



The Power of Not Knowing

By Dr. Dustin Burleson

The Polish poet and Nobel Laureate, Wislawa Szymborska, said, “Our certitudes keep us small. There is a generative power of not-knowing.” Whatever inspiration she has had in her life, she says it is “born from a continuous ‘I don’t know.’” A generation later, artist Ann Hamilton wrote a brilliant essay titled, “Making Not Knowing,” adapted from her commencement address to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005:

“One doesn’t arrive — in words or in art — by necessarily knowing where one is going. In every work of art something appears that does not previously exist, and so, by default, you work from what you know to what you don’t know. You may set out for New York but you may find yourself as I did in Ohio. You may set out to make a sculpture and find that time is your material. You may pick up a paint brush and find that your making is not on canvas or wood but in relations between people. You may set out to walk across the room but getting to what is on the other side might take ten years. You have to be open to all possibilities and to all routes — circuitous or otherwise.”

You might be thinking, “Why is Burleson talking about art?” I’m glad you asked. Your life is the greatest work of art you’ll ever produce. Bulgarian Writer, Maria Popova, insightfully summarizes the power of the unknown in building your greatest piece of art, your life: “The daily act of living is the act of chiseling destiny through choice — from the bedrock of all possible lives we could have had, we sculpt with our choices the

one life we do have. Those choices can be difficult or easy, conscious or not, made for us or made by us, but whatever their nature, they require a leap into the unknown.”

“Your life is the greatest work of art you’ll ever produce.”

Mark Twain put some practicality on the power of the unknown when he said, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”

Think about the certitudes in your life that are keeping you small. Ask how the generative power of not-knowing can make you stronger and help you build a better life. Sit down tonight and write down at least five “I don’t know” statements. Then, think about them. Open yourself to new solutions through the possibility of leaping into the unknown. It’s been one of the most powerful exercises in my life and for my orthodontic practices.

I dove into the unknown with all of these “don’t know” statements: I didn’t know if opening my office late in the evening and weekends was a good idea or not. I didn’t know where to get better at marketing and customer service training and I didn’t know if I could afford it. I didn’t know how to train employees from

scratch to be exceptional clinicians and business leaders and I was intimidated by the steep learning curve required for me to get good at those things. I didn’t know if sending direct-to-consumer advertising would work and whether or not I could afford it. I didn’t know what would happen if I offered a lifetime satisfaction guarantee. I only knew that other smart companies had tried all of these strategies and had tremendous success with them. I knew that I was curious and stubborn enough to take them seriously, study them extensively, try them, see what worked and what didn’t.

Luckily for me, leaping into all of these unknowns forced me to become a better student of my practice. Based on my embrace of the unknown and my insistence that we shun the “certitudes” in our profession and marketplace, my destiny has been chiseled by choice. Luckily for my family and my community foundation, so have my bank accounts.

Ben often quotes Paul Saffro, Director of Palo Alto’s Institute for the Future, when he says you should have “strong opinions, loosely held.” He’s absolutely right. General Norman Schwarzkopf said he didn’t know many soldiers who would march off to battle with a wishy-washy general who led by “It depends,” or “Well, what do you think?” Generals become great leaders because they have strong opinions, but they stay in power by their ability to hold onto them loosely and to pivot when the evidence demands it.

If you must be certain, be certain in your ability to recover from bad decisions.



everything else, be willing to hold loosely. Unless you are absolutely perfect in your life and in your practice, you might want to be open to changing some things from time to time. Be open to empirical evidence.

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Unfortunately, most orthodontists aren’t making enough decisions to get anywhere near the level of empirical evidence. “If

it didn’t work once, it must not work at all in my area.” I hear doctors say this all the time about direct mail. I’ve mailed over 3 million pieces of direct mail and guess what? It didn’t work for me the first time either. But I was curious enough to pay attention to what pharmaceutical companies and other healthcare providers were doing via direct mail and I was determined to run enough tests that eventually some empirical evidence, no matter how small, would start to show up. I wanted to know for sure what I should and should not believe, based on holding everything loosely until something stuck. How many new ideas are you testing when it comes to hiring, managing, motivating and rewarding your employees? What about your marketing and your clinical treatment systems? How strong or loose is your grip on all of this?

If you’re honest with yourself (the first step to growth, by the way), you’ll admit that you have a death grip on too many things in your practice and in your life. Why?

We avoid trying new things because we don’t want to fail. It’s much easier to cling to our alibis and convince ourselves “It would have never worked anyway.” Why risk getting tackled when we can be a Monday-morning quarterback?

What do you “know for sure” that’s chiseling your destiny in a way that is less powerful, less inspiring, less successful and less abundant for you, your practice, your family, employees, your patients and community than it would be if you embraced the unknown and leaped into uncertainty? What would your life and your practice finally look like if you got over your fear of failure? How certain are you that you will bounce back quickly from any bad decisions you make?

My smartest clients in 25 countries around the world have answers to these questions. Don’t envy them. Join them. Now is the time for an honest self-assessment. Which part of Progressive Orthodontist didn’t you understand? 🧐