that travesty was done in the name of religion. Misguided religion, yes; corruption of religion, absolutely, but nevertheless it was done as an act of faith on the part of fanatics who believed they were serving the cause of their god with that murderous act.

As a Christian, I have no responsibility to "make" you believe as I do. As a Christian, I have no responsibility to "force" you to believe as I do. As a Christian, I have no responsibility to "defend" the Christian faith against attacks or against attempts to destroy it.

As a Christian, I do have a responsibility to love you. And, that does not mean to "feel good about you," or to "like you." It means that I have a responsibility to care about you in such a way that I would expend resources, energy, effort, emotion and time to support you, to help you and to let you know how important you are as a person. It means that I will share your joy, feel your pain and hope for the best for you, working as I can, within my power to see that the best is yours.

As a Christian, I do have a responsibility to live in such a way that others would believe that it is possible that my faith is real both to me personally and subjectively, and that it is real objectively and externally to myself. No matter how often I fail; no matter how often my conduct, my feelings, my personal flaws, come short of that goal, as a Christian that is my responsibility.

As a Christian, I do have a responsibility to tell you that there is no other Name, under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved, other than the Name of Jesus Christ. And, that is not to say that there is something magical about the phonetic construction of this 11-letter name, for the utterance of that Name can be co-opted by those who know nothing of Christ's redemptive power. It is the Person Jesus Christ, Who is One with God, the Father, Who was born of a virgin, Who lived a sinless life, Who died an atoning death, Who was resurrected and Who reigns in the Person of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit -- One God -- as the Redeemer and Judge of mankind, Who is the Savior.

It is my responsibility to love you enough to tell you that truth -- which is what the Apostle Paul meant when he commanded that we "speak the truth in love." Yet, it is my responsibility to love you if you don't accept that truth. It is my responsibility to care about you if you don't accept that truth. And, as a citizen of this world, it is my responsibility to protect your right to teach a belief which would deny the truth that Jesus Christ is God.

Before September 11th, I had been invited to visit Pakistan. There are no people on this earth that I personally love more than my Pakistani colleagues. There is no one I would rather see become Christians than these dear, dear people. Yet, it is not my responsibility to "change their religion." It is my responsibility to love them, to care for them and to tell them, by my life, the truth of what I believe.

When I was planning to go to Pakistan, I repeatedly stated to my contacts in Pakistan, "You know what I will say if I come?" they repeatedly said, "Yes." I repeated, "You know that I will say that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and that Christianity is the true faith. You know that I will ask you to fulfill the principles of your constitution and give the same freedoms to Buddhist, Jews, Hindus, Atheists, Christians and other religions, which we give to Muslims in America, freedoms not only to practice their faith but freedom to propagate their faith." I was pleased that I was told again and again that I would be free to say those things publicly.

As my wife and I fly out of Logan Airport on Monday, I want to be sure that when it comes my time to die that all I have to do is to die, because I am prepared through faith in Christ to face the consequences of death which is eternal judgment and I have told the truth to those I know and love. As we fly out of Logan Airport, I want my children, my grandchildren and through them my great grandchildren and my great, great grandchildren to know that their Grandfather and Grandmother, imperfect humans as they are, confess that Jesus is the Christ, the only Begotten Son of God, the Only Savior of mankind. I want them to know that no religious act or activity, that no system of laws or

ordinances can bring them salvation but only an humble act of the confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ.

And, upon the day when their Grandmother and Grandfather are "surprised by death," I want them to know that we lived richer, fuller lives because of our individual, personal acts of faith in Christ and that that act of faith was expressed in our love for others, even, and especially for those who do not share that confession, and that our act of faith is expressed in our love for our children, our grandchildren, our colleagues, neighbors and friends

The memorial which we will build to those who were surprised by death on September 11th is a memorial of love -- of love for Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Atheists, indeed for all people who we have the privilege of knowing on this earth. And, that love will not be conditioned on our hopes or expectations of their accepting our faith; that love will be conditioned simply on the premise that out of our hearts, filled with Christ's love, flows a genuine, pure love for others.

And, as faith and love brings hope, we build a memorial of the hope that one day, we might hear of another story similar to Nate Saint's. A story where because of the love and redemptive power of Christ, one of the wives of a man who was killed in the Twin Towers would minister to the families of the men who perpetrated that terrible deed, even as Elisabeth Elliott gave her life in service to the people who killed Jim. And, that the day would come when one of the children of a man killed on September 11th would be baptized in the former shadow of those buildings by a relative of one of those who committed that crime.

This is impossible for science, technology or medicine to achieve. It is impossible for the grieving and angry mind of a nation still in mourning to conceive. But, it is the hope of the Gospel. And, it is that hope which allows my wife and me to fearlessly get on a plane at Logan Airport on September 9, 2002 and to come home to a community and to a group of people whom we have the privilege and the honor to love in the Name of Jesus Christ.

Sincerely yours,

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