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"Medicine For the Mind, Soul and Spirit: Faith"

Your Life -- Your Health

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The relationship between the mind and the body is well known, but not so well understood. Medical science knows that it is possible to "make yourself sick" with worry, anger, bitterness or hate. It is, also, possible to "make yourself well" with forgiveness, joy, thanksgiving and gratitude. One of the loveliest women that I have ever known was bedridden and severely crippled from Rheumatoid Arthritis. Yet, for almost forty years, though virtually incapacitated, she kept a positive outlook, a joyful countenance and had a kind word to say to everyone who visited her.

There have been numerous studies which demonstrate that "people of faith" are healthier, particularly in how they respond to negative events in their lives. This positive influence of faith goes beyond the fatalism which accepts everything as the will of Providence and has more to do with an optimism and a hopefulness about the future. Faith is most beneficial in the mental and physical health of people when faith motivates them to service for others. Few things help a person as selflessly serving others. Few things are as destructive of the human mind as self-centeredness and selfishness.

Except in extreme circumstances, mental health is a choice each person makes each day. Few things reflect our values as much as the choices which we make in regard to what we are going to allow to affect our emotional state. These positive choices are reflected in St. Francis of Assisi's well known prayer:

LORD, make me an instrument of Thy peace; Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light; and

Where there is sadness, joy.

Divine Master,

Grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

As we celebrate a day of thanksgiving, we can make a choice about our past and our future. We can be a part of the solution to our future or we can perpetuate the problems of our past.

One of the things which I have observed in children through the years in a clinical setting is the incredible filter children have for what happens to them. I have seen children who are abused remain deeply committed to their abusive parents. I have seen children who have great sadness focus on occasional happiness. While this can be attributed to a "denial" mechanism, which we all employ from time to time in order to ignore the unthinkable, it is really more than that.

We are all flawed individuals. There was only One Who was and is Perfect Who lived on this earth. But, the miracle of the human condition is that at the core of our human hearts is a huge capacity for forgiveness and even for forgetting abuses or offenses. Unless we make an effort to the contrary, amazingly, when our mind retraces the images of our youth, it selectively stops on experiences which are positive. Oh, there is no doubt that the bad can be dredged up. It is possible to recall negative experiences, but the "default" position to which my mind automatically goes is to the good. That is one of the miracles of the human mind. That is one of the miracles of how God created us.

Beside forgiveness and a choice to do good for others, the greatest motivator of mental health for others is "gratitude." Recently, my brother sent me a picture of my father's hands. These hands protected us, provided for us, punished us, and petted us. They saddled horses, loaded shotguns, paddled boats, fixed windows, cooked fish and held us when we were hurt. When my brother had appendicitis -- I was glad they didn't treat me the way they did when he had tonsillitis; he got sick and they took my tonsils out -- those hands carried my brother from the hallway where he collapsed to the bed, and then to the car to the doctor. Those hands bought little Golden Books for us and labored to support us.

I love those hands, yet, as I reflect on the Psalmist's confession, "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek," (Psalm 27:8) I realized that these hands are only an extension of the face of the powerful man who is our father. And, that sun-burnt face is only a reflection of the character of the man who is known as Billy Holly.

The Psalmist also said, "Behold, as the eyes of the servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that He have mercy upon us." (Psalm 123:2) To please the master, the servant watched attentively so as to anticipate the desire of the one who he/she served. In some ways, but not in as many as I would have liked, we were like that with our father, wanting to please him.

My brother's picture has made "hands" much more meaningful to me. At this thanksgiving season, we have so much to be thankful for. As we forgive those who have hurt us, as we serve those who need us, and as we are thankful to those who have blessed us, we take the best medicine which we can. We take tablets of faith, as manifested in these "acts of faith" -- forgiveness, service, thanksgiving.