

*This month, I step aside from the customary probe into primary issues and promising practices to invite you to relish with me in the seasonal yearning for serenity, joy and love. Many religions and philosophical traditions celebrate this time of year as the birth of hope. In that spirit, I wrote the following message and poem. May the New Year bring you the blessings of peace, the security of purpose and the courage to wonder.*

**Peter A. Gorski, M.D., M.P.A.**

## ***In the Spirit of Hope and Health***

I love this annual holiday season. The warmth of neighbors opening their doors to neighbors parries the oncoming chill of winter (I still use images from my northern years). Giving takes social precedence over receiving, and minds turn to reflect upon the essential grace that distinguishes the human spirit. Those of us who share our lives with loved ones sense a deeper than usual level of joy and health in this season. And, indeed, we should trust this feeling that connects good will with good health.

Biological research demonstrates the link between healthy relationships and general health. The human brain develops, beginning in the earliest years of life, the ability to recognize, respond to and regulate emotions as the first code for communicating important information. When a child experiences consistent affection, sensitivity, support and commitment from parents, teachers, and other caregivers, her brain organizes circuits that help combat illness, control physiological stress reactions, regulate emotion and enhance learning. Unreliable, insensitive, cold or harsh primary relationships too often force children to try to cope with the aching wound of personal indignity through aggressive, depressed, disorganized or distant behavior. For these unfortunate children, their bodies and minds face enormous odds in the effort to reach full health and achievement. Children most likely to walk the path of opportunity are those lucky enough to be reared by families, caregivers and communities where mutual support prevails over interpersonal conflicts, where social justice secures personal hope, and where individuals actively nurture their emotional ties, social collaboration and cultural diversity. This process, in which the body reflects the spirit, continues as we age. The virulence of heart disease, stroke and cancer can modulate with the well being of the soul. Peace of mind reduces the risk for bad health and aids our ability to adapt to chronic illness. In short, our health is more threatened by dis-ease than by disease.

Community, perhaps the most advanced form of human relationship, seems to shelter us from forces that would otherwise impoverish the spirit and diminish resistance to disease. Just as access to health care does not guarantee health, neither does material wealth. While economic poverty increases the susceptibility to illness, poverty of the spirit grows into a terminal malignancy. When the cancers of disparity and inequality neutralize the strength of diversity, then hopelessness, carelessness and poor health abound. In such societies, the advantaged as well as the disenfranchised live shorter and less healthy lives.

In our place and time, as music rings in the spirit of seasonally inspired harmony, the bell also tolls a reminder of the high cost of loneliness. And while our holiday lanterns celebrate the perennial hope of reversing solstitial darkness, they also cast harsh light upon the shadow of endless night for those who live unseen or untouched by the caring hearts of a humane society. We all need to belong, to be in dialogue with others. Let us then extend the holiday glow and promote health year round by valuing our relationships. As you join with family, friends and co-workers during the holidays, think about the health benefits you create and receive from feeling connected.

Our nature gives each of us the power to heal. The gift of health rests first within and among us. As we live, learn, and otherwise advance the human condition, let us remember what the holidays teach us about the realm of possibilities.

*BIRTH OF A NATION*

*They labored hard, our mothers,  
Red with effort, now blanched by the face of creation.*

*Just then, pale glow burst, blackened in proud expectation.*

*They felt loved, I hope.*

*Time now, our moment to reconstitute all history,  
From seeds planted in brown earth womb,  
Grown firmly connected and freely parted,  
Dilating our way to the dawn's yellow light,  
Crawling, surfacing, wet from the soul of existence.  
We deliver a life, a future, a rainbow.*

*With our first breath we begin to sing,  
With our first steps we continue the march.  
Someday soon, I hope, we will draw a circle.*

Peter A. Gorski