

*Leke Alder*

# **The awesome treasure in dentistry**

**6th Faculty of Dentistry  
Conference, OAU, Ile Ife**

**Leke Alder**

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Let me begin this lecture by first thanking the Provost of the College of Health Sciences, Obafemi Awolowo University, Professor Babatope Kolawole. He is our chief host this morning.

I particularly want to thank Professor Morenike Ukpong, the Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry, for facilitating this opportunity to share a few of my thoughts and experiences with you. She personally reached out to me. I probably agreed to deliver this lecture because she shares a name with my wife.

Now, because I know that it takes a team to organize a conference like this, I will also like to thank members of the faculty of Dentistry, as well as the administrators that toiled behind the scene to make this event a reality.

My apologies for not being physically present with you this morning. I did try, but my schedule just wouldn't accommodate the travel down to Ife. But this is the modern era. With technology we can bridge the gap between space and time. We can be in multiple locations and hold our conference. This is how modern corporations function. At Alder Consulting we once ran a political campaign with a team of executives in Abu Dhabi, US, London, Jamaica, Dubai and Lagos.

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Let me confess upfront that I have a love-hate relationship with dentistry. To be sure I don't hate dentists. I am a long-term customer of dentistry. I have been visiting dentists since I was a little boy. My father said I ate too many sweets. I am grateful to your profession for taking away my toothaches, but I can't get over the numbing terror of that needle you use to administer Novocain. Who thinks of something like that! It looks like a narrow metal pipe welded to a test tube by Fatai the local



welder on my Dad's street. In my estimation, it is right up there with instruments used for orthopedic surgery, and that is not much of a compliment when you consider that I rank orthopedic surgeons high up there with butchers in abattoirs. The fear of root canal is the beginning of wisdom. I have heard so many dentistry procedures done I can serve as tourist guide to dentistry. I remember my root canal. At the end of what seemed like seventeen hours my dentist finally pulled out something that looks like the intestine of a very, very tiny worm. And she felt victorious.

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The topic I have been given to talk about is quite interesting in formulation. Our topic of deliberation is, The awesome treasure in dentistry. We can approach the topic from a variety of angles; but in order to choose the right approach we must contextualize our topic within the ambition of the faculty of dentistry. I sense a faculty that is thinking outside the box, one whose imaginings are unconstrained by the artificialism of the denuding walls of academia. In inviting a non-dentist to give a keynote address I sense the faculty is trying to build a cross disciplinary bridge between the bucolic idealism of a university campus, and the riotous jungle out there. This is apparent from the overarching theme of this year's conference, Dentistry Without Borders. Not all departments are trying to do this of course, and certainly not all universities. I know this from interviewing graduands seeking jobs at Alder Consulting. The firm is a multidisciplinary brand consultancy. We work on ideas for our clients, helping them create pathways into the market. We also help politicians win elections, and we help formulate policies once they get into office. Because of the multidimensional nature of our work our recruitment is open.



We recruit people from various disciplines. Over the years we've recruited lawyers, doctors, mathematicians, engineers, microbiologists, bankers, computer scientists, technologists and graphic designers. We adapt the knowledge from those disciplines to solve client problems. Suffice to say we're not interested in certificates. Rather, we're interested in thinking capacity.

Some years ago, a young man applied to work at Alder Consulting. He had a first-class degree in engineering from a well-known university, a first-generation university. (Not Ife). At his second interview we presented a case study of a factory to him, asking him to calculate the efficiency at a particular bottleneck. You're probably wondering about the usefulness of such an exercise to a brand consultancy. But that's because you don't realize it was the elimination of unnecessary bottlenecks and the fanatical focus on service efficiency that led to the rapid success of banks like GTBank and Zenith Bank. The lessons from such an exercise can help resolve bureaucratic bottlenecks in the public and educational sectors as well. If you go to a ministry and they spend weeks trying to locate your file, or if after graduation it takes the university more than a week to process your transcript, chances are there's an artificial bottleneck somewhere.

The young man we were interviewing didn't know that for us there was no right or wrong answer. We just wanted to see how he thinks – how he processes data. Unfortunately, the approach of his university to his education was the exact opposite. It wasn't about development of critical thinking capability, it was about cramming and regurgitating notes in exams; or they wouldn't have awarded him a first-class degree. He could not think. We spent almost an hour prodding him on,



giving him clues, dropping hints here and there, but he never got it. After some time, we gave up.

