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The Man with the Golden Arm

As we gather with friends and family this Thanksgiving and remember those who have come before us and events in our lives for which we are grateful, I wanted to share a story I found inspiring about a true hero from another part of the world.

What does a hero look like? What actually makes someone a hero? I've been pondering those questions lately, and in doing so, came across a story I'd like to share with you. The story of the Man with the Golden Arm.

No, that's not the name of the next James Bond film. Nor is it the moniker of Major League Baseball's hottest new pitcher. The Man with the Golden Arm is something much better.

He's one of the greatest heroes you've never heard of.

James Harrison is an 84-year-old man from Australia. At first glance, there's nothing particularly remarkable about him. He's not a famous politician, sports star, or best-selling author. He doesn't hold a thrilling, death-defying job. To the best of my knowledge, he's never made a breakthrough discovery, founded a world-changing company, or become the undisputed master of a particular skill. So why am I writing about him?

Because over the last sixty years, James has saved the lives of 2.4 million human beings – most of them babies.

When James was just fourteen years old, he was forced to undergo major chest surgery. To keep him alive, doctors gave him a massive blood transfusion. As a result, James left the hospital with a newfound appreciation for the miraculous substance coursing through his veins. Even though he was just a teenager, James knew he owed his life to an anonymous blood donor. So, he made a vow to pay it forward. As soon as he turned eighteen, James began donating blood – and before long, doctors made a startling discovery.

James' blood was magic.

Maybe not literally, but to those who were in dire need of it, it probably seemed that way. You see, James possesses an extremely rare form of blood. It contains "unusually strong and persistent antibodies"¹ against something called the D Rh group antigen. From these antibodies, doctors were able to develop a special formula called "Anti D" that fights against rhesus disease. This is a condition where a pregnant woman's blood attacks the unborn baby's blood cells. Untreated, it can cause brain damage or even death for the baby.

The Red Cross estimates that approximately 17% of Australian women who become pregnant need Anti-D injections. Since Anti-D can only be made from donated plasma, every ounce of the life-saving stuff is priceless. In fact, before James, thousands of babies died each year from the condition. Countless more were born with brain damage. And that's not even to mention the number

of women who suffered miscarriages. So, when James learned what his blood could do, he knew exactly what *he* had to do. That's why, every two weeks for the last 60 years, James has gone to the local Red Cross to donate plasma.

Every. Two. Weeks.

Think about that kind of a commitment for a moment. Most of us donate blood once or twice a year. After all, donating blood is a time-consuming process. It can be painful and scary, especially for those with a fear of needles. Sometimes, it can leave donors feeling physically depleted for hours or even days afterwards. For James, who is still bothered by needles all these decades later – he confesses that he can't bear to watch one go into his arm – committing to the ordeal every fortnight is, frankly, astonishing. As one Red Cross worker said, "It's unlikely we will ever have another blood donor willing to make this commitment."²

But it's a commitment that has paid off in more ways than one. The Red Cross believes that every batch of Anti-D ever made in Australia has come from James' blood. As a result, it's estimated his donations have saved 2.4 million babies, and multiple mothers, too. One of those being his own daughter, Tracey, who received Anti-D when she gave birth to her two children. No wonder Australia calls him "The Man with the Golden Arm."

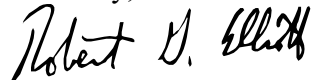
When we think of heroes, we often think of caped crusaders and super-warriors with magical powers. Often, we refer to celebrities and sports figures as heroes. But sometimes, the greatest heroes are the ones who do their work quietly, behind the scenes and out of the public's eye. Sometimes, being a hero means recognizing you've been given a gift...and then making use of it. Sometimes, being a hero just means doing what you can, as often as you can, for those who need it most...without any desire for praise or thought of reward.

These kinds of heroes aren't the ones we usually read about in history books. We don't put their posters on our walls or name streets after them. But often, in their own simple, unassuming way, they do the most good. For their family. Their community. Their country. Sometimes, even for the entire world. As James puts it, "*It's quite humbling when [people] say, 'You're a hero.' But it's something I can do. It's one of my talents. Probably my only talent – that I can be a blood donor.*"³

But when you get right down to it, that's really what a hero is, isn't? A donor. Someone who *donates* – whether it be their time, their talent, their wealth...or their blood. And since all of *us* can be donors in some way or another, that means we can all be like the Man with the Golden Arm.

I hope you and yours enjoy a safe, peaceful, and healthy Thanksgiving!

Sincerely,



Robert G. Elliott, CFP
Vice President

¹ "James Harrison (blood donor)," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Harrison_\(blood_donor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Harrison_(blood_donor))

² "Man with the Golden Arm Saved Millions of Australian Babies With His Blood," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/world/australia/australian-blood-donor.html>

³ "He donated blood every week for 60 years and saved the lives of 2.4 million babies," *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/11/health/james-harrison-blood-donor-retires-trnd/index.html>