

James L. Holly, M.D.

Metaphors for your Life

By James L. Holly, MD

Your Life Your Health

The Examiner

November 20, 2008

As I have continued my sabbatical, I have spent time reading through the Bible in a month, renewing my exercise program, and for the first time since having West Nile Virus in July, 2006, returning to the level of physical conditioning which I had at that time, reading, thinking about how to improve the care patients receive at SETMA, planning how to expand the services we provide at SETMA and revisiting significant and potentially sentinel moments in my life.

Nothing defines us as human more than our consciousness of the past, the present and the future, and nothing contributes more to our mental health than when there is continuity, consistency, and certainly a connectedness between these three aspects of our life. As I have thought about the present and the future, I have inextricably been led to think about the past. In doing so, I have remembered events which should have suggested to me what to expect in the future but which when remembered during this time of reflection certainly serve as “metaphors” of what my life has been like.

Rocking the Boat and “I am in trouble”

As a second born child, one of my greatest needs in life emotionally was the approval of those whom I loved and respected, yet, even with this strong motivation, I have also had a strong desire to change things, which has led me to accept the disapproval of others in order to effect change. During my sabbatical, my wife and I visited my father’s grave site. I have done that often since his death three years ago. It is a sort of “touch stone” for my life, as he defined who I am more than any other person. After leaving his grave, we drove to Little River.

My earliest ‘real memories’ of my childhood surrounded our living in Central Louisiana in Pineville, on Holly-Moore Road, and at Camp Livingston, before moving to Natchitoches in 1949. Early in my life, my mother, father, brother and I spent a great deal of time with my father’s parents, even for a short time living with them. My grandmother’s mother lived with us also and in her latter years was in a wheelchair. Part myth, part memory was an incident in which I had disappointed my grandmother, whom I adored. I was about three years old. She was in the process of disciplining me when I fled to my great grandmother, jumped on the back of her wheelchair and declared, “I’m in trouble; roll Mamma, roll!” Unfortunately, as was always the case in my life, I did not escape the consequences of my bad choices.

As Carolyn and I drove to Little River last week, I retold the story which is probably the most significant metaphor for my life. Due to limited financial resources, our recreation and entertainment were the things which were free and close. One of them was fishing. We did a lot of that as a family. When I was four and a half, we went fishing on Little

River. We were in a boat which had three seats. My older brother, my mother and my father sat on the seats and I sat in the bottom of the boat. With time on my hands, I did what any healthy, four and a half year old would, I rocked the boat.

This created some degree of discomfort in my brother and mother, and amusement in my father. Both reactions were a stimulus to continue, which I did. Through the years, for better or for worse, I would have this same effect upon others. As we drove down the dirt road along Little River, I replayed this even over and over in my mind.

Listening and learning

Christmas gifts can simply be for fun and be soon forgotten, or they can reflect the values of the giver and the importance of the recipient to the giver, while teaching a lesson. When I was in the first grade at Tioga, Louisiana, the school bus only brought my brother and me to within three miles of our home. Everyday, my mother picked us up to take us home. I wish I could say that I walked those three miles, in the snow, bare-footed, up-hill, both ways, but “unfortunately” I had a mother who was there every day I came home from school from the first grade through the twelfth.

I remember Christmas of 1949, but I only remember one thing about it. When mother picked us up the day Christmas vacation started, she said we had a surprise at home; our family’s Christmas present had been delivered early. As only a six-year old could, I exclaimed, “I’ll tear the house down to find it.” My mother was a serious person and let me know quickly that such behavior would not be tolerated.

Part of our excitement was that, until this Christmas, presents were small and few. We didn’t know we were poor, but we were. Now, however, the post-World War II boom was well established, it had reached central Louisiana, my father had a good job and Christmas was going to be bright. We couldn’t wait to get home.

When we arrived, deep in the woods of Camp Livingston, where we lived in a two-bedroom, power-company house, which we shared with another family, my brother and I raced into the house. There in the living room sat the most beautiful piece of furniture, which we had ever seen; and, it talked. It was a large radio in a beautiful wooden cabinet.

No one had a television, a circumstance which I would now count a blessing, so this radio became the center of our entertainment, amusement and education from the outside world. As I look back, I realized that in purchasing this particular gift my father was making a statement about what was important to him and to his family. This gift opened up an entire new world to a country child, who knew so little of the city that crowds of a few hundred were frightening. This gift taught me to love music, news and learning. It taught us to laugh and to listen. It taught us that laughing was not fun, unless it was shared with those whom you love.

Creativity and Survival

I started first grade in September, 1949, but did not turn six years old until November. I was slow in learning for two reasons. One, I had a learning disability which was never discovered but which became less and less of a problem the older I got. Two, I could not see. It was a year later, in the second grade in Natchitoches, Louisiana, that I finally told the teacher, when asked to read something on the blackboard, that I could not see the blackboard; it was a blur.