Life will demand critical thinking from you. The higher you go, the more the demand. Life is never going to ask you, What is dentistry? Rather, life will present case studies to you, like those case studies we treated in law exams.

I was a law student in this university from 1981 to 1985. In no exam in those four years did our lecturers ask, What is tort, or what is contract, or what is criminal law. Instead they gave us case studies, like those parables of Jesus: An Ile-Ife man was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was attacked by bandits on Ibadan-Ife road and they left him for dead. A good Samaritan from Modakeke rushed him to the University Teaching Hospital. He had suffered blunt force trauma to the left side of his head. Upon closer examination the doctors discovered that his lateral and central incisors were also broken, as well as his lower first and second premolars. This necessitated dentistry surgery.

On the day scheduled for dentistry the dentist on call was Ngozi Oingobongo. She was three years post-med school. She examined the patient and determined some teeth had to be pulled. As she administered Novocain, a local anesthetic of the amino ester group, the patient experienced the equivalence of an electric shock. He convulsed off the dental chair, hitting his head against the spittoon in the process. He fell to the floor and began to writhe like a demoniacal. Unfortunately, the needle was stuck in his mouth. As he jerked his head here and there, the base of the needle jammed against the wall and another 350mg of Novocain was shot into his body, taking him beyond the recommended 600mg single safe total dose. This led to further convulsion. Dr. Ngozi became alarmed. She held her head in her palms. It was all too much for her. She had been

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having a running battle with her mother-in-law and things came to a head that Monday morning. Her mother-in-law had implausibly decided her son would no longer eat her cooking. She created an exclusive second pot for her son, which she administered personally. In essence, she anointed herself the local government chairman in her son's marriage. Sadly, her son could not confront her. It was then up to Ngozi to do the confrontation. She had never liked Ngozi. She considered Ngozi too narrow in the hips, implying she would have problems with child delivery, while also insinuating she wasn't well fed from home. Unfortunately, there was delayed conception in the marriage. Unknown to her mother-in-law, her son had low sperm count. What are the legal, life and dental issues in this case?

This is the kind of question life will throw at you.

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Let me share one or two things from my student days in life. Let's see if we can pick up one or two lessons.

In our prelim year as law students we never touched a single subject in law. Not one lecture on the law of contract, or family law, or land law, or tort, or company law, or law of evidence. Not even jurisprudence, which is the philosophical basis of law. Instead, we were parceled out to other faculties to do extracurricular studies. We spent a whole year studying Sociology, English, Logic (which was actually Add Maths), Greek Philosophy and Economics. We didn't know it then, but we were developing mental perspicacity, to borrow the words of our English professor, Professor Afolayan. We only began studying law proper in our second year.



It wasn't until after we started Alder Consulting that I came to appreciate the immense value in those extracurricular courses. Indeed, the most useful and the most relevant part of my university education to my professional calling were those extracurricular courses. My best year in the university was my first year. Now, that's not saying I didn't learn anything from law. I did. A lot. Law gave me mental discipline, but it was those courses that broadened my horizon. They made me culturally literate. If you want to hobnob in rarified air, or move in international circles you must be culturally literate.

Surprisingly, those courses also enabled deeper spiritual understanding. Greek philosophy gave me a deeper understanding of the concept of the Logos enunciated by Apostle John. As it turned out the first person to propound the concept was an eccentric philosopher named Heraclitus. He did so five hundred years before Apostle John. The intellectual leap of faith by Apostle John was in asserting that the Logos is not a principle but a personage. I would later find out Apostle Paul referenced Socrates, Plato and other great philosophers in his writings. He sometimes quoted them.

What am I trying to say? You can garner all the tooth extraction skill you want from your faculty, but that alone won't guarantee you success in life. Life requires more. If you want to go far you must acquire extracurricular capacities. If you want to run a successful dental practice for example, you must learn people skills, develop emotional intelligence, learn to think strategically. It is those extracurricular capacities that give you the confidence to hold your own at Ikoyi Club or Metropolitan Club. Because of them you can be sent to represent your company or institution at international conferences. Your exposure gives you leverage. Your teachers will teach you a



lot, but you must also teach yourself. You have to take responsibility for your life. Invariably, the best students are those who teach themselves. And boy, did I teach myself in life!

