

States of the Union

CONVERSATIONS WITH MY DENTIST

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.

—JOB

Of middle age the best that can be said is that a middle-aged person has likely learned how to have a little fun in spite of his troubles.

—DON MARQUIS

MARTY, my dentist, has discovered that my teeth suffer from "mobility." He seems pleased. Like most dentists, Marty likes to blame the victim. "It's what I've been telling you all along," he says as he inserts two fingers in my mouth and waggles my mobile teeth. "If you don't take good care of your gums, they won't take good care of you."

"How true, how true," I manage to intone through his fingers.

Marty steps back and frowns. "You say that, but you don't mean it," he informs me. "It's just lip-service."

"Gum service," I correct him, and get the hell out of there.

I go home and take a nap, to avoid worry. Instantly I dream that all my teeth are falling out, form-

ing a clicking cataract and spilling into my cupped hand. I shake the teeth like dice and cast them onto the ground, where they scatter in all directions. "Oh dear," I say to myself, "this could cause problems." I wake up edgy and resentful. Freud says loss-of-teeth dreams signify a fear of impotence. They also signify a fear of loss of teeth.

The next day Marty makes an appointment for me with a periodontist. Periodontists allegedly know how to keep one's teeth in one's head. They rely on a variety of polysyllabic techniques like "curettage," "gingival therapy," and "occlusal equilibration." Basically, periodontists clean teeth and cut away gums. Marty says most periodontists are rich and peculiar, and that the one he has recommended to me is no exception.

I am ushered into the periodontist's office and find him sitting gravely behind a shiny, kidney-shaped desk. He has a gray, pointed beard and melancholy blue eyes. He does not get up.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

"Marty sent me. He says I have too much mobility."

"I won't be able to help you unless you've made up your mind to help yourself," he says. "There are a lot of special things you have to do with your teeth and gums—massaging and brushing and things like that. For the rest of your life you'll have to become a teeth freak."

He stands up. I see he is wearing dark hip-huggers tucked into suede boots. He walks across the room to inspect a potted rhododendron. "This plant looks a little the worse for wear," he mutters.

"Who doesn't these days?" I answer.

He beckons me to the dentist's chair, an S-shaped contraption made of white leather. I lie down, and the periodontist glances at my teeth. "It'll cost you \$800," he says, "but you won't have to pay it all at one time. You can pay \$50 every month."

"I'll be an old man before I'm through paying. It's outrageous."

The periodontist sighs. "You're right," he says, "and some of my colleagues charge even more. It shows you how much the country needs national health insurance."

"But while we're waiting for so-

cialized dentistry," I ask, "need we go broke?"

The periodontist smiles, "Who's going broke?"

Driving home, I brood about the psychology of teeth. It appears freighted with unfathomable meanings. There is magic in a tooth, especially when it no longer resides in the mouth. In parts of South Wales a boy's extracted tooth is placed under the bark of a tree near a river or lake. If the tooth falls into the water, the boy will be healthy; if the tooth starts to rot and is exposed to ants, then the boy will be diseased.

We are all teeth freaks, but not in the sense my periodontist intended. We tell our children to put their dropped teeth under their pillows. If the tooth magically turns into coins, all is well. The tooth thus mingles in the child's dreams, and in our dreams as well, with a welter of yearnings that help to shape the unconscious, the part of us managed by hobgoblins and tooth fairies. As children we are likely to feel that our desires go unheeded; so, quite literally, we put teeth in them. The game is tooth and consequences.

(Which reminds me of a time, many years ago, when a dentist "put me under" with gas in order to remove a wisdom tooth. As I came to, I was certain that I heard him saying to me, "The truth is out, the truth is out." The message depressed me terribly. Still in a stupor, I kept thinking: *They know they know they know they know they know.*)

ON MY NEXT visit the periodontist puts something in my mouth and tells me to bite hard. He stares at the impression I have made and shakes his head sadly.

"What's the matter?" I ask. "Is my bite worse than my bark?"

"You grind your teeth," he explains. "That's a serious problem."

"You're wrong. I never grind my

teeth. What I do from time to time is *gnash* them."

"If the tops are touching the bottoms," says my periodontist, "that's bad. You ought to ask yourself why you keep gnashing your teeth. What in your life makes you do that?"

"In the long run, who's cheaper," I ask, "a periodontist or a psychoanalyst?"

No answer. I press on. "If you want the real truth, I gnash because I'm a child of the kingdom."

"What?"

"But the children of the king-

he asks, "What is your philosophy of life?"

"Ouch!" I say, and grab a cup of water. The blood is flowing freely this day.

"I'm serious," he goes on. "Everybody should be able to state his philosophy of life in a few sentences. Especially a wordsmith like you."

"It's out of the question," I say. "Why are you embarrassed?" he persists. "Don't you have ideals?"

"I'm not embarrassed and of course I do." I am shouting.



dom shall be cast out into utter darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Matthew."

"I'm going to try not to hurt you," says my periodontist. And he proceeds to jam a sharp instrument into my gum.

I keep making more visits to him, but they have never become a habit, and one of these times I may lack the courage to return. It is not just the pedestrian pain of dentistry that puts me off—it's the conversation.

Today, for instance, while probing cruelly beneath my upper gum,

"Well?"

"Well . . ." I relent slightly. "Actually, I'm just an old-fashioned humanist."

There is a long silence while he hacks away at my gums. Then, musingly: "An old-fashioned humanist. . . . You know, that's something Hitler could have said as easily about himself."

I spring to a sitting position. I sputter helplessly. All words remain trapped behind my mobile teeth.

The periodontist smiles and hands me a cup of water. "Rinse," he says. "Then we'll talk some more."