



# Teething Problems

JOHN WURZELMANN opens real wide and says, “Bah”

I lost my job the other day, so I figured it was time to go to the dentist before my benefits ran out. I called up and got an appointment for a cleaning. The dental hygienist was very sweet. She asked me how I was feeling.

“Fantastic,” I said, knowing she didn’t want to get involved in a socioeconomic discussion.

“Any problems?” She asked. I believe she was referring to my mouth.

“None.”

“Looks like you’re about due for some x-rays.”

“No, thank you,” I said. Last I heard, radiation causes cancer, and moreover I haven’t had a cavity in about 30 years. In fact, now I wonder if I ever had a cavity. Maybe my mouth was just a big public-works project back when I was a kid.

She proceeded with the cleaning, being extra sweet about my tooth sensitivities. Nowadays, dentists and their assistants try to be nice about pain. I remember my first trip to the dentist when I was 6. He said, “Just raise your hand if it hurts.” Well, I raised my hand, and I raised my hand, and I raised my hand, and he kept drilling. So much for

trusting relationships.

Anyway, the cleaning went fine. I noticed they don’t use a spit bowl anymore. You are completely at the mercy of the hygienist’s siphon. I also noticed that the chair was set up for the convenience of a right-hander. Ever seen a left-handed dentist? There are probably a few around. On the other hand, with the large number of left-handed first basemen in the major leagues, things probably even out.

“Do you ever get tired of looking in people’s mouths?” I asked, what with germs and food particles and tartar.

“I only work part-time,” she said. She took care of her grandmother on other days. She gave me the usual lecture about proper brushing and asked if I used an electric toothbrush.

“No,” I said. “Do you recommend the one with Homer Simpson on it, or the Little Mermaid?” She said they were offering a rebate on the Braun Oral-B. It had a timer. “No thanks,” I said, wondering at the generosity of the good people at Braun.

She finished and said, “The doctor will be in to see you in a minute.” I hadn’t come to see the doctor, but apparently in North Carolina dental hygienists can’t operate without a dentist’s supervision. This is to prevent mad gangs of dental hygienists from roving the streets, inflicting tartar control on unsuspecting citizens. I’ve often thought it would

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*Dr. John Wurzelmann is a bon vivant and dilettante in Chapel Hill. When not plumbing the mysteries of the universe, he enjoys books, political debate, and music with a good beat you can dance to. He never ends a sentence with a preposition and otherwise does whatever his wife tells him to do.*

be nice if it you could get your teeth cleaned just like walking into a barbershop and getting a haircut, but the dentist wants to get his two bits for the 35 seconds he spends staring into your maw.

So the kid — I mean, the dentist — comes in and we exchange the usual pleasantries. He feels around my jaw and says nothing. Five years ago, another dentist did the same and told me I had Temporomandibular Joint Syndrome. She recommended that I see a surgeon to get it fixed. I respectfully declined, since my jaw felt fine. Somehow or another, however, the presence of this life-threatening condition seemed to escape the notice of today's inspector. Or perhaps, through the practice of diligent prayer and chewing beef jerky, I'd managed to realign my miscreant mandible.

Then he recommended x-rays and a crown for a particularly old filling. I'd heard the same thing five years before. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," I've always said.

"How much would it cost me?"

"About \$845, but your insurance may cover some of it depending on your plan." I'd rather buy stocks, I thought. "We can get a pre-authorization from your insurer to get a specific cost. My secretary will help you with it."

So being a sucker for pain, and not wanting the poor dentist to miss a boat payment, I said OK. They'd have to do an x-ray, however, since apparently the insurer did not trust the dentist. I gave the secretary my name, Social Security number, and the name of my insurer, but she wanted my insurance card. I'd given it to my wife the day before, so I didn't have it. The insurance companies can be pretty dumb when it comes to finding out if you have coverage.

"Please mail or fax me a copy of your insurance card; so I can obtain pre-authorization," she said.

"Sure," I said. "See you in five years." •

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