

## **James L. Holly, M.D.**

### **The Power of Story Telling in Healthcare and in Life**

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**Your Life Your Health**

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For the past several years, SETMA has been involved in a research project with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation conducted by the MacColl Institute in Seattle, Washington. In the fall of 2014, a SETMA team attended a face-to-face meeting with all thirty practices which are part of the “Learning from Exemplar Ambulatory Practices” study. (see: [The Primary Care Team: Learning from Effective Ambulatory Practices \(PCT-LEAP\): Performance Measures Worksheet - Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#)) One of the most remarkable experiences was the meeting of a young man whose job at his practice is to be a “story teller.” He collects and writes stories which tell the growth and development of that practice.

This was remarkable because SETMA has always known the power of “story telling.” Many of SETMA’s stories can be found on our website at [Medical Home - The Story and the Ideals](#). Story telling allows us to learn from our experiences and then to share those lessons with others. Powerful lessons can be learned from stories which recount successes and failures. In fact, the most powerful stories often come from the re-telling of stories in which we did not do well but from which we learned important lessons. Mistakes are inevitable in our lives; the question is what is the result of a mistake? Do we learn, or do we just develop a bad habit.

Plutarch said, “To make no mistakes is not in the power of man; but from their errors and mistakes the wise and good learn wisdom for the future.” In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge, quoting the founder and president of Polaroid said, “A mistake is an event, the full benefit of which has not yet been turned to your advantage.” On SETMA’s website there is the discussion of one of my mistakes and of what we learned from it (hyperlink [Learning From One’s Mistakes](#)).

But stories can also encourage us and remind us of when we did well. On January 27, 2015, SETMA’s Executive Management team was in a meeting when our CEO noticed an e-mail which had just arrived. As he read the note; he wept quietly. The following is part of its content:

“My name is \_\_\_\_\_...you have treated most of the elders in my family...I am writing you because of a kind gesture in August of 1985.

“My life was a mess, I was suicidal...I grew up in a financially strapped home. My parents did the very best that they could with what they had. Still, things happened; I was molested. It manifested its self in my teenage years with a string of bad decisions and eventually an attempt or two of ending my life.

“That’s where you and your family come into play. You all were going to attend a (Christian) seminar. My parents...allowed us to go with a group from your church. Our tickets I believe were paid for by you. While I forget now many of the details, here is the one thing I do remember..... I met the young man who would, years later, become my husband. We dated for about a year and a half after we met. He had me in church every time the doors opened and allowed God to work through him to save my life. He ended up joining the Air Force and moving to California. He wrote letters, but my mother did not give them to me. He ended up getting married as did I. I kept up with him for many years, calling his grandmother and checking up on him. She would never tell him that I called, only that a little birdie was checking on him. She told him he needed to come home way back then and grab me up. I love her so much. After 23 years, we both ended up back in the same place and single. He found me on Face book and the rest is history.

“I tell you this entire story because..... There once was a suicidal young lady that because of your kind gesture is alive and well today. My husband and I have been married now for 4 years. We have 4 children and one beautiful granddaughter between the two of us. My life has been a little crazy at times, but know this....God has a purpose for me and because of your obedience; I am living to fulfill His plans. Thank you!!! **Oh, by the way, I work for you now....** as does my daughter.” (Story shared with permission)

This is a powerful story which reinforces a life-long commitment to helping others; a commitment which has been incorporated into the philosophy of SETMA.

In 1966, my wife and I were living in Waco where she taught school and I was completing my pre-med work. One Sunday afternoon, we were out riding and went past the house of a fellow student; We almost stopped but didn’t want to disturb our friend. The next day, I told him about our driving by his house. He said “Do you know what I was doing? I was hooking the vacuum hose to my car’s exhaust pipe in preparation to kill myself.” He concluded the comment by saying “Don’t ever ignore the impulse to reach out to someone.” Sadly, a number of years later, in a far away city, our friend did take his own life.

Seven years earlier, while I was still in high school, one of my friend’s father died suddenly and unexpectedly. He lived in town and I lived in the country. That night, I ask my father to take me to my friend’s house. I expected a crowd but initially, I was the only one there. Shortly, a neighbor came and the three of us visited. During our visit, we told funny stories and after one, I said, “If my father ever did that, I would kill him.” Instantly, I was shocked at what I had said. I wanted to fall through the floor. The words hung in the air like a sword.

The next day, after the funeral, I walked over to the family car and spoke to my friend. I said, “I am so sorry, I didn’t know what to say.” His response has been with me for the past fifty-six years; he said, “You didn’t have to say anything; you were there!” Through the years, that story

has motivated me to enter the most difficult situations in an effort to comfort others. Through those years, I have learned “what to say,” but I have never forgotten that eloquence is not what is needed. What is needed is “to be there.”

Before SETMA, I was in practice alone. One day, it became apparent that money had been stolen. Everyone, including me, felt under a cloud of suspicion. It took a two hours to determine who probably took the money and I confronted the person. After some pressure, the theft was admitted and I told the young employee, “Call your father.” The father came and I told the employee to tell his/her father what had been done. The employee said, “You tell him,” and I said, “I will not accuse you to your father, you confess to him.” After some encouragement, the confession was made.

The father reached into his coat pocket and I said, “What are you doing?” He responded, “I am going to write you a check for what was taken.” I said, “You weren’t called here to make restitution. Quite frankly, if I never get the money back, it will not affect my future; but, your child is in trouble and you have been summons to rescue him/her.” I added, “Your child can be prosecuted for a felony or he/she can move back home, get back under your authority, continue his/her job, even continuing to handle money, and make restitution.” The alternative was for me to call the police and for the young adult to go to jail.

The father thought this was the strangest demand but both agreed. The child remained in my employment and made full restitution until moving to Houston. Twenty four years later, on Christmas Eve of 2005, I received a telephone call. It was from this employee who related that his/her life had turned out well. He/she had a family and he/she wanted to thank me for the kindness from long ago.

These are simple stories but with powerful messages. Everyone has stories. Remember them, learn from them, tell them to others and listen to others’ stories. You can give gifts of diamonds and trinkets but the greatest gifts you can give are gifts of your heart which are wrapped in your stories.