

WE LEARN FROM MANY MASTERS



By
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Foreword

Twenty-five years ago, I wrote an article entitled "We Learn from Many Masters." It was about how, as clinicians, we must bring our hearts and our souls into our work with patients. I had had many clinical articles and a few continuing education courses published by that time, so I fully expected that article to be accepted and published, as well. The first editor to whom I sent it turned it down. I submitted it to another. And that editor declined to print it. One by one, all of the editors I had worked with politely refused to print the article. Each said it was well-written and very thought-provoking, and each said that this was not the climate in which to discuss philosophical or religious content in a dental journal, and that I should stick to writing about the science. I was disappointed because spirituality is an important part of my life and because I bring my heart into my patient care all day, every day, in one way or another. I've always said, "I love my patients back to health," and I believe that's why I have such meaningful relationships with my patients and why I love and feel so privileged to do what I get to do every day. I couldn't believe that my colleagues wouldn't want to read about and discuss this topic that was so close to my heart. I've since written many articles and continuing education courses covering important scientific aspects of dentistry and dental hygiene. An admitted science geek, I've enjoyed researching and writing every one of those pieces. And for years the article about spirituality and love in dentistry has never left my mind or my heart. I feel that now, more than ever, we need to lead with love, so I decided to write it anew. What follows are my thoughts on this philosophy of patient care, and I take full responsibility for the content. My gratitude to the publisher is immeasurable. Thank you. Namaste.

One of the most pivotal moments in my life happened at my dental hygiene school graduation. My father, Phillip Kamish, DDS, MD, an internationally acclaimed practitioner and my idol, took my hands in his and said, "You have healing hands, just like mine." This blessing and charge have been my standard ever since. I have spent my life and my career loving dentistry the way he did and trying to make him proud.

DENTISTRY FROM THE HEART... AND SOUL

Poet Kahlil Gibran wrote, "Work is love made visible." Does your work feel like love? Or does it feel more like you're running on a hamster wheel, seeing only the blur of mouth after mouth, and not the whole person attached to each? We've all had those days when we're overbooked, we're running late, another patient needs an unexpected occlusal adjustment, someone's anesthesia isn't profound enough and extra injections are needed, and an emergency patient needs to be worked in before lunch. Our heads swim with mental to-do lists. We're stressed and exhausted. It doesn't have to be this way.

When I first read Harvard Divinity School graduate Wayne Muller's book, "Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy Lives," this thought jumped off the page for me: "In the trance of our overwork, we take everything for granted. We do not have the time to savor this life, nor to care deeply and gently for ourselves, our loved ones, or our world."

I wonder, do we not have the time, or do we not take the time?

Muller continues, "In our drive for success we are seduced



by the promises of more: more money, more recognition, more satisfaction, more information, more possessions, more security. Even when our intentions are noble and our efforts sincere – even when we dedicate our lives to the service of others – the corrosive pressure of frantic over activity can nonetheless cause suffering in ourselves and others."

I truly believe the profession of dentistry is built on the most noble intentions. I've had the honor to work with and coach some of the most sincere, caring professionals in my thirty-plus years in this profession. These are people who are committed to making a difference in the quality of people's lives, who feel a benevolent sense of purpose for what they do. And I believe the hectic pace and pressures inherent in dentistry can cause even the most dedicated professionals to sometimes lose focus on the individual attached to the mouth in front of them. The demands of caring for patients and staying on schedule can affect the way we respond to the emotional needs of those who seek our help. How patient and attentive can we be if we feel we don't have a moment to spare?

Work has become our way of establishing our personal identity. Work is a way to create social status, to build self-worth, to find satisfaction and potentially to find meaning and purpose in life. Career accomplishment can build one's sense of esteem; but without deep human connection, is it really enough for long-term happiness, fulfillment and enlightenment?

The Reverend Kusala Bhukshu, a Buddhist Monk, wrote, "Every day you spend making a living is a chance to find personal fulfillment and even more to the point, enlightenment."

Finding enlightenment while making a living in dentistry can be challenging. By the very nature of our patient scheduling, we are ruled by the clock. When I observe my coaching clients, and even at times in my own practice, I see dental professionals who are so busy trying to stay on schedule, to fully attend to their patients' treatment needs, and to accomplish all of the tasks required in each appointment within that ridged time allotment,

that they may not take the time to connect deeply in a personal way with the person in the chair. The busyness in dentistry is relentless. If we're not careful, our days can feel like we're trapped in a revolving door to get 'em in and get 'em out. That's the last way we want to run our practices if we want to feel truly fulfilled and enlightened by our profession.

