
How Much Is Enough?

◆ Issue #55 ◆ Douglas E. Reese

If Adam Were An Actuary And Eve Were An Artist... Would It Be A Match Made In Heaven?

Convictions and Conflict around Caring

One of the common themes of my childhood, unfortunately for my mother, was, "It's often easier to ask for forgiveness rather than permission." A young curious mind asks many questions and tests many rules. I'd like to think it was because I was the youngest. (You who are youngest in the family know that we have it the toughest, even though our oldest sibling would beg to differ.) My fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Hay, in her usual somber tone expressed in a note home to my mom, "Your son has an overactive imagination and excess energy."

So this month we will play the "what if..." game. To those recovering from or rediscovering an overactive imagination lost somewhere in the process of life, this is a rallying call. To those stuck in the Mrs. Hay Hall of Conformance, this is a wake-up call. Here's the disclaimer: This is a game, simply a game of "wondering and wandering." In advance, I will ask both permission to daydream and forgiveness for any part of the hypothetical game misinterpreted as offensive in any way.

In The Beginning...

What if...in the beginning God foresaw in His infinite wisdom the coming of dental caries (disease)? (Who could have ever known how much decay would come from one apple?!) And thus on the first day He created dentistry. And God was well pleased, seeing that this plan was good, but lacked form.

And thus on the second day He created the dental practice. God saw that this was good, but lacked character.

And thus on the third day He created the dentist, in the likeness of His own image, equipped with perfect skill, care and judgement. He would call His dentist "Adam." With the dentist He was well pleased, and He saw that this plan was good, but lacked accountability.

And thus on the fourth day He created the first dental team member. He would call His first team member "Eve." With this team member He was well pleased, and he saw that this plan was good, but lacked activity.

And thus on the fifth day He created the dental patient. In all of His glory He saw the formation of the perfect union of "care." Yet, not wanting a world without adventure, challenge, excitement and a good testing ground for humility, patience and perseverance, He created the daily scheduler and the hygiene recall system. (Over time the recall system would be translated from Greek to Hebrew to English and would become the "recare" system.) Thus, systems were born, and He was well pleased. He saw that this plan was good, but lacked the proverbial tenants of wisdom, discernment and discretion.

And thus on the sixth day He created a tiny seed. This seed, when held onto, seemed

insignificant. But when let go and spread across the varying landscapes, the seed would sprout forth tiny buds that would grow, blossom and bear fruit in abundance. To this, His very prized thing (God wasn't big into "things") He would add a secret ingredient that would captivate his people for generations to come.

The secret only came forth in the blossom, which when nurtured and given time to open up, held a message inside that would become critical to anyone in the business of nurturing growth and development. The message read as follows:

I am a one-of-a-kind, unique in my own way, looking similar to others but needing my own special attention. It will take time, energy and money. But don't give up on me, and don't treat me like all of the others, and I will reward you beyond your wildest dreams.

And thus "caring" was born.

(Unfortunately as history would unfold, there would come about seasons of pestilence, drought, and oh yes...a year of a lot of rain, all of which over time seemed to slowly make it more difficult to allow the secret to come forth at the blossom. Thus, "caring" began to lose its original intention. (Yet, the secret ingredient remained, like the Master's touch -- flawless and timeless, laying in wait to be rediscovered.)

Then came the big moment that would change everything. God looked at His creation of the dental community and saw that it was good. And, before resting on the seventh day, He invoked a privilege that would baffle the masses for eternity, for He did not want a people void of creativity.

And thus early on the seventh day God created "freedom of choice." Then God rested, and that's when all you-know-what broke loose...

Let's join an "already in progress" Sunday afternoon gathering of Adam and Eve and the first documented staff meeting. What follows is the meeting transcript...

Adam: "Eve, will you read the last minutes?"

Eve: "There were no last minutes. This is actually the first minute."

Adam: "Good, a fresh start. I have some new ideas I'd like to implement immediately. (Adam had just returned from the state dental meeting full of himself. Eve would reserve judgement.)

[Background information: As we are each granted gifts and talents at birth, there for our discovery, Adam would soon realize he came with actuarial tendencies. This meant he was naturally inclined to focus on small and intricate details, to compare and to analyze, and to want results to justify the means. His guardian angel was to be Father Time...Eve, on the other hand, would find her joy and her passion through artistic expression, discovering a deep and personal interest in the way the world naturally fit, and seeking understanding of the timeless truths. Her guardian angel would be Mother Nature.]

On this, the first day...actually in the first minutes, Adam and Eve would learn the meaning of conflict resolution. Since sin had not yet been introduced into the world, conflict was not yet known and the minutes simply read, "Entered new process we'll call 'participative management.'" Sensitivity training was about to have its birth. Let's again join the meeting.

