DISCIPLINE CLOSES THE DOOR TO CHAOS

...if it's not OK, it's not yet the end

A CONVERSATION WITH DR. BRENDAN BARTHOLOMEW · BY GISELLE HUDSON · 2021

There's no denying that COVID-19 took us all by surprise. According to predictive reports from McKinsey: "Large-scale quarantines, travel restrictions and social-distancing measures drive a sharp fall in consumer and business spending. Consumers stay home, businesses lose revenue and lay off workers, and unemployment levels rise sharply."

For Dr. Brendan Bartholomew, this time calls for him to dig deep and trust himself and his instincts. He believes in facing whatever surfaces head-on. After all:

> *"You will go through struggles, yet if you keep the faith and trust, you will see it through to the end. And if it's not OK, it's just not yet the end."*

His reliance on instinct is not to be scoffed at. In his new book *Memos from the Head Office*, business strategist and author Perry Marshall shares the story of a currency trader who receives a million-dollar algorithm as a "mental download." A financial advisor has ominous dreams three nights in a row, then warns her clients to cash out; three days later, markets plummet as COVID hits. Two years into a bogus lawsuit, a CEO chooses to forgive. His attorney calls four minutes later: case settled.

GOOD TIMES ARE NOT A GREAT TIME FOR INNOVATION

When the markets are booming, everyone can make money doing mediocre work. Prosperity usually breeds copycats, and there is little need for business owners to think creatively. The solution is not to hustle harder but, as Brendan has realized, to listen, and trust.

As I sit across from Brendan, I am momentarily startled by his deep voice. I can't say I remember it being that deep when I first met him, sometime around 1995, but my surprise is quickly eclipsed by his quiet, contemplative nature.

None of my questions is answered hastily. I am mindful not to fill the silences with unnecessary chatter.

A PROFESSOR OF LOVE

His dad, Professor Courtenay Bartholomew, recently passed away, and Brendan is so grateful for all that he was, his great example, and all that he taught him.

He describes his mom as a "professor of love," and cherishes her wisdom and stoic qualities: never complaining, always positive, seeking the good, and using up all of herself in loving, caring for and supporting their family.

He credits the Bartholomew matriarch with giving him two of the most influential books of his almost 51 years on the blue marble. The first was about a teenager exploring good and bad, and the benefits of choosing good. The second came about two years ago, when she gifted him the now-classic *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle.

Just like his cadence, contemplative and unrushed, Brendan is taking his time as he navigates Tolle's wisdom. "Each line I read is like, 'Whoa!'" It is the book he most often recommends to friends.

> *"The moment you realize you are not present, you are present."*

LIVE TO LEARN

Over the past four or five months, he has accepted that he cannot change the world, and he definitely cannot change anyone else.

"The main purpose of this life is to get to know your true self. Take time and focus on you. This is the only way you change things around you."

For Brendan, that's the biggest revelation. "The only way you can change what's happening around you is by your example: the way you look, the way you talk, the way you do what you do, the way you interact positively. If you can do that, that's when things around you change."

But he hastens to add: "Don't limit yourself to what you've been taught," especially in his area of expertise. "There's much more to dentistry than what you're taught. What you're taught allows you to gain entry into the field," a step he took working as an associate with Dr. Nigel Camacho in 1998.

> *"We have to live to learn, and be open to learning."*

"While you learn about dentistry as best you can, don't ever think you know it all. You have to learn from others, and you must know your own limitations."

He thoughtfully adds: "Becoming good in any profession comes after years and years of practice. When you've mastered the basics, only then can you begin to ramajay."

Brendan views dentistry as 90% psychology and 10% technique, with the patient at the centre. "You can have two patients with the same issue, but how you treat patient A is going to be different from how you treat patient B. Being in the presence of the patient guides you to what you need to do."

SAID NO ONE EVER

Dr. Bartholomew keeps one sobering thought at the back of his mind: nobody really wants to go to the dentist.

"'Ah cyah wait to go to de dentist,' said no one *ever!*" he adds, in hysterics. "Our goal is to give each customer a unique and positively memorable experience at The Practice."

Choice seems to be a theme that runs through this dentist's life. If he could have a billboard, it would say: "Live good. Do the right thing."

