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Boldness from a Dental Hygienist

I was surprised when the dental hygienist came to get me in the waiting room. It was not Margaret, my regular “cleaning lady”, but an unfamiliar face. Laurie apologized that Margaret was sick and that she was filling in. Laurie was a contractor, moving from office to office as the temporary needs of a dentist’s office ebbed and flowed. She had seen a lot of offices in the last four years as a contractor.

I immediately noticed that Laurie did things differently. She had me hold and use the miniature vacuum cleaner for the mouth, sucking up rinse water as she cleaned. “It gives the client more control and makes it a lot easier on me.” Self-service had come to a lot of places but this is the first time I had seen it in the dentist’s chair.

The sound of scraping on my teeth seemed louder than I remember in the past. I felt like a boat being cleaned of its barnacles. But the worst was the pain. Laurie’s tools of torture seemed to be settling in for the long haul. What was going on here? I was used to having a fairly pleasant rest in a reclining chair, with an occasional glance at the scenic travel poster on the ceiling. She could see me wincing with pain. “Oh, I’m almost done. I’m just getting the hard chunks out.” Laurie finished shortly after and I was relieved to have my mouth to myself again.

Laurie was sympathetic but unapologetic. “If you’re going to go in to clean, you really need to get it all.” My ears perked up.

“I hate to say this but some people think they are getting good care for their mouth, when they aren’t. There are some hygienists who don’t want to cause any pain to the client. So they don’t get everything out. And then the client has gum problems later on.” I was beginning to have new respect for this woman. And wondering about years in the chair with my regular hygienist at the helm, amid pleasant conversation and quiet picking at my teeth. I quickly became thankful for the stinging sensation that Laurie had left around my gums.

This stranger’s words seemed oddly appropriate for my work as a business and personal coach. When I was a newbie, I had had too many experiences of not going for “the hard chunks” in order to keep the client comfortable. I didn’t want to see what might be in the murky depths of the client’s life and neither did the client. And in the end, it only served to perpetuate an illusion that everything was just fine, when down below, the gums were bleeding. Go ahead and scrape. Let the dissonance ring loud and clear. In the short term, it might be painful for both you and the client. In the process of “getting it all”, don’t back off from the truth of what the client needs to see. Rest assured that after the initial sting wears off, your clients will thank you.

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