I was not a fully engaged law student. I had other interests, one of which was art. I held a very successful art exhibition at the commencement of my second year in life. It lasted a week. Two thousand people attended. I still have the attendance register. In those days it was not unusual for me to go to the library two weeks to exams to read up on science. I would photocopy scientific articles to study, and sometimes illustrations. My best friend was a medical student. He studied at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH). We met in Kings College playing truancy. Now a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine in England, he was a very brilliant student whose notes for an entire year of medical studies were warehoused in a medium sized diary. I would travel down to Lagos to attend medical lectures with him. I almost got into trouble the day I attended a tutorial. The lecturer was pointing out people to answer questions. He pointed to my right and left. I actually wrote my law school exam from LUTH.

Those interactions I had gave me a profound understanding of scientific reasoning. You can't be a dentist and not understand scientific reasoning. It's a contradiction in terms. Most times the difference between a good and a bad doctor boils down to the ability to reason scientifically. There is a process of elimination, and there's a process of resolution. There's inductive reasoning, there's deductive reasoning. In my adulthood I picked up interest in physics and cosmology. I'm richer for it.

I'm not asking you not to attend your lectures or to lose focus. You must attend lectures. All I'm saying is, develop reasoning capacity and broaden your worldview with extracurricular





studies. As science students you should do cross-disciplinary studies. Study the humanities and the arts. Be culturally literate. It enhances your chances of success.

The reason our nation is the way it is, is because of the cultural illiteracy of our politicians. Nemo dat quad non habet. You cannot give what you don't have. It's why they don't prioritize education. It's why history was banned in schools. It's why they imagine the humanities don't matter, that courses like Philosophy are irrelevant to national development, and only the sciences matter. Yet the people who came up with the concept of the atom were the philosophers. They referred to it as "atomos" – the uncuttable. Apostle Paul would later use the word in his writing. Extracurricular studies matter. We all use Apple products today but what influenced the design of Apple computers and the reason it is the most used computer for desktop publishing is because of the calligraphy course Steve Jobs took at Reed College. I know how powerful that can be. My father was a graphic artist. He taught me calligraphy. The graphics he taught helps me assess interface design of the websites we develop at Alder Consulting. If you're a smart dentistry student, you will read beyond how to pull out rancid teeth. You will travel through books and magazines, until you can afford to do so in person. When you travel go to a museum. I'd recommend a museum of modern art. Modern art is dedicated to creative intelligence.

This is how you will arrive at the portal of dentistry without borders.

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There's more to dentistry than meets the eye. We can even extrapolate a management philosophy from dentistry. It boils



down to this: It is always better to remove rotten teeth. That's a simple but powerful principle of management. A rotten tooth in any system invariably corrupts the system. It spreads contamination. If you doubt look at our civil service culture. The rotten tooth culture is creeping into academia.

Removing rotten teeth is never easy. It's usually painful. It requires skill, effort, and doggedness. Even after you remove it there will still be pain, for some time. If you don't remove rotten tooth, however, things will fester and get worse with time. The arrow of time points towards system degradation and compromise. Remove rotten teeth.

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But we seem to assume a lot in our discourse. We seem to assume for example that everyone who passes through the faculty of dentistry will practice dentistry. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Some of you will end up in the Ministry of Health as administrators while some will become policy wonks in international organizations. Some will abandon dentistry altogether and go and run an NGO. One or two of you will go and read another discipline entirely. That's usually the case with those who never wanted to read medicine, but whose dad made them do it. Some of you are going to end up in business, perhaps going into medical supplies or manufacturing. Some will acquire an MBA to give themselves corporate latitude. Indeed, some of you won't even move near medicine at all; you'll rather devote yourself to your family. And some will become Pastors or Imams. Some of you will migrate to Canada, US, UK, Australia, South Africa, or Rwanda. Some will become politicians, starting each sentence with, "Welleme, erm..." And without a doubt some of you will end up in private practice.



A word about going into private practice. Don't make the mistake of lawyers. A lot of young lawyers assume graduation from law school gives them license for entrepreneurship. The average lawyer wants to set up his own firm, if possible right after law school. With no experience, no contacts, low exposure, and little or no capital, he sets himself up for failure. Some set up practice too early just because they want to boast they never worked for anyone. This, as you'll soon learn is a very useless and irrelevant factor in the equation called success. When last did you meet a successful businessman and begin to wonder if he ever worked for anyone prior to starting his business?

