

Gesundheit!

-- by "Patch" Adams, M.D.

Hunter (Patch) Adams, M.D. is the Founder and Director of the Gesundheit Institute,⁽⁶⁾ a holistic medical community in West Virginia that has provided free medical care to thousands of patients since it was founded in 1971. They are building the first hospital to fully incorporate humor.

Each year Patch leads a trip to Russia. No experience is necessary, only the willingness to live, love and have fun for two weeks. "It is heavenly. We do massive misbehavior."

The following is taken from an article entitled Humor: Strong Medicine, *IJAM II* (2), Fall 1993, pp. 22-23. Printed with permission of Patch Adams.

"I am both a professional clown and a physician. Each discipline took about the same number of years to master and the difficulties in becoming each were also similar. In one, I had to master information and the ability to synthesize information to make responsible decisions. In the other, I had to master the art of spontaneity and freedom of behavior. I could never say which parts of my clown persona did the trick in a healing interaction and I bet the patient could not either. I can only say that my character brings a blatant expression of love, innocence, fun, joy and friendliness to which people respond readily.

"I believe humor and love are the core of good bedside manner, burnout prevention, and malpractice prevention, and for these alone, humor deserves a central place in a medical practice. Let us not, however, deny humor its value as just raw fun. In spite of my long deep experiences with humor, I still can be brought to tears of joy over its power. All this was brought home to me in November 1991, in a children's burn unit in a hospital in Tallinn, Estonia.

"I walked in on three women (one physician and two assistants) who had just begun to change dressings and perform debridement on a 5-year-old boy with third degree burns covering 60% of his body from ears to knees and both sides. He was in the third week of recovery. Although there were no masks or strong painkillers, the work had to be done. I witnessed the utmost in loving tenderness on the part of the staff and commanding bravery on the part of the boy as the bandages came off his wounds. The silence was punctuated by the boy Raido's screams with each tug of the bandages. At first, I felt the horror of a parent for his suffering. From this came a gushing empathy moving the clown to act instinctively, to love, comfort, care for, and bring forth laughter--without fear.

"I just watched during the first third of removal because I was not sure how to proceed. The boy's neck involvement prevented him from looking up at me. When the staff took a

short break, I went over (dressed in full clown regalia), bent over him, and smiled. Spontaneously, he looked surprised and delighted and said in Estonian: "You look beautiful." My heart was captured, and I immediately went around to the head of his stretcher and spent the next hour stroking his face and hair, smiling and laughing and talking with him. We played, and he stopped screaming entirely. I was only one foot from his small unburned face and, having a 4-year-old son myself, fell in love with him. I had never seen humor's power so raw, and I kept telling him he was beautiful and strong and that he was going to live.

"It is clear that the child is the one who changed himself from being sad to being cheerful; I was my clown self. His response "You look beautiful" came as a surprise. My character is not "beautiful." It was his willingness to let me inside that made me of value to him. Another child could have been frightened and cried. Unlike a pill or operation, the impact of humor on the patient wholly has to do with the patient.

"I cannot say what I did that was, in this case, the catalyst for a pain-free experience. Was it the sparkle in my eye, the duck hat on my head, the soothing stroking of his head, the words of love and encouragement--or was it simply skilled diversion?

"He asked me to come back to his room, so I wheeled his mummified body (bandages already bloody) back to his bed. There, for one hour, I entertained him with clown silliness, still peering into sky-blue eyes and stroking his face. I do not know who benefitted more, because my whole body shook, thrilled for being there. I left most of my toys with him--even dressed up his dad like a clown while the boy laughed heartily. It was hard to leave him; I felt that he had given me much.

"When we left, the whole staff said, they wanted us to stay for all the bandage changes. On the bus, I cried for a long time, thankful Raido had been there for me.

In an Interview with *Caring People* (Spring '93) Patch was asked: "How do you handle it? The conventional wisdom is not to get involved with your patients, particularly if they are dying."

Adams answered: ". . .it's friendship. Remember, I make patients my friends. I can't distinguish between them. I don't want a patient that isn't my friend. I want to be intimate with every person that dares be intimate with me. I'm very confused about my boundaries. I literally want to fall in love with every person I'm with. I want that kind of relationship because I love friendship. It's just such a magnificent creation.

"And I am curious. It doesn't matter where people come from for me. I just want to be with people and enjoy it. The magic of being a physician is that they will let you into their lives. If they perceive you care, they will let you into their lives in ways you cannot dream. People spend their lifetime with a friend trying to get what I can get on the first encounter with a patient. It's pretty breathtaking."