

James L. Holly, M.D.

How Should I Feel at 73?

By James L. Holly, MD

Your Life Y our Health

The Examiner

November 3, 2016

When this article appears in print, it will be one day before my 73rd birthday. I think I am supposed to be an old man and that I am supposed to act like one. I know that I tire more easily than I once did but I still find life amazing and often amusing. Everywhere I turn, to the chagrin of my family, I find humor and amusement. I have been accused of “hebephrenia,” which is a psychosis form of Schizophrenia, often characterized by inappropriate laughter. There it goes again, as I write this I smile and chuckle. The Scriptures says, “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine.” Obviously, in medicine, there are many serious and even solemn circumstances where humor and/or laughter would be inappropriate, but in general life benefits from joy, laughter, humor and happiness.

I learned the power of humor from my father. When I was ten years old, my mother’s oldest sister died. At Aunt Josie’s funeral, her daughter, my cousin, who is now also deceased, fainted every time she walked up to the casket at the funeral. She was very large and my father and three other men could only ease her to the floor as they could not hold her up. Everyone feared that she would faint at the grave site and possibly be injured.

On the way from the little, white, framed church building in central Louisiana to the grave yard beside the church, my father walked with my cousin and I walked behind them. As we walked, my father said, “Virginia, will you do me a favor?” Virginia answered, “I love you, Uncle Billy, I’ll do anything for you,” she sobbed through her tears. My father said, “When you die will you not ask me to be a pallbearer; it would break my back to pick you up.” Virginia started laughing and she didn’t faint again. Now, I understand the depth of relationship required to use humor like that. No one else could have gotten away with that, but I saw the power of laughter and merriment even in serious circumstances.

At 73, I still have that boyish delight in life. When my wife and I met, I was 18 and she was 19 (get the point, she is older; oops, there I go again). She reminisces that when we met she thought, “He will do anything to make someone laugh,” and I would. I often see humor where others don’t. Not infrequently, I will say to someone, “I have to explain to you why I smiled just now.” It’s not fair for others not to know what it was that amused you. When my son was young, he understood humor also. Often, as we sat in church, at the most inappropriate moment, he would lean over and whisper a humorous comment to me. He would then enjoy my discomfiture as I tried not to laugh out loud in the

middle of the service. I often thought about “beating” him for that but I couldn’t stop laughing long enough.

Surely, at some time or at some age, you will feel old, or different, or whatever it is that you are supposed to feel in your eighth decade of life. No, that’s not a mistake. Your first decade in life is from birth to 9 and the second is 10-19. Do the math. Your seventies are the eighth decade of life. This past summer, Carolyn and I decided to drive to Colorado. As is our habit, we took off early in the morning and 750 miles later, we stopped in Dalhart, Texas. Our longest drive in our marriage in one day was from Grand Junction in Yellowstone National Park to Dalhart, Texas (1050 mile -- 5 AM one day to 1 AM the next day). We suspect that some day we will have to stop that, but for twenty-year-olds (that’s our mental age) it is not big deal.

There are recognizable changes in Carolyn and me. One of the principle ones is that we don’t enjoy shopping as much as we once did. We still love to give but a day spent in Houston is rarer and the results are sparser than once they were. It was always difficult to buy my mother and father gifts as there was nothing they really wanted and nothing they needed. I used to lament that but now I understand it. Give me an afternoon to sit and talk with one or more of my family and I am animated but “things” don’t have as much interest as they once did. There is one exception and that is in relationship to the “things” Carolyn and I have enjoyed and treasured through the years. We do wonder if they will be as treasured by the next generation. Probably not but I hope some of them will find a prominent place in new homes and be the focus of memories of where they came from.

On October 25th, I wrote Carolyn to tell her what I wanted for my birthday, tomorrow. I wrote: “What I want for my birthday – I would like the two of us to leave at 6 AM drive to Pineville and visit Mother and Daddy’s grave site – then to Natchitoches – visit the St. Augustine Catholic Church at Melrose and Cane River Lake – have lunch and at some point head home.” Increasingly, this is my “bucket list,” not new, novel and unusual experiences, but going back to our roots, visiting familiar and beloved places and people. So tomorrow, November 4, 2016, that is what we are going to do. I invited one of my high school teachers to join us for lunch but he is out of town. Amazing that 55 years after graduation from high school, I have teachers who are still alive.

As we make this day-journey, we will not create new memories and these old memories are still vividly part of our active memory. Perhaps, those memories will be refreshed but perhaps, we shall only have the pleasure of reliving parts of our lives which gave us pleasure then and which give us satisfaction now.

I think this is a part of mental health, which is “remembering.” And, even when memories are not pleasant, the years soften the edges of their sting and reliving them, at some point, brings more delight than depression. I am looking forward to Friday while I am aware that anticipation is often more enjoyable than the experience itself. I would leave at 4 AM – I love to start a drive in the dark and to watch the sun come up during the trip – but my beloved assures me that while I am welcome to leave that early, she will be available at 6 AM. Again, I smile and chuckle, this is not a new discussion with us; we have had similar ones before. I look forward to smiling at her, holding her hand and sharing this day, again.