In the first grade, I found a creative alternative to not being able to see, spell or add. I copied the paper of the boy sitting next to me. Morally, this was not cheating because my motive was not to deceive but simply to survive. And, it worked. When I got glasses I could see, and as I got older, I learned to read and to count. When I graduated from high school at seventeen, I had a mixed academic record but then things got better. Having made a D in high school chemistry, I was inadvertently placed in an advanced freshman chemistry class at Texas A&M.

Half way through the second semester, the professor called me in and said, "Larry, we have a problem. You are not qualified to be in this class but you have the highest grade in the class. Can you explain that?" I told him that I was surprised when I was put in the class but that after the previous summer things which had not made sense to me suddenly were clear. We were both surprised.

Hard Work

When I was ten, I attended summer 4-H camp at Camp Grant Walker. I was given the award for Outstanding Camper. There was no mystery why this happened. On the first day, we were given a sheet of paper which had many different activities listed for which we would be given points. The camper with the most points won. The activities were all service and work related. I was "outstanding" only because I worked harder than anyone else and did the things which no one else wanted to do.

Never Give Up

When I was fourteen, I was invited by our 4-H leader to go to the Alexandria Rodeo and enter the "calf scramble." For the "city fellars" that's where a bunch of calves, in this case Brahma calves which weighed 150-200 pounds, were turned loose in an arena on one end and a group of boys who weighed 75-100 pounds were turned loose on the other. The object was for the boys to catch a calf, put a halter it and "lead" him/her over a finish line. The winner of the final would win a registered Angus heifer calf.

There were four preliminary events and the winners and runners up would be in the finals on Saturday night. Also, each night a sportsmanship award was given to the "sucker", I mean kid who tried the hardest but who was not a winner. The winner of this award was also invited to the final.

My group participated on Wednesday night in the preliminaries. When the gun went off, I ran down to the calves which were group up. Because I was faster than the other boys, I was the first to catch a calf. Unfortunately, I didn't catch "a calf," I caught two, one with each arm. It took a while to figure out how to let one go without losing both. Once I did that, I realized a dreadful fact. I had never put a halter on a calf in my life and part of my learning disability was spatial relationships. Struggle as I might, I never got that halter on that calf, but I also never stopped trying.

When I became conscious of others, I heard the ring master announcing the two winners. I then heard him say, "And, right down here we have a young feller who has never gotten his halter on his calf but he never gave up; he's our sportsmanship winner tonight." I realized then that everyone was laughing at me.

Before Saturday night, I learned how to put a halter on a calf. Again, I out ran all of the other participants and caught ONE calf while they were bunched up. I got the halter on quickly and then only had the problem of getting this 150 pound calf across the finish line when I weighed 90 pounds soaking wet. Fortunately, just as I got the halter on, the calf decided to leave those parts and headed for the other end of the arena. I held on for dear life and was again shocked to hear the announcer say, "And, we have our winner." It was me. The calf had dragged me across the finish line in his journey to the other end of the arena. I learned never to give up.

Problem Solving

Having finished college, Carolyn (my wife of 44 years) and I were scheduled to get married on August 7, 1965. I was working in the oil field six days a week and could only see her on Sundays, but she lived 170 miles away and I did not have a car. One Sunday morning, I determined to go see her but knew I had to hitchhike there and back in one day. I knew that was going to be hard but thought of a creative solution.

Early in the morning, before sunrise, I walked from my parent's home on Cane River Road, down the "lateral" – a one mile road which connected Cane River Road to Highway 1 which was called "the 'latral'" – and I stood on the side of the road waiting to catch a ride. I looked up when the first car that roared by at a high rate of speed and screeched to a halt. The driver roared back and stopped in front of me and said, "What in the ___ are you doing?"

I said, "I am going to see my fiancée in Baton Rouge and need a ride." What I didn't tell you was that my gimmick for catching a ride was that I put on a suit with tie and carried an umbrella and a book. As the sun rose, I stood on the side of the road in the sunshine with a clear sky with the umbrella open over my head, reading my book.

He said, "I have to catch a boat in New Orleans in two and a half hours, get in." He roared away and we got to Baton Rouge, well, we got there in less than legal time. I learned that day, that if you really wanted to do something there will always be a way to do it.

We are all a collage of our experiences. Some of them are good and some are not, but even our weaknesses can become strengths and our inabilities do not have to result in failure. As I continue my sabbatical, I am grateful to God and to those who have influenced my life that no matter when my life is over, it will be filled with memories of bad things that turned out good and of good things which turned out better.