

## What's a Dentist to Do? The Search for Meaning

**From the Editors:** This is the last report from Dr. Jack Churchill as Chair of the MDA's Committee on Ethics, Bylaws and Constitution. On behalf of everyone associated with *Northwest Dentistry* and the rest of Dr. Churchill's devoted readers, we thank him for the many years of thoughtful, insightful, at times uncomfortable, and always eminently readable contributions to understanding what makes a person into a dentist, a dentist into a person, and both those entities into the best each of us can be. Jack has believed in us even when we haven't believed in ourselves as much. The standard he expresses is as indelible as it is undeniable. As our journal continues to celebrate the individual voice, Jack Churchill's will resonate in what we carry forward. Thank you, Jack, for all you have shared with us.

Please e-mail us at [jackchurchill@msn.com](mailto: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.

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

We are in a continual search for meaning in our lives. This need for meaning supercedes even the need for pleasure or the need to avoid pain. Viktor Frankl, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, says this search leads to an inner tension which is totally healthy. We need this tension between what we have achieved and what is left to accomplish, or between who we are and who we should be. Here we do not need equilibrium. We need to strive and struggle for a worthwhile goal. Perfecting our dentistry and our service to our patients is certainly a worthwhile goal, and does not come without its struggles and sacrifices. But to seek and then acknowledge a meaning in one's life and work helps us to effectively survive.

Nietzsche wrote, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

Frankl also says we can discover this meaning "in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed, (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone, and (3)

by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering."

Examples of the first are obvious in our profession. Hopefully – I doubt we'd be in this business without it – we get meaning from our work. Throughout my career in dentistry I have experienced the ups and downs we all have felt. I have lost good employees. I've lost bad ones. I have felt invigorated. I've felt totally fatigued. I have had good days where everything was flush, and other days when nothing went right. I have

felt part of a dynamic team. I've felt betrayed. Throughout this roller coaster ride, however, I have always had my work, my dentistry, to fall back on. That has been my constant.

Of course, another way to find meaning is serving others, perhaps in ways "outside the

box". There are many, many ways to serve in our profession – Give Kids a Smile, Project Homeless Connect, the Dental Lifeline Network's Donated Dental Services program, a mission trip, and now Minnesota Mission of Mercy, a new program approved

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by the 2011 House of Delegates to deliver care to the underserved. Minnesota's first MOM event will be in Mankato August 17 and 18, 2012.

That brings us to number three on Frankl's list.

Being human "always points, and is directed, to something or someone other than oneself — be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself — by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love — the more human he is."

Viktor Frankl was a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp. He was often one of a group that would be marched from the camp to a work site to do hard labor. It was a long trek starting in the early darkness, often into an icy wind, guards shouting all the way and driving them with the butts of their rifles. Along the way, he would think of his wife. "Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading

*Continued on next page*

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# Ethics Committee

Continued from previous page

and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness."

He understood then that someone who has absolutely nothing left except suffering may know bliss, if for a moment, in the thoughts of those he loved. He realized then man's greatest secret — "salvation of man is through love and in love."

Yet another time, as Frankl worked in a trench, he spoke quietly with his wife, wondering why he suffered so. He was slowly dying. Suddenly on the horizon a light was lit in a distant farmhouse. He sensed something. Once again he felt his wife's presence — felt he could reach out and grasp her hand. She was "there. Then, at that moment, a bird flew down silently right in front of me and perched on a heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch and looked steadily at me."

The practice of dentistry affords us innumerable rewards and satisfactions. We are indeed blessed. Along with its joys, however, are the realities of running a business while

providing a product that people often do not want in an environment that can sometimes be hostile. How about that for suffering?

We have, and Viktor Frankl and all other holocaust survivors had, the ultimate freedom — the freedom "to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way". Every day, every hour, decisions are made in our practices. We should make those decisions based on strong convictions and on an inner strength which prevents us from becoming "a plaything of circumstance". This inner strength in the face of troubles can sometimes raise us above our outward fate. We are all confronted with fate, but also with the opportunity of achieving something through our suffering.

The movie "Saving Private Ryan" speaks to this in its finale, when James Ryan, with his family by his side, finds the gravestone of Captain John Miller. Captain Miller and his men had saved Private Ryan from certain death during WWII. Private Ryan had since committed his life to achieving something from their suffering — "to earn it", as Miller had whispered in Ryan's ear just before he died.

Difficult situations both in our offices and out give us all the unique opportunity to grow professionally, personally, and spiritually. How do you bear these burdens?

Frankl describes our past as "full granaries to be continually salvaged of all our deeds, joys, and sufferings. No one can take this from us." What we have done, what we have thought, what we have suffered — all this, though past, is not gone. "Having been is a type of being and perhaps the surest kind." So don't be a pessimist turning the sheets of the calendar with fear and trepidation that your days are passing. Instead, as the months go by, make notes of your life — lived to its fullest, though imperfectly — on the back of these sheets, and reflect on them with pride.

In the end, Frankl says it does not matter what we expect from life, but rather what life expects from us. We should stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead allow ourselves to be questioned by life. How does life want us to act, think, and talk? Life demands we find the right answers.

And what about us? Are we the end point of the evolution of the cosmos? Is there possibly another dimension beyond us where the question of the meaning of a human life could be answered? ■

We need this tension between what we have achieved and what is left to accomplish.

\* Information, ideas, concepts, and quotations for this article are from *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, forward by Harold Kushner, published by Beacon Press, Boston, MA, copyright 2006.