

A  
BETTER  
WAY

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The surprising path  
to a complete life.

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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY  
**PETER E. DAWSON**  
WITH GREGG LEWIS



# DEDICATION



To Jodie,  
the love of my life, who played such an important part  
at my side for more than 60 years in helping me find the  
true measure and real meaning of “*a better way.*”



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# Introduction

One morning, as I sat at my keyboard writing, I received an out-of-the-blue phone call from a long-time friend and former co-author. After warmly greeting me and inquiring about my family, Dr. David Stevens, President & CEO of the Christian Medical and Dental Associations (CMDA), got right to the point of his call:

“I don’t know what you’re working on these days, Gregg. Or how many book projects you might have on your plate right now,” he said. “But I have someone I really think you need to meet. He’s got a remarkable story.”

I had a couple projects in the works that promised to take a few more months to finish. So I was not actively looking for anything new at the time. But as a free-lancer, my ears are usually open to potential book ideas, especially when they come from people I know and whose judgment I respect. “Okay,” I said, giving tacit permission for Dave to go on.

Which he did: “His name is Pete Dawson. And he’s probably the most famous dentist in the world.”

“Really?” Evidently my quizzical response conveyed an uncertain measure of enthusiasm.

Because Dave chuckled and admitted, “I had a similar reaction when someone first described him that way to me: I didn’t know there was one!”

I laughed because my friend had nailed my sentiments exactly. But then I listened as he went on to explain why and how someone I’d never heard of could actually be “the most famous dentist in the world.”

Dave began by saying, “Pete has personally taught and trained over fifty-thousand graduate dentists through . . .”

“How many?” I thought I’d misunderstood.

“Over fifty thousand,” Dave replied.

Wow! I did hear him right. “How in the world . . .?”

Dave went on to explain . . . “Mostly through courses Pete has taught and still teaches at the Dawson Academy in St. Petersburg, Florida.” I would later learn the academy was a research and training center Pete founded and developed to provide continuing dental education (CDE) instruction to practicing, graduate dentists at four locations across the United States and as of this writing in 2018, at another six Dawson Academy centers around the world.

Dave proceeded to tell me how he became personally acquainted with Pete

Dawson who he assured me was not only “the world’s most famous dentist” but a man of deeply committed faith who fairly recently joined the Christian Medical and Dental Associations board to devote his time, energy, name and prestige to the ongoing ministry of this professional Christian medical organization. “Because,” Dave explained, “as committed as his life has been to improving dentistry and to training and helping other dentists find a better way to practice their profession, Pete has been, and is, just as concerned about helping others find a better way to live their lives by becoming the professionals, and more importantly, the people, God created and wants them to be.”

Dave went on for another few minutes, telling me more about his friend Pete, before he finally reached the ultimate plan for his call. “So,” he asked, “if I give you his contact info, would you be willing to set up a time to talk with Pete to hear his story? And then let him (and me) know if you think there is a book there, and whether or not you’d be interested in helping him share his story?”

“Sure,” I agreed, “I’d be glad to; he sounds like an interesting guy.”

“Oh, he is!” my friend assured me. “I know you’ll like Pete. He’s in his eighties (88 as this book goes to press), still sharing his professional expertise and wisdom with thousands of listeners each year in person or through online Academy courses. And despite a lifetime of impressive professional accomplishments that literally changed the practice and the teaching of dentistry over the last 60 years, he’s one of the most humble individuals you will ever find.”

Even if Dave hadn’t already convinced me Pete Dawson was someone I wanted to meet, those final words of endorsement would have been enough to persuade me. Nothing intrigues, excites and inspires me as a writer more than a subject or co-author whose life and story is marked both by the achievement of true greatness and genuine humility.

I’ve had the honor and privilege of writing with or about a number of such individuals over the years. And those books have been among my favorite and most personally satisfying and enjoyable projects.

