

# Contemporary Smiles

I've said it before, some things stay the same, but others change dramatically. Case in point: I have never seen such perfect looking teeth displayed among the young and not so young among us. For an old codger like me who unfortunately has too few original choppers left it's a bit unnerving. I have often said that most of us were born without two things: hair and teeth, and in the old days we could be sure, most males anyway, to die in the same state. But not any more. Contemporary smiles are changing all that.

I have an interesting position at the church I attend. I'm a kind of greeter. I open doors for people and slap backs and shake hands, and even hug a few necks from time to time. In the midst of all of that, I'm struck with the pearly smiles glittering and sparkling from the fresh young faces that pass by me. I am truly amazed because when I was a boy back in the middle thirties and early forties; straight, even, white teeth were somewhat of a novelty. Maybe there weren't many orthodontists around back then, and even if there were, chances are most folks couldn't afford them. Consequently, schoolrooms were filled with over bites and under bites, some extremely severe, and braces were rare. Personally, I had my first permanent tooth pulled when I was maybe ten, and another about a year later. They were both upper molars molars as I recall and before I started high school, I had developed quite a wide space between my two front teeth. I had a kind of Terry Thomas look, if you know what I mean.

When my sons were small, their stay-at-home Mom went to work for several years to help support a local orthodontist. The boys looked a bit metallic with all those wires and rubber bands, but hey, it did the trick. Before long, with constant care and flossing, they had the even, white smiles their Pop never had. They still do.

However, it seems that to attain the desired look these days, one must not only possess a mouth full of sound, even teeth, but there's a fetish for whiter and still whiter smiles. One commercial on the tube these days depicts a cute young thing who seems attracted to a good-looking hunk only to shine him on when he flashes his very ordinary less-than-pearly whites. She turns and walks away with her nose in the air, obviously disappointed. Most popular toothpastes, in addition to fluoride and twelve-hour protection against cavities, advertise whiteners that promise miracles before the tube is half-gone. Lately, something new has come on the scene. For a chunk of cash and several hours in a dentist chair one can whiten one's pearlies several shades, promising to last for at least six months. In addition, if that flattens your billfold too much, you can pick up a packet of whitening strips that will do the job while you work drive, play golf and wander the malls. These little transparent tapes contain an ingredient they say that will deep bleach your dullest incisors and bicuspid and in record time. Just stretch a strip over your front teeth, fold it back and you're on your way to a sexier, sparkling smile.

**It occurs to me from time to time that I don't fit in too well in the contemporary scene. Not only am I too old for the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force, but the police and fire departments as well. In a way, there's a real comfort in that. My hair is long gone; I am constantly battling a lustful craving for PB & J's, and I desperately need to lose 15 pounds so my pants will fit my thickening waste line a bit better. However, all is not lost. I save a lot on hairsprays and conditioners; I haven't enough of my permanent teeth left to warrant whitening strips; and I've already outlived in years most of the men in my family. So, maybe I'm in the right position in the workings at my church after all. Regardless of my less than Tom Selleck looks, I have a lot of fun saying hey to folks on Sunday mornings, opening a few doors and slapping a back or two and not trying to compete with all those young dudes and dolls with their perfect smiles. They hopefully, have a lot of living left to do and the years are dwindling down for the likes of me and my kind. Personally, I've gone to the funerals of a lot of friends and acquaintances in days gone by who had full heads of hair and gorgeous teeth, but lacking both I'm still here. It occurs to me, there's a message in there somewhere.**

**Tom Harvill, November 18, 2002**