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The Honor of Being a Physician By: James L. Holly, MD

Tremulously, Private James Ryan, now in his seventies, approached the headstone of Captain John Miller who gave his life that Ryan might live. In perhaps the most poignant moment in a great film, tears stream down his face, as Ryan plaintively said to his wife, "Tell me that I have lived a good life; tell me that I have been a good man." The sacrifice of others, imposed upon Private Ryan a debt only a noble and honorable life could repay.

Everyone owes such a debt to someone. The circumstances of that debt may not be as dramatic, but it is just as real. Years ago, a man asked me, "Aren't you proud of what you have accomplished?" I said, "I have worked hard, but what I am is a result of the contributions of many. And, there are at least seven turning points in which it is obvious that without the providence of God my life would have been much different. Proud? Yes, but more grateful and humble than proud. And, ultimately, I am responsible for the gift and honor of being a physician."

Traditionally, the professions were law, ministry and medicine. Yet, the nobility of all contributions to society makes each person's work worthy of celebration, whether in labor, management, service, manufacturing, homemaking, government, education, law enforcement, fire fighting, military service, or other. To isolate one endeavor for special consideration is not to diminish the value of any.

Nevertheless, there are few gifts as great as that of the opportunity to be a physician. The trust of caring for others has always been a sacred trust. It is a trust which should cause each person so honored to tremble with fear that he/she will not have lived worthily of that honor. It should cause us to examine our lives for evidence that we have been good stewards of the treasure of knowledge, skill, experience, and judgment which has been bequeathed to us by our university, by our professors and by the public which funded our education.

Reflecting upon thirty plus years of being a physician, I feel a deep sense of gratitude and of humility, out of which grows a sense of honor. Gratitude is founded upon the debt owed to so many who have contributed to making it possible for us to be physicians.

Humility is founded upon the confluence of known circumstances, providentially orchestrated, I think, which allowed each of us the opportunity to be physicians.

What nobler calling could one have than the opportunity to collaborate with others in their quest for health and hope? The honor of trust and respect given by strangers, who share their deepest secrets, knowing they will be held sacrosanct, is a gift which exceeds any pecuniary advantage. The pursuit of excellence in the care of others is a passion which is self-motivating.

Passion is the fuel which energizes any noble endeavor. It is what makes a person get up early in the morning, work hard all day, and go to bed late at night looking forward to the next day. It is a cause of great sadness that today's society is so devoid of true purpose-driven passion. Many only vicariously experience passion through the eyes and lives of athletes, movie stars, or musicians. Ultimately, passion and purpose are what make life worth living. Those of us, who have been allowed the privilege of being physicians, can and should know the passion of a noble purpose every day of our lives.

Never has there been a time when a physician's knowledge and skills could have more positive impact upon the lives and futures of others. Never has there been a time when the role of the physician has been more defined by the concept of "team," in which each participant – doctor, patient, family, nurse, clerk and others – coalescence into a vanguard against illness and pain.

Now, well into the last half of my career, I do not crumble by the headstone of one who has given his life for mine, but I do stand humbly before the cornerstone of my life as a physician. I stand there grateful to God, to my parents, to my wife and children, to my University of Texas Medical School at San Antonio, to my professors -- among many, Drs. Pannill, Taylor, Wesser, Beller, Fuller, Forland, Gold, Sears, George, Persellin and Cander -- to medical school class mates who challenged me with their abilities and drive, and finally to my associates and partners at Southeast Texas Medical Associates (SETMA) and to my colleagues in Southeast Texas. Each has contributed and continues to contribute to the passion and drive borne of the honor of being a physician.

The tale is not yet told as to whether I shall have been faithful to this great honor, but it is a responsibility which motivates me daily. To my university and to all who have contributed to the honor of my being a physician, I say, "Thank you."