

James L. Holly, M.D.

By Your Bedside

By: James L. Holly, MD

(Author's note: At times, it seems because they are so often faced with life-and-death decisions and with pain and suffering that physicians and other healthcare providers are not touched by human suffering and/or loss. That has never been true, but perceptions are hard to overcome. This week's Your Life Your Health is a personal meditation by Dr. Holly, as he stood by the bedside of his Father during his recent life-threatening illness. At the time that this article was written, it was doubted that his father would survive. Happily and thankfully, he did. Maybe these thoughts will help others learn to process their feelings at the loss, or the potential loss of a person whom they love and cherish. This experience has certainly shown Dr. Holly how patients often feel when faced with a crisis.)

As I sit beside your bed, I am drawn to the man I have known and loved my entire life. It may seem strange for a man with children and grandchildren to be so captivated by his own father, yet I find myself increasingly needing to remember who this man is that has so defined my life and my person.

As I stand at your bedside, watching you slumber -- hoping and praying that you will recover -- for at 60, I am still unready to relinquish you to the ages, I listen to your voice in my mind, a voice which has at times expressed great joy and at times has reproved, admonished and corrected me.

I see your deeply tanned brow, long devoid of hair. I remember the two pictures of you as a youth and as a young father which show you adorned with hair. The face is the same but the resolute strength by which I know you is no longer concealed by a head covering.

I look deep into your eyes -- in my mind only -- as your lids conceal the glimmer of the depth of the soul revealed by those seemingly all seeing eyes, which have so often penetrated and exposed the fabrications with which I attempted to avoid your judgment of my shortcomings. I look deep into these eyes whose gaze accompanied by the quick

smile and obvious pleasure, were the reward I so often sought and equally often received from one who defined my ideal of what and who a man ought to be.

With my gaze I peeled back each layer of browning of your complexion which has been applied by the trade you pursued to provide for those to whom you totally committed your life: my mother, my brother and myself, along with many others who were the beneficiaries of your supply. As I examine each of these layers, my life becomes less of a mystery to me, as I see in the "annual rings" of your growth and development the origins of my own.

As you utter the sounds of semi-consciousness, I think of that voice which I have loved and which I determine to remember all of my life. I remember that voice which intentionally -- as a signature unique to you -- mispronounced certain words, words which I now love to listen to in my mind as I play them over and over and over.

I look at your lips bordering the mouth which provided the instrument for the melody of your vocalizations. I smile as I remember your attempt to sing -- attempts as helpless and hopeless as my own -- yet attempts which now are more beautiful to my memory than Mozart or Rachmaninoff.

The nurse just showed me your morning laboratory work. Its imperfection no more defines you and what you are than the illness which has gradually drained from you the energy, the vitality and the personality which were the conduits through which we could know the character of a great man. I could only wish that each of those who care for you could have known you as I do. It reminds me never to allow data to define the daddies and mothers, the brothers and sisters, the children and grandchildren whom I care for each day.

Daddy, as I watch you lay so still, so vulnerable, I remember how you lived so nobly. At an age, which I would now consider that of virtually a child, you acted so bravely, so responsibly, indeed, so nobly. You were only 23 when I was born. You were almost a child yourself. Almost 2 years earlier you had become a father for the first time. As virtually a child, you worked hard to support your family. My earliest memories were of your warmth, your protection, your love. I remember you rescuing me from drowning in Arkansas. I remember the efforts and heights to which you went to take us to exotic places on vacation. I remember how you patiently endured a child so different, yet so like yourself. I remember how you let me become who I am even when you didn't understand, or even when you didn't agree with what I was becoming. I remember how you stood up to others who wanted to force me to become what they were. I remember you said, "leave him alone."

Greatness is not defined by office, by position or possessions. Greatness is defined by you. When you pass from this life you will not lie in-state in the Rotunda of the Capital in Washington but the battles you fought and won, the challenges you met and surmounted, the tasks you undertook and completed, are as noteworthy and as monumental as those of men who due to fame or fortune are honored by society, for it is

upon the platform prepared by such men as you, Daddy, that the performances of such men can be carried out.

Few perhaps will ever understand and some may even want to misunderstand what a joy it is for me to hold your hand and to comfort you. The peace which I see in your eyes, the quick and ready smile on your lips are the ultimate value judgment of my life. God will never give me a gift greater than the memory of these moments spent alone with you in the ICU room, when the evolution of our relationship came to full flower as both our needs were met so wonderfully.

I wish everyone could have had a father such as mine. Perhaps someday I can write a book-a book of remembrances-of who you were, Daddy, but until and unless I do, the lives of your children, your grandchildren and your great grandchildren will have to be the tablets upon which the tale is told. It will be inadequately told, no doubt, but the magnitude of who you are will drive us on to greater and greater heights. And as we ascend the precipices of our lives, we shall each declare to others, you should have known our father, Billy Holly; he is a great man.

I Love You Daddy.