

# Open Heart Listening

~ Shobi Dobi

As caring clowns we are often confronted by death and suffering. "Oh, I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say." Perhaps what is really going on is "I'm afraid of death and suffering." To be compassionate clowns, we cannot be afraid to be touched to the quick! To drop our clown characters, pick up a weak thin hand and stroke it with a smiling heart. This takes courage. This takes knowing thyself.

When clowns are vulnerable, we are spontaneous, we are loving. Fear can shut us off from our creative self and those we wish to care for. When fear arises try not to deny it or shut down, but recognize it. Tip your hat to it and say "hello." It may become more intense, you can feel it in your chest. Then let your mind find something or someone you love that brings you to a place of joy, peace or love. Try this at home at first. Find a symbol of joy, so you can call on it at an unexpected moment (an age old acting technique). The symbol can become a key to opening your heart. This key can be anything that works for you -- that reminds you of your inner joy. That may not be a vision of a loved one, but a childhood doll or tune. Mine is a silly little tune that pulls all of Shobi Dobi in place. And with her comes the innocent joy of a child. Open heart listening takes practice. The more you tread the path, the easier it is to find.

As caring clowns it is our duty to find that place of joy in our hearts, know how to get to it at a moment's notice, and how to open our joy to the world! This is not about being funny. Funny words will not change the atmosphere in a hospital room, but funny gestures, words and tricks presented with a smiling heart can fill a room and be very contagious.

## *Listening with Your Smiling Heart*

Listening with your heart is not a passive activity. Sometimes when I am in open heart listening, I sense love so strongly that I imagine it embracing and stroking the patient. Try it in front of a mirror. Get into your heart think of the joy, open your eyes and smile with your heart. Something happens to your eyes, your soft smile.

When you smile with your heart, you can't get caught up in reaction to a situation -- reactive listening. With reactive listening you: focus on facts, look for solutions, your mind is actively framing options. In the listening heart you focus on the feelings of the patient, look behind the words, and allow whatever comes to unfold. This practice can validate your humanity, deepen your compassion, and definitely reduce the isolation of a patient.

By relaxing the mind, and letting go of worry, fear and reactive thoughts, you can defuse your focus and allow your love to embrace the one you are listening to. When you focus on your heart you can see many things at once. I remember when I was a child I seemed to ride on a train a lot. (Back and forth to my dancing and piano lessons in the heart of Chicago took 30 long minutes.) I remember being fascinated by my looking. If I focused outside and saw outside, my eyes would catch an object and go with it -- and then catch another and go with it, and on and on. But, if I defused my focus, but stayed aware, my eyes would not catch an object, but simply see everything that went by. Try it sometime. (Not while driving your car!)

When you are open and spontaneous, whatever your spiritual background, this means opening to allow a greater energy than yourself to shine through. When I am spontaneous, I can trust my heart to be appropriate. When I am in my reactive mind, I may not be appropriate as I am depending mostly on my limited self. Allow this spontaneous happiness to evolve from your clown character.

"B.B." Widdop of the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit in Boston shows a perfect example of being in the moment, doing something very spontaneously that he probably would never have done if he had to think about it. He shares this moment with us.

"We met Shari on her first birthday. Every time she saw me her eyes would bug right out and she would wiggle -- we of the CCU (Clown Care Unit) call that a 'Stand-up wiggle.' It's the highest award a clown can get! They are just excited to see you and are wiggling because they don't know how to clap yet. For six months every time I saw Shari, I'd get a Stand Up Wiggle. I'd sing 'You Are My Sunshine' and she'd wiggle even more.

"Shari had a very bad heart when she was born and had never left the hospital. One day we found out Shari was going to get a new heart. Everyone was so excited we were all dancing. The mother was dancing, the nurses were dancing, the doctors were dancing, the clowns were dancing and Shari was wiggling. -- this was Celebration time. That was on a Monday, on Wednesday the transplant had taken place and I saw Shari in isolated room at Cardiac ICU. There she was in all her nakedness, stitches and wounds from the transplants under these sunlamps. The nurses had given her these fluorescent sun glasses, so she looked like she was posing for a magazine. It was like 'Go Shari!' On Friday they were moving Shari's name off the 'run down' board. I said 'Is Shari leaving the floor?' The nurse said, 'It looks like Shari is leaving us!'

"We did the rest of the rooms, and as we were coming around the end where the isolated rooms are, Dolly (my clown round partner) just couldn't take it anymore. She ran to the lounge and started to cry. For myself, and again I don't know why I did this, I ended standing up in front of the isolation windows where Shari was still lying and sang 'You Are My Sunshine' at a very slow tempo. When I finished singing, I turned to my left and Shari's father was standing at my shoulder. I remembered the article in the newsletter and said 'Have fun, Shari. You'll see heaven is fun!' [Editor's note: From what we know of NDE's I wonder if Shari at that time was floating over head watching B.B. The Clown singing, standing next to Dad, both of them with tears running down there faces.]

## *Arming Yourself with Your Joyful Heart and Glowing Smile*

Listening to a whole room full of troubles and remaining in your place of joy. That is a practice. I'm working on it. A joyful loving heart is never out of place -- among the dying, the suffering, or the grieving. When you smile with your heart, you bring a presence. It is a balancer. I am not speaking of being an outrageous funny clown. I am speaking of a joy that glows through your clown makeup. A joy that radiates in your smile.

-- Shobi Dobi