

All Work, No Play Makes Clown No Fun at All!

Hurry to work! Catch the train, inhale your lunch, answer the phone, don't forget the email, clean the house, balance the checkbook, throw on your costume - only 20 minutes to get into "face," off to a birthday party, promised to volunteer at the hospital at 1 p.m., it's now 2, hurry, hurry, hurry. Riding on this fast train, I am not only not funny, I'm not having fun! Who ever heard of a clown not having fun? (Other clowns!)

When we're so busy with external busy-ness, it's easy to lose our sense of play and then our sense of humor. The costume and face may be funny, but it is our sense of play that makes us fun. We can't afford to lose this play especially in the hospital, where we can't depend on a stage show. It's one-on-one and heart-to-heart. We have to share our own self.

My "raison d'être" (reason for being) is simply to glow. As a clown that becomes the sharing of that glow as joy. So it is my responsibility on the personal level to keep the windows to my inner glow clean. What is it that fogs those windows? Stress, anger, pain, and fear. Fear underlines all the above and makes us contract, cutting off our spontaneity and our inner source and glow. When we are truly in the moment, we don't experience fear. Almost all fear is projection (with the exception of sudden falling or pain). We all have that glow inside, sometimes it gets as small as say a mustard seed. (Hmm). I want to do more than lift the environment of a hospital room, I want to "brighten the environment." It's about the quality of our presence.

Play is living and appreciating the moment -- realizing that every moment in our life is full of the glow of the universe, if we would only "stop and smell the roses." Oh, the discipline of being present. If only I could remember all the time to be in the moment. So this is why I wear a red nose?

What makes work play? Watch the children. They do everything with a hop, a skip, a jump and often a song. They are always right there in the moment ready to see all the wonderful little intricacies in our garden of life. They see the caterpillar on the leaf as fascinating, not judging that it will soon be eating our tomatoes.

The hospital clown today is not so much the didactic critic, but the experiential playmate. We give the experience of the moment. It is the gift we get, and it is our gift to those suffering. It is the gift of play we bring to hospitalized patients, and staff and relatives. Because right then, with you, they can connect to that inner child and to the moment, to that inner glow, that love, that universal connection.

I always remember the couple who every time they see me laugh and say, "Cordon Bleu" (a rubber chicken on a blue cord from my rubber chicken lunch box) They told me that every time they get into an argument one of them will remember to say "Cordon Bleu" and they laugh. It brings them right back into the moment. You see, one day, at a time of great fear and pain in their lives, (the husband was in ICU) this clown happened to walk into their hospital room with her rubber chicken lunch. They laughed so much that it brought them back to the moment, which wasn't fearful at all, but for them, full of the love of their relationship.

If, in street clothes, I approach someone and smile they may think "Oh what a nice lady, she has such a sweet smile" A little of the glow shines through, but when I am in clown motley something more happens. "Oh, there's a clown" It's like getting a direct line to their glow to their inner child, to their play. It's really "Oh, there's a clown. Let's play!"

But what happens when your feet hurt, you're hungry because you haven't taken the time for lunch or you're angry because another clown promised to show up and didn't. When does clowning stop becoming fun? When you don't want to go anymore. When you find excuses not to go. When other things become more important, then it's time to make it play again. It is part of taking care of yourself, so you can care for others.

One of the most brilliant men I ever knew told me how he, Einstein (yes, Albert Einstein) and Oppenheimer of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton University would play with toys. They would even give each other toys at Christmas time. They played not only because it was fun, but to keep in balance. Their work was serious, but they learned to make it into play. Play is an important balancer in our life and it opens doors to creativity.. When I get dry and uninspired, I go out to the yard and see how many big soap bubbles I can get to go over my house. (I have a lot of bubble toys) I don't think about anything else. It clears my mind and gets me in to the moment. Find something that will do that for you. Treat yourself to play. You deserve it.

When we clowns play, we play hard. Clowning is like acting. You are "on" all the time you are in costume. I have taught 8 hour workshops and not been tired afterwards. I have put 7 hours in at the hospital and been exhausted beyond belief. I come home and go to sleep. Yes, it is good sleep, as the rewards are those of the heart. But, you wouldn't ask an actor to act on stage for 8 hours, or a dancer to dance for 8 hours, or your horse to race for 8 hours. Clowning is, after all, performing. Five hours is a good amount of time for me to be at the hospital; however, I found it often takes me 2 hours to get out of the hospital as I have to walk through the lobbies, the elevators. And there is always -- "Oh please can't you go up and see my mother," or my child, my friend. So I have to consider into my five hours the "leaving" time.

Rest is important. I use to feel guilty about this, but I'm learning to pace myself. Find a place in the hospital that you can be alone -- not the cafeteria, or the nurse's lounge. A place that is without people where you are not "on stage" where you can eat lunch, put up your feet, and relax. It may be a supply closet or an empty room. Ask a staff member for it. You deserve it. In my hospital there are little alcoves near the elevators. On the hospital floors they are always full of waiting family. But on the administrative floors they are always out of sight and empty.

We will continue this in the next issue. When money and survival enter our playing field, more issues come up. The next issue will continue the discussion of "The Thorns in Our Colorful Sides."

– Shobi Dobi