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Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men

By: James L. Holly, MD

Today is the Eve of Christmas Eve! Whether Christian or not, a great deal of the western world celebrates the Christmas holiday, if not the meaning. We all lament its commercialization, but the holiday remains a wonderful time of giving and getting, of joy and merriment, and it is a time of "good will toward men", if not "peace on earth."

The promise of the birth of Jesus, announced by the angels in the benediction of the heralding of His birth, is: "Peace on earth, good will toward men." While we who confess Christ as Savior would invite all to know Him personally, it is this promise of His birth which I wish to focus upon. It is the promise of "peace on earth good will toward men" which can unite Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and even agnostic and atheist in the world community. And, before anyone points out how much mayhem, violence and destruction have been and is wrought in the name of religion; I argue that it is the perverters of faith and belief which have done such, not the practitioners.

There are few things which contribute to individual and public health as "peace on earth and good will toward men." Not only do bombs and land mines kill and maim, but the stress and anxiety produced by conflict, anger and war prematurely age all men and women. Yet, few subjects have engendered more conflict and indeed more wars than have religious differences. This is such a contradiction, as almost all of the great world religions espouse the promotion of peace, even as the enunciation of the birth of Christ was accompanied by the promise of "peace on earth, good will toward men."

While it is beyond the power of an individual to effect "peace on earth," even an individual who has great power and position, it can be and should be in the hearts of all men and women to promote peace and good will. In the movie *Sneakers*, all of the characters were to receive a reward. Each chose their heart's desire. One wanted a trip around the world for him and his wife. Another wanted a fully equipped Winnebago. Erwin "Whistler" Emory, a blind computer whiz, played by David Strathairn, only wanted, "peace on earth, good will toward men." The government agent in the movie, played by James Earl Jones indicated that might be a little beyond his capacity to deliver.

The absence of "peace on earth, good will toward men" creates tension and stress in the lives of people. Sometimes that stress is as acute as a battlefield situation; sometimes that stress is as chronic as worry, anxiety or frustration over family, friends, finances or the future.

The Physiological Reason for Stress

Stress causes chemical changes in the body that, left unchecked, can have negative effects on both mental and physical health. High levels of stress contribute to health issues as diverse as depression, insomnia, heart disease, skin disorders and headaches.

Stress is actually the physical expression of our "Fright/Flight" survival mechanism. A threatening or tense situation triggers a stress response, which prepares us to confront or flee a possible danger. This is a healthy response to immediate danger, such as confronting an assailant or running from a fire. Unfortunately, the stress response is also triggered by tense situations where physical action is not an option, such as an unreasonable boss, or traffic jams.

Stress can be divided into two subtypes: acute and chronic. Acute stress prepares us for fight or flight, and is generally short-term. Chronic stress lasts longer, and is the main cause of stress-related health problems.

Acute Stress

Acute stress is a short-term response by the body. How long acute stress lasts may vary—the response can last for a few minutes or a few weeks. During an acute stress response, over seventeen different hormones are released. These trigger several physical responses:

- blood sugar levels rise
- additional red blood cells are released (to carry extra oxygen)
- peripheral blood vessels constrict
- pulse quickens
- blood pressure rises
- digestion stops.

Chronic Stress and Cortisol Levels

Chronic stress occurs when repeated acute stress responses keep the body on alert continuously, negatively affecting health. The ongoing stress response causes the hypothalamus and pituitary gland (portions of the brain) to release a chemical known as ACTH (adrenocorticotropic hormone). ACTH, known as the "stress hormone," stimulates the adrenal gland to produce and release cortisol.

Cortisol is one of the hormones associated with waking and sleeping. Levels of cortisol naturally fluctuate during the day. Cortisol levels are highest in the morning and lowest at

night. Higher levels of cortisol in the morning help us wake up. When chronic stress stimulates cortisol production, the daily cycle of cortisol levels is disrupted. High levels of cortisol may occur at night. This can result in insomnia.

Stress and Your Health

Stress levels affect health, but the effects are not immediately seen. Imbalances of cortisol and other stress-related hormones weaken health over time.

Solution: Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men

The solution to stress and of its health consequences is the promise given at Christ's birth. While you and I cannot affect world peace and we cannot change the hearts of others to make them love one another, we can change ourselves. How?

Again, I speak from a Christian perspective but one which has application for those of other faiths and even for those of no faith. First, personal peace comes from recognizing and accepting your value as a person. One of the saddest developments of western culture is that our value has become associated with what we do for a living. Peace is the inevitable result of recognizing that life is not a competitive sport and that it is not a zero-sum game. You don't have to outperform someone else in order to have value and you don't have to win while someone else loses in order to be worthwhile. It is amazing how much stress and conflict evaporates when we cease to try to prove our worth and simply accept it.