In the biography of Ernie Stuery, *Miracle at Tenwek*, I told the story of an Indiana farm boy whose forty-some years of medical ministry among the Kipsigis people of Kenya grew a one-man clinic into a 300-bed mission hospital. Today Tenwek trains African doctors, nurses, and hospital chaplains from across that continent in a medical center that has transformed health care throughout southwest Kenya while becoming a model of medical and evangelistic outreach for mission hospitals around the world.



I co-authored *Tom Landry: An Autobiography* with the legendary football coach whose career at the helm of the Dallas Cowboys, “America’s Team,” did as much as anyone in NFL history to grow professional football into what eventually became America’s favorite (certainly most economically powerful) professional sport.

More recently, I’ve written three books with, and three children’s books about, Dr. Ben Carson, who for more than 30 years headed up the Department of Pediatric Neurosurgery of Johns Hopkins Medical Center (often ranked as the #1 research and training hospital in the world) while pioneering numerous surgical practices. After retiring from his distinguished neurosurgical career, Ben mounted a surprisingly viable candidacy for the presidency of the United States in 2016. At this writing, he serves in the Cabinet of the President of the United States as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Each of these three men I have been privileged to know and work with, have been widely recognized and lauded for outstanding accomplishments in their respective careers. All three achieved and defined success in their fields. Despite the greatness of character that I witnessed in them, the uncommon character trait that impressed me the most, and common to all three, was their personal humility.

Many a time I have described my friend Ben Carson to others by saying, “He’s one of the humblest people I’ve ever met . . . with the least reason to be so.” I could say much the same about Ernie Steury or Tom Landry. And now, after following my friend Dave Steven’s recommendation and getting to know Dr. Peter E. Dawson and his life story, I put Pete in that same category.

And yet, after researching and helping tell this story (the longest book I’ve ever written, by far), and after learning more about dentistry than I ever expected or wanted to know, I can still understand why you might be reacting much the same way I did that morning I received an unexpected phone call from a friend who wanted to introduce me to Pete Dawson. Even after reading this far, you may still be asking another question I asked myself before I met Pete: Who is going to want to read (let alone write) a book about a dentist—even if he is the “most famous” dentist in the world?

How would I go about trying to convince you that you should?

I could attempt to impress you with numbers. I’ve already mentioned that over 50,000 dentists have studied under Pete Dawson in the Continuing Education courses he has taught over the years. There are approximately 190

thousand practicing dentists in the United States. Which means one out of every three-to-four dentists in this country have received professional training from Pete.

When my wife inquired if our dentist knew who Dr. Pete Dawson was, I don't remember his exact words, but his reaction could be paraphrased as, "Well, sure!" He'd actually taken courses from Pete. Asked how many dentists would recognize the name Pete Dawson, he said, "Pretty much all of them." When my wife finally explained the reason for raising the subject, he exclaimed, "Gregg is writing a book with PETE DAWSON! REALLY? What can I do to get an autographed copy?" (Next time I saw my dentist I promised him I would work something out. He got excited all over again and wanted to hear details about the book.)

Need a few more impressive numbers? This year will mark Pete's 74th year of working in dentistry! (At 14 he became a paid apprentice in his father's dental laboratory.) He began dental school at the age of 19, after completing only two years of undergraduate work at a community college. Pete has been a practicing dentist for 64 years and a teacher of other dentists for going on 60.

But it's not just the quantity of time invested or the numbers of dentists he's trained that measure Pete Dawson's contribution to his profession. He's also authored the three best-selling dental textbooks in history. He just completed a fourth major text. And over the years, he's patented dozens of devices used throughout dentistry.

Maybe you're thinking, Okay, so, you've got some attention-getting numbers. But it's gonna take more than that to convince me to read a book about a dentist—no matter how famous. I hear you. The kind of books I like to read (and write) need to be about more than numbers and facts. They need to include the elements of a great story—which in my mind means the narrative has to depict uniquely interesting and strong characters I can identify with—individuals who struggle, endure hardship, experience conflict, face significant challenges, maybe encounter and battle injustice, and overcome great odds along the way.

