

Those Pails are Full of Teeth

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Some Memories Stick for a Lifetime

Excerpt from *Tales of Love and Service: Stories from the Heart*, by John W. Gehring. The following story took place on a Religious Youth Service (RYS) project in the Philippines.

I have been carrying with me for decades certain recurring memories; some are rich in emotional warmth while others carry with them a sharp edge. Those memories need only to be touched by a word, a smell or a picture to trigger their return. I would like to share one that has some sting to it; regardless, the imagery can remain as a poignant message, one that serves as a reminder in the often cluttered drama of our life.

We Need Dental Care!



We were in Das Marinas, Philippines, a community filled with unemployed and underemployed men and women. In our neighborhood there were many children and elderly who suffered from malnourishment. Daily life was filled with difficulties but many children found an escape through eating sweets filled with processed sugar. Processed sugar is very harmful to teeth and in our community many people had a mouth full of cavities.

Few families had the funds to visit a dentist and almost no one had money to pay for full and ‘proper’ treatment. Without proper treatment the holes in teeth get larger and larger. In time the decay can expose nerves and send out waves of pain that can be close to maddening. Since going to the dentist was too expensive, teeth were pulled out by a designated family member with whatever means they could improvise.

In sharing with local children and their families we heard and witnessed the suffering that people were dealing with on account of dental problems. Several parents asked us if there was something we could do to help. We responded by sending a request to Japan in hopes of soliciting a dental team from our sister organization, the International Friendship Relief Foundation (IRFF). The IRFF team in Japan regularly sent out medical teams to poorer nations in Asia. To our relief they shared that they were planning on sending a dental team to the Philippines and they would squeeze us into their tight schedule.

Adapting to the Situation



Japan has state of the art medical facilities and this is what our team of professional dentists was used to. Their regular customers had the luxury of being able to return week after week till their treatment was completed. This was not the situation they would be facing in Das Marinas. Our barang (village) could offer no such places for them to do their craft. With short preparation time, all we could manage was to set up an impromptu outdoor office under a canvas canopy critical for shielding patients and doctors alike from the blazing sun or pouring rain.

The dental team was under time constraints while in the Philippines and could spare only a single day in Das Marinas. To some, there visit may have seemed impractical because the medical options of a single day of treatment are very limited. Yet, for those who were suffering with toothaches a single treatment could offer them relief from the intense pain of toothaches.

Understanding their limitations, the medical team discussed options and shaped a plan of action. The team would utilize that day by focusing treatment on those suffering from the most intense pain. In most of the cases the only course action they had was to simply remove teeth.

Our team in Das Marinas decided to prepare the community for the arrival of the medical team by calling that day, Dental Day. On Dental Day we would provide free dental service as a gift from our friends from IRFF-Japan. To get the word out we shared the news with some of our neighbors and asked them to spread the news by word of mouth. You would be surprised how well communication happened in an era before cell phones. The news spread.

One family got excited and told a person who worked in the local radio station. Before long Dental Day was being announced on radio as a public service announcement. Community anticipation of “Dental Day” grew, for many this was going to be their first visit to a dentist.

Dental Day Arrives

Our improvised temporary clinic included the jury-rigged canvas canopy with an outdoor basketball court serving as the floor. The open air environment allowed breezes to keep the work area a little cooler. Unfortunately, the open air also allowed various flies and bugs to join us.



When Dental Day arrived the response caught us by surprise, as it was much greater than we anticipated. Long lines of people of all ages began to form hours before the early morning opening. It was becoming clear that the dental team was going to be pushed to their limits to meet the community’s expectations. Taking into account the long lines, the dentists asked that we start ahead of the scheduled opening. We immediately got busy making the last minute preparations.

When the first patient sat and opened her mouth the dental team went to work. People continued to nervously saunter in and the lines took on special identities. A line was dedicated to those waiting to be checked, a second line was for those that were about to be worked on. A third line would later form to handle the after-care patients. Sitting in a central location were three improvised ‘dental’ chairs dedicated to those that would be having teeth extracted. Besides the ‘extraction’ chairs were tall metal buckets, buckets that would serve to hold recently departed teeth.

The dental team with care and persistence checked patient after patient. Squirmy young children, elderly women, anxious mothers all took their turns to meet with a dentist. Time passed and the heat grew in intensity. Patients sat down on the improvised chairs and received a prognosis that was almost always in favor of extraction. Each visitor added their extraction to the pile of teeth that was growing in the buckets.

Buckets of Teeth and the Recurring Memory



One memory that holds me, it can recur with the stimulation of a special word, a picture or even a smell is that of a weather beaten face of one particular grandma. She has her mouth open and is displaying the decayed teeth on her lower right jaw. Nervously sitting on the operating chair, sharing no common spoken language with the medical team, they are using hand gestures to communicate. The grandma may not have realized that her nervous face was a visible publication of her feelings. The dentist begins to work on the patient and soon her teeth are added to the bucket.

What does a bucket of teeth look like? When I say that the bucket was filled with teeth it isn’t the same as saying the glass was filled with water. A glass is filled with water when water is near the top. This is a normal perception. I never associated a bucket as a place to put extracted teeth. The multiple layers of red spittle and teeth formed an uneven pile in the metal canister. It was an absurdly disturbing visual, enough to earn the distinction of being classified a bucket full. As the day wore on and new teeth were continually being extracted, the bucket full continued to fill. So much for concepts.

Going Beyond the Ordinary

What did the day seem like from the eyes of the dental team? As dedicated keepers of teeth and tooth-health, the day stood in stark contrast to the daily office routine in urban Japan. While in Japan, they worked in clean white state of the art dental offices while they now sat in simple wooden chairs a few meters away from buckets filled with teeth, blood and the spitting of surgery. As the day progressed flies swirled in increasing numbers. The dentists with overwhelming persistence seemed unstoppable, pausing simply to swat at flies, drink water or take a brisk walk to use a neighbor’s outdoor toilet.

Despite the mess, the people from the community were relieved, relieved from the continued pain of aching teeth and the ailments linked to drastic tooth decay. In a sense, the buckets of teeth were a cause to celebrate. The dental team served as liberators, their bloody work was releasing the patients from a daily routine of pain.

As the evening sun began to set, an exhausted medical team was calling it a day.

They took a break and over conversation shared cups of Green tea brought with them from Japan. Being the curious type I took a walk over to survey the area that had served as the clinic. The three buckets were lined up as if on watch over a war zone. I approached the first sentry and peered into its depth to survey the mix of teeth and spittle. The evidence of the struggle was visible.

In a surreal way we measure a day's success from various points of view. For soldiers on the battlefield it may be the fact that they along with their mates made it safely through a tough day. For the businessman, success could be the closing of a big deal, for the artist success may be the visual creation of an image or experience long held in the imagination.

Our dental team found solace and satisfaction in the efforts of the day. They realized the situation they faced was regrettable but they faced a reality they did not create and dealt with it as best as they knew how. As the dental team sipped their tea in reflection you could read on their faces a sense of warm satisfaction that was an expression of a state of mind that did not come from doing the ordinary.