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Aging Well - Part IV Thanksgiving,

Gratitude and Mental Health

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In a June/July 2003, four-part series entitled, *A Comprehensive Plan for Your Health*, (see www.jameslhollymd.com, *Your Life Your Health*), we discussed seven areas of your life which must be considered for healthy living. They are:

- Your total, daily caloric intake
- The glycemic index and the glycemic load of the foods you eat
- The fats, and particularly the "trans" fat content of the foods you eat
- The nutrient value and particularly the vitamin and mineral content of the food you eat
- Your activity level and your exercise including strengthening, striking (walking, running, etc.) and stretching
- Your mental and emotional health
- Your spiritual well-being

On this Thanksgiving Day, and in the context of aging well, it is appropriate to turn our attention from laboratory tests, pills and science to our mental and emotional health which is inextricably interwoven with our spiritual well-being.

In reality, long life is not a goal in and of itself. The goal has to be a quality of life, a "reason to live," or, as the French say, a *raison d'etre*. It is our purpose for life which gives meaning to our existence at any age. And, it is this purpose which enables us to embrace the reality that "old age is to the uninitiated winter; to the learned, it is harvest."

Thanksgiving! Giving thanks -- expressing gratitude joyfully -- these are the emotions which promote health in our hearts and minds. The enemies of joy, peace and contentment are bitterness, anger and unforgiveness. Aging well, even in the face of physical infirmities, is reflected in the countenance of the joyful person, who is at peace and who is content. Aging well finds us harvesting the seeds which we planted years before. And, the crop which has greatest value is harvested from the fruit of the lives of

those who are important to and intimate with us. The harvest is the fruit of the lives of those in whose lives we have invested and are investing our time, energy and hopes.

Each age has its grace and blessing. The grace and blessing of aging is the discovery that the things which you thought were important -- family, friends, faith -- are. In thanksgiving, we invest value in things through the act of being thankful for them. We esteem that which has enduring value to us. As we age well, we realize that it is not the "toys," "trinkets" and "treasure" which are lasting, but relationships, people and memories are the "stuff" of dreams, hopes and joy.

Perhaps the first imperative for "thanksgiving" among men and women comes from Exodus 20:12 which instructs, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long." In the New Testament, this admonition is repeated often and the Apostle Paul declares in Ephesians 6:2, "Honor your father and your mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth."

If I told you to "take a pill," which couldn't hurt you and which would make you live longer, would you do it? Of course, you would. Because of disappointment, bitterness and unforgiveness, some might say, "It would be a bitter pill to honor my father or mother. You don't know what I lived through." Yet, the promise is real and the potential is there. Honor your father and your mother and you **WILL** live longer and you will live better.

As we explore ways of aging well, both in living longer and in having a purpose for those added years, here is an instruction which we must never ignore -- honor your father and your mother. The concept of honor in both the Hebrew idiom of the Old Testament and in the vocabulary of the New relates to "esteem, reverence, weightiness." "Respect" is a very inadequate substitute for the concept of "honor." The root of the word for honor is the concept of "heaviness."

In a 1997 tribute to my father, I wrote, "I don't remember when I first met my father but I do remember my first impressions of him. He was big, powerful and invincible." That's weightiness which is the foundation of honor. The years taught me that my father was not perfect just as those same years exposed my imperfections as well. Yet, it was in his imperfections that I found the basis for loving my father, for honoring him and for holding him in a significant degree of awe.

My father is aging now and so am I. Interestingly, as my father's powers diminish, my esteem of him grows. As my father's capacities decrease; my honor of him enlarges. It is possible that the only way we can truly honor another human being is to know their frailties and their failings, for it is in the discovery of these that we find their greatest strength and value. You see, I do not honor my father in spite of his shortcomings; in many ways, I honor him because of them. I honor a man who though imperfect lived a life worthy of honor and respect.

Yet, here is the rub. The commandment is not to honor our father and mother, if they are honorable, it is that we honor them because of who they are, not what they are. No matter what your mother or father has done; no matter how you judge that they have failed you, or hurt you, they are by design worthy of your honor and of your respect.

The barrier to emotional and mental health for many is the bitterness, anger and/or unforgiveness which are felt toward an abusive parent. The reason is man's design. The almost universal moral code at the foundation of civilization is the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments instruct us in our relationship with God, the last five our relationship with our fellow man. The transition between God and man, the universal joint which unites the power train of our relationship with God to the advancement of our relationship with other humans, is the commandment; honor your father and your mother.

Honor is an act of the will; it is not at first a feeling. It is a decision. The foundation of that honor is not the acts of our parents, but it is that they are our parents. It is who they are, not what they are.

A number of years ago, a young man was present when I was speaking in another state. In my address, I commented that I was going to Seattle, Washington to speak. He had never traveled and asked my wife if she thought he could go with me. We agreed.

The next week, I was speaking in another city and he traveled with me. As I spoke on the “holiness of God’s people,” I said the first element of holiness is to honor our father and our mother. He became agitated and angry. You see, when he was an infant, his father abandoned him, his brother and his mother. His father “ran off” with their teenage baby sitter. For twenty-seven years, he had never heard from nor seen his father. He had experienced loneliness, bitterness and unforgiveness for the hardships, heartache and hard times of growing up fatherless. His mother had worked three jobs at a time to support his family. He and his brother, growing up unsupervised, had been in and out of trouble. He had married and divorced. All of his hopes and dreams were unfulfilled.

By the end of the day, my young friend had determined to forgive his father and had committed to God and himself that if he ever met his father, he would honor him. Now with a plane ticket to Seattle in his pocket and with a new resolve in his heart concerning his father, he received a telephone call from his mother.

She said, “You will not believe who just walked into the house of your grandmother in Northwest Arkansas: your father.” His father had not seen his own mother in over twenty years and had not seen his own children in twenty-seven. My friend’s mother said, “Do you know where your father lives? Seattle, Washington.” Today, my young friend is the father of two precious boys – just like his father – but he is building a legacy for his children unfettered by bitterness, anger and unforgiveness.

Aging well requires decision and it requires action. However, taking pills, walking and eating right is not the whole story. If you want to live well and long, you must deal with bitter, anger, unforgiveness. You can start by honoring your father and your mother.

This will radically change your relationships with your spouse, your children, your siblings, your friends and associates. You will then live well and you will age well. It is a promise.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health.