

What's a Dentist to Do? Johnny the Bagger

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You and I are on a mission, one of self-imposed duty. We should think about and define that mission. None of us wants to be insignificant. We want to make a difference. We want to leave the world a little changed, maybe a little better, don't we? "This hunger for significance is an indicator of who we are and why we were created."

We need meaning, just as Porsches need speed, but if we're not "careful, this need can get distorted by our egos, sidetracked into narcissism."

I want to relate to you a story of one person's search for a mission — the story of Johnny the bagger, as told in John Ortberg's book *When the Game is Over It All Goes Back in the Box*. Johnny worked in a grocery store. Johnny had Down syndrome. One day Johnny went to a training event held for the frontline workers of the supermarket chain — cashiers, truck drivers, stockers, etc. The presenter spoke of how to make a difference at work, how to create a memory, how to bless someone's life, and she spoke of how to recognize those opportunities to do so.

Johnny decided, even as a mere bagger, that he could make a difference. Every night after work he would sit down and think of something positive, some reminder of how precious life is, how special people are, or of how many gifts we are surrounded by. Every night he and his dad would write this "thought

of the day" down on a strip of paper and make 300 copies of it, and Johnny would then sign each one.

The next day while bagging his groceries, Johnny would place one of his strips of paper on top of the last bag and say, "I've put a great saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming."

A month later, the store manager couldn't believe what was happening in his store. Johnny's checkout line was always three times longer than anyone else's. When it was announced that other checkout lines were open, no one would move. Shoppers would say, "That's okay. I'll wait. I

want to get Johnny's thought of the day."

Before too long Johnny had transformed the entire store. The floral department used to throw away unused or broken corsages. Now they would go out into the aisles, find an elderly woman or little girl and pin it on her. The butchers started putting

ribbons on their cuts of meat they'd wrap up for customers. And so on. Everyone in the store was uplifted by Johnny's actions, and business boomed.

If this can happen in a grocery store, it can happen in our dental offices. We may think that our jobs are barriers to our mission, or that "This is not the right time. I'll start tomorrow somewhere else." We tread water. We wait for another time, another place. But what is important to realize is that you do not choose the time. Time chooses you. And you

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.

are in your place now for a reason — whether it is at work, in a marriage, as a parent, with a friend, amongst neighbors, volunteering at school or church, or wherever — to further your mission. Where you are today is no accident!

As well, your mission is not about you. Each of us should be "the salt of the earth". Salt does not exist for itself. When was the last time you went to a dinner party and remarked, "Boy, that was great salt!?" "Salt's calling is to lose itself in something much bigger. It then fulfills its destiny. We were made to be salt. We were made to count. If we seek our mission by ourselves for ourselves, it is useless. If we seek it with others for others, it comes alive.

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****Quotes and all material based on and originating from** *When the Game is Over It All Goes Back in the Box* by John Ortberg, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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Each of us has the capacity for what Martin Seligman calls “signature strengths”:

- Wisdom and knowledge (which include abilities like curiosity, love of learning, judgment, and social intelligence)
- Courage (perseverance and integrity)
- Humanity (with capacities for kindness and the expression of mercy)
- Justice (the ability to bring about fairness and leadership)
- Temperance (qualities like self-control, prudence, humility)
- Transcendence (the appreciation of beauty, the expression of gratitude, the ability to hope, the capacity for joy)

Use the one(s) that resonate more deeply within you in the service of something larger than yourself.

In dentistry we get caught up in perfect margins, perfect colors, perfect occlusion, perfect appliances, etc. We also get caught up in “the bottom line” and running the business. These things are important no doubt, but don’t mistake these for your true mission. Your true mission is to serve others and improve lives. These things are simply vehicles to carry you to this end.

Use your weaknesses. We all have them, but they shouldn’t rob us of having a significant mission in life. In fact, the opposite is true. Struggle and adversity should make us wiser and more powerful and more apt to reach our goals. Look at Johnny the bagger. Without his weakness he would never have achieved what he achieved.

Also understand that “your mission will be connected to your deepest dissatisfactions.” What troubles you the most? Feed your discontent. Engage your emotions, and “carry the fire that things must change.” Your mission’s place should be where (1) your need or desire to do, and (2) the world’s hunger or need to have done meet.

Use your weaknesses.

One other thing. Beware of what Ortberg calls the “shadow mission”. If we cannot find a true mission of purpose, we will find a substitute. These are “patterns of thought and action that betray our deepest values.” They allow self-centered pursuits to take over. These shadow missions are very commonplace and totally shaped by the culture we live in. Being clear on them, and even naming them, helps to see them for what they are — distractions that lead to despair and

prevent us from pursuing our true mission.

Most importantly, discovering and living your true mission is not the same thing as being successful. What our world tells us is the bar or measure of achievement may not be what your heart tells you it is. This is a giant struggle and it is not easy, but of course, no one would ever go to the movie *Mission Not So Difficult*.

Our world tells us “more of everything.” Our consultants tell us more crowns and more profits. Society wants whiter teeth, so more bleaching, to the point our patients are so white they look like they swallowed a piano. *Mpls/St. Paul* magazine and its “Top Dentist” list tells us “more recognition”. More patients. More high tech equipment. More this. More that. These are shadows. These are never enough. They never will be.

So if you’re in the game, go ahead and try to win. Just make sure you’re in the right game. Renounce your shadow missions. Stay true to what’s important. Who knows but that you have come to be a dentist at this time in this place for a reason. That should be enough. ■