

What's a Dentist to Do? The Butterfly Effect

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Are you a person of action? Aren't we told that it is better to do something than nothing when faced with a situation? Whether it's right or wrong, just *do* something? Don't we forget sometimes, though, and retreat to the couch hoping the problem will go away? Our lives, as well as our practices, are filled with these "fight or flight" decisions every day.

How we approach these decisions can have a huge impact, not just on those directly involved, but on others we could hardly fathom would be affected. You see, every time you do something, it matters. Every one of your actions changes something. Thereby, no one in our lives or in our practices, from the front desk (the Director of First Impressions) to the doctor's chair, is either unimportant or ineffectual. We all have value. Our actions and the actions of those around us matter for all of us.

Those actions are not unlike a wave rippling from one shore to another. This phenomenon, called the Butterfly Effect, was proposed in a doctoral thesis written in 1963 by Edward Lorenz. It hung around for years because it was interesting, but subsequently was proven to work and work in every type of matter. It states that a butterfly, by flapping its wings, creates moving molecules of air which set into motion adjacent air molecules, moving those next to them, and so on and so on, conceivably creating a hurricane on the opposite side of the

world. Far fetched? Perhaps. But this scenario is not just for butterflies. It is for humans as well.

Consider this story as told by Andy Andrews in his CD *The Seven Decisions*.** *One hundred and forty-five years ago, one 34-year-old man, a teacher and professor of literature, made one move and changed how a nation exists.*

On July 3, 1863, this colonel in the Union army was engaged with the Confederate army near a small town in Pennsylvania called Gettysburg. He was told whatever you do, you can't leave here; whatever you do, you can't allow the Confederates to breach your flank and get behind the main Union lines. If that were to happen, it would mean certain defeat for the Union army.

This man, Joshua Chamberlain, commanded the left edge of a line of 80,000 Union soldiers. At 2:30 p.m. that day, the 15th and 27th Alabama charged his troops. Advancing several times, each time they were pushed back. At one point Chamberlain took a bullet to his own belt buckle.

Eventually his troops were reduced from 300 to 80, and they were out of ammunition. Joshua told his sergeant to take ammo from the dead and wounded, but that had already been done. The Confederates gathered for the final fatal push. Joshua's brother hollered, "We're leaving, right?"

Another shouted, "They're coming! Make a decision!"

His brother again yelled, "Make a move!"

It was then Chamberlain made his fateful decision: "Fix bayonets!" and

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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.

"Charge!" His Union soldiers from Maine subsequently captured more than 400 Confederate soldiers. After the bulletless onslaught, one of his men guarding more than a hundred Confederate prisoners said, "Colonel Chamberlain, I'm holding these prisoners with an empty weapon."

Chamberlain replied, "Just don't tell them."

Had Chamberlain's left flank been breached that day, the South would likely have won the Battle of Gettysburg. Had the South won Gettysburg, they would have won the Civil War, and the United States would likely have looked like Europe — nine to 13 individual coun

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** Quoted and descriptive material from *The Seven Decisions* by Andy Andrews, a PBS Special recorded on DVD and CD. Mr. Andrews' website is <http://store.andyandrews.com/Detail.bok?no=44>

† Quoted from *Giving Thanks — The Gifts of Gratitude* by M.J. Ryan, Conari Press, San Francisco, CA, 2007.

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tries. Hitler would have pressed through Europe unopposed by the United States of America. Hirohito would have had his way in the South Pacific. Who knows what our world would be like now without a strong USA. This United States of America exists because of one move by one person 145 years ago. Think of it!

Joshua Chamberlain is a human example of the Butterfly Effect — one person making one move 145 years ago the effects of which are still rippling through our lives.

Each of us has a purpose in life. As we move toward that purpose, that aim, we are all either approaching, in, or coming out of a crisis. As we negotiate these unavoidable crises, we must remember that until we accomplish our purpose, we cannot be harmed.

Colonel Chamberlain, after his service to his country, became governor of Maine, where he served four terms. One day he received a letter from a member of the same 15th Alabama that fought him that fateful day. The soldier felt compelled to tell him that on several occasions that day he had had him in his crosshairs, but could not pull the trigger. You see, Colonel Chamberlain had not yet accomplished his purpose. He was protected. We too are protected until our goals are met.

I practice in downtown Minne-

apolis in a professional building with several other dentists. A few of those dentists and I have created a fun group called the Hopeless Prognosis Study Club — simply an excuse to get together and enjoy one another. We met recently to share some holiday cheer. Only four of us attended. It occurred to me that the four of us were all “flapping our wings” from what in my estimation are enormous endeavors to the performance of an act that day which went largely unnoticed except by me.

One recently committed himself to a mission trip to Cameroon, Africa, for two weeks of providing dentistry to those in need. He went there not knowing what to expect but knowing that he needed to act. Another takes time from his practice to provide dentistry to the Union Gospel Mission once a month even though he has a busy practice and a large family. The third is an endodontist to whom I refer many cases and for whom I have the utmost respect. When my patients return from his care, I receive nothing but the most glowing remarks. He has deep faith and is always very giving. He is also a beekeeper, and to our gathering he brought some of

his honey (actually, the bees' honey that he stole; just kidding, Jim) in a jar the shape of a bear. I assumed he intended it to be a gift to one of us, but the manager of the establishment took an interest in it. Jim recognized his “enamor” with the honey and without hesitation gave it to him. This simple, generous act had a large impact on me.

As G. Richard Rieger says, “Our work-a-day lives are filled with opportunities to bless others. The power of a single glance or an encouraging smile must never be underestimated.”†

So remember, the choices you make and the actions you take are important to all of us forever. They are important not only to you, but to your friends, your family, your community, your practice, and your colleagues, perhaps even to someone on the other side of the world. Every action creates and re-forms the world around us. Like a butterfly flapping its wings, we all must create a better world. We're in it together and should hold each other accountable. Everything we do matters — from the smallest to the largest act.

So get off the couch and flap those wings. ■