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**Shared Memories
By James L. Holly, MD
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“Don’t you think I was there?” I smile as I write this because it is exactly what my wife often says when I tell one of my stories of which she was a part. There are few things which enrich life as do memories which you share with others. One of my disappointments in life has been to discover that try as I might, I cannot give my grandchildren my memories, but I can create a new generation of shared memories with them.

As I look at children pictures of my wife which were taken before we met, I have often wished out loud that we could have known one another as children but then my mother says that that wouldn’t have worked as if she had she would never have married me. As I think of this, I realize that we were almost children, as I count age now. We met as sophomores in college. She was 19 and I was 18 – yes, she is older than me. Ok, it’s only four months and three days, but whose counting?

The Little Green People

My wife and I met in a speech class – I can assure you that if my wife reads this column, she just stopped reading. She knows the story perfectly. She was there which is one of the things which makes the story so dear. Our teacher and I had a love-hate relationship; I loved him and he hated me. One day, I attended class in my usual state of unpreparedness. Seeing me sitting in my chair, well, OK, I was slumping, but I was eighteen, without anything in my hands, he knew that I was unprepared. Our speech required a visual aid, which by its definition means something you can see. As he could not see anything in my possession, he knew, well, I’ve already mentioned that.

In keeping with our relationship, he skipped over the eight people ahead of me, which was the cushion upon the basis of which I procrastinated preparing my speech with a visual aid. When he called my name, I knew it was something or nothing and a nothing was a zero. Quickly deciding to go down fighting rather than surrender, I stood up. As I stood, he sat up in his chair and looked quizzical. I walked to the front of the room casting my eyes about looking for something I could see; remember the “visual aid?” I needed a speech but without a visual aid I was hung. I had to have one and you couldn’t use the blackboard. This was before the innovation of the “green board.” Then I saw it; and, the fact that I saw it meant that it qualified as a visual aid, as it could be seen.

It was a piece of chalk; picking it up and I turned toward the class. The professor had his hand up to say that I could not use the black board, but before he could say anything, I took three

quick steps toward the class – a power move in public address we had been taught – and tossed the chalk into the air. “Ah,” I thought, “I have a visual aid; now all I need is a speech.”

My first words were a question, “What made that chalk hit the floor?” Relief, I now had a speech to go with my visual aid. I said, “You think it was gravity, but it was really the little green people. They live in the air and regularly clean their houses which we misinterpret as gravity.” The class of course could not see them, as I explained, because they didn’t believe in them as I do. I took one from my pocket, invisible to everyone except me, and I talked to him.

I gave a fifteen minute speech and sat down; like me when I walked into the class, the professor was “speech-less”. At the end of the class, the professor would give you your grade. He showed me his grade book. He had assigned my speech an “A-,” but there was a question mark beside it. I asked about the question mark and he responded, “Oh, the speech was excellent, but I want to know when you prepared it?” I shrugged my shoulders and walked away.

Two weeks later, we were assigned an extemporaneous speech. Students stood in front of the class and the teacher gave them a subject. They then had to give a five-minute speech on that subject, right then with no preparation. Of course, I had already done. My subject was “the alarm clock.” Before “-ock” was out of his mouth, I said, “In 1781, John Smith in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania first conceived of the idea of combining an alarming device with a timing device and designed the first alarm....” The professor interrupted and said loudly, “Stop, stop, stop! You know too much about alarm clocks.” I started laughing and he said, “You made all that up didn’t you?” I confessed. He was furious and I was still laughing. He then said, “OK, Mr. Smarter-than-your-pants, give me a speech on the hole in the doughnut.” I did.

School days are great times to develop shared memories. You have many in your life. Tell them to others and build a repertoire which will enrich your life and the lives of others.

Screen Doors

My daughter was a few months old. It was the summer of 1971. We were visiting my wife’s brother and his family. Our daughter was asleep in their house. Their son, who was four, ran into the house and slammed the screen door. I cautioned him to not slam the door because his cousin was sleeping. Without hesitation, our sister-in-law said, “This is his home and he can slam the door if he wants.” Wisely, I agreed and that was the end of that. Over the years, however, that incident became an amusing memory which was an emotional touch point for good between me and our sister-in-law. We often laughed about it.

Tragedy brought us back together when four years ago, that little boy, now a man, died in a motorcycle accident. As we drove to Baton Rouge to the funeral home, my wife said, “Now don’t bring up the screen door.” I agreed. When we walked into the funeral home, the sister-in-law, weeping mournfully, ran to me, hugging me and through the tears sobbed, “Larry, do you remember the screen door.” That experience was a point of reality which reminded us, not of an

awkward moment but of the joy of life and particularly of the joy of the life of that little boy who as a man had died.

So often our dearest memories were created in a moment of crisis or of conflict. As I remember my father, I remember:

1. He often said, “I can’t keep you from it, but I can make you wish you hadn’t,” as he counseled us not to do something. My children till this day say to me, “Tell us what Papa Bill used to say.”
2. Once, when I was 13, I was angry with him and he saw in my eyes rebellion and the thought, “I could take him.” He said, “Do you want to?” I said, “No, Sir,” to which he replied, “Good, then you’ll live to eat supper.” I remember where he stood and where I stood and, I remember how my life flashed before my eyes when he said, “Do you want to?”
3. Ah, but the *Pièce de résistance* was when my father caught me running with a loaded shotgun. That’s another cherished memory which was deeply imbedded in my person – actually my backside – but that’s another story.

You are a biography

Next week, as we celebrate July 4th, we will relive shared memories, but these will be community-wide or country-wide shared memories. Memories are what our history is. And, it is our memories – our shared memories – which make us a people, a family, a community. If you like biographies as a literary genre, remember that you are a biography. Don’t forget to tell your stories, share them, give them away, and then listen to the stories of others.

Memories are part of what makes us human. Shared memories makes us families and communities. Our mental health is supported by our memories. And, the fact that our memories can work for our health or against it is reason enough to work to make sure that our memories are as good as we can make them and that when we have bad experiences we learn them so that our memories, even of bad things, can work for our good.