

James L. Holly, M.D.

Health & Stress: Prejudice, Hatred, Bitterness

By James L. Holly, MD

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In the context of last week's discussion of racial prejudice, the question arises as to whether the one who harbors anger, bitterness, hatred or prejudice toward others personally experiences stress. The answer is yes. It is also the case that the victim of bigotry is subject to tremendous stress and harm.

Stress is a major contributor to poor health. We most commonly associate stress with emotional upheaval, fatigue, insomnia, worry, anxiety and other common causes of the symptoms of stress. Annually, SETMA completes a "stress assessment" on each patient we see. The reason is that stress is recognized, diagnoses and addressed, physical symptoms disappear. For instance, a patient with diabetes and high blood pressure was not treated to goal. Try as we could, we were not successful in improving her outcome. Then the patient was asked about stress factors in her life. A significant interpersonal relationship which was creating overwhelming stress was discovered. Through multiple agency intervention, the stress was relieved and the patient's diabetes and high blood pressure responded to treatment.

Before SETMA began using electronic patient records (EMR) we could not effectively track changes in patient's vital signs. But with the EMR, we were able to look at vital signs over time. We began to see patterns, which were not obvious with paper records. We noticed that with some patients, their blood pressure would be uncontrolled at the same time every year. This observation allowed us to address stress factors in the patient's life, rather than just adding more medication. Often we found that a personal tragedy had taken place and that each year at that time grief overwhelmed the body's defense mechanism. With this awareness, rather than adding more blood pressure medication, we were able to deal with the real cause of the physical symptom, stress.

Prejudice

It is not often discussed in relationship to health but hatred, bigotry and prejudice are major stressors in society and in the lives of those people who are prejudiced. I grew up in the South and experienced the destructiveness of racial hatred from both the victim's and the perpetrator's

perspective. It is story for another day, but I journeyed from being a bigot to the recognition of the dignity and worth of all human beings regardless of race or color.

The good news is that as I write this article, I have in the forefront of my mind the fact that my grandchildren do not see others through the prism of color. I have watched them with

their African-American or Hispanic friends. I have listened to their conversations and watched them interact. They don't see color. I have smiled in appreciation and admiration of this progress.

Yes, there are vestiges of racism in our society, in places more than vestiges. And, tragically, race is used by liberal and conservative politicians for their own political purposes. These residual elements of bigotry will not disappear accidentally. Like any physical or mental health improvement, the elimination of bigotry will require intentioned action. As I have wished to eliminate any semblance of ethnic prejudices from my life, I have looked for ways in which to use the word "black" in a positive context. "Our company is in the 'black,'" which is positive and good. We most often use "black" in a negative context such as "they are the good guys, they wear white hats," or worse yet, "He was 'black balled.'" With a little reflection, you will see how foundational the concepts of "black" and "while" are to our society, and you will see how the last vestiges of bigotry will require our divesting ourselves of this dichotomy.

The course every high school and college student ought to be required to take today is a course in the Civil Rights Movement. It is impossible to read of Medgar Evers, Thurgood Marshall, Steve Biko, Martin Luther King, Jr., W.E.B. Dubose, and thousands of other heroes without being grateful for the price which has been paid for my grandchildren to live without the health hazard of bigotry and racism being a part of the fabric of their life. Today, a great deal of what our young people know about the Civil Rights movement is through movies.

I have recently seen most of the movie, *The Help*. It was supposed to be funny from what I had been told, but I was furious throughout the movie. I grew up in the South and the movie was too close to the truth to be funny. Throughout the movie I had to keep reminding myself that these were actors. The main Caucasian character was Hillie. She played her role so well, she was loathsome to me. Almost all of the vestiges of racism depicted in *The Help* were familiar to me but there were a couple which had never occurred to me. One is that housekeepers, domestic workers or whatever classification you apply to people who work in other people's home are often not covered by Social Security, Medicare, have no paid holidays, vacations, sick leave or health insurance. It is possible to be a bigot and to pay these fees. But, the providing of employee benefits to those who work in your home, particularly when they are of another race, is one objective way of declaring your recognition of your employee as a person with value as you treat them with dignity and economic equality.

The Help refers to the murder of Medgar Evers, which reminded me of the movie *Ghosts of Mississippi* which documents Evers' assassination June 12, 1963 and the trial of his assassin three decades later. It reminded me of *Mississippi Burning* which documents the murder of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Michael Schwerner, a 24-year old from Brooklyn, New York, and 21-year old James Chaney from Meridian, Mississippi, were working in and around Neshoba County, Mississippi, to register blacks to vote, opening "Freedom Schools" and organizing black boycotts of white-owned businesses in Meridian. It reminded me of *Cry Freedom*, which tells the story of Steve Biko being murdered by the South African Government. We cannot leave to Hollywood the moral education of our children. It must be done in home, church, community and school.

Hatred and Bitterness

The real health tragedy of racism, prejudice and hatred is experienced by the children who grow up being treated like second class citizens, where success is the exception rather than the rule.

The harm to the health of the bigot is not the great tragedy, but those who consider themselves to be neutral – neither a bigot nor an activist against bigotry – must be reminded of the famous truth, “All that is required for evil to prevail is for good men and women to do nothing.”

Whether it is the plagues of alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs, violence, inaccessibility to preventive and screening health care, medications or routine healthcare, poverty, or illiteracy, all members of our society pay a tragic price for the perpetuation of the evils of bigotry, racism, prejudice, bitterness and anger. And, the price to which we refer is not essentially economic.

It is faith which makes the past of significance; it is love which makes the present joyful and fulfilling; it is hope which makes the future a positive expectation. It is the past which gives meaning to the present, and it is the future which gives purpose to the present. It is the present which connects the past and the future. And, it is the knowledge and the sense of all three regardless of our geographical location which makes us human.

As we make decisions about our healthcare, it is not just so that our bodies will continue to function – that is the biology of all mammals. As we make decisions about our health, it is because of the voices, the eyes and the hands of those we love and care for, as our experience of them and with them connects all of our senses in a web of "common sense."

Wealth and Worth

In this world, there will never be equality of wealth, but there must be equality of worth. If we are to be healthy, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, we must purge ourselves of bigotry, prejudice, hatred and bitterness. The steps in successfully doing that are so ordinary and so simple they may seem insignificant. It can be done and it must be done. And, it must be done now.

We must no longer depend upon our “religious” fervor for evidence of our spiritual worth; we must find our truth worth in how we care for our fellow man, and particularly when that fellow man, woman or child looks, lives, and even acts differently than us.