

What's a Dentist to Do? The Horses are Out of the Barn

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Ben Stein, former White House speechwriter, columnist, trial lawyer, law school professor, scriptwriter, and author, rubs elbows with lots of Hollywood stars. In his last syndicated column, he wrote about who his heroes were, and who they were not.

"A man or woman who makes a huge wage for memorizing lines and reciting them in front of a camera," he said, "is no longer my idea of a shining star we should all look up to. A real star, the kind who haunts my memory, is the U.S. soldier in Baghdad who saw a little girl playing with a piece of unexploded ordnance. He pushed her aside and threw himself on it just as it exploded. He left a family desolate in California and a little girl alive in Baghdad." Stein went on to list orderlies, paramedics, teachers, nurses, hospice and cancer ward workers.

"Think of each and every fireman who was running up the stairs at the World Trade Center as the towers began to collapse," he said. "Now you have my idea of a real hero. I came to realize that life lived to help others is the only one that matters. This is my highest and best use as a human."

Albert Einstein stated that "Society today places power in the individual and his/her development. In so doing society encourages and develops that which drives the individual's ego, and those impulses which drive him/her to others are discouraged and atrophy." We have become a society of individuals more concerned with

"me" than "we". "The only way to eliminate these evils," Einstein continued, "is education of the individual which aspires to revive an ideal that is geared toward the service of our fellow man."**

Our job as dentists is a gift. I believe we should be guided by three principles:

- (1) An unquenchable thirst for knowledge.
- (2) A striving for excellence. Being a perfectionist and needing to always improve can create anxiety and a sense of inadequacy, can't it? But this can be a good anxiety, one with a purpose. It keeps you humble and acts as a catalyst to drive you to greater things.
- (3) A need to serve others.

Without #3, 1 and 2 ring hollow. Yet currently it would seem that our practices are falling away from service and toward self-focused, commercial enterprises. Doctors are providers. Patients are consumers. Health care services are commodities. Therein lies a problem.

Another dentist told me, "Jack, forget about

it! The horses are out of the barn and they're all the way to Montana." Well, maybe he's right. I know it's hard to ignore today's market forces. And our students are graduating now with such huge debts. But we need to reemphasize the "other" spirit.

Granted, young people are generally (not just generationally) more self-centered than other-centered, but admitting applicants to dental schools who demonstrate a propensity or willingness to serve

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others may help. And within dental school curricula, more emphasis on developing professional personality traits and the service components of practicing our profession would be helpful.

In our continuing education curriculum and in our study clubs, we need to make the service model our life-long vocation. Integrate service into your life. Cultivate the servant's spirit. Seek ways – even small ways – to serve. At home. In your community. In your practice. If you want to succeed, seek knowledge and excellence, but most importantly, humbly serve. Everything else springs from that.

We need to see our heroes as humble servants. That's how to start to get the horses back in the barn. ■

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