Adam: “Something tells me we’re in for a ride, and we need to be ready with our best gameplan.”

Eve: “Ride? Gameplan? What are you talking about?”

Adam: “People will come to us for service. We need a gameplan. I suggest this system for charting and records...”

Eve: “Where in the *garden* did you find that thing?”

Adam: “...And here is our financial policy, our treatment acceptance goals, and monthly production and collection targets. We need to keep on top of this every month...”

Eve: “Every what?”

Adam: “Real service could eat up a lot of time, which we can only afford so much of, and they’ll only pay so much for. So let’s break this thing down to a commodity approach. I’ve come up with a Fee Schedule by procedure. If we map out our ideal production week, matching the commodity price with units of time, and we keep our recall and new patient flow healthy, our schedule will work like a dream.”

Eve: “Now you are dreaming.”

Adam: (A bit frustrated with Eve’s lack of enthusiasm and support for his masterful plan.) “Well, I sense this is not the perfect plan for you. What do you suggest?”

[At this point, Father Time has been in the wings, watching with great anticipation if Eve would buy into this program. After all, it meets all of the criteria for keeping a tight control on time and keeping an eye on profitability. Now enter Eve, with her chance to express her vision of service. In the wings will be Mother Nature, watching with anticipation if Adam can understand the meaning of allowing growth to occur in its proper season.]

Eve: “How can we best care for each human being that comes to us?”

Adam: “Huh?”

Eve: Let’s sit with them, learn how they tick, get a sense of them as a person with very individual needs, fears, hopes, and uncertainties.”

Adam: “You mean just ‘be’ with them awhile? Be present without judgement or advice or models or x-rays?”

Eve: “X-rays?”

Adam: “What about the mouth? When do we go in?”

Eve: “When we have gone into their lives through their point of view. They tell us about them before we show them what needs work. Then we help them learn and choose based on their needs, not ours.”

Adam: “What about treatment acceptance rate? What’s the goal there? This feels very time-consuming.”

Eve: “Success will be measured by their level of oral health on the 20th anniversary of their new patient visit, and we will have a celebration with a cake and 28 candles.”

Adam: “Huh?”

Eve: “One candle for each tooth they have kept healthy and attached to the bone.”

Adam: “20 years! How about we meet in the middle?”

[Adam had no idea this caring would be such a time commitment and would require a lot of personal attention.]

Eve: Compromise is not an acceptable means of caring. However, I will listen to your meet-in-the-middle ideas.”

Adam: “How about we spend 20 minutes with them and then shoot for 80% treatment acceptance? You know, the 80/20 rule.”

Eve: Let’s focus first on caring for their needs, not counting up ours.”

Adam: “How much does that pay?”

Eve: “Lifetime dividends.”

Adam: “How much time does it take?”

Eve: “As much time as it takes. Each one will be different, unique, individual in their needs.”

Adam: “Doesn’t sound very streamlined.”

Eve: “Caring is not streamlined. It is the often times slow and natural progression of allowing someone to come to terms with their own personally defined needs.”

Adam: “When do those dividends begin to kick in?”

Eve: “Likely in the third to the fifth year of the relationship. By then, people will have had a chance to really trust us, to learn to value their oral health, and to begin to want the finest things we have to offer.”

Adam: “Three to five years?! I don’t know. That’s a long time.” [hesitantly...] “But if you think that’s the best way, let’s try it.”

Eve: “Ok, good. Now, I’m hungry...let’s find something to eat.”

[Then, the promising and perfect beginning to a caring profession took a turn at lunchtime when they walked into the garden and ran into that snake.]

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What does it mean to provide CARE? Is it service for a fee? Can it be measured and conducted in units? How much can it be standardized? replicated? Whether you are a provider of CARE in the dental office, in the home, in another vocation or avocation, consider the following thoughts with regards to care.

An Assessment of CARE

C ~ Consistency and Continuity

A ~ Action and Accountability

R ~ Results

E ~ Enduring Value

Consistency is maintaining a “common voice” so the recipient knows what to expect with each interaction.

Continuity means an ongoing dialogue that embodies the dynamic process of care and reflects the need of the individual.

Action means decision in the moment of choice.

Accountability means submitting to a high standard of commitment, honoring it in your own actions and upholding it in the actions of others.

Results are the defined realization of your intended outcomes. It is the measurement of success, seen and defined.

Enduring Value is the natural progression, the truest measure and the greatest reward for uncompromised care.

Does your caring reflect a common voice of consistency? Does your walk match your talk? Do you maintain a continuous and open dialogue that reflects the needs of another? Do you take action when action is needed? Do you hold yourself and others accountable? Are you getting the results you want -- in your work, your play, your family and friendships? And how would those you serve answer the question, “Did they provide me with true enduring value from their service?”

Something to think about.