

James L. Holly, M.D.

Caring for Your Health versus Getting Healthcare

By James L. Holly, MD

Your Life Your Health

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Often a person wants a pill, procedure, or test when they think of healthcare. But the reality is that the most important care giver in the maintaining, retaining, or regaining of health, is you.

How do you deal with the "trials and vicissitudes" of life? How do you deal with heart ache, disappointment, personal failure, or calamities in your life? More important than how to deal with heart failure is the wisdom of how to deal with heartbreak. More important than how to deal with dementia caused by the chronology of life is how to deal with depression caused by circumstances in life.

There are times when medications are critical to the enduring of emotional problems and/or life's stresses. And, when those medications are needed, one should never feel like a failure or that you are not "strong." However, either before medications, or along with medications, life's problems need to be dealt with through "life and living."

As the opera singer said in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, "that sounds clever, what does it mean?" It means that purpose and meaning in life are found through life not through medicines. It means that while seeking appropriate medical care for emotional or physical problems, we always need to turn to faith, family and friends. It is imperative that we live while we are dealing with problems.

A number of years ago an elderly lady came to my clinic. She was depressed and despondent because her only child had died. She did not know how she could go on. Her condition required medication but it also required a "life prescription." My counsel was for her to find a little boy or a young man who needed "mothering" and for her to emotionally adopt that young person. She would, I told her, as she met his needs and as she poured her life into him, discover her cure.

The result? A few weeks later, this lady bounded into my office with a smile on her face and with joy in her heart. She declared that she had "found him" and that she had a new purpose and passion in life. It wasn't long before she had collected an entire community of people who became her life as she met their needs. She did not forger her son, but she honored his life and memory by investing her life in others. By the way, she never took a pill.

With Caring For Others

Recently, I re-read my favorite novel, *To Serve Them All of my Days*, written by British novelist, R. F. Delderfield. It is the fictional story of a young man, David Powlett-Jones, who was injured in World War I. Previously, my focus in reading the story had been Powlett-Jones' life as a teacher and of my own experience as a teacher. It has always caused me a little sadness that I did not spend my life as a formal educator, although in many ways, I have been and am still a teacher at heart. But, this reading was different. This time, I focused on Powlett-Jones' recovery, indeed, I focused on the reality that his healing was the result of his serving others rather than his being preoccupied with his own condition.

This is not to deprecate the value of physical medicine, or the imperative of excellent surgical, medical, nursing and health care. It is however to suggest that there is an element in healing of the body and mind where that healing and the return to "life," is found in having a purpose for living which cannot be found within ourselves and which cannot be found while focusing upon ourselves. Powlett-Jones suffered serious physical and mental wounds from battle and subsequently suffered the tragic death of his wife and a child, he found survival, peace and recovery in serving others.

Describing Powlett-Jones' physical injury, the author states: "...at the very end of it all, that ultimate mortar shell, landing square on the parados and pitch forking him over the threshold of hell where for the most part he was unaware of his identity as a man, or even a thing, but floated free on a current of repetitive routine - shifts on a stretcher, or in a jolting vehicle, daily dressings, carried out by faceless men and women..."

Twelve years later, having recovered from the wounds, Powlett-Jones would experience the trauma of the loss of his wife and a child in an accident. The mental and emotional scars of the death of his loved ones would heal but only as a result of his being involved in the life of others. The author states: "That was the way of it, not only as far as end of term, and through the summer break, but on through the Michaelmas term to his first Christmas alone. It was as though his existence, as a man with some useful part to play in life, was a shallow-rooted plant, dependent upon the strength of a cluster of root fibers that ran just below the surface, searching for points of anchorage, another, stronger root perhaps, or an angled rock, or a layer of heavier soil... he made the discovery with time and with the caring for others."

It was in the "caring for others" that Powlett-Jones found the care which he needed. It is also often the case with us.

Patch Adams

The dramatization of the real life of a unique student who became a physician illustrates the point. The following dialogue is taken from the movie, as one student who was brilliant addressed Adams who was effective in treating others::

"I heard something about you.-- That I was in a mental hospital? - Is it true? – I tried to kill myself. The mental ward was the best thing that ever happened to me. - What did the doctors do to help you? - The doctors didn't help me. The patients helped me. They helped me realize that by helping them I could forget about my own problems. And I did. I really helped some of them.

"It was an incredible feeling, Carin. There was one patient named Rudy. I helped him be able to pee. But for the first time in my life, I forgot about my own problems. It was an incredible high."

In another scene, a fellow medical student who disliked Patch Adams had the following dialogue with Adams: "Patch Adams said you're the top student in the class. You're smarter than me. Is that what you want to hear? Now can I leave?" The other student said, "You know Mrs. Kennedy in 407? She doesn't eat. I visited her room every day for the last three weeks. I can't get her to eat. Now, I know everything there is to know about medicine. I've studied relentlessly. I guarantee you I can outdo, out diagnose any attending and surgeon in this hospital. But I can't make her eat."

As the story unfolds, this lady's health was not found in medicine but in fulfilling her dreams. She had always dreamed of "swimming" in a pool of spaghetti. Her appetite returned after a romp in a swimming pool filled with spaghetti. The point is not to focus upon the silliness of a pool of spaghetti but it is that people are unique and that "all sizes do not fit" everyone, and it is to remind us that our hopes and dreams are realized as we help others fulfill theirs.

"I will tell you a way out of hell"

Sometimes our despondency is so great that we would describe it as "being in hell.". There is one scene toward the end of the movie *Gandhi* which is absolutely stunning. The partition of India in 1947 was followed by a blood bath of such tragic dimensions that Gandhi, his heart nearly broken, decided to fast to death unless the Muslims and the Hindus made peace between themselves.

Gandhi is fasting in Calcutta in the house of a Muslim. He is greatly emaciated; his friends with anxious faces are standing around him. A band of rough-looking murderers walk in and surrender their weapons. At this point the wildest looking of them all bursts in with a chapati (Indian bread) in hand which he almost throws on Gandhi. "Here! Eat!" he shouts, "I am going to hell; but I do not wish to have your death on my soul!"

Feeble, his voice barely rising above a whisper, Gandhi tells him, "Only God decides who goes to hell. Tell me, why do you say you are going to hell?" The man confesses, "I killed a small child! I dashed his head against the wall because they [the Muslims] killed my little one." Gandhi says, "I will tell you a way out of hell:"

"You find a child whose parents have been killed. Then you and your wife bring him up as your own. Only, make sure the child is a Muslim and that you raise him in the Muslim faith." Disbelief and then a look of awe came over the dazed eyes. He bends low, touches Gandhi's feet with his forehead, and silently departs.

It is in meeting the needs of others that our needs are met. It is in focusing upon the health of others that our health is improved.