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The Implications of D Day, June 6, 1944 for the Delivery of Healthcare June 6, 2018

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On June 6th we remember June 6, 1944. 74 years have passed since the day which will always be named “D Day.” On that day, I was two days old beyond the seventh month of my life. No one knows for sure, but the estimate is that 10,000 men and women were killed or wounded on that day in Normandy, France. Yes, millions are living in freedom today because of the sacrifice made on that day.

“Numbers and statistic do not capture the significance of that day, but it was an epic and decisive battle. Code named ‘Overlord.’ it was the largest air, land, and sea operation undertaken before or since. The landing included over 5,000 ships, 11,000 airplanes, and over 150,000 service men. After years of planning and seemingly endless training, for the Allied Forces, it all came down to this: The boat ramp goes down, then jump, swim, run, and crawl to the cliffs. Many of the first young men (most not yet 20 years old) entered the surf carrying eighty pounds of equipment. They faced over 200 yards of beach before reaching the first natural feature offering any protection. Blanketed by small-arms fire and bracketed by artillery, they found themselves in hell. When it was over, the Allied Forces had suffered nearly 10,000 casualties; more than 4,000 were dead. Yet somehow, due to planning and preparation, and due to the valor, fidelity, and sacrifice of the Allied Forces, Fortress Europe had been breached.”

The Supreme Commander of Allied forces, General Dwight Eisenhower, issued the following statement on that date: “You are about to embark on the great crusade toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you... I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle.”

There are 14 federal holidays on the calendar – three are associated with the military – Independence Day, Veterans Day and Memorial Day. Two are specifically focus on Civil Rights: Emancipation Day (celebrated only in Washington, D.C.) and Martin Luther King, Jr’s Birthday.

I remember the evocative words which I first heard in the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, but since have virtually memorized: words in which President Abraham Lincoln consoled a mother with a nation’s gratitude. He said:

"Dear Madam, I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom. (Letter to Mrs. Bixby, November 21, 1864)"

The records would subsequently be corrected as Mrs. Bixby had only two sons but lost them both, but that error neither changes her sacrifice nor the President's sentiment. My personal gratitude and grief for those who have been lost is not conditioned upon any judgment of the conflict in which they died. It is only measured by the inestimable value of each human life which has been sacrificed and for the heartache of the parents, children and friends of each person who has died in service to this country. I could wish that each family who has lost a loved one in defense of this country could have received a letter with these words, or that they could take these words as their own.

In the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, a scene is portrayed where Ryan, now in his seventies, approached the headstone of Captain John Miller, the man who gave his life that Ryan could live. In the most poignant moment in a great film. With tears streaming down his face, as he crumpled before Miller's tombstone, 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. My debt and yours did not originate so dramatically, but it still exists.

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 trust. 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, our professors and the public which funded our education.

What nobler calling could one have than the opportunity to collaborate with others in their quest for health and hope? The honor of the trust and of the 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.

With the growing complexities of healthcare delivery, each participant in that process will be challenged to place the needs of others ahead of personal gain. Each healthcare provider of whatever description will need to test his or her personal responsibility to set aside selfish motives to make sure that all who seek care are given the best without regard to the personal advantage of the provider.

Few of us will be called upon to give our lives or even to risk our lives for the welfare and benefit of others, but we will be called upon to place absolute value upon the lives of others and to care for them with the awareness of that value.