

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

**For Your Stories: I Was There**

**Thanksgiving 2008**

**By James L. Holly, MD**

**Your Life Your Health**

*The Examiner*

**November 27, 2008**

Without doubt, my favorite day of the year is Thanksgiving. There is no other day of the year which so totally unites family, friends, faith and memories. This year, for me, Thanksgiving is the capstone of my sabbatical. Through this month, I have read through the Bible – I will actually complete that exercise two days early -- visited family and remembered those who have passed away. I have thought about life and health and I have retold “my stories” again. On Thursday, November 20<sup>th</sup>, my wife and I were at lunch in Houston. During the course of that meal, I related one of my stories and she said, “You tell every story as if I am hearing it for the first time; I was there.” I realized immediately what an important moment and statement that was. I realized that this is the principle focus of Thanksgiving for me this year: my wife and our almost 47-year relationship.

We met in a speech class at Northwestern State University in September, 1962. She remembers it well. I was debonair, suave and sophisticated. Ok, that’s not the way she remembers it but don’t forget that memories are rarely composed of facts as much as they are a collage of facts, feelings, and fantasies which have been fashioned into our history. One of my favorite stories is anchored in that speech class.

Our professor assigned a project in which we had to give a speech with a visual aide. Remember, I was eighteen years old and as was my custom, I attended class one day unprepared to give a speech and without a visual aide. This was not irrational because there were eight people ahead of me alphabetically in the class and we could only give four or five speeches during the period. I was safe. Alas, the teacher noticed my empty hands and the absence of a “visual aide.” Because we had a love-hate relationship – I loved him and he hated me – he skipped over the eight people and called my name.

Now the dilemma: something or nothing. I could announce that I was not prepared and would have received a zero, or I could do something. The assessment only took a few seconds and I stood up, which surprised the teacher, as he expected acquiescence. But, I needed a visual aide and you could not use the blackboard. As I walked to the front of the room, I cast about looking for a visual aide. Remember, desperate people do desperate things and the definition of a visual aide was something which could be seen and which served to illustrate or to support your speech. I would settle for something which simply could be seen. With my future wife sitting there watching me twisting in the wind, I approached the blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk. As I turned around, the teacher had his hand up to remind me that you could not use the blackboard, which I did not intend to do. Before he could speak, I took three quick strides toward the class, threw the chalk into the air, watched it crumble to the floor and said, “What made that chalk hit the floor?” I had a visual aide, now I just needed a speech. I said, “You

think it was gravity, but it really was the little Green People.” Fortunately, I had one in my shirt pocket. I explained that they could not see the little Green People because they did not believe in them, so much for visibility, which is the essential element of visual. For the next fifteen minutes, I gave a speech about why the little Green People kept pushing “things” out of their living space – an activity which had been confused by scientists as a force of gravity. At the end of the class, the teacher would give us our grade. I had an A- with a question mark, written like this “A-?”. I asked what the question mark was for and he said, “Oh, it was excellent, no doubt but I want to know when you prepared it?” I smiled, shrugged my shoulders and walked away. Some things are better left unexplained.

Just to make sure that the foundation of our future, and at present 43-year marriage and counting, was seasoned with stories, our teacher assigned another speech for several weeks later. This was to be an extemporaneous speech. You would stand in front of the class and he would give you a subject and you would then give a five-minute speech off the top of your head. As you are aware, I have already done that, so this was my “cup of tea.” The day of class arrived and the professor called my name. I stood in front of the class and he said “alarm clock.” This meant that I had to give a five-minute speech on the alarm clock. No problem. Before the echo of the phrase “-ock” had fallen upon the room, I said, “In 1782, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, John Smith first conceived of the idea of uniting an alarm device with a timing device.” At this point, the professor exclaimed, “Stop, stop, stop. You know too much about alarm clocks.” I began to laugh and he began to fume. He said, “You made that up?” I nodded. He said, “OK, Mr. Smarter-than-your-paints, give me five minutes on the doughnut hole.” Little did he know that doughnuts were my specialty. I got an A. By the way, if you google the topic “history of the alarm clock,” you will see an article which states, “It has been said that Levi Hutchins of Concord, New Hampshire invented the first alarm clock in 1787.” Amazing how art imitates reality. Ok, I get your point, I was five years off, but the internet didn’t exist and there were no computers, so I could “create history.”