Pete Dawson's story has all that. He recounts an idyllic childhood marked by many mischievous escapades amidst "a kid's paradise," which is how he describes life in historic Florida during the 1930's in his beloved hometown of St. Petersburg. Until a family tragedy during Pete's high school graduation week threatened to derail his plans for college and his future career.

You'll have to read this book to learn how, without the unique ability to produce rare blood on demand and the talent to perform jazz on a saxophone, the most famous dentist in the world might never have even completed dental school. Neither of those two skills factored into Pete's life as a U.S. Air Force dental officer in the Far East in the wake of the Korean War.

And yet during his military career he survived a near-death experience when the airplane taking him to his overseas assignment lost two engines, caught fire, and suddenly plummeted straight down toward deep blue oblivion in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. That near-disaster delayed his arrival in Japan just the right amount of time for him to bump into an acquaintance from his officer training days on the crowded sidewalks of Tokyo. That friend just happened to invite Pete to accompany him to his duty assignment, an unplanned side trip that put Pete at the right place at exactly the right time to have a ticked off colonel send another Lieutenant Dentist to war-torn Korea in Pete's place and keep Pete in Japan for the duration... a plum assignment that gave him a better education and more experience in his chosen specialty (prosthodontics) than he could have gotten in the best possible internship in the States.

More unsought excitement followed Pete throughout his two-year overseas tour. Like the time he singlehandedly skippered a sailboat all night through a raging typhoon. Or the day Pete (who as a youth once water-skied behind the Goodyear Blimp) first attempted snow-skiing in the Japan Alps, flew off the mountain, actually crashed through a wall to land inside a traditional Japanese teahouse to the surprise of its customers, and lived to tell about it. (You can learn the details of these and more of Pete's military service adventures if you keep reading.)

After he returned from Japan to open his own one-chair dental office in St. Petersburg, Florida, Pete began private practice asking one simple question of everything he (and every other dentist he knew) did. Then he asked the same question about everything he'd been taught in dental school.

It was the posing of that one-word question and his pursuit of honest answers, that would provide the impetus for, and determine the direction of, Pete Dawson's remarkable career of achievement.

The answers he soon found and determined to share with other dentists, differed so greatly from accepted dental dogma of his day, that his claims ignited flaming controversies which eventually spread through professional convention and dental school halls and across the pages of professional

journals. Pete's maverick conclusions were not merely questioned, but denied in the most vociferous of terms. Critics didn't just publicly debate and criticize him personally, they denounced and sometimes even vilified him. Elements of those professional disagreements dragged on for decades. Yet despite some very persistent vocal detractors, Pete began generating an army of believers through his teaching and writing.

Pete now smiles a bit ruefully as he remembers what he now refers to as "those blood-on-the-wall years". The smile results in part from the fact that over the decades he's watched the tide gradually turn and slowly erode enough foundational fallacies of "usual and customary" dentistry that Pete has been awarded Lifetime Achievement Awards for his contributions by ten different national dental organizations or academies of dentistry. He's also received lifetime awards by the American Dental Association and the International Pierre Fauchard Academy for his contributions to the profession. And he's been honored by his alma mater, Emory University, for special achievement. (Not that you'll find those awards or many others even mentioned elsewhere in this book. I'm surprised he could be persuaded to let me mention them here, in my words—not his, as part of my pitch as to why readers might want to read his story. His usual response whenever I suggested including in our narrative, the account of his receiving some significant honor, was almost always the same: "I don't think we need to talk about that.")

Fortunately there remains much about Pete Dawson's eventful and interesting personal and professional lives he gladly recalls in the following pages.

You'll find and follow the strong thread of a wonderful love story woven through the pages of this book. For a guy who took dating as seriously as anyone I've ever known, Pete Dawson's quest for *The One* he believed was out there waiting just for him, took Pete through a long, laugh-out-loud litany of dates gone disastrously wrong. When he finally found the girl of his dreams there was a whole new story to tell about winning her over...not a slam dunk for reasons that make this story both meaningful and interesting).

