

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

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“Wisdom In Your Hands”

24 Sept 2010

Fifty-trillion cells. That is the approximate number of cells living in you today, right now. Cells that are reproducing, discarding waste, and providing energy – coordinating each breath, each heart beat, each move. And this summer, I had the privilege of holding those cells in my hand. These cells were cancerous, being utilized in the hopes of developing a new treatment for solid tumors. Without inserting a miniature science lecture, I will just tell you that I was responsible for changing their medium, or liquid food, and ensuring that the cells did not overgrow their plastic containers. The cells were sorted, counted, and analyzed. They were frozen, thawed out, and held. And at the end of each project, the cells were thrown away. One of these cells was called HeLa.

Henrietta Lacks was a poor Southern tobacco farmer, raised in the home-house that once served as the slave quarters for her ancestors. Following the birth of her fifth child, she discovered a lump on her cervix. In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot (a narrative science writer and correspondent for Nova Science Now) depicts Henrietta’s journey to the public wards of John Hopkins. “A ten-and-a-half-foot marble statue of Jesus stood, arms spread wide, holding court over what was once the main entrance of Hopkins. No one in Henrietta’s family ever saw a Hopkins doctor without visiting the Jesus statue, laying flowers at his feet, saying a prayer, and rubbing his big toe for good luck. But that day Henrietta didn’t stop.” She was diagnosed with cervical cancer and later returned for her first treatment, in which doctors sewed a tube of radium inside her cervix. But before the surgeon closed, he removed a dime-sized piece of tissue from her tumor.

Henrietta showed initial signs of improvement, before taking a turn for the worse. Her tumor was extremely invasive and she passed away in 1951. But the tissue sample removed in

her first treatment lived on. They became the first human cell line to survive, and grow, in culture. They were unstoppable; they were immortal. And these cells have become one of the most important instruments in medicine and research. The development of the polio vaccine, the key characteristics of cancer, viruses and the HPV vaccine, and studies that displayed the effects of the atomic bomb all relied on her cancer cells. According to Skloot, “if you could pile all (of Henrietta Lack’s) cells ever grown onto a scale, they’d weigh more than 50 million metric tons – as much as a hundred Empire State Buildings.” Her cells were named with the first two letters of her first and last name. The cancerous cells were called HeLa. It was the cells of Henrietta Lacks that I held in my hands, fifty years after her death.

I wish I could stand in front of you today and tell you that while I held those cells, I embraced the opportunity to learn from the life of another, to marvel at the gift of life and the importance of those cells growing in my hands. But I did not. The cells passed from the growth chamber, to my hands, to the trash. All in a days work, or so I thought.

Today’s text is a prayer for wisdom, acknowledging the power of God and His hand in all that wisdom encompasses. The text tells us that God has granted us the knowledge “to know the structure of the world and the activity of the elements, the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots.” It speaks of nature and observations, seasons, animals, and stars; but not of text. It is a wisdom obtained not from reading, but from experiencing - from holding in your hands.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor narrates the story of Jacob from the Genesis text as he flees from his home, stopping only when he finds place to sleep. Resting his head on a rock, Jacob encounters God in his dream. “Surely the Lord is in this place” he exclaims as he wakes, “and I did not know it.” He holds the rock in his hands for the second time, finally aware of the importance of this place. The rock becomes an altar; Bethel, House of

God. “There is always a chance that one of us will wake up and say ‘Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!’” says Taylor, “[In the time of Jacob], people were free to see the whole world as an altar.”

God is present in the rocky wilderness as Jacob sleeps, just as He is present today in our forests and plains, where we sleep and where we learn. The Bible presents many stories of encounters out in the world. Of these stories, Taylor writes “People could learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture... I do not have to choose between the Sermon on the Mount and the magnolia trees...the House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other.”

Unfortunately, the descendents of Henrietta Lacks do not arrive at the same success as the HeLa cells. After concluding my research project, I stumbled up her biography – a story troubled with racism, ethical questions, and poverty overshadowed by cells that revolutionized medicine. Her family lived in poverty; Henrietta’s daughter did not have enough education to decipher between a cell and a person, so she was driven into hysteria by the thought of her mother being cloned thousands of times each day. Henrietta’s children get the opportunity, through Skloot’s writing efforts to visit John Hopkin’s and examine their mother’s cells under the microscope. They hold her cells in her hands, and begin to understand. And finally, they are able to share the tragedy that they have held onto for over fifty years. It is this story that I held in my hands every day, and as I threw the cells away, the gift of life and the story of hardship went with them. But as I held the story for a second time, I looked at my experiences differently. Just as Jacob’s rock became an altar to God, discovering the story of the HeLa cells challenged me to see more than the physical properties of the cells under the microscope. It is not seeing, or acknowledging, more than the science, but *truly* seeing the science. It is not “just another days

work,” but the opportunity to receive the gift of wisdom through the beauty, wonder, and awe of the science occurring every moment in God’s creation. The cells had to be thrown away; not doing so would result in contamination and health risks for those working in the lab.

In a quote posted multiple times in the biology department, St. Augustine points to the wisdom portrayed in today’s text. “Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?” The text is not encouraging us to embark on an either/or relationship, but a both/and. Incorporating the wisdom that the Word of God provides, but also taking the time to experience the wisdom of nature and the physical world. Taking the time to discover the wisdom we hold in our hands.