"Our main purpose on this journey called life is to make the right choice. Life is a game with many choices and consequences. We want to make sure we have really good consequences," he says, laughing.

PART MYTH, PART TRUTH

Our understanding of the lives of others is always part myth, part truth. When we look at the success of others, we tend to see that alone. We don't see when people get stuck, stymied or frustrated.

Brendan started his own service business, The Practice, in 2007. Since then he has married, had children, and built the offices at 52 Luis Street, Woodbrook from the ground up, from mud and stone to the beautiful building that stands there now. His marriage subsequently ended in divorce.

The phrase "dark night of the soul" is often used to describe an extremely difficult and painful period in one's life: the death of a loved one, the break-up of a marriage, the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness. In his book *Dark Nights of the Soul*, psychotherapist and former Catholic monk Thomas Moore observes:

> *"The dark night calls for a spiritual response, not only a therapeutic one." It calls upon the affected person "to remain in the present, not bound or deluded by the past and not imprisoned in a fixed and defensive idea about the future... the most difficult challenge is to let the process take place, and yet that is the only release from the pressure of the dark night."*

Brendan, perhaps not consciously realizing he was going through his own dark night of the soul, woke up one day in August 2020, in every sense of the word. His eyes opened onto the day, and everything since has been different. From that moment, everything around him (personal interactions in his office, his business, the potential, the dream, the future, his imagination) has gone through the roof.

"Can I keep this up?" he asks, partly to himself, half-asking me. "But that feeling," he says optimistically, "keeps coming back."

His eyes move up and to the right, reflecting on the time since 2015, when he separated: all the time he spent alone, thinking, contemplating. It was difficult. Yet he maintains:

> *"You can allow failure to crush you, or you can choose to make it the reason you become something greater than you were before."*

BEING DAD

He has taken his role as a dad seriously from the very first day he was tasked with buying diapers at the supermarket. "I am now a parent," he thought. "This is serious."

Brendan's son is now 10 and his daughter 12. They are his pride and joy. He enjoys hanging out with them and playing the fool, the jokester, especially in public, sometimes to the point of embarrassing them. He loves seeing them beg him to stop. But there's always a lesson: don't take things too seriously; don't get too caught up in yourself; go out and have fun; don't be too critical of yourself all the time; be natural.

DISCIPLINE CLOSES THE DOOR

What has most changed his life is the habit of doing 20 minutes of exercise every single day.

"Habit is discipline. Having a routine and keeping things in order is hard. Staying healthy is now most important to me." His exercise time is non-negotiable.

After a day doing his thing as a dentist, he comes home and dons his parent hat. He plays with the dogs, makes dinner, feeds his kids, spends time with them, then puts them to bed. No matter how tired he is, he does his 20 minutes of exercise.

Brendan cautions: "Chaos is so easily achieved. You don't have to think to create chaos. It could be twelve o'clock at night, and I'm doing my routine, because chaos is waiting to envelop me."

> *"Chaos is just waiting for that slip, that opportunity, to come in and create havoc. Discipline closes that door."*

At this stage of the game, Dr. Brendan Bartholomew is unstoppable. For many, the loneliness, isolation and fear of the COVID-19 pandemic is, indeed, a dark night of the soul.

Dr. B's prescription? Mindset: sky's the limit.
Affirmation: "Step out of the way, I'm coming through!
Watch out! Let's have some fun!"

THREE TAKEAWAYS FROM BRENDAN'S SPOTLIGHT

1 *Discipline closes the door to chaos.*
A small, non-negotiable daily habit, like 20 minutes of exercise, keeps chaos from finding the slip it is waiting for.

2 *Change starts with your example.*
You cannot change the world or anyone else. The way you look, talk, work and interact is what changes things around you.

3 *A dark night can become an awakening.*
Failure can crush you, or it can be the reason you become something greater than you were before.



Dr. Brendan Bartholomew

Dentist and founder of The Practice, which he opened in 2007 and built from the ground up at 52 Luis Street, Woodbrook, Trinidad. Began his career in 1998 as an associate with Dr. Nigel Camacho, and sees dentistry as 90% psychology and 10% technique.

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