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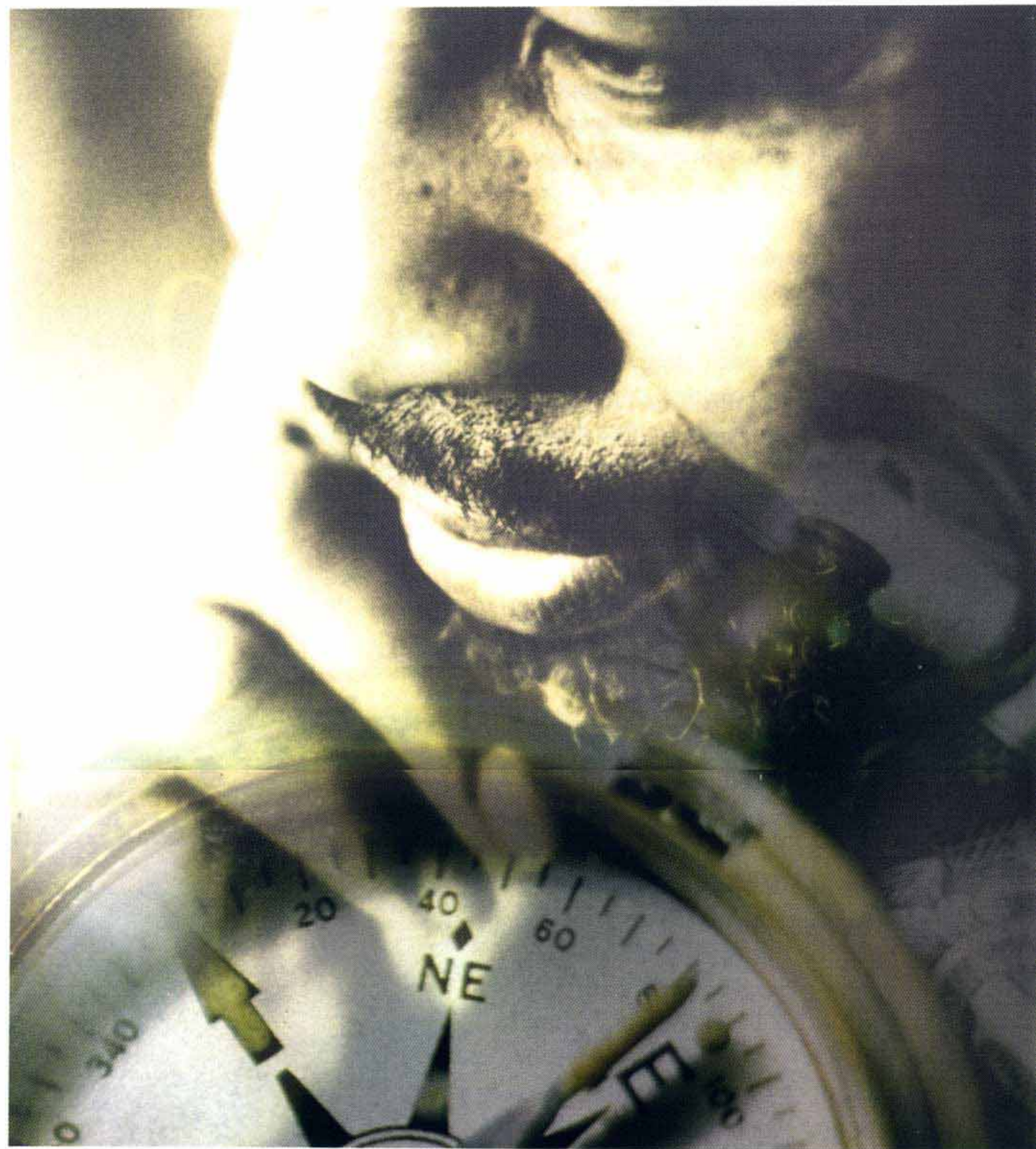
## Learning to Think

Continuing education can be an ongoing experiential journey

In recent years, more and more discussion has taken place throughout the profession regarding the future of dentistry, and the questions lingering in the minds of professionals often are self-reflective: How do I feel about my dental school education? Were my clinical skills adequate when I graduated? Are they adequate now? Do I feel empowered? Did I feel confident then? Do I feel confident now? Did I just learn to know, or did I learn to know and think?

