

"Life is like learning to play the violin

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This is the modified make-up Shobi did for Barbara at the Winnipeg Retreat. What a great smile!

The words in the title above which I heard at my college graduation have always stayed with me. I've certainly hit my share of sour notes. What I am learning, however, is that it is important to take moments to hear the beauty of the music being played, as well.

Over the past two years, I've been asked to share at conferences and dinner meetings, about my life experiences and some of the "life lessons." I write the following experiences in an effort to remember what I am still learning. The sharing helps me to learn & relearn. The process also helps me to gain perspective. I think we are always given opportunity to learn that which we need to know in order to play a great concert!

The first experience that I share began when I was 23 years old and was

backpacking through Europe for ten weeks. It was a fascinating experience that broadened my world in many ways. I think one of the most profound insights came when I visited a concentration camp in Germany (Dachau). As a young girl growing up in a prairie town in Canada, World War II was something I studied at some point in history class. My memories of these lessons have long since faded. I'm sure it was not the fault of my teachers, but just a result of youthful egocentricism making it difficult to relate to an event that seemed at the time to have happened so many years ago in a land so far away.

So when I came face to face with the realities and atrocities of what human beings suffered at the hands of fellow human beings, I became overwhelmed with sorrow. I remember crying all the way through the tour and the film that showed actual footage of the events that had occurred in the place that I was then standing. I'll never forget that awakening.

After my trip, I moved to a large Canadian city to embark on new adventure. In no time, I had landed a job as a nurse in a large hospital. A few weeks into my job, I experienced another moment of awakening. I was working the night shift and responded to a call light of a patient whose nurse was on her break. The elderly man was frail and emaciated. He beckoned to me to come close as he whispered his request for assistance to stand so that he could use his urinal. The request was quite routine, yet the memory is permanently etched on my mind. For on his arm, I noticed a small blue tattoo of numbers – a remnant of the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Standing together in that hospital room, his arm around my shoulder and mine securely around his waist, I felt

profoundly moved. I couldn't help but wonder what it must have been like for him as a young man, similarly frail, emaciated and in need of assistance. What suffering he must have endured in his life. I hoped that in his final stage of living here on earth that he received the gentle caring that every human deserves in the face of suffering. What a privilege, for me, to share this moment with this man.

Not long after, I read the book entitled "Man's Search For Meaning", which was written by Viktor Frankl, a short time after he was released from a concentration camp in 1945. In this small book, Frankl speaks very openly about his own feelings and reactions about being imprisoned and about his observations of his fellow prisoners. It is a very significant piece of literature. What makes a person able to endure such atrocities? Why do some people, who are physically frailer than their neighbor, survive and others do not? What helps people cope and even thrive?

In the past ten years, I have found myself being drawn to learn from the experiences of people who have suffered huge atrocities and have not only survived, but have even thrived. In my experience of working in palliative care, I've been at the bedside of many people facing the end of their earthly journeys. What a privilege to have had the opportunity to glean the wisdom in the experiences they've shared. Yet sometimes it is not with words that life lessons are passed.

Anna was a ninety-four-year-old Jewish woman who had emigrated from Europe years earlier. Each time that I would enter her hospital room, regardless of the reason, she would take a deep breath, clasp her hands together, and say: "God bless you! You come to visit me, an old lady!"

and giving a concert at the same time"

Then her weathered face would break into a smile; every crease joined in a picture as beautiful as any mountain scene. (If wrinkles are inevitable, then I want happy ones like Anna's!) Each evening I would bring Anna her bedtime medication. Her big blue eyes would widen as she'd add to her usual words: "Barbara, you have my candy?"

I'd nod, as she'd wink and slowly sit up and pat her bed, silently instructing me to arrange myself beside her. Without fail, as Anna would reach for her medication, her hand would stop in mid-air: "Did you bring my Ativan?" "Of course," I'd answer. (Anna took a small dose of Ativan so she could sleep.) Then she'd smile, take her pills, and settle into the sheets for the night. One night, she reached for my hand and held it a little longer than usual. Pulling me close, she kissed my cheek and said: "Not one Ativan, but ONE HUNDRED Ativan you are to me!"

I've always remembered Anna. Not only because she gave me one of the nicest compliments of my nursing career so far! (Although one friend tells me that being compared to a sleeping pill might not be a compliment!)

It is Anna's radiant beauty, which reflected such joy, even in the midst of suffering, that I remember most. Throughout her time on the palliative care unit; Anna had a unique way of making others feel so special just by entering her room. She'd focus her attention on others, instead of dwelling on her own circumstances.

I never did ask Anna many details about her younger years or her life prior to moving to North America. I can only speculate that her life had been filled with much suffering. I often wondered, though, how she could still be so joyful and at peace.

Maybe she had, like Viktor Frankl, learned that meaning can be found in the midst of suffering - that the last of the human freedoms is the ability to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.

Our lessons as caring clowns can come in many ways. It was late on a Saturday afternoon, and I was running behind schedule. Choosing the quickest route possible to get to my next destination, I soon found myself driving through an area of the city that is not the most pleasant for a young woman alone. As I approached the first stop sign, I quickly checked that my doors were locked, and said a little prayer for an uneventful trip. That intersection, however, proved to be a very memorable junction where I experienced a profound moment of insight in my life's journey:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the people who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

*Viktor Frankl's reflections
on his experience in
Auschwitz during World War
II.*

As my car waited at the stop sign, a young man with a very unkempt appearance walked through the middle of the street. He held a freshly lit cigarette in one hand and a large case of beer in the other as he rather unsteadily headed to what was presumably going to be a night of heavy partying.

As he passed my car, I swallowed hard. Just at that moment, he turned and looked right at me. Our eyes locked, mine filled with what I was sure would be recognized as fear. His eyes, however, instantly changed from their defiant glare to those of a wide-eyed kid, as a huge smile cracked through his whole tough persona.

Simultaneously, the cigarette dropped from his fingers as he began waving that hand happily at me! It was in that moment that I remembered that I was still dressed as my alter ego, Twinkle the Clown, returning from a child's fifth birthday party! As I drove past him, waving and smiling in my best clown fashion, I realized that I had just received one of the best gifts.

I had seen this young man for who he really was – under the tough mask that he had learned to wear for reasons I'll never know. I had glimpsed the little child he had once been and who still lived inside of him.

Now, whether I'm speaking to a group of business professionals about using humor to keep a balanced life, or working in my role as a hospice program coordinator, or just driving home as Twinkle from a birthday party, I often remember that man and smile. I now really believe that everyone has an "inner clown" no matter how it may be hidden. And what a privilege to get an unexpected glimpse!