

When you work steadily as a clown at one hospital, you get to know the patients. You see them heal, get well and go home. Also, you see them lose their hair to chemotherapy; you see them lose limbs; you see them suffer and you see them die. How do we deal with this as caring clowns?

Become a Gentler, Gentle Clown

As I visit Intensive Care Units as a routine, I am always around suffering and death. When I hear “Code Blue,” I don’t run in the other direction. I do get out of the way, am considerate of the grieving family, but I do see the other patients in the unit. For me “Code Blue” means tread softly, become a gentler, gentle clown.

I remember more than once having a patient remark how glad they were to see me, because someone had died in the unit during the night and they needed to be reminded of the funnier side of their life. I have been called to the side of a dying woman who wanted to see the hospital clown. I’ve been asked to do clown magic for patients so plugged into hospital machines that I can hardly see their faces. But to be able to see a faint weak smile on that face makes all of this worth it!

To die is something we will all do successfully. I have found I need to constantly be aware of my own inner Self and reactions. Stuffing grief (denying it) can be very unhealthy. Many of you wrote that you work by yourself without support of a clown unit. This page will be here for you (and me). There will be a page on death and dying in every newsletter to share our experiences and memories. So please write them to us.

As a patient comes closer to death, family members often visit less frequently. There is a decrease in visits, and nurse and physician time. We as clowns are very often the only friends to those “on their way out.” And all we need to do is listen. Listen to them, listen to our hearts and listen to the “Angels.”

Closer to The Light

At a hospice I entered the room of an elderly woman asking permission to visit. She said "Sure, come on in an' join the party." She introduced me to her relatives around the room. Then she resumed a lively discussion she was having with two of her relatives at the foot of her bed. This was puzzling as the patient and I were the only two people physically present in the room. I stayed for a few moments and then quietly backed out of the room without being noticed (I think). The woman died the next day. I told this to a friend a few days later and she gave me the book Closer to the Light by Melvin Morse, M.D. It speaks of NDA's (Near Death Awareness) and NDE (pre-death experiences). Was the woman having one of those experiences? Was that what I had the privilege to witness? The company of her "angels" or past relations? The next time I walk in on one, I will pay attention a little differently.

In Dr. Morse’s opinion: “By discussing predeath visions, near-death experiences, and death itself with dying patients and their families, we can take grief out of isolation and stop ignoring this difficult yet inevitable event.”

Dr. Morse did hundreds of interviews with children who had once been declared clinically dead. His research concludes that a person has to be near death to have a *Near-Death Experience* (NDE). This finding silenced many skeptics who said that NDE’s were just hallucinations that any seriously ill patient could have. The book

contains some of his interviews and his conclusions.

He found the same description, the same experience over and over again: that the end of life is serene and joyful, a welcome event not to be feared.

“You’ll see. Heaven is fun!”

Dr. Morse quotes from children too young to have been influenced by adult death taboos and fears. Here is one of those remarkable experiences:

After a Christmas Pageant a three-year-old remarked that God did not look like the man in the play. He had never been told of his cardiac arrest at nine months old. At that time he had severe bronchiolitis and while in the ER went into full cardiopulmonary arrest. His parents had chosen not to tell him of this experience.

He told his parents the following: “I saw nurses and doctors standing over me trying to wake me up. I flew out of the room and [went to the waiting room, where I] saw Grandpa and Grandma crying and holding each other. I think they thought I was going to die.” He reported crawling up a dark tunnel with a bright light at the end. At the end of the tunnel he found a bright place and “ran through fields with God.”

The last page in his book tells the story - a child who had a NDE quoted, “You’ll see. Heaven is fun.”

From my notes: A Kiss from beyond

In many hospices the predominant goal is the alleviation of distress, the palliative care of the patient. There is little encouragement to cut through identification with the body as being who we really are or the mind as being the whole reality. Hospices can have a tendency to overlook dying as a means of spiritual awakening. Though many hospice workers’ hearts are opened greatly by confrontation with the impermanence of this body. Few use this as an opportunity to touch the deepest aspect of themselves, to explore their inherent wisdom and joy. Most still consider death only a tragedy, an emergency, a loss. There is seldom the recognition of the deeper unfolding, of the need of the body to die, so that the next life experience may arise. Few hospices encourage their workers to make their work with the dying work on themselves. Few recognize the ripeness of certain patients and ask “Who is dying?” Few encourage the investigation that allows that person the direct experience of being a passenger in the body.

“A women dying in considerable pain in the hospital said, ‘I can tell, as they come in the room, which people have opened to their own suffering. Because they are the ones who can open to mine. And the people who haven’t opened to their own suffering, who haven’t opened to their pain, who aren’t using all this as a way of going deeper are just tight. They’re nervous. They’re not particularly helpful. If I am in pain they grimace They make the pain the enemy.’

In the same way we make the death of a loved one painful. It came to me one day when talking to a friend about her father who had died two weeks earlier. She said “I keep thinking ‘I’ll ask Dad about that, and then I remember that he is no longer available. It is so painful. From somewhere inside the response came; “That remembrance is like a kiss from the past. Or maybe even a kiss on the inside from beyond. – a remembrance of love not love lost, but love still there. It is all a matter of attitude.