That you graduated from the school of dentistry doesn't mean you automatically acquired a certificate in entrepreneurial competencies. Business is another thing entirely. If you want to succeed in business you have to learn how to recognize opportunities, learn to take initiative, learn to network, to formulate vision, develop strategy, define your mission, iterate your corporate objectives, master your branding, and flesh out your values. And you must know how to hire. Some people are better off in a partnership than on their own. If you're going to go into business at least draw up a business plan. A dental practice is a business. There are so many business plan templates available on the internet. I bet you you'll find one for dental practice. You'll need to learn how to build an administrative structure, learn to manage your cashflow, how to market your service. The idea is to reduce the possibility of failure.

It is also advisable you acquire some experience working in a private practice before setting up shop. I know the barrier of entry into private practice is high because of the cost of



equipment, but it behooves you to learn as much as you can before venturing out. You'll be shocked to learn that something as basic as filing can ruin a practice. When I thought I was going to go into law practice and looking for office space I got an offer from a senior lawyer. He wanted to barter office space with me in exchange for handling his cases in court. He wasn't really interested in law, he was more of a politician. But he had all these cases he was handling. Going through the files I soon discovered his filing system was atrocious. Papers were falling out of files, there was no chronological order in the filing of documents, there was poor annotation of what happened in court at the last appearance... Seeing how he filed his papers I easily understood why he would do well in Nigerian politics. In Nigeria politics is a jankara system.

Without a doubt some of you will pursue opportunities outside of dentistry. If there's nothing I have learnt from my law class set it is the fact that what everyone would become was already apparent while in school. We just never see it. Looking back now the pastors were apparent, the judges were apparent, the Senior Advocates were apparent, the academics were apparent, the politicians were apparent, and even the brand consultant was apparent. We couldn't see the apparent because as often happens with young people we were blinded by false and childish competitiveness. One of my friends who is now a pastor did her master's degree in law at King's College, University of London. Why did she do it? Because it seemed all our classmates were going for LLM degree. That wasn't her path. We were competing with our classmates instead of following our path. Twice I attempted to obtain my master's degree in law. Thankfully I dropped out on each occasion. It would have been a waste of resources. I didn't like law even though I was good at it. Follow your path.



It is however difficult to follow your path if you get into unnecessary and unhealthy rivalry, or if you lack self-esteem. Self-esteem is very important in the game of success. Develop self-esteem. Nobody is going to give you self-esteem. You give yourself self-esteem. Value yourself, appreciate your gifts, don't let your past hold you down or determine your future. If you're from a poor home so what?! You have something in common with 99.99% of the students in the university. I once surveyed the CEOs in the one-mile radius of our old office in Victoria Island and none came from a wealthy family. They all found their way to Victoria Island. And the children of the rich who couldn't hold their own ended up selling their assets to the dogged children of the poor.

My class set met for the first time after graduation three years ago. This was thirty-four years after graduation. It was soon obvious we didn't really know each other even though our class was relatively small. On campus we moved in clusters. After graduation we maintained those clusters. That was a mistake. Get to know your classmates now. You're going to need them later on. Make friends across board. Make friends across divides - religious, cultural, political, economic, and geographic. You're going to need to traverse those divides in your pursuit of success. Some of you are going to work in corporations and you'll be in charge of registering dental practices. Don't compromise standards but be kind to your classmates. Help as many as you can. If you don't, they will make it without you and you're going to find yourself needing to apologize to them on your class WhatsApp group years later. Chances are the table has turned. Now, you need them.

Because I left law practice, I hardly came across my classmates after graduation. I was in a different world. When



we regrouped, I got to know some people. They were so wonderful I regretted not knowing them in school. Make friends with intentionality. Reach out. Break molds. Relate across disciplines. Years from now you will realize the value of those friendships.

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This is my last piece of advice. Don't hate any course and don't dislike any lecturer. It will affect your performance. I hated a particular course when I was in life and that affected my grade. Not that I didn't do well in the exam, but I could have done much better. Don't allow your emotions get in the way of your strategic objective. Life often demands you relate to people you don't like in the pursuit of your vision. You don't have to like a lecturer. Dentistry is not a likability contest. In truth you only need to endure the lecturer for one semester or one year. Learn how to discipline your emotions and compartmentalize issues.

All I've been telling you, all that I've labored to say in so many paragraphs is that you're going to become the awesome treasure in dentistry. The treasure we're searching for out there is nothing but you.

I want to thank you for listening. I wish you the best in life and all your endeavor. See you at the top.