Through the years, I have enjoyed retelling this story over and over and over and over! And, the very nicest thing is that my life-long mate was there and remembers it exactly as I tell it. My only regret is that we were not born next door to each other so that my stories could start with the first time I stole her bottle or something equally as creative.

No one who knew my history, however, would be surprised at this story. When I was in the tenth grade, my best friend who would become the valedictorian of our graduating class was entering the science fair at Northwestern. Because we lived a long way from one another, the only time we got to spend together away from school was in extracurricular activities so I decided to enter the science fair also. Well, the big day arrived and the judges were going through the exhibition hall looking at the entries. Realty struck as the judges were two exhibits away from me. I suddenly saw how excellent everyone else’s projects were – posters, explanations, complex models – I had a fruit juice can, a Bunsen burner and a pinwheel. That’s it. No “visual aide”; no nothing. I suddenly realized how embarrassing this was going to be. It had been worth it because we had had a lot of fun but it was not time to pay the piper. Suddenly, I remember that

we had studied the formula for rotary horsepower in science class. When the judges stepped in front of me, my pinwheel was turning, driven by the steam coming from the fruit can filled with water being heated by the Bunsen burner. I explained to the judges that this was a steam turbine and calculated the horsepower for them. As they moved away, I sighed with relief. When we attended the awards ceremony, I had survived the day and had enjoyed the time with my friend greatly. As the awards were announced, my friend's brilliantly and beautifully executed project was overlooked and an idiot was awarded an honorable mentioned for his "steam turbine engine model." There is no justice in science fairs.

Septembers came and went until three years after the speech class, September, 1965 arrived. Carolyn and I had then been married for a month and we are teaching in Golden Meadow, Louisiana – Carolyn at the elementary school and me in junior high. One day, Carolyn came home and said, "Larry, what's going on at the junior high?" She added, "The rumor is that a teacher made a child stand up in front of the class and tell all about her biological functions." With the enthusiasm generated by an epinephrine rush, I said, "Carolyn, they are talking about me." You must know that I was teaching 84 girls divided into three sections. I had each section for two hours a day and I was teaching English. I quickly explained that the previous day, a child had come to my desk and asked to be excused to take a pill. Because some of the children were taking diet pills and other non-prescription medications, we had a policy that without a prescription and a note from their parents, we would not allow any pills to be taken at school. So I said, "\_\_\_\_\_", calling the young lady by name – which name I remember to this day, "What kind of pill?" She giggled and didn't say anything. Another child, "\_\_\_\_\_", whose name I also remember 42+ years later, presented a pill bottle before my face. I began to read, "Midol..." Remember, I did not have a sister and I had been married for a month. I had taken biology in high school and college but knew nothing about women; forty-two plus years later, I can truthfully say essentially the same thing in many ways. As I continued to read, I discovered that this medication was not for weight reduction, or for the sniffles. Without redirecting my gaze from the bottle, I said, "\_\_\_\_\_", remember, I still know here name, "go take your pill." The other student found all of this very funny and laughed loudly.

When I finished telling my new bride this story, I ran from the house and raced to the high school, as the junior high and high school were on the same campus and had the same principal. I ran up the stairs to his office – I still remember the principal's name. Thankfully, he was still there. I burst into his office and began telling my story. He began to laugh. I said, "What is so funny; they are going to tar and feather me and ride me out of town on a rail?" He said, "Let me tell you about my first year here." He then told me a story which would be politically incorrect today about his confrontation by a knife-wielding father whose son had been expelled. In 1965, 30 years after the event the father was the principal's closet friend. The principal said to me, "Go home, Larry, nothing will come of this." And nothing did.

On Thanksgiving Day, Carolyn and I, and our family have sung *America* each year we have been married. We shall do so again today and give thanks to God for the gift of our

love and life. We shall remember our stories; we shall be grateful that for 65% of our lives, for each of our stories, we were both there. This year, we who married in 1965, are 65 years of age and have been married 65% of our lives. We shall be grateful that for the rest of our lives, any story we live will be our stories. Happy Thanksgiving to all of you. I trust that your stories bring you delight and joy. I trust you tell them often. Did I tell you about the time....