If we serve our patients to the best of our abilities and we're well-rewarded, why are so many of our colleagues frustrated and disenchanted with dentistry? It's possible that some of us feel disconnected because while we're trained to be outstanding technicians and scientific thinkers, we're not encouraged to bring our emotional and spiritual selves to work. In our culture, it's considered ill-mannered to discuss controversial topics such as religion and spirituality in the workplace. We're taught to avoid these subjects lest we offend someone of different beliefs and values.

I believe that if we treat all religious and philosophical beliefs with respect and honor, they cease to become controversial. And I believe deeply that we must allow ourselves to relate to our patients on a personal, human level in order to feel connected. Spirituality, in my humble opinion, isn't just for Sunday morning in church or Friday night in synagogue. It's meant to be an integral part of the way we live our lives every day.

If you're feeling stressed out and like something important is missing and you're beginning to wonder if you've chosen the right career path, think again. You don't have to abandon the training and experience you've worked so hard to attain. It is possible to do enlightened work. You simply need to find inspiration to transform your practice towards a more spiritual path.

The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish text also found in many Christian bibles, states that wisdom "hastens to make herself known to those who desire her." As it is said, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." I believe that once you chose to find inspiration you will see it everywhere you look, including in your patients.

I have had patients say the most surprising things to me, seemingly out of the blue. When I was expecting my first child and experiencing some symptoms that made me fear I might miscarry, a patient to whom I had revealed nothing about my condition touched my arm and said, "I believe you will have a healthy baby. Find peace in knowing that the universe is carrying this child with you." Her words brought tears to my eyes and wonder to my heart. How did she know I was worried? I had no idea but was deeply grateful that she shared her insight with me. I did indeed carry that child to term, with the blessings of the universe. That moment, and others, reaffirmed for me

my belief in the deep and mystical connections we share with one another.

Many years later, as I was losing my father, a brilliant dentist, to the ravages of dementia, a dear patient of mine whom I had not told of my father's condition hugged me and said, "I see your father in your eyes. He will live on in your heart, and he will guide your hands as you care for your patients." The marvel of her intuitive knowing never ceases to amaze me.

Another patient, a Christian minister who knew my father's condition, began reciting verses to me in Hebrew while I was performing his oral cancer screening. When I admitted that I didn't understand, he translated the passages for me. He had recited the Jewish prayer for healing, the Mi Shebarach, and had asked God to grant my father refuat hanefesh, complete healing of his spirit. This man is now very ill with Parkinson's disease and we quietly pray these same prayers together for him at every one of his dental appointments.

There are many masters, many prophets and spiritual guides who share inspirational lessons. Every spiritual practice has insights to guide us on our quest for enlightenment, for compassion, for human connection. The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, says, "Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values." I believe he reminds us that while preserving faith in one's own tradition, one can admire, appreciate and respect other traditions. While some may fear that this might dilute one's foundational beliefs, I believe it can serve to enhance our spirituality and lead us closer to enlightenment. As you open yourself up to the abundance of inspiration all around, you may find that this abundance strengthens the lessons learned from your own faith.

My idea of spirituality grew out of both my traditional Jewish upbringing and my explorations of different religions, from Baptist to Buddhist to Baha'i. The sages, prophets and theologians I have studied share the basic fundamental values of love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, patience, generosity, service and honesty. Studying different traditions can foster awareness and understanding. It can improve our everyday lives, relationships and sense of purpose. As you explore these lessons from different spiritual masters, you may find your personal values become more defined and meaningful.

Whether you use the term God, Heavenly Father, Almighty, Holy Spirit, Allah, Buddha, Brahman, Waheguru, Higher Power, Universe, Supreme Being or any number of other terms, they are all used to describe a spiritual essence bigger than us. For ease in this text, I'll use the term that

is most familiar to me, God, to symbolize this essence.

I realized that all of the faiths that I had experienced and studied valued the same thing but used different names and terminology. At the core of all spiritual teachings one learns that God is Love. And in my opinion, love is what we need more of in dentistry.

I have found the following foundational beliefs to be beneficial as I practice a more spiritual loving form of dentistry:

ALL PEOPLE ARE TRULY SACRED

How would your patient's experiences in your practice change if everyone on the team treated each patient as if they were the embodiment of God? Imagine the experience you would create for your patients if you treat everyone with the reverence that you would show to your Heavenly Father.

Roman Catholic Nun, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, known as Mother Teresa, chose to see every person as Jesus Christ in disguise and treated them as such. Australian professor of Psychiatry, Philosophy and Anthropology, Roger Walsh, author of Essential Spirituality, states, "As we see and treat others, so do we see and treat ourselves. Seeing the sacred in others helps us recognize the sacred in ourselves." I find this is so important in giving ourselves grace when we inevitably fall short of our own high expectations.

