

Dentistry at the Crossroads: A Pre-Millennium Perspective

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1923 was a propitious year for William Gies and a propitious year for the American Association of Dental Schools. After Dr. Gies visited all the dental schools in Canada and the United States, he initiated, and later led, the negotiations that resulted in the creation of the Association. Now, some seventy-five years later, we come together in celebration of the best of dental education.

I, along with my Committee on the Future of Dental Education colleagues, traveled fewer miles than Dr. Gies to be with you today. We visited not fifty-four but eleven dental schools, from Los Angeles to New York, from Chapel Hill to San Francisco. Nevertheless, it is a great honor to be a part of this leadership summit.

We meet in the midst of great traditions. It was three hundred years ago that one of Spain's great scholars, Baltasar Gracián, wrote of "examples of greatness" and went on to say that "nothing makes the spirit so ambitious as the trumpet of someone else's fame. It frightens away envy and encourages noble deeds." In 1937, Dr. Gies used similar words in describing dentistry as having the "qualities of a noble profession . . . high ideals, important duties, special opportunities." He went on to appeal directly to his colleagues: "follow impulses and leadership that represent ideals; that point the way to your professional destiny." I, too, want to speak of greatness, of noble deeds, and of leadership.

This was, and is, what the Institute of Medicine (IOM) report was all about. From its summary: "The future of dental education will be shaped by scientific, technological, political and economic factors that are in part beyond the profession's control. Nonetheless, dental educators, individually and collectively, have important choices to make. . . . They may attempt to preserve the status quo . . . alternatively, they could follow a more difficult path of reassessing and renewing their missions . . . so that they could contribute more—and more visibly—to the university and the community. Taking this path would require new vigor."

Making choices, choosing the difficult path, making contributions with vigor: it's all about leadership. And it's this that I want to share with you today: a post-IOM perspective on leadership

To put this in context, we must heed the words of Albert Hunt in a recent edition of the *Wall Street Journal*: "The defining political issue of the 1990s is health care. More than economy, war and peace or abortion, this issue persistently arouses America's passions." Now, more than ever, it is time for leadership at its best—for academic dentistry.

Speaking of leadership, there is one special person I wish were here, one who would probably be very pleased but quite surprised, I suspect, that the young John Howe who wanted to carry his doctor's bag as a child would today have the high honor of being your morning speaker. That person is Dr. Bill Boynton, a family physician who had a major influence in my formative years. This small-town doctor who would let me follow as he made rounds, who would describe both diagnoses and treatment to me in terms I was too young to fully understand, was the person I most wanted to emulate.

You had someone like Dr. Boynton in your life. I know, because we all did. A role model, a hero even, not just to you, but the entire community. It doesn't matter whether you were reared in Pritchett, Texas, or in Boston, in Seattle, or in Jacksonville; someone touched our lives at some young age and planted the idea that we could become health professionals.

I'm not sure Dr. Boynton would recognize the practice of medicine and dentistry today. He probably would have never owned a computer, even if they had been available. He was content to diagnose with his hands, his stethoscope, a blood pressure cuff, and a microscope. He had no time for government acronyms. He guarded his practice and his patients, nurtured them, and treasured them.

But the past is past, and some years ago he retired, forced to give up his practice by things he never understood: paperwork, technology, gatekeeping. To be sure, if he were practicing today, Dr. Boynton would approve of some of those changes, though he would never have envisioned them, and he would have been dismayed by others.

No one ever rolled over Dr. Boynton.

And as I keep his memory in focus for the next few moments, I want to ask you to also think back through the years and remember that individual who most influenced you and keep that person in your mind as well.

There are other images I want us to have, collectively, in our thoughts today. In addition to those who guided us, I want us to keep in mind some even earlier heroes who guided, not us, but a young nation.

For me, to invoke the images of a Washington, Jefferson, or Madison may seem incongruous. Let me explain.

Not long ago, I had the privilege of addressing the George Washington Birthday Celebration in Laredo, Texas. For those who have never attended, it is quite a memorable event. Nearly 1,000 of the state's leading business and political leaders are assembled in one room for the luncheon that concludes ten full days of festivities. I enjoyed speaking at that event, because it is not often that I have such a legitimate reason to speak publicly about Washington or any of the Founders whose lives and intellect and commitment I admire without reservation.

There are so many lessons for us to learn about courage and commitment from those citizen politicians, those signers of the Declaration of Independence who included among them farmers, educators, and even a physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush. In a letter to John Adams, Dr. Rush describes in such eloquence, "the pensive and awful silence which pervaded the house when we signed what we believed to be our own death warrants."

What incredible courage! Their dedication provides a lesson for us that we can apply some two hundred years later to the struggle—for it truly is a struggle—for the heart and soul of the academic health professions.

Let me give you a few parallels.

It is famously recorded that upon the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, a Mrs. Powel of Philadelphia asked Dr. Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have you given us? A republic or a monarchy?" "A republic," replied Franklin, "if you can keep it."

Franklin knew that the task of sustaining the republic would fall on the shoulders of ordinary men and women. Today, those ordinary—and extraordinary—men and women who are dentists and physicians are faced with a challenge of our own: sustaining our professions from those who would put bureaucrats between us and our patients and saddle us with massive amounts of red tape. How many patients, politicians, and even peers realize there are some 45,000 pages of Medicare regulations facing the health professions today?

It is no wonder we feel overwhelmed—and it is no wonder that we have every legitimate excuse to leave the politics of medicine and dentistry to someone else. After all, we do have a few other demands on our time!