Four children, eight grandchildren and more than six decades of marriage since, all testify to Pete and Jodie Dawson's lasting belief that they indeed found *The One* meant for each other. Not that those 60 years have always been easy. Pete transparently shares his decades-long struggle to balance the huge demands of his professional life against the time and energy required to maintain a fulfilling marriage and a happy family life. And Pete's touching account of his ongoing

journey with Jodie through her recent Alzheimer's years serves as a beautiful and insightful example of true love.

Along the way, intertwined with the growth of Pete's own practice into an internationally recognized center of excellence, the relentless growth in extracurricular commitments occurred. What Pete labels, the "curse of the entrepreneur" trapped him into so many endeavors that "success" robbed him of any margin in his life. The lessons Pete learned about the price of a life overcrowded with too many commitments or too much "stuff" could benefit anyone who reads his story.

So why would anyone decide to read this book about a dentist, famous or not? Perhaps, because Pete Dawson is more than a dentist. He's also a teacher. An inventor. An entrepreneur. Founder/creator of a tech company that made and sold software for managing dental offices. A developer/builder who formed a partnership to build the first high-rise office building in St. Petersburg, Florida in forty years. A banker who, with seven friends, bought one small, single-branch suburban bank and saw it grow into a progressive downtown financial powerhouse with multiple branches throughout the Tampa Bay area and one of the fastest-growing banking institutions in the Southeastern U.S. A civic leader. He even served as Commodore of the world-renowned St. Petersburg Yacht Club.

But if you would ask him about these and many other titles or positions of leadership, responsibility, and service Pete Dawson has held at one point or another during a very accomplished lifetime, he would quickly tell you that none of these roles have been as important to him as the greater roles of Husband, Father, or Grandfather.

Pete's professional accomplishments have earned him a broad platform, and his long and remarkable life path has led him through a wealth of unusual experiences which have provided him great insight and wisdom. He shares both in this autobiographical book with his trademark spirit of humility befitting a man of faith who truly endeavors to serve and honor his Lord in all he says, does, and teaches.

Why should you read this book about a dentist? Not because it's about a dentist some say has contributed more to the advancement of dentistry than any other practitioner in history. But because of the promise reflected in the title of this book and in Pete Dawson's life-long quest to discover *A Better Way. A Better Way* to practice dentistry, for sure. But also, *A Better Way* to define success. And *A Better Way* to balance the demands of a career with the needs of a family.

In short, *A Better Way* to live.

Thank you for allowing me to interrupt your thoughts to say, “I don’t know what you might have on your plate today, or what books might already be on your reading list. But I have a friend I’d really like you to meet. He is very probably the most famous dentist in the world. But I’d like you to get to know the other sides of him and hear what he has to say in the following pages—then maybe you could let me know if you think there’s enough of a story here to make a book . . .

Spring 2018—Gregg Lewis

## *Getting started*

When I received my discharge from the Air Force at the end of my tour, I headed home for Florida with a clear vision of how I wanted to practice. My two years of experience with crown and bridge prosthodontics in Japan had given me confidence that I was ready to practice at a higher level than the customary “drill, fill and bill” standard of general practice at that time.

I also believed my background as a dental technician gave me an advantage few dentists enjoyed. And I intended to maximize that expertise as well. On top of that, I thought having grown up in St. Pete could be a benefit I could leverage to build my practice. Family friends and acquaintances, Dad’s extensive connections and reputation in the business and civic community, plus the hundreds of families I’d gotten to know well during my summers as the swimming teacher at Sunset Country Club could make for a promising potential patient base.

Nevertheless, I had no illusions of starting my practice on a grand scale. The money I’d saved from my Air Force captain’s pay would only be enough to open and begin a practice on a very limited scale. In addition to covering start-up expenses, I knew I needed to begin paying the Exchange Club back for the scholarship/loan they had provided for my dental education at Emory University.

I decided to begin with a no-frills, minimalist start-up in a small rented space. And I found just the location, in a newly constructed strip-building which included a café and room for three other small offices on 9th Street North. I leased 800 square feet of space at the south end of the building where I could enjoy a lovely view of the Phillips 66 gas station next door.

