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Matters of the Heart

Heredity. Genetics. Family History. These are among the words and phrases I heard as I began to cope with my heart disease diagnosed in the last half of 2011. Secretly (and probably somewhat smugly) I thought I had been spared this dreaded malady, this family ailment that had afflicted my mother, her mother, three of her sisters and my dear younger brother. Not so, I learned.

You may be familiar, dear reader, with the distress heart disease causes, not just the frightening, painful physical symptoms and the complicated medical procedures and the complex medications, but the emotional and mental stress that accompanies this number one killer in the U.S. I can testify it is very attention-getting indeed to get the news you have heart disease!

After my three cardiac “interventions,” all within a ten week period, I enrolled in a lengthy cardiac rehabilitation program and also made, as they say, lifestyle changes.

When I use the word heart as I have above, you understand I mean the marvelous physical muscle in the upper part of the chest, usually located on the left side.

But we have other meanings for the word heart, including core, as in “the heart of the matter,” a loved one, as in “s/he is my heart and soul,” the source or center of emotions, as in “our hearts go out to those suffering,” sadness or grief, as in “heartbroken,” or courage, as in “take heart.”

Throughout my cardiac adventure, I spent much time considering matters of this other figurative heart, this “heart of my being.” I reviewed my relationships, asking, Have I been loving enough? Kind enough? Receptive enough? Forgiving? Humble? Generous? Do I expressed my true feelings?

I emerged from this review with a promise to myself to be more open and more ready to express loving-kindness to others.

Such introspection was not encouraged in my youth, certainly not in my High School years. Boys (and men) who talked about their “feelings” were and frequently still are viewed with suspicion, as being “weak.” Males are taught the stressful practice of “stuffing” feelings, including anger, anxiety, disappointment over loss, resentment, and various physical and emotional hurts. We are told to be “manly” even as young boys.

The bad news is this stress strains our *physical* hearts, thus contributing to heart disease. (See *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, “Acute Emotional Stress and the Heart,” July 18, 2007. Also see, *The Atlantic*, February 17, 2012, “Do Negative Emotions, Stress, and Anxiety Lead to Heart Disease?”)

The good news is *behaviors* can help manage the effects of stress. Quiet time, meditation, prayer, yoga and relaxation techniques all help. Heredity, genetics and family history are the part of the heart disease equation that cannot be changed but diet, exercise and attitude *can* be managed.

As I watch my grandsons, some of them in High School, and observe other young men I encounter, I am optimistic they are perhaps not as burdened with unhealthy expectations of males as were their fathers and grandfathers. I’ve seen many young fathers tending their children, including babies, and openly expressing warm emotions both verbally and physically. And books such as *The New Male*, *The Male Machine*, *Men and Masculinity* and more recent titles are helping reshape attitudes about men’s roles. And hopefully they are also leading to improving men’s emotional health and therefore bettering men’s heart health.

Expressing our feelings honestly, openly and lovingly, being mindful of what and who is *really* important in our lives, enjoying each moment, all make us richer and healthier, I think. These things are, after all, matters of the heart.