Second, personal peace comes from recognizing and accepting the value of others. The root of hatred, prejudice and conflict is the failure of one to embrace another as a "real" and valuable person. The key is that when we have personal peace we don't accept others because they look like us, act like us, smell like us, think like us and talk like us. We simply accept others. Read that last sentence, "We accept others, period." And, we particularly accept others when they are "other," i.e., when they have a different language; they have a different faith; they have a different culture.

Where there is acceptance of one's self and where there is acceptance of the person of others, all wars and most stress disappear. It is impossible to harm, hurt or harass a person whose personal worth you have affirmed. And, if enough people in a community affirm one another, it is impossible for wars and conflicts to erupt.

Herd Immunity

In medicine, there is a concept called "herd immunity." This addresses the ability of a group to resist an infectious organism's effort to pass from one person to another. The more infectious an organism is the higher percentage of people in a group must be immune in order to prevent the spread of that infection. If the "herd immunity" for a particular infection is 70%, and 75% of the population has been immunized, the infection

cannot spread through that community. This person and that person may become ill but an epidemic cannot break out.

The same is true with hatred, prejudice, bigotry and conflict which are the organisms which infect people to destroy “peace on earth, good will toward men.” I cannot produce world peace and I cannot stop wars, but I can stop the spread of their causes. I can refuse to be a “vector” – a harbinger of the hatred, prejudice, bigotry and conflict -- which are the agents which infect the hearts and minds of men and women resulting in conflict and war. I can contribute to the “herd immunity” of the human race to hatred, bigotry and prejudice. And, if another and another do the same, eventually, it may be possible to affect world affairs.

I cannot stop Muslims and Christians from fighting in Lebanon. I cannot stop Catholics and Protestants from fighting in Ireland. I cannot stop Hindus and Muslims from fighting in India. I cannot stop Jews and Arabs from fighting in Palestine. But, I can value the lives of Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, Jews and Arabs whom I know. I can love them and esteem them and in so doing, I can create a sector of immunity, which if enlarged might affect the world. And, if it doesn't, it will only have made me realize the promise of Christ in my heart and world.

Contentment

Third, personal peace comes from contentment which is not complacency. Contentment is a complex state; it is not synonymous with nor compatible with complacency, but it an inner peace which is best described by “happiness with what you have.” Contentment does not exclude ambition and industry, but it does mean that personal value is not found in “more” and the value of others is not measured in terms of “haves” and “have nots.” In fact, in the absence of contentment, “more” only increases stress and anxiety.

Expectations

Four, personal peace comes from how we deal with “expectations.” Personal disappointment and disappointment in others, both of which produce stress and which decrease “peace on earth,” are the result of events not producing the positive results or feelings which we anticipated. In fact, one truism is that the reality of an event, an accomplishment, or a milestone rarely rises to the level of our expectations as to fulfillment and/or pleasure. Additionally, the performance and/or the response of others often disappoint us, which frustrates our expectations. Expectations destroy inner peace because they can make us and others victims of our disappointment. When we subordinate our expectations to the value with which we esteem both ourselves and others, and to the contentment which we have, conflicts are avoided and peace prevails.

How many families have experienced the trauma of discord when expectations have been disappointed? The husband or wife is delayed at the office; dinner is cold or late, and an argument, conflict or stress ensues. How different is the result when each esteems the person of the other, yielding their expectations to meet the need of the other. As in world

affairs, so in personal relationships, the practice of “peace of earth” is transforming of us and of others.

Celebration, Joy, Love

Finally, personal peace both produces and proceeds from celebration, joy and love. Celebration allows you to enjoy the success of others and of yourself without comparing the two. Joy allows you to delight in and value others emotionally and sincerely. Love is the collection of all of these. Love genuinely desires the best for others and desires it for their sake, and love celebrates and rejoices when good comes to or happens to others, even when we do not share in that goodness.

For your health, I shall not wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year; I shall wish you “peace on earth, good will toward men.” For whether you are Christian or Jew, Muslim or Hindu, Buddhist or atheist, you can embrace and take joy in “peace on earth, good will toward men.”

Nothing could do more for your health than making peace with those with whom you are personally at war. And, as we all pray for peace in the world, we can participate in producing peace by loving our neighbor, especially when he/she is different from us.

As you work toward personal peace in the hope of world peace, remember, it is your life and it is your health.