The natural segue to these questions is a realization about the necessary fundamentals of our required continuing dental education. Today, continuing education can no longer be just about the clinical aspect—finding the right formula or the right technology and materials. Rather, it also must be about the people who make the experience and bring a certain magic and enthusiasm to the process. In short, today's successful continuing dental education should be about complete personal and professional development as well as a holistic approach to treatment.

Therefore, when faced with deciding on which conferences, seminars, and courses to attend in fulfillment of required or even desired continuing education, it's important to choose those venues that instill passion and confidence and make you want to go back for more. These likely will be true learning organizations that, according to Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*, "are constantly expanding their capacity to create their future." Because the key to personal and professional growth is not only adapting, learning, and surviving, continuing education facilities that are learning organizations will enable



you to thrive and generate success. Here's how.

What differentiates today's dental learning organizations from traditional continuing education facilities is the approach to treatment and personal mastery. Traditionally, dentists are trained to focus mainly on teeth and often use a reductionist method of thinking that breaks the ideas—and

specifically the teeth—down into parts. Often, they do not consider how the parts fit back into the whole body—as in a holistic approach.

As clinicians, we do need to think about the whole body and how the proposed treatment relates not only to the teeth but also to the muscles and the joints. How will the teeth, the

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treatment, and the muscles and joints interact? Will they affect posture? And what posture are we talking about? Is it the posture of the body or the mandible, or both? Can the posture of the mandible and its terminal end point (teeth) affect the rest of the stomatognathic system? Could musculoskeletal signs and symptoms (headaches, tingling fingers, and vertigo, to name just a few) actually be related to the posture of the mandible? Is there a missing link between patients seeking answers to multiple musculoskeletal symptoms and the lack of answers they find? Adopting a holistic approach—rather than a reductionist view—prompts such questions, such thinking. So, too, do today's dental learning organizations.

Additionally, such continuing education facilities break down the traditional hierarchical walls and facilitate communication among all participants in the learning process. From the leader or educator to the student, everyone is on equal footing so that barriers to learning are eliminated and information can be freely dispersed and shared. As a result, participants learn to learn and think, and the treatment process becomes a successful and holistic problem-solving process. By emphasizing the importance of personal mastery that develops from with-

in—and by enabling participants to conquer a paralyzing fear of failure—continuing education facilities that are learning organizations generate enthusiasm, stimulate creative thinking, and promote success.

When the fear of trying something new and failing—of embracing the latest and greatest—is gone, students can realize a greater chance for success. With more confidence in applying a greater variety of restorative options to the treatment process, clinicians can create their own avenues for future prosperity and professional satisfaction.

One organization that exemplifies the above philosophy is the Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies (LVI). At LVI, the implementation of a learning organization approach to education and training consistently leaves program attendees wanting to return for more. As an in vivo learning organization facility, it provides a hands-on venue where the training and completion of continuing education is an ongoing experiential journey, not a destination. Through programs that enable participants to apply their knowledge directly to live patients—while working side by side with expert mentors—the facility instills the confidence and passion to excel that ultimately leads to personal mastery.

As a result, continuing education participants become the best they can be by thinking, not just by learning. While much can be garnered from an all-day lecture, the ability to translate that information into a treatment plan that is applied directly to a patient affords the dentist tremendous advantages. At LVI, the benefits include a true, shared knowledge, passion and commitment from the faculty, access to the most proven and innovative restorative technologies and equipment available, and the implementation of a holistic approach that accounts for the satisfaction of both the patient and the clinician.

Once you embrace change and remove the fear of failure, you can approach the educational and clinical process with confidence, enthusiasm, and integrity. Overall, it's important to remember that when pursuing your continuing education requirements, learn not just to know but also to think. In doing so, you'll equip yourself with the tools you'll need to succeed on an ongoing experiential professional journey. ■