

# Be alive, be aware, be a clown!

An excerpt from: Seeking the Heart of Wisdom by Joseph Goldstein & Jack Kornfield, Shambala Books

*“Wisdom replaces ignorance in our minds when we realize that happiness does not lie in the accumulation of more and more pleasant feelings, that gratifying craving does not bring us a feeling of wholeness or completeness. It simply leads to more craving and more aversion. When we realize in our own experience that happiness comes not from reaching out but from letting go, not from seeking pleasurable experience but from opening in the moment to what is true, this transformation of understanding then frees the energy of compassion within us. Our minds are no longer bound up in pushing away pain or holding onto pleasure. Compassion becomes the natural response of an open heart.”*

What is an open heart? It is an opening of our own feelings, both comfortable and uncomfortable, to the pain and suffering of ourselves and others. To be compassionate we must be willing to experience our emotions. In our society it is quite easy to get addicted to watching TV instead of watching the real world, much less watching our inner world of feelings and emotions.

It is not easy to be aware and sit with uncomfortable emotions. Most of us avoid them at expense to our spiritual growth and compassion expansion. We set up a resistance in the mind. (Of course, I am speaking from experience) We analyze the situation, we escape, we substitute, and we resist. When there is reactive resistance in the mind, compassion cannot arise, because we have closed ourselves off from the present situation.

How very fortunate we are to be caring clowns: every time we go out, we are exercising our compassion -- letting go of our resistance and opening our hearts. I think it is a process and is the ever expanding heart.

Saying good and bad feelings is a way of resisting. It is judging a feeling and getting into that reactive mind. A reactive mind is busy judging the situation instead of being aware of it. This is a way of denying the feelings instead of absorbing, sensing and allowing ourselves to feel it and be with it. Our minds wander instead of listening, and being there. Many health care givers do not have the time to be compassionate.

Clowns can do this -- we have the time. We have the pauses in our routines, the silly faces and the compassionate smile. We don't need to give answers, we only need to be present.

Empathy is a “heart level understanding” of suffering in others. How can we empathize with an other's suffering

until we experience our own? This understanding does not necessarily mean “why am I feeling this way.” It is simply feeling it, watching it, being aware of it, naming and identifying it, and not running away from it. All things pass in time. This very act of awareness is compassion.

No matter where you live, suffering is always there - it is inherent in the process of life. If we have a body, we are going to get sick, older and die. We have a great taboo in the USA about looking in the face of death. This causes even more suffering in the dying. We are in denial. Was “Death” taught in your school or in your church school? “How We Die 101” would be a science course in most colleges.

## **Grief, the Paramount Pain.**

I have found there is a rose petal lining to grief. Grief is so deep. It is a place most of us would only go when pushed. Yet, it can be done with the awareness of being in a cave deep in your heart that you have not been to before. Sitting with it, the tears may flow, but there is something wondrous about being that deep inside yourself. Many people emerge with a change of life -- a new outlook. Others by denying the pain, contract, close the heart, and become bitter. Which experience do you think opens the wellspring of compassion? As it turns out death may be the greatest experience of our lives!

Stephen Levine in his books and lectures on hospice work speaks of the “*Soft belly*.” It is a wonderful tool. If you are contracted your stomach muscle contract. Just relax them and then proceed. It is amazing how it works. Try it before or even during a visit with a patient that is suffering.

In an ideal world compassion would be without prejudice, but we are clowns and not saints. We all have situations where being with the feelings of suffering is too difficult. There is so much work out there to be done -- so much Joy to spread that there is room for every clown in every situation. You don't have to hold the hand of a dying patient or be at the bedside of a suffering child. We do, however, need to be aware of what we can and cannot do. Mainly so we will not burn out and stop this great work!

Personally, I can be present when people and children die; however, I cannot see an animal suffer. I have thought a lot about it. It doesn't make any sense to me, because I care so much about animals. However, it is too painful for me. I cannot watch a movie where a dog (or a horse or wolf etc.) dies or is injured. Putting my dog to sleep was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. If Shobi had to clown at the city dog pound, she would stop clowning. (However, I'll never have to do that -- only humans laugh.) To each their own! There is so much to be done. Be in your element and glow!

There is no cap on the love that comes out of the wellspring of compassion. It is so great to be alive, be aware, and be a clown!

--Shobi Dobi