A beautiful tradition of recognizing the sacred in others is the Sanskrit greeting, namaste, which has been translated to mean "I bow to the light I see in you" and "The greatest good in me is honored to recognize the greatest good in you." There are numerous variations of the translation that are all extremely reverent, acknowledging the holiness of the other person and the holiness of us all. I say a silent "namaste" as I greet my patients, hoping they will subconsciously or intuitively feel the reverence I'm extending to them underneath our traditional, "Hello! So great to see you!"

IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE

In the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, love and service of others are often given equal status with love and service to God. Chinese philosopher Confucius taught, "Make it your guiding principle to do your best for others." Some traditions hold generosity and service in such high esteem that they are considered the essence of spiritual life. Service is an expression of spiritual awakening. Our service to others also serves ourselves. Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Prize winning author

who devoted his life to serving the poor and sick in Africa, stated, "The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Dentistry is a profession dedicated to service. The key to true professional fulfillment, in my opinion, is to begin to serve our patients' spirits as well as their health. When I have a patient in my chair who has an emotional need that I can intuit, I feel it is my calling to create space for their emotional care if they are open to it. There are times we may not even accomplish any dental treatment. If I simply listen deeply and intently, share a prayer, share a tear, hold hands, hug my patient or otherwise offer comfort, I believe I am serving them to the best of my ability in that moment. Of course, one must use sensory acuity. You must be able to intuit your patient's desire for this emotional connection or preference for privacy, and respect those needs.

EVERYONE COMES FROM GOOD INTENTIONS

Success coach Anthony Robbins, not a religious prophet but a source of wisdom and inspiration for me, shares this core belief. When I accepted it as one of my personal core beliefs, it had a profound impact on my life. I now believe that no one intends to be a difficult dental patient or a difficult team member. They may simply be afraid or have an unmet need of some kind. Robbins also teaches that every communication is either a cry for help or a loving response. Realizing that your more challenging patients or co-workers don't intend to stress you out but may actually have an unmet need will help you see them in a more charitable light. When it dawned on me that one of my most difficult patients' blustery behavior was a cry for help, a need for significance, according to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, I was able to change my approach to him. Once I met his cry for help with the loving response of making him feel extra important, instead of my own cry for help in feeling annoyed by his behavior, I became more loving, and he became much easier to love.

OUR INTENTIONS TRANSFORM OUR DEEDS

Our motives can transform our actions from the mundane to the spiritual. If we perform our daily activities in a spirit of service, those activities will be transformed as will our experience of them. The underlying intention is critical in spiritual life. So, as we perform a cancer screening, a prophylaxis or a crown preparation, with the intention of serving our patient at the highest physical and spiritual level, our service is elevated to that of the Divine.

Muhammad, the founder of Islam, stated that "All actions are judged by the motives prompting them." The same actions can be performed with the thought of just getting

it done, with one's focus on the payoff at the end, or they can be performed with a pure and giving heart, with the intention to serve the needs of the other person to the best of one's ability. It is easy to understand the difference one's motives make on the outcome of the action. When you perform acts of service with the primary intention of benefitting or blessing the other person, the result will ultimately benefit, or bless, you.

By embracing these foundational beliefs and allowing oneself to be inspired by the many masters who have come before us and who can guide us along the path to more enlightened work, I contend that you will find more fulfillment, satisfaction and happiness in your work. I invest my energy and my love into my relationships with my patients, and we have developed bonds far beyond those of simply professional clinician and patient.

I believe that as more dental professionals allow themselves to connect more spiritually with their patients, dentistry will evolve into a more fully integrated health care profession. We will begin to more consciously address our patients' emotional and psychological needs as well as their dental needs. When we take the time to support our patients' emotional well-being and make accommodations for their psychological needs during their time with us, they will know we truly see them as sacred individuals.

This is the holistic, mind/body approach that some healthcare practitioners are beginning to successfully integrate into the traditional practice of medicine and dentistry. Embracing the mind/body approach starts with the heart. When we connect heart to heart and soul to soul with our patients, they will be served on a more meaningful level, and we will find more fulfillment in our careers.

We learn from many masters. We simply must be willing students with open minds and open hearts.

About the author:

Kathryn Gilliam, BA, RDH, FAAOSH, HIAOMT, is a Certified Biological Dental Hygienist and Founder of PeriOLinks, LLC, a consulting and speaking company. She is focused on empowering dental professionals to powerfully impact the whole-health of their patients and grow their practices. Kathryn's interest in the medical side of dentistry led her to years of advanced study of oral-systemic connections and the medical model of care. Kathryn guides teams to integrate the latest science into practical clinical protocols. Even after over 30 years as a dental hygienist, Kathryn still loves and is passionate about her career as a dental hygienist, and she feels her purpose is to love her patients back to health. To book Kathryn to speak or to discover how she can partner with you to grow your practice, contact her at kathryn@periolinks.com or www.Calendly.com/coachkathryn.