Using the skills I’d learned earning my architecture merit badge as a Boy Scout, I drew up my own plans for the office. Then I hired a carpenter by the hour and worked side-by-side with him to partition off two rooms for operatories with a small combinational lab and dark room between—which also included

space for my sterilization equipment. I saved just enough room at the back of my rental space to shoehorn in a tiny private office for myself, with a desk I built out of plywood and laminated with formica.

My dental office had only one small waiting room just inside the front door. Some of the older dentists warned me I would lose business by disregarding the common practice of the times and not providing separate waiting rooms—for “whites” and “coloreds.” Segregation remained in effect in Florida in the mid-1950’s, but I felt it degrading and a violation of my Christian beliefs. So, I made a determined decision to welcome and treat anyone who walked in my door as a patient, and give everyone the same respect and quality of care I would the Governor of Florida if he called and made an appointment.

Despite those early warnings, I never had a single white patient complain about sharing my reception room. And some of the finest, most faithful patients I enjoyed over decades of practice resulted from that decision.

The two final pieces required to complete my office were a tiny restroom and a reception desk. I’d almost finished constructing the desk myself in the back of my office space when I heard a ruckus coming from my unfinished reception room. I hurried up front to find two workmen applying gold-leaf lettering across the inside of my front window. It read: “Peter E. Dawson, DDS.”

I hadn’t ordered such signage, and I certainly couldn’t afford gold-leaf lettering. “What’s going on?” I demanded of the workmen. “Who authorized you to do this?”

“Mr. Hemple sent us over. He told us to not ask permission, and to not let anyone stop us, but to just go ahead and complete the job.” It made me smile to know Mr. Hemple, President of Ace Sign Company had fully forgiven me for covering him with whipping cream back in my soda-jerk days. He was a true friend to remember me in such a nice way after all the years that had passed.

Suitable office space wasn’t all I required to launch my practice. I still needed to purchase some very expensive equipment. Billy Anderson, the president of LM Anderson Dental Supply Company, and a long-time, close friend of Dad’s came to see me. Billy offered not only advice, but solutions for financing what I would need to set up my first operatory plus other necessary equipment for sterilization and X-ray developing. I also needed basic dental laboratory equipment, because I intended to do much of my own lab work until I could afford an in-house technician.

Most of the dental equipment we used in the 1950’s would seem pretty



primitive in a 21st century dental office. Patients sat upright in my first dental chair, so I had to bend over to work in their mouths. In those days of stand-up dentistry, almost every older dentist I knew had one shoulder lower than the other after years of working awkwardly bent over sideways. At dental meetings, you could always spot the dentists when you walked thru the lobby of the convention hotel; they were the ones tilted to one side.

Dental chairs in those days came equipped with an accompanying cuspidor. And every rinse-out of the mouth resulted in varying amounts of wasted time while the patient swished and spit. Some patients could drag out the procedure to the point of frustration, perhaps to avoid getting back to the vibration and heat of the belt-driven drill that rotated only about 2500 RPMs. So much production time was lost during rinsing and spitting that it was a common complaint among dentists that in the typical dental practice, patients spit a new Cadillac down that cuspidor every year.

Never imagining what the future in dental equipment design would bring, I was thrilled with my first office. Especially the new piece of equipment that looked like a gas pump next to my dental chair. The Ritter Company's latest design allowed me to simply push a button that opened a sliding hatch to let the air and water syringe emerge over the patient. It was the "modern look" in dental equipment, and I thought it gave my office the appearance of really being up-to-date.

Now all that was needed before I could open my door for practice was a dental assistant. I was putting the finishing touches on the office one afternoon when I looked up to see a cute, 18-year-old girl standing in my front doorway. Donna Letzring had noticed the work going on in my office, had seen the gold-leaf sign on the window, and stopped to ask if I could use a receptionist. I knew I couldn't afford both a receptionist and a dental assistant, so I told her I'd hire her as my receptionist and promised to give her on-the-job training if she was willing to double as my dental assistant. She accepted immediately for a salary of \$20 a week.

