

What's a Dentist to Do? The Art of Discernment

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He was the illegitimate son of a Florentine lawyer and a servant girl. He was tall, athletic, and quite handsome. He had considerable aptitude for arithmetic but no understanding of Greek or Latin. He had a terrific singing voice and was skilled at playing musical instruments. But most importantly, he was an expert at seeing. He could see more than others could see, and he could draw. He could draw "like an angel". His name was Leonardo da Vinci.

At the age of fourteen, he was taken by his father to apprentice under the great Andrea del Verrocchio in Florence. He learned much, and the pupil quickly eclipsed the master. In Verrocchio's painting, the *Baptism of Christ*, two details stand out: the depth of the landscape in the background, and the expressive vibrancy of the angel holding Christ's garment in the left corner of the painting. Neither was done by Verrocchio. They were by his young apprentice. Leonardo da Vinci was destined to be the most influential artist of his time, and perhaps of all time.

However, Leonardo did not intend it to be that way. His ambition was to observe, comprehend, and explain nature with his works. He wanted to understand everything the eye could see through the art of discernment. His greatest teacher was experience which he observed with his own eyes and recorded on canvas with unparalleled skill.

Leonardo was interested in many,

many things. "He was an anatomist, botanist, biologist, physicist, aerologist, astrologist, paleontologist, mechanic, painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, map maker, designer of pageants, and more."** His interests were so diverse, he often left his painting projects unfinished.

In 1482, at 30 years of age, Leonardo left Florence to work for the duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, as a military engineer designing "catapults, battering rams, scaling ladders, cluster bombs, mobile bridges, cannons, mortars, ships that resist shelling, armored tanks,"** even a submarine. All these creations were to implement an activity he hated — war. He couldn't kill even an animal. He was a vegetarian. Quite a contradiction. But he was always very interested in how things worked, and it gained him employment.

Leonardo was also a prodigious writer, keeping volumes and volumes of notes. They were written backwards, not to keep them secret, but because he was left-handed he found it easier to record his observations using

"mirror writing", the text being read correctly in a mirror's reflection.

Leonardo carried his notebook everywhere, always ready to record his observations with a quick sketch — the movement of an arm, the flight of a bird, the flow of a river. How things moved and why was a lifelong fascination. He discerned the working of our muscles, a student of the

human form. He used this knowledge

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.

to lend naturalness and grace to his paintings. "The human foot," he said, "is a masterpiece of engineering and a work of art."

Leonardo studied the movement of water and understood its power, thereby proposing canals and hydraulic machines for a variety of uses.

Little escaped his eye. His notes are infused with the belief that knowledge does not come from books but from experience. He wrote, "The rules of experience are all that is needed to discern the true from the false."

Experience, seeing for yourself, was the one sure way to acquire knowledge.

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** Quoted from *Character is Destiny* by John McCain with Mark Salter, 2005, Random House, Inc., New York. Information about Leonardo da Vinci obtained from *Character is Destiny* by John McCain with Mark Salter, 2005,

Random House, Inc., New York.

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His two most famous pieces – The Last Supper and the Mona Lisa – are testaments to the rich experiences of a truly discerning eye and the hand of a master.

Later in life, Leonardo moved to France, where he died in 1519 at the age of 67. A stroke had left him partially paralyzed, but his eye remained as keen as ever.

The American College Dictionary defines discernment as “to perceive by sight or some other sense or by the intellect; discrimination; acuteness of judgment, to distinguish mentally.” Discernment is at the heart of ethics; it is the ability to see right from wrong, to distinguish between good and bad. For those of faith, discernment is distinguishing between

what is of God and what is against God.

We dentists are consummate discerners. We note daily the natural form of the human tooth “as a masterpiece of engineering and a work of art” – the tracing of a transverse

ridge arcing from a cusp tip to a central groove, the guest appearance of a Cusp of Carabelli on an upper first molar. We also observe the graceful movement of these teeth as Leonardo observed the movement of an arm or a leg. Our trade demands we be discerning observers of the human form and then duplicate what we see. It’s just that our canvas and our brush are something very

different from his.

We need to be discerning on another level. We each need to

judge for ourselves how we frame our practices. This framework is our philosophy of practice, our interpretation of what it means to be a dentist. Within this framework is our canvas – our “nuts and bolts,” day-to-day practice of dentistry. On an even grander scale, any artist, including Leonardo, is not historically judged by one of his works alone but by his entire body of work. Likewise, dentistry is judged as a profession on the accumulation of its entire work – every one of our practices. This is not visual discernment, but discernment of the heart and mind. This type of “seeing” is much more difficult. It involves training and experience under the custody of our conscience.

To Leonardo, discernment meant seeing the world as it is in order to put it on canvas. Discernment to us means distinguishing between what is right and what is wrong for us, our practice, and our industry. Let’s call it the Da Vinci code...of ethics. ■

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