But so did our ancestors. Like all of us, the Framers loved their private lives—Jefferson, for instance, was practically a newlywed when he served in the Constitutional Congress—but they balanced their love of private life with their noble dedication to the *res publica*, public things. For them, the primary public thing was the establishment of a new nation, built on the principles that were worth fighting and dying for.

Fortunately for us, we don't risk facing a scaffold for our convictions, as did the Framers. But I suggest we have something of a *res publica* facing us today as well. And our "public thing" is to reclaim the profession and the practice of dentistry and medicine.

When a bunch of angry colonists dumped tea into the Boston harbor, they established an American tradition. And today, Americans are still not shy about letting their leaders know when they have reached their limit.

My colleagues, we American dentists and physicians are reaching our limit!

In the eighteenth century, the tenor of the times was seen and shaped by such writers as Thomas Paine and by Madison in his *Federalist Papers*.

Some two hundred years later, it is not those eloquent words, unfortunately, but another popular medium, television, that is often considered a mirror of society. Is there a message in this medium for us?

I believe there is, and there's no better example of the changes in health care we live with every day than in the comparison of an episode, any episode, from the old *Marcus Welby, M.D.* TV show with any episode of the nineties number one television hit, *E.R.*

In the former, the kindly and wise Dr. Welby had all kinds of time for his patients. Cost was never an issue, and a patient never questioned the doctor's advice.

Things are quite the opposite on *E.R.* where patient-physician confrontations are a frequent occurrence, where cost and method of payment are always factors to be considered in prescribing tests and treatment, and where downsizing, layoffs, and labor disputes are a way of life.

I suspect if our patients were surveyed, they would probably prefer a return to the style of Marcus Welby. In fact, if I ever had any doubt about patient frustrations with the complexities of health care in the 1990s, it was brought home to me in a dramatic way through a spontaneous audience response to a scene in the Academy Award-winning movie, *As Good As It Gets*.

Thousands of our colleagues have simply sold their practices to colleagues, in what they hoped would be a move to allow them to concentrate on what drew them to medicine in the first place—direct patient care, improving the health of people they care about. I cannot, and do not, criticize these dentists and physicians for that decision, nor do I ever intend to. But we are all stunned by the shift that is occurring in our profession.

Are we being rolled over? Many would suggest that we are. I would like to suggest that it doesn't have to be that way.

If we show the same commitment that the Framers of our constitution showed, and the commitment our predecessors showed, we can turn this unwieldy, unyielding ship around. Including all 45,000 pages of fine print. We can take back our professions if—and this is a big if—we are willing to take up the fight. All of us.

I think most of us are willing because we've seen what happens when we aren't. Robert Frost had a wonderful quote about willing people. He said: "The world is full of willing people—some willing to work and the rest willing to let them."

It is clear to which group this audience belongs. By your participation in academic dentistry, you have already shown that you are willing to engage in the battle, literally and figuratively, and by doing so, you too are serving as important role models for those who will come after us.

In the words of Harvard Business School author John Kotter: "people who are making an effort to embrace the future are a happier lot than those who are clinging to the past. This is not to say that learning how to become a part of the twenty-first century enterprise is easy. But people who are attempting to grow, to become comfortable with change . . . these are the men and women who are typically driven by a sense that

they are doing what is right. . . . That sense of purpose spurs them on and inspires them during rough periods." Without question, your "sense of purpose" is serving as a source of inspiration during this "rough period."

Another great American, Teddy Roosevelt, would have highly approved of the way you've lived your lives. Roosevelt, in his own words, preached "not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life." That's what we all may be facing this year: the strenuous life.

All of this takes work—on top of already overloaded schedules. But what a magnificent difference we can make. What a wonderful legacy we can leave. And how unthinkable for the future if we don't!

But, also like Roosevelt, we will have the satisfaction of being that individual "in the arena . . . to whom the credit is due." Roosevelt honored those who take on great challenges. In a similar vein, so did the great writer Jack London. London welcomed a challenge, no matter how high the odds, and it is *that* philosophy which led him to write his personal credo:

I would rather be ashes than dust.

I would rather my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze,

Than be simply stifled.

I would rather be a superb meteor,

With every atom of me in magnificent glow,

Than a sleepy and permanent planet.

President Reagan, who told such wonderful stories, recalled that London's credo was once read to NFL quarterback Ken Stabler of the Oakland Raiders, who was then asked what it meant. "It's easy," replied Stabler. "Throw deep!"

And that's what I'm asking all of you to do. Throw deep!

I know we can make a difference for our profession and I'm sorry that Dr. Boynton won't be around to see it. But others will be—others who have inspired us and continue to inspire us, with the commitment to our noble professions.

What a rich tradition we have behind us: as a nation, as professions. How unthinkable it would be if we do not show the same commitment that men and women of a different era so unselfishly showed. After all, we

were designed to “throw deep,” and with all that is at stake, I predict that is exactly what we will do.

Our predecessors gave the best they had to the best they knew. At the beginning of this new century, surely we can do no less.

My message is a simple one. Dental education continues to be at a crossroads. What’s needed now, three years after our report, is just as important today

as it was in 1995: put simply, leadership, the best of leadership, the most vigorous of leadership, yours and mine.

That is our proud legacy from the past and our bright promise of the future. In the words of Dr. Gies: “The soul of dentistry is marching on.” We, in this room this morning, can and must be at its lead.