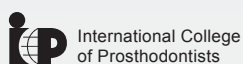




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Leading Through Crisis: Reflections from the Helm of an International Professional Organization

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In our past, humans evolved to work in teams in order to survive. We learned that hunting for food was more effective in a group than hunting alone and that rearing offspring was more successful when a tribe of trusted members protected one another and shared precious resources. Hoarding had significant consequences, as it undermined the trust necessary for the group to live. Being part of such a team was the essence of survival, as there was an intrinsic benefit to working together and maximizing each person's limited resources. Today, for those who spend their days concerned with survival, nothing has changed—they are vulnerable and need help from others, as they have few resources of their own to go it alone. For those who have enough or an abundance, there is no obvious need to rely on others or to feel an obligation to help those with less. It becomes easy to see the world through selfish eyes and rationalize away “the trajectory of disadvantage”¹ that has predetermined billions of lives based on where, when, and to whom each of us is born. Those in need are the most vulnerable to fewer resources, as these precious resources were already the difference between health and disease, between love and cruelty, and between life and death. This chasm between the haves and the have-nots is nothing new, and all societies, showcasing the weakness of our humanity, have a history of looking the other way and leaving those in need to fend for themselves. A mistaken belief that those in need deserve to be in need because they do not work hard or because they made poor decisions has especially harsh consequences when great hardship manifests. This argument is conveniently built around concepts of “meritocracy,” where those who have achieved more deserve more, ignoring the fact that the opportunity to succeed is not equal to begin with. We champion martyrs to the cause of selflessness, like Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa, as an excuse for our unwillingness to face the reality of our own apathy or our own paralysis at how to start making things better. It is awfully convenient to argue that these inequities are not of our making and that they have been around for a long time.

In 1913, the historian R. H. Tawney said, “The continuance of social evils is not due to the fact that we do not know what is right, but that we prefer to continue doing what is wrong. Those who have the power to remove them do not have the will, and those who have the will have not, as yet, the power.”² One hundred and six years later, along comes COVID-19, and Tawney's words ring truer than ever—where are those with the power and the will? In the past 2 years, as our world has been challenged to come together during the global pandemic brought on by the COVID-19 virus, this challenge has been largely unmet. Divisive and unhelpful politicized debates over the origin of the virus, or wearing a mask, or enduring a

quarantine, or receiving a vaccine, have overshadowed the desperate need to collaborate. The aspiration of “we are all in this together” remains elusive among those who utilize “democratic” principles to champion an argument of “no one is going to tell me what to do” and that anyone who has a different opinion is an enemy. The argument of “If you only like democracy when it goes your way, you don’t actually like democracy”³ is lost on too many. Worse still, the desire to forgive, the commitment to heal, the integrity to put others before oneself, and the compassion to serve those in crushing need are muted. A lack of respect for the differing opinions that are inevitable in the vacuum of the unknown and the fear of the uncertain have led to fragmentation of so many friendships and communities. Even families are being torn apart over the refusal to put aside one’s own convictions and engage in simple acts of kindness; eg, “My child is immunocompromised, and would you please wear a mask in her presence?” It is nothing new for individuals to mercilessly castigate others for having a different opinion. Seeing the other person’s point of view or being forgiving are seen as signs of weakness. The ability of cowards to incite animosity through the use of hateful rhetoric is amplified by the catalyst of social media—we have a monster among us that we do not as yet have, it seems, the will or the power to curb. Again, “democracy” and “the right to free speech” have subsumed the obligation to be a good person during a crisis, which is, tragically, when it matters most.

It is with these frames of reference that we had the privilege to lead the International College of Prosthodontists (ICP) from January 2020 to December 2021. Any dreams we had of a smooth Presidency were shattered as we faced the implications of COVID-19 and needed to navigate a set of challenges unique to an international organization in dentistry. When we are born, two classifiers are assigned to us immediately: our gender and our nationality. Each brings a degree of identity that, although not impossible, is difficult to change in the future. With over 800 members from over 50 different countries in January 2020, we received support and criticism for our decisions. Support came from those who viewed the pandemic as a humanitarian crisis transcending all boundaries. Criticism came from those who

viewed the pandemic as an issue of blame for specific nations and who wished to use the ICP to show displeasure toward the countries they blamed for the pandemic.

The criticisms based on national identity led us to contemplate whether we have the right name for our organization. *Inter* comes from Latin roots for a word that means “between” or “among,” while *international* then translates to “between nations” or “among nations” and certainly expresses a worthy goal, perhaps a better term would be one that transcends nations. Furthermore, whereas a *college* implies a collection of individuals, we suggest that the actions of a collection of individuals who come together is better represented through the word “collaborative.” When the ICP was formed over 40 years ago, mobile/cell phones, laptops, internet, social media, web-based communication, etc, were unknown. These capabilities have flattened the world and diminished the impact of a variety of boundaries, including those between nations, allowing for collaboration between anyone with internet access living anywhere at any time. With this context, if the ICP was formed today, would it have a different name to represent today’s capabilities? Would its name represent a blend of futuristic goals with today’s capabilities—to bring together like-minded individuals in a Global Collaborative of Prosthodontists, where one’s national identity is set aside? Such a GCP would be better positioned to capitalize on the similarities and differences that make us stronger together. Perhaps a GCP would be most successful if its members came together as our ancestors did to protect one another and share precious resources and to pursue a collective mission to transform the lives of those destined to be our patients and our students.

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