That turned out to be the best decision I could have made at the time. Donna proved fantastic with patients and spent the rest of her professional life in dentistry. She eventually served 50 years as the full-time director of the Pinellas County Dental Society (at an increased salary).

Before seeing our first patient, I wanted to spend a day with Donna in orientation and training for her job. As we worked down a list of her various

duties, a knock sounded on our front door. And there stood an old family friend, Frank Schilling, Dad's good buddy, the-jack-of-all-trades handy-man/mechanic who'd provided those snazzy, one-of-a-kind rebuilt bicycles for all the Dawson kids and constructed his own cabin next to ours on the Chassahowitzka River.

"Hello doctor!" Frank greeted me (with an obvious exaggeration on the doctor part). "I'm here because I want to be your very first patient."

I laughed and welcomed him. After explaining to Donna the great influence Frank had been in my life growing up, I had her practice going through the process of seating him—which we'd just gone over minutes earlier. I examined Frank's mouth and found it to be completely healthy. I told him there would be no charge, but he handed me a dollar bill anyway, insisting the reason he had come early was, "So I could be your first paying patient!"

I laughed again and thanked him. As he walked out the front door, I remember thinking, *I guess my office is officially open for business!*

# # # #

At that time, any signage had to be attached to the entrance of the office and limited to no more than four inches high. It was also considered unethical and illegal to advertise for dental services, so I had to depend entirely on word-of-mouth to build my practice. I realized that meant I would have to provide exceptional service because I knew I wasn't going to impress anyone with my modest little one-chair office next to a filling station.

Turns out there was, and still is, a very effective way to build a successful dental practice. Every young dentist could benefit from understanding it. You just start with the first patient and then build the practice one patient at a time—depending on each satisfied "customer" telling others what an exceptional experience they had. Obviously, the key to this plan is making absolutely sure patients have such a positive experience they will want to tell someone else about it.

This strategic blueprint worked without any need for advertising in 1956 and I see it working today for any dentist who focuses on helping every new patient understand what is required to have a healthy mouth for life. Then it's the job of the dentist to help the patient figure out the best way to achieve that health with consideration for his or her personal, family, and financial circumstances.

That was the mindset I started out with in my practice. But I had a lot more to learn about many aspects of dentistry than I, like most dentists, didn't even

know existed when I opened the doors of my first office. My determination to treat every patient with the best level of care I could offer was a good starting point, however. I would have to learn over years of experience and much study, how much better the care I provided could become.

I got by, just practicing the way I had been taught. But I didn't always feel my treatment results were as good as they should be. I knew one thing for certain: If you don't consciously strive to see if there is a "better way," you will go on doing what you have always done. And eventually you'll grow content with the professional status quo, telling yourself, I'm doing as well as most of my contemporaries. But as good as my education at Emory was, and as much as I learned during my Air Force experience, I knew intuitively there were a lot of things about dentistry I didn't know.

I made the decision to search out anyone in dentistry who was doing anything better than I was doing it. I would go to that person and try to learn everything I could from him. I would then try to improve on whatever I had learned.

My first year in practice I attended 12 postgraduate courses on various subject matter. I had to borrow the money to do it but I reasoned that every time I learned a better way to do anything, it would produce repeated benefits for my practice. I will never understand how any dentist can rationalize trying to practice without benefit of the best available postgraduate education.

I hope you won't misconstrue what I am about to tell you: When I started my practice, I made a secret commitment to myself. I believed I had a good enough brain to learn whatever I needed to learn. I also knew I had above average dexterity and skill in using my hands. I reasoned I should be able to learn anything and do anything any other dentist could do if I just learned how they were doing it.

By searching out practitioners excelling in different phases of practice and then seeing if I could find ways for improving on what they were doing, I felt sure I could become as good a dentist as anyone anywhere. So, I decided I would become "the best dentist in the world." That very personal goal had nothing to do with bragging rights or self-promotion. In fact, I'm sharing it on these pages for the first time.

