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Exercise of the Heart Part III: Loving Others

Remembering and Making Memories

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Your Life Your Health

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The study of heart disease and the examination of how to preserve your heart's health is important. For all who are over 14, one of the most obvious conditions which affects our heart is age. Every equation for evaluating risk of heart disease has age as a heavily weighted factor. Yet, because we know the heart "lasts a lifetime," we also know that other factors have a more serious and often correctable impact on the health of the heart.

The lack of the exercise of one's heart is the principle cause of the deterioration of its function. However, there is another element of "heart exercise" which is not physical; it is in loving others. Commonly, at Valentine's Day, it is romantic love upon which we focus, but love is a much bigger subject than romance. And, while physical exercise of the heart has its limits, i.e., the heart can effectively only beat so many times per minute and that maximum inextricably decreases with age, the emotional and spiritual exercise of the heart in loving others appears to be limitless. I thought I could never love anyone or anything as much as I did my first grandchild, but now with seven, I find that there is room to love each one with "all my heart." A physical contradiction for sure, but not when speaking of love.

While we must exercise our hearts physically and while we must pay attention to risk factors for the development of heart disease, we must never forget that while "the heart" to which we refer in speaking of love is not a cardiovascular pump, the ultimate reason for living is to love. The only reason to live longer is to love more and to know succeeding generations of those whom you love. Only yesterday, I saw a delightful lady who at 90 years-of-age takes no medications for her heart and who was brought to my office by her granddaughter. As they both laughed and talked, they talked about the granddaughter's grandchildren. The grandmother at 90 cares for her great, great grandchild part of each day. Here is a goal worthy of the effort, to know and to love your grandchildren's grandchildren.

How then do you exercise your "heart's" capacity to love? There are two songs which haunt my heart and mind each time I hear them, and I make certain that that is often. The first is entitled, *Try to Remember*. The words are:

"Try to remember the kind of September
When life was slow and oh so mellow

Try to remember the kind of September
When grass was green and grain so yellow
Try to remember the kind of September
When you were a young and a callow fellow
Try to remember and if you remember
Then follow (follow) follow (follow) follow . . .

“Try to remember when life was so tender
That no one wept except the willow
Try to remember when life was so tender
That dreams were kept beside your pillow
Try to remember when life was so tender
That love was an ember about to billow
Try to remember and if you remember
Then follow (follow) follow (follow) follow . . .

“Deep in December it's nice to remember
Although you know the snow will follow
Deep in December it's nice to remember
Without a hurt, the heart is hollow
Deep in December it's nice to remember
The fire of September that made you mellow
Deep in December our hearts should remember
Then follow (follow) follow (follow) follow . . .”

Perhaps the greatest effort of love is to remember! It is in this effort that we exercise our heart in order for the heart to remain “mellow” – pliable and flexible – for as one evidence of physical heart disease is the “stiffening” of the heart – the heart losing its ability to relax – so aging without remembering can make the heart hollow -- empty without the capacity for love.

The song reminds us that “Deep in December” – in a time when our own life draws to a close -- the joy of life and the youthfulness of our emotional heart is retained by memory. And, for those of us whose memories are filled with pain, the song accurately and appropriately reminds us that it is in those painful memories that we find all of the elements of love. The lyrics of *The September Song* are also in harmony with Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “*In Memoriam*,” written in 1850 which states:

“I hold it true, whate'er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.”

Heavy exercise, with a rapidly beating heart and with rapid breathing, may make us uncomfortable for a moment but done with safety precautions, this discomfort strengthens our heart and improves our health. The pain of remembering may sometimes

be so great that we think our “heart” will break in the moment, but the reality of who we are is often confirmed by the memories which cause us the most pain.

The second song is entitled, *From May to December*, and the lyrics are:

“Oh, it’s a long, long while from May to December
But the days grow short when you reach September
When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame
One hasn’t got time for the waiting game

“Oh, the days dwindle down to a precious few
September, November
And these few precious days I’ll spend with you
These precious days I’ll spend with you.”

It is my hope that my children and grandchildren will know these songs and love them as I do.

Our hearts are exercised not only by remembering, but also by creating memories.

In June of 1997, I wrote a tribute to my father. Its last paragraph stated: “And, some day, when this reminiscence of my father, will have become his memorial, I pray that my father’s character, courage, commitment and choices will be that of my son, of my son-in-law, and of my grandson.” It would only be eight years and four months when this tribute would become my father’s memorial. As I read part of that 1997 tribute at his memorial service, through my tears and heartache, I remembered those “precious days” and thanked God for each one of them. I spent a lifetime passively creating memories with my father, but the last eight years, I intentionally created memories by asking him questions, by learning who he was, by discovering what he valued and by appreciating why he was who he was. It is not possible to create memories with him any longer, but the fuel of those precious days continue to give strength and even definition to my life and to my love.

For those who are in the “May of their life” – those who are a long, long way from the autumn of their years after which time the days will pass quickly -- I admonish you to love deeply and greatly. Risk the heartache of love often, but don’t imagine that love is anything like Hollywood’s caricature. Love is commitment and caring; love is giving rather than getting, and love is sacrificing for those who mean more to you than your own life. Until you love someone else more than you love yourself, you have not learned the greatest joy of life.

For those of us who are approaching and/or are in the September, November or even December of our lives, we must spend those “precious days” with those who we love. In doing so, we bring to reality the memories of our May and June and we give a gift to the next generation which will give substance to their lives when they like us are faced with “days (which) grow short” and “autumn weather turns the leaves to flame.”

Live long and live well, but unless you live well – which we would define as remembering and making memories – by loving those who helped make you who you are and by loving those whom you are fashioning in the image of your heart – you may have existed but you have not lived.

Care for your heart – care for the pump which beats in your chest – but also care for the “heart” which exists in your soul. Remember, it is your life and it is your love to live and to give.