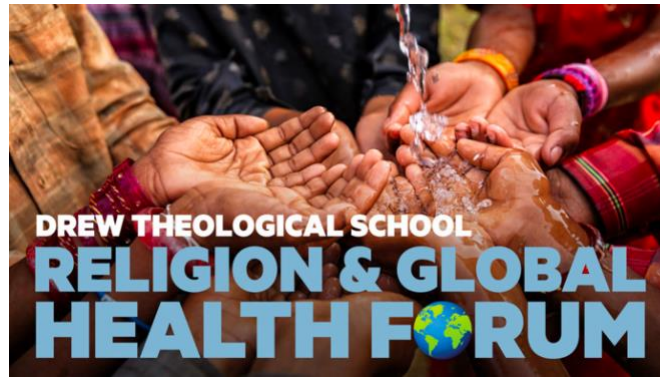


BLACK HISTORY MONTH



Forum 1.7: The Scientific & Spiritual Legacy of Henrietta Lacks: “The Mother of Modern Medicine”

By Dr. Sharon Kimberly Williams

For decades, scientists had been collecting tissue samples from patients without consent, searching for cells that could live outside the human body. In 1951, an African American woman entered a hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, and changed everything.¹

In honor of Black History Month, *The Religion and Global Health Forum* of Drew University Theological School pays tribute to the life and spiritual legacy of Henrietta Lacks for her role in advancing biomedical research. Known as “The Mother of Modern Medicine,” Henrietta Lacks was an African American woman born in Roanoke, Virginia, on August 1, 1920. The narrative of Henrietta Lacks is unique because it is both *scientific* and *spiritual*, making her particular story relevant to the field of religion and global health.

Henrietta Lacks’ journey with the medical community began after losing her battle with cervical cancer. Her cancer cells were collected without her family’s consent following her death. From Henrietta’s cells, scientists discovered the first immortalized human cell line. More commonly known as the HeLa cell line, her cell line is categorized as immortal. What makes her cells “immortal” is that, under certain conditions, the line will reproduce indefinitely, allowing the cells to live and multiply continually in service to humanity. To this day, Henrietta Lacks’ HeLa cells remain one of the most important cell lines in medical history.

This discovery through Henrietta Lacks’ cell line redefined the parameters of death and life. The medical community was astonished to learn that her cells were active and alive, multiplying outside the human body’s realm, thus blurring the fragile boundary between the living and the dead. Although her body was dead, her cells were very much alive. They continued to merge with other cells, which set the stage for countless medical and scientific discoveries so that others could live. For the first time, new life was born from a body transitioning to death.

¹ Wolfe, George C. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. HBO Films, 2017.

Today, HeLa cells have touched every one of us. HeLa cells are at the forefront of almost every major medical breakthrough of the twentieth century. Henrietta Lacks cells went up in the first space missions to see what would happen to human cells in zero gravity, and they helped with some of the most critical advances in medicine: the polio vaccine, chemotherapy, cloning, gene mapping, and in vitro fertilization.² HeLa cells have been used in biomedical research around the globe for treatments for cancer, HIV-AIDS and advancing stem cell research. HeLa cells have contributed to over 10,000 medical patents worldwide. There is not a person alive that has not been touched by HeLa cells.

During this Black History Month, we must celebrate the unique life of Henrietta Lacks, which proves we can never underestimate the power of one individual to change the world. Ronald J. Daniels, President of Johns Hopkins University, states, “Through her life and her immortal cells, Henrietta Lacks made an immeasurable impact on science and medicine that has touched countless lives around the world.” She miraculously gives her life and spirit to humanity through her death. Johns Hopkins Hospital is the Baltimore hospital that treated Henrietta Lacks for her cancer and collected her tissue sample. “Scientists had been trying to keep human cells alive in culture for decades, but they all eventually died during the research process. Henrietta’s cells were different: they reproduced an entire generation every twenty-four hours and never stopped. They became the first immortal human cells ever grown in a laboratory.”