Aiming to be the best simply made sense to me because I just could not justify treating patients in a way that was inferior to the best that was available to me. So, from the time I started practice I decided I would look at everything

I did with two questions:

Question 1: Why? . . . why are we doing it this way?

Question 2: Is there a better way?

Every day as a young dentist, I started asking those two questions about everything I did. And it was truly amazing how answering that simple question “Why?” soon provided the new understanding required to make improvements in any number of procedures, techniques, or processes. I firmly believe that asking “why” was the starting point for many, if not most, of the advancements I made or helped make in dental practice over the past 60 years. Which is why I’m convinced consistently asking this question will benefit any other dentist.

Even more amazing was discovering how powerfully these two questions worked together. I found almost everything we were doing in dentistry could be done better. The “Why?” question had never been asked often enough or explored adequately enough to determine whether standard procedures could be done in a better way. It seemed that in common practice, if it was “in the book” it was accepted without questioning.

Early in my practice, I learned what was in the textbooks was not always right. Asking “Why?” and looking for “a better way” became my passion.

What an exciting journey it has been. I can’t help but think the same practice could lead to greater forward strides in any business, any field.

# # # #

Because fluoride only began to be introduced into the nation’s water supply in the 1950’s, many of my early patients suffered rampant decay, missing teeth, abscesses and serious periodontal disease. Nearly half of my patients had either lost all or most of their teeth, or were coming in because they felt they were, or would soon be, in need of full dentures.

As a result, I had ample opportunity to restore many broken-down mouths with crowns, bridges and partial dentures. I already considered myself an expert in making gold crowns and bridges, since that’s what I spent most of my time doing in the Air Force.

Despite my confidence in the quality of my work, I soon realized I didn’t know what I didn’t know about doing restorative dentistry. Ironically, I would begin to come to this career-changing awakening through a unique set of circumstances which arose from my commitment to pursue a “better way” and to raise the quality level for two rather simple aspects of my new dental practice.

In those days, silver amalgam (a mixture of silver, mercury and other metals) was the standard dental material used for almost 100% of fillings on posterior teeth. Being a low-cost filling, usually out of sight in the back of the mouth, most dentists drilled out the decay, then packed the soft silver mixture into the cavity. When the metal mixture hardened, the dentist removed the excess, and seldom gave those fillings any further thought.

I found it didn't take much longer to do those fillings "a better way"; so I made a habit of carving all my silver fillings to perfectly match the contours of healthy tooth enamel. Then I'd polish the silver to a high shine—even if the filling was out of sight in the back of the mouth.

Another "better way" step I took to further establish my practice as one of exceptional quality, was to replace the standard, cheap-looking, cardboard holders used to display dental x-rays. I custom-designed a much classier, shiny black, thick cardboard X-ray holder on which my name and office address was embossed in silver letters. The entire x-ray display was then covered with a perfectly-fitted sleeve of clear plastic. No one had ever seen dental x-rays displayed in such a classy manner.

When I sent my first referral of a patient to an oral surgeon, Dr. Fred Nichols noticed the quality of my silver fillings and was so impressed by the x-ray display I'd sent with the patient, that he called me on the phone. We didn't know each other, so this out-of-the-blue connection resulted entirely from his noticing the quality in those two small aspects of my work—plus the inclusion of a careful and complete write-up detailing the patient's case.

"Pete, you and I haven't met," Fred Nichols began, "But having seen your work makes me want to invite you to participate with me and two other dentists for a three-day clinical session with Dr. Sigurd Ramfjord, a professor from the University of Michigan, who is coming to town to teach us about a new process called "occlusal equilibration." Would you have an interest in joining us? If you can, I won't call the other dentist I originally planned to invite."

I'd never heard of this professor, but this sounded like a great opportunity for learning something new. I immediately accepted the invitation—having not a clue how my spur-of-the-moment decision would impact and change the direction of my life.