

James L. Holly, M.D.

The Power of Anniversaries and Celebrations

By James L. Holly, MD

Your Life Your Health

The Examiner

August 3, 2017

Renewing your marriage vows!! That's a major event, which is commonly associated with milestones, such as twenty-five years or fifty years of marriage. Twenty seven years ago, my wife and I celebrated our twenty-fifth anniversary at which time we had a formal ceremony renewing the reality of what we had declared, August 7, 1965. Two years ago, we celebrated our 50th Anniversary and our children surprised us with a celebration of close friends and family.

I remember our first. I gave my wife an ivy plant. It was beautiful and green. An attached note stated, "As this ivy grows and blossoms, it will remind you of the vitality and the endurance of our love." The sentiment was sincere, but the symbol was short-lived; the ivy died two weeks later. Fortunately, our marriage did not. As men judge faithfulness, I have been faithful to the vows I made fifty-two years ago. Yet, I wish I had been kinder, gentler, and more compassionate toward my wife and family. I wish I had demonstrated to her in ways, which she could have understood better, the esteem, honor, admiration and affection in which I hold her. But the only way my "I-wish-I-hads" become anything more than sad reminisces of past failures is to turn them into "I wills" for the present and future.

Why do we invest so much significance in the remembrance of anniversaries? The main reason is that annual observances of special occasions declare the worth and value of the one upon which we focus. They reaffirm the decision, which we made to get married. Birthdays are our celebration of someone's life, and they essentially say, "I'm really glad you were born."

Long after life has settled into a pleasant "sameness," remembering is important. In the novel, *Chesapeake*, James Mitchner put the following words into the mouth of a Quaker woman, who gives advice to a young couple reciting their marriage vows; she said: "The cold winter nights of your old age will be warmed by the memories of the passions of your youth." One of the enduring qualities and values of life is that youthful passions, well directed and well spent, provide staying power for life-long relationships.

The richness of our present life is dependent, often, upon the vividness and the excellence of our memories. It is not that we live in the past or that we obsess on the “good old days,” but the past gives significance to the present, as the present gives possibility for the future. When the pressures of the present squeeze out the memories, which preserve the past, those pressures diminish the value of the past, and often are judged to invalidate the decisions of the past. When a man forgets his wedding anniversary, his wife does not lament his neglect of a calendar date, she associates his forgetting with the esteem in which he holds his relationship with her. And, though this lamentation may not be cognitive, it is nonetheless real and important.

Women often provide families with continuity between the past, present and future. They often treasure the important things in life, seemingly more than men, and are uniquely designed by God to serve in this function. Picture albums are more often the bailiwick of women than men. These repositories of images of the past provide concrete evidence of the realities which have aided us in becoming what we now are. Women prepare and execute celebrations, which instill self-esteem and value in individuals, as they schedule and carry out birthday parties, baby showers, engagement parties and the other social events which, being far from trivial, are the stuff out of which a whole life is embroidered. When you reduce life to its essence, stocks and bonds, ledgers and balance sheets are not nearly so important as the seminal social events, which define who we are and what we hold dear.

Men need to learn from women. Fathers need to create memories for the family, and when the events contained in those memories are repeated often enough, those memories become traditions, whose observation provide anchors from the past which bring stability and significance to life in the present and in the future. A word of advice to you fathers, “If your children can’t name three family traditions in just a moment of thought, you need to work on this aspect of your family life.” If you asked my children and grandchildren, they would instantly say, “At Thanksgiving we all sing *America the Beautiful*, a Bible permanently lies in the dining room chair, placed there when our oldest grandchild left for military service and it is removed only when he is home, every summer we journey together for a week of vacation.”

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, the wonderful Broadway musical, which became a great movie, Teviah, the patriarch of his wife and five daughters, examined the issue of traditions. His traditions were religious and had been passed down for centuries, but his observations tell us of the importance of traditions. Commenting that life is as tenuous as a “fiddler playing his fiddle on a high-pitched roof,” Teviah asks the question, “How do we stay up there, without breaking our neck?” The answer, “TRADITION!” After relating a number of traditions, Teviah asked a question, which he intended to answer, “Why do we have these traditions?” Quickly, he answered, “Because they teach us who we are and what God expects of us!”

Gentiles have never quite discovered the power and the value of traditions, but women intuitively have known this seemingly from the beginning of time. Whether your traditions are ancient religious ones, or a tradition, which you started last year, they

provide opportunities to invest life and individuals with value and power. Special occasions such as wedding anniversaries and birthdays are logical and important occasions on which to make affirmative statements about the value of relationships.

As we grow older, new anniversaries will be added. For our family as with your, at some point, we will add the anniversary of the death of a member of our family. As we add these remembrances to those we already have we endow with new significance days and dates which now are just marks on the calendar but which in the future will be the opportunity for “remembering” and “celebrating” those we loved and lost but whom we will never “forget.”

Mental health, emotional health and actually physician health is supported by memories, celebrations and anniversaries. We must never let them diminish for in remembering, we truly become human and healthy. And, let it be noted, not as an afterthought but as a core value, that the importance of celebrations in your life, is not related to the cost of any gift, but it is measured by the gift of your heart which is memorialized on such occasions.