

What's a Dentist to Do? Comfort and Hope

Jack L. Churchill, D.D.S.*

First of all, I apologize to all of you readers, if still around, who have over the past few years read this column on dental ethics expecting and hoping for case studies, I am sorry if I have disappointed you. Our work is our cases, and I do not know how or why I have neglected that, but I have. No excuses!

On that note, I wish to write to you this time as well not about a specific case, but about something fairly philosophical and somewhat conceptual: a word on wholeness.

We human beings (not just dentist human beings) all are constantly trying to become complete or whole – physically through exercise, mentally through our never-ending education, skillfully through lectures and study clubs, and spiritually through the church of our choice or other avenues. Yet life in and of itself, lived in full, offers countless opportunities to become whole. “Everything teaches.”** We only need to stay awake, pay attention, and not be distracted. Life offers up wisdom at every turn. But we must also be patient, because this wisdom comes slowly according to its own schedule. Eventually we do become more than we were when we started.

“You may say there is a seed of a greater wholeness in everyone.” This seed has a great capacity for wisdom which grows as we age. This wisdom is not necessarily something we acquire, but simply something we

become. We naturally deepen in faith, “compassion, kindness, forgiveness, harmlessness, and service.” Whether we like it or not, we are all a glorious work-in-progress. Knowing this seed exists changes our perception of who we are. We are now more than we appear. That offers us great comfort and hope.

We are not different from an acorn. By looking at an acorn, you would have no idea of its secret potential. Woven into its being is the capacity to become a powerful 80-foot oak tree. The acorn is defined by this capability. Without it, it is not an acorn.

We too are defined by our capacities to learn, to feel, to serve, to forgive, to love, and, like the acorn, “none of us are only the way we seem.”

The acorn yearns to be an oak tree. We yearn to be whole. This is a basic human need.

Here's the down side. This need to be whole requires that we suffer. Dr. Rachel Naomi

Remen, in her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, analyzes the phrase “pearls of wisdom”. An oyster lives on the sandy ocean floor. Upon opening its shell, a grain of sand may enter the soft, tender, vulnerable part of the oyster. This grain of sand irritates the oyster and causes it pain. Gradually the oyster wraps this grain of sand with layers of a material called nacre, the same material lining the inside of the shell. This eventually creates a pearl. It creates something of great value from its response to its suffering.

Pain, disappointment, and loss are

Please e-mail us at jackchurchill@msn.com or fax us at (612) 339-3618. We look forward to hearing from you not only regarding this article, but also if you have any ethical dilemmas you would like to present to the membership. Perhaps we can help you decide what to do.

a part of all of our lives. To transform such suffering into wisdom is what makes us whole.

Mitch Albom, author of *Have a Little Faith* and keynote speaker at our Star of the North Meeting this year, said, “The only whole heart is a broken heart.”

Paul wrote in Romans 5:3: “... rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us.” Also, as the soft oyster is vulnerable, we too are vulnerable. By having the courage to accept that vulnerability, we can become whole.

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** Ideas and quotes from *My Grandfather's Blessings* by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, The Berkeley Publishing Group division of Penguin Group, New York, NY, copyright 2000, and *Kitchen Table Wisdom* by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, The Berkeley Publishing Group division of Penguin Group, New York, NY, copyright 1996 and 2006.

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In another one of her books, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Dr. Remen writes of wholeness as lying beyond perfection. I have written of perfection in previous columns. Perfectionism is only an idea, yet for many dentists it is a life-long pursuit. The pursuit of perfection is built into our dental schools and pervades everything we do. It can break your heart and the hearts and

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wills of those around you. It is a major addiction of our profession. It is the sense of always falling short, of never being quite good enough. Sound familiar? On an even deeper level, it is "the belief that life is broken." Thankfully, perfectionism is learned, and therefore can be unlearned. We often teach our children perfectionism by loving them for what they do rather

than for who they are. Those children have to *earn* their parents' love. True love, however, is never earned. That which is earned is called approval, not love. These two are often confused. "Love is unconditional. Anything else is just approval."

So, like the acorn, we are all more than we seem as we fulfill our potential, and like the oyster, our disappointments lead to pearls. Ah, a message of comfort and hope in a world that can be uncomfortable. ■