When interpreting the legacy of Henrietta Lacks, what is most important to the Lacks family is that people understand that their mother’s spirit is still alive, even now, in her immortal cells. They thought that if you believe the Bible is the literal truth, the immortality of Henrietta’s cells makes perfect sense.³

*Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection and the life:
He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:
And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.
—John 11:25-26*

According to the Lacks family, Henrietta Lacks is yet alive! “This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised, it will be immortal. There is, of course, a physical body, so there has to be a spiritual body.”⁴ Therefore, the family is saying HeLa is her spiritual body.⁵ This can be understood as Henrietta Lacks having spiritual immortality through her live, active HeLa cells. And the longevity of her cells (immortality) is well documented within both the medical and faith communities. As the cells thrived, she declined. The HBO film director that covered this story in 2017, George C. Wolfe, stated, “Cells contain DNA; the DNA is what makes a person a person. Henrietta is present, scientifically, in

² Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Crown, 2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid

every single cell around the world. In that cell is her DNA. Even scientifically, the family is not wrong. She's alive.”⁶

The Lacks family also believed that God chose Henrietta as an immortal being to advance medical research for countless generations. The idea that God chose Henrietta as an angel who would be reborn as immortal cells made much more sense to the family than other explanations.⁷ The family who knew and loved her testified that they could feel Henrietta's spirit everywhere. All the time. Even now. Thus, this narrative reinforces the spiritual understanding of the relationality of earthly creatures, beings and the interconnectedness of all things. The film star and executive producer of “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,” Oprah Winfrey, stated, “I will tell you that I know that all things are connected. I know that is true, and that's just not some mumbo-jumbo spiritual rhetoric. I know that they are. I know that the force that is God is also part of every living thing and everything that has also lived. I feel within me and have always felt; from the time I was reciting Sojourner and Margaret Walker and Fannie Lou Hamer, I always felt the spirit of those women abiding in me. The same is true for Henrietta Lacks.”⁸

As we witness God raising the next generation of women of color to be leaders in the field of religion and global health, Henrietta Lacks narrative is a perfect example that urges the scientific and spiritual communities to unite to heal humanity. For aspiring leaders coming to the field, this example serves as inspiration for the scientific and faith communities to find common ground for the common good. Each entity needs the other to work together to serve and make proper sense of an ailing world.

It all started with one woman chosen to do God's work. In this instance, God's work of healing is done through a black female body, which comes with its own moral challenges. The dark side of this narrative brings to light the ethical dilemma of the widely accepted practice of medical experimentation on African Americans. Since the first day captured Africans landed on America's shores, many hospitals and scientists have held the practice of collecting black bodies for studies, medical testing, experimentation, and biomedical research. Scientists have also taken human specimens from public wards and justified their experimentation practices because the patients were being treated for free, giving them the right to use their bodies to cover their indebtedness. If the donor's identity is removed, patient consent is not required for research on human tissue obtained during medical treatment, in the case of Henrietta Lacks, whom researchers renamed “Helen Lane” at one point as a way of covering their tracks once they realized the actual value of her cells. Today the grandchildren of Henrietta Lacks are still seeking economic justice for the family from the medical community, including Big Pharma, whom all profited from the sale of their grandmother's cells.

⁶ Scott, Sydney. “The Spirit of Henrietta Lacks Isn't Just in Her Cells.” *Essence Magazine*, (Oct. 26, 2020), [Henrietta Lacks Spirit - Essence](#).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Scott, Sydney. “The Spirit of Henrietta Lacks Isn't Just in Her Cells.” *Essence Magazine*, (Oct. 26, 2020), [Henrietta Lacks Spirit - Essence](#).

In conclusion, Henrietta Lacks narrative changes how we view death and life. When does one's life end? It forces us to look at the spirit of life at the cellular level and how that spirit can live outside of the human body after death. Is a body dead if the cells are still alive, and is the life force of the spirit still part of those cells for as long as those cells are still active and alive? We begin to understand something new about immortality and how death can represent transformation and new life. Are we still alive after death if a part of our human body is not dead but remains alive? Lastly, this narrative brings together the fields of science and spirituality to heal our world. For all these reasons and so many more, we honor the "immortal" life and spirit of Henrietta Lacks for all she represents to the medical and faith communities and the whole of humanity. As the Lacks family proclaimed about their dearly departed ancestor, Henrietta, "Not only does her spirit live in those cells, she is those cells." Here are the final words written on the tombstone of Henrietta Lacks, "The Mother of Modern Medicine." May she rest although her spirit is yet alive:

Henrietta Lacks, August 1, 1920 – October 4, 1951

*In loving memory of a phenomenal woman,
wife and mother who touched the lives of many.
Here lies Henrietta Lacks (HeLa). Her immortal
cells will continue to help mankind forever.
Eternal Love and Admiration, From Your Family*

References:

Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Crown, 2010.

Wolfe, George C. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. HBO Films, 2017.

Scott, Sydney. "The Spirit Of Henrietta Lacks Isn't Just In Her Cells." *Essence Magazine*, (Oct. 26, 2020).