

## **James L. Holly, M.D.**

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The average life expectancy of a child born in the United States of America, no matter what geographic section, no matter what socioeconomic status, no matter what ethnic origin and no matter what religious affiliation will live 20 to 40% longer than a child born in almost any other country on the face of the earth. It may seem unfair that an "accident" of birth could be such an incredible contributor to the state of one's health, but it is.

As we celebrate the political birth of our nation today, we do so with the sobriety birthed of September 11, 2001. Ten months has changed America. We are less confident of our security and more aware of how much of the rest of the world has lived for a long time. Hopefully, we are more grateful for the blessing of being born in or of having adopted this country. In remembering another terrorist act, Melissa Fay Greene quoted the following:

"The Gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. And a person will worship something, have no doubt of that either. One may think that tribute is paid in secret, in the dark recesses of his or her heart, but it is not. That which dominates imagination and thoughts will determine life and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we are worshipping, for what we are worship we are becoming."

In her monograph, *The Temple Bombing*, Ms. Greene detailed the October 12, 1958 bombing of the Reformed Jewish Temple in Atlanta, Georgia. This is the temple bombing portrayed in the movie, *Driving Miss Daisy*.

In our College street offices at Southeast Texas Medical Associates we have a group of four etchings. They are of old men whose faces have been carved by the choices which they made. The dark lines of their faces reflect the gods they served: gods of self-centeredness, indolence, greed, and alcohol. As we stand and reflect upon these men, we realize that the faces we wear in our futures will be a collage of the choices we make at present.

You cannot worship fear and hatred without becoming ugly and spiteful in your appearance. You cannot worship repression and anger and not reflect those values in

your countenance. You cannot worship rejection "of-anything-different-from-yourself" and not begin to look like the thing upon which you look and without becoming the mirror image of the thing you hold in such contempt. Therefore, as we celebrate our freedom today; as we delight in the liberty which we enjoy, let us make choices which will reflect well in our countenance in the coming years of our lives, individually and collectively. Without doubt, it will be discovered that when you reject the worship of these false gods your health will profit. You will live longer and you will live "well-er."

If you wish to choose the palate from which you select the colors with which to paint your own image for the future, let me suggest three: respect, trust and gratitude. Few things are as motivating as genuine gratitude. Gratitude flows from a fountain produced by humility -- the realization that what we have is not of our own making; it is a gift from others. Nothing should engender more gratitude than our having been birthed in America. The humility of knowing that we did nothing to be worthy of our place of birth should make us thankful to those who made such a place as this possible. We are thankful to the young men and women who did not have great, great, great grandchildren, as they did not live long enough to have children. And, they did not live long enough because they chose to make liberty possible for us and their choice cost them their lives.

Our gratitude means that as we work to preserve for future generations the liberties that we enjoy today, we realize that there are perils for us, as there were perils for them. We can remove all perils, but not without destroying the gift of liberty which we were given. Our gratitude to those who came before requires us to make choices which will present those liberties to the next generation unencumbered by errors on our part. That means that in gratitude to those who sacrificed for our freedoms, we will NOT sacrifice the freedoms of others, even if and when they seem to deserve those freedoms so little. It means that we will defend the rights of others, even if they seemingly have surrendered those rights by their choices. It means that we will NOT hysterically allow ourselves to be made over in the image of that which we fear, hate, disdain, abhor or reject.

Joined with gratitude, respect will paint the countenance of our future a rosy complexion which will reflect an inner joy unmatched by those who believe they are inherently better than others. Respect for those who are different from us will allow us to demonstrate the validity and vitality of what we believe and of what we are, even to those who reject both. Respect for others does not derive from their worthiness of that respect; it derives from our respect for ourselves and our gratitude for being allowed to become what we are and will be.

When gratitude and respect are joined by the mixing of both with trust, it creates a rich patina which grows more beautiful each day. Trust is not blind and being trustful does not mean that you ignore danger, but trust derives from the character of a trustworthy person. As the expression of gratitude engenders gratitude in others, and as the respecting of others very often results in a reciprocation of that respect, so when we are trustworthy, we often motivate others to be both trusting and trustworthy.

As we celebrate our freedoms today, let us determine to fashion our future with these three cardinal virtues -- gratitude, trust and respect. It would not be a surprise, I think, to discover that people who practice these virtues live longer and healthier lives, than those who don't. It is no surprise that organizations, like SETMA, which values and practices those virtues is healthy and prosperous.

And, as we extend these virtues to others -- to family, friends, associates -- we extend them to those who would be considered "foreigners," those born in or citizens of a foreign land. As we extend the fruits in our lives of our gratitude, respect and trust to them, we realize our differences. As we know and care about individuals who are "foreigners," we learn to trust them and eventually, we extend to them our trust. In so doing, we re-birth within our society, culture and country, the promise of our founding fathers and of those who have sustained that promise with their sacrifice. With the extension of these virtues to others, almost effortlessly and almost costless, we renew America's lease upon liberty and extend that lease to a new generation.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health. Celebrate both today by celebrating your liberty. Remember, the ultimate celebration of your own liberty is protecting the liberty of others.