FROM WHAT’S IT MEAN ANYWAY?
LLOYD NATTKEMPER, DDS, EDITOR

Each of us, perhaps at a low point in our career, or at certain critical junctures, or every year, or every day, or several times each day, is going to wonder about, yup, the meaning of our life. Our meaning as dentists. As parents, sons or daughters, as professionals, as members of our community, as single individuals amid the six billion eight hundred million four hundred thirty-five thousand, five hundred eighty-seven other folks (projected population for 1 December 2009) on this planet. What IS the point, anyway?

Do we matter? I will admit that there have been times when I have been mired around 4:30 pm at the junction of the 5 and 405 north of LA, wondering how there could be so many people driving so many cars and how could they all matter—to loved ones, people they work with, to our human community, to our time, to history.

It is pretty clear to me that focusing ones’ life on making an impression on society, trying to get in the history books, or trying to influence others in order to get recognition or material gain, is a short-lived enterprise that results in nothing more than others becoming disenchanted and disinclined to invest in whatever we are about. It is also clear that there are lots of folks who might question what the meaning of their life is and be quite content with answers from their subconscious like, “to be the best dad I can be,” “to drive this truck as safely as I can,” “to teach kids what I know about science.”

I know something else. As dentists, it’s pretty unlikely we’re going to get into the history books. Think about it. The ONE dentist who really did, John Henry Holliday, wasn’t famous because of his dentistry at all. Personally, I would have preferred to let a badly decayed molar go untreated than have a tuberculin, alcoholic, trigger-happy Old West dentist cough on me at close range.

Doc Holliday made history because he was a devoted and loyal friend to Wyatt Earp (all right, he was pretty dang good with a gun too). Wyatt, for what it’s worth, made history not just because of a gunfight (there were lots of them back then and still are, unfortunately) but because, at least during and for several years following his stint as sheriff of Tombstone, he remained fiercely loyal to his personal ethics, his brothers and his job.

So I look at it this way. If making a mark in history is important to you, you’re better off doing something other than dentistry. If on the other hand you’d like to live each day feeling good about your life, and maybe a while from now, long after you’ve retired and you’re spending a lot more time looking back than looking forward, you’ll be deeply grateful to have discovered the key. The thing about the profession we have chosen is this: you have the opportunity, every day, to serve. You have wonderful skills, intelligence, knowledge. Marian Wright Edelman said, “Service is the rent we pay to be living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time.” And in serving, you can find meaning.

Maybe you think this concept is a waste of time. Maybe you think you are on your way to a comfortable life, a life you envision where you can kick back and do absolutely nothing if that’s what it is you have in mind for a particular day, or week, or year. Have no worries, know that you are set. If you just keep on the present course, and don’t get distracted with responsibilities that don’t pertain to your own needs. Besides, “serving” just sounds like something a waiter does. Maybe you envision yourself as the owner of that imaginary restaurant, anyway! Or, maybe you envision a far more humble life. Something attracting less attention—maybe you are just, well, just a dentist. You have a job, just like the next guy. Period. OK. If you are either of these dentists, I’ll leave you alone. Please pass the next few paragraphs and proceed to the next article (unless that article is asking you to volunteer for something!)

Let me offer another quotation that may intrigue those of you still with me. Clinton Davidson wrote, “If you want to become the greatest in your field, no matter what it may be, equip yourself to render greater service than anyone else.” Think about it. What distinguishes the restaurant or restaurants you frequent the most—on the assumption that the food at local competitors is comparable? Service. What is a common thread among the best experiences you have had with various businesses, be they banks, accountancy firms, car rental agencies, shoe stores, or golfing supply stores? Service. Face it. To the public, dentists are pretty-much about the same, even if some have bigger or fancier ads in the Yellow Pages. There will be consumers who are impressed with plush office surroundings, with special deals, with the latest gadgetry. But most, even the stodgiest WW II vet who seems pretty dissatisfied with most everyone and everything, will respond to exceptional service provided by you and your staff. He will trust you. He will come back to get his teeth cleaned, maybe even for the bridge or that implant you feel is the best option so he can get rid of the flipper he has worn, and repaired and worn, for the last ten years. The service you provide becomes an avenue through which you improve the quality of your patients’ lives.

Let’s jump to another level. Service this time is about improving the lives of our colleagues and our community. And here, I am going to get personal. I want to offer examples of two individuals who I look up to as truly embodying the concept of service in their lives—and who are leading rich, rewarding, exciting lives at least in part because of that service. Both are MBDS members (one since 1961, the other since 1964). Both have retired from practice. Both, however, are still extremely active in contributing to your wellbeing as professionals, to our community, and to the knowledge and growth of individuals with whom they interact. Both happen to live in Santa Cruz.
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Bruce Donald practiced dentistry in Santa Cruz for 42 years, retiring in 2006. He loved doing dentistry, and was dedicated to providing the best care possible to his patients. During that time, he served on the MBDS Board first as a member of the Ethics Committee (which later evolved into the Peer Review Committee) and was actively involved with Peer Review for at least 25 years (serving as head of the committee during many of those years). He passed through each of the “chairs” (V.P., President Elect, President, Imm. Past President), founded the Fluoridation Committee in 1998 (over which he still presides), and has served as the MBDS State Trustee for the past six years. Bruce spearheaded successful fluoridation campaigns in Santa Cruz and Watsonville (he will be the first to point out that he had help from others, including the late Teran Gall, Cynthia Matthews [former mayor of Santa Cruz] and Betsy McCarty [head of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency]. He would even insist that they deserve “most of the credit”. In contradiction to Bruce’s self-effacing comments, he and is considered by many (including individuals who have served on the executive Board of the ADA) to be one of the most effective and knowledgeable dentists in the country with regards to fluoridation in our communities. Our society presented him with our “Dentist of the Year” award, according to our own Carole Hart, “for his years of service to the society”—in 1998. Bruce provides all of us who serve on the Board a wonderful mentor, a superb example of enthusiasm for dentistry at every level, and a link to who and what matters in our profession. I would ask that you notice who provided the photograph for the cover of this newsletter—and for several previous SmileLines. Bruce.


He has served on the MBDS Board in various functions, currently serves on the Board for Dientes Community Dental Clinic, and on the Cabrillo College Dental Hygiene Advisory Committee. I had the pleasure of sitting with him and his wife Judy at the Inn at Spanish Bay the evening he was awarded the MBDS “Dentist of the Year” award. But there’s a lot more. John studied part-time during his first years of practice, earning a teaching credential in 1971. Shortly after, he developed and began teaching a course in oral medicine at Cabrillo College for their Dental Hygiene Program. Wednesdays, 1 – 2. John has taught in the Dental Hygiene Program at Cabrillo continuously since then. Pharmacology. Oral pathology. Care of special-needs patients. Nitrous oxide analgesia. Going on 39 years. Cabrillo hygiene students he has taught consistently score among the highest in the country in these subjects on their national board exams. Classes I have taught with John have consistently voted for him as their finest, or favorite, or “most memorable” instructor. Since “retiring” from practice, he needed something else to do—so now is also teaching pham and path at Western Career College Dental Hygiene Program on his “free” days. This man has provided multiple generations of dental hygienists up-to-date knowledge—knowledge that they remember and use every day. He is a consistent role model of professionalism, humor, sincerity, and insight--firmly based in literature and experience—to students, other faculty and everyone who meets him.

So what’s the point of all of this anyway? Simply this. You have been given gifts, some you were born with, others acquired through teachers, through practice, through experience. If you use them, all of your life, for the joy of improving others’ lives, you will be rewarded, all of your life, right up to the end. And you will know that you mattered.