

Hospital Clown Newsletter

A Publication for Clowns In Community and World Service

www.HospitalClown.com PO Box 8957, Emeryville, CA 94608 - Vol. 4, No. 3



You must believe in its power and effectiveness with your whole heart and soul. This passionate energy, will stimulate you to learn, grow and increase your skill level. Passion is necessary to help you withstand those who doubt your work or challenge your right or ability to do it.

Patty Wooten, RN, BSN is a nurse, a renowned international speaker, and an hilarious clown. With an extensive background in critical care, hospice, and home health, Patty set forth to express her love of nursing through the development of her clown characters. From Modesto to Madrid, from Alaska to Australia, Patty's audiences have laughed, learned and experienced the incredible power of humor in healing. These characters come from Patty's soul. They are all part of her being and who she is. She uses each in a unique way. Scruffy visits the elderly, Nancy Nurse the staff and Nurse Kindheart the patients . . . and sometimes they invade each others territory.

Patty reminds us: "What is needed to become a hospital clown is passion and sensitivity. You must have a strong passion for whatever medium you choose to express your healing efforts.

"Next, you must be sensitive; sensitive to your patient and to yourself. Let your sensitivity guide how you implement your healing modality and especially how you assess its effectiveness.

"Passion without sensitivity may cause you to overwhelm the patient with your needs and beliefs without providing opportunity for them to discover or express their own inner awareness. Be sensitive to yourself and your energy levels."

. . . . and Scruffy, Nancy Nurse, and Nurse Kindheart

Patty Wooten and . . .

Patty continues "Sometimes in our passion to share, we may ignore internal signals that remind us of the need for rest and renewal. Remember to maintain your sense of humor and to notice how easily your laughter bubbles up (or doesn't).

"The spirit of the clown is, of course, love. First, we must love ourselves, accepting our own weaknesses and imperfections, acknowledging our foolishness. Clowns radiate love towards others. We accept people just as they are, and honor their personal space. We remain sensitive to everyone we encounter, reading their non-verbal cues, and responding with kindness and love."

Comic vision comes when you look through the eyes of a clown and you see the potential for comedy. You see the incongruity. You see how to take reality and distort it "just enough" to find that funny edge.

Comic vision in the health care setting is looking at what needs to be laughed about and then doing it with sensitivity. It's the AT & T approach: Appropriate, Timely and Tasteful!

"For what, after all, is the laughter a good clown brings us but the giddiness that comes from suddenly seeing, as if from a cosmic viewpoint, the absurdity of what the mighty are up to?"

"For that moment, we taste the sanity of divine madness, and become, for as long as the joke lasts, fools of God."

--Theodore Rozak

On the pages following is Patty Wooten's story of how she created her clowns from the hurdles of her life and how she uses them in her successful nursing and humor career. Each clown will speak out of their own character which is really Patty's inner clown. They speak to her and to us.

My first inner clown was born in 1973. Recovering from a painful divorce, my heart ached. Even after a year, I still had crying spells while trying to provide a loving home for my one-year old son Ken. A bright and playful toddler, he greeted each day early -- usually seven in the morning. This was much, much too early to awaken, but as every mother knows, your day begins when your kid get up. I usually got into bed about 3 AM after getting off the evening shift, driving to the baby-sitter's to get Ken, and then driving home again. My mornings were always busy with household chores, a trip to the park, and then I was off to work at 1:30 PM at University Hospital.

Before I even started my shift I felt tired. The next nine hours in a busy ICU for neurologically damaged patients, were spent caring for young victims of motorcycle accidents, elderly people who suffered massive strokes, and people of all ages with cancerous brain tumors. I would care for these often comatose patients, comfort their families, and try to help the new interns learn something about our care protocols in the unit. Everywhere I looked, both inside and out, I saw pain, suffering, sadness, and loss. The joyful spirit, which usually filled my inner being, was gone. I knew that I had to rediscover

my happiness, or be sucked into a black hole of depression and hopelessness.

One day, while driving to work, a radio announcement caught my attention. A very happy voice seemed to speak directly to me! The voice announced a new "clownology" course that was being offered by the San Diego State University extension program.

Would this clown training help me rediscover my joyful spirit? I enrolled the next morning in the fourteen week course. Rich Wise, a Ringling Brothers Clown College graduate, taught the course. His enthusiasm and playfulness inspired us to push past the hesitation we all felt about becoming foolish. Together, with fifteen other adults, I learned how to apply make-up, design costumes, develop a character, and perform funny magic tricks and skit routines.

Scruffy my first born clown is a sad faced tramp clown. At first, my make-up was reddish with a gray wig, but I noticed that kids were afraid of him. I think the make-up and wig colors were too depressing. Also, my sad mouth was turned downward too severely and didn't change when I smiled. Then I purchased an orange yak fur wig and changed my make-up to auguste, and the smile to one whose expression could quickly change into delight upon discovering someone to play and laugh with. Scruffy began visiting nursing homes. I saw how quickly the elderly were able to access their inner child and become playful. Walking down the halls of the nursing home, the residents would clap their hands excitedly and announce, "The circus has come to town." They would reach out to touch me and laughed and smiled. The staff said they'd never seen some of those residents smile before my visit. They assured me that after my clown visit, the residents had much more energy, better appetites and were more open to interaction with others. Wow! I was funny--and, even better, I was making a difference in someone's life!

Clowning taught me that I had the ability and flexibility to change the way I looked at life. I could choose to view my life as depressing and serious, trying in vain to control the people and circumstances around me. Or, I could choose to distort my problems and see them in outrageous and comical proportions. My inner clown taught me how to laugh and play again. I knew I had to do that, if I was to remain physically and mentally healthy.



Scruffy Speaks Out

"Life is not always fair, and sometimes you don't get what you want. But, you can't let that stop you from having fun. And you can't just sit around and wait for fun to find YOU. When you start to have fun, you can turn your frown upside down. It happens to me. When I'm not having any fun, I look sad and forlorn, I feel lonely and hopeless. Once I start having some fun, everything changes and I know that I can survive anything. When I first met Patty, she was one of the most forlorn people I'd ever seen. Her frown was so down it touched the ground. I couldn't bear to see her that way, so I decided to teach her my ideas about fun. Together, with her son Ken, we helped her discover her playful inner child. Soon she was laughing again and indeed her frown had turned upside down. I knew she would remember the skills I taught her and use them if she ever got stuck again."



As I grew and changed, so did my inner clown. I decided that if nurses were going to see the comedy inherent in their profession, it would help if they could identify with a "nurse clown." This wacky character could comically distort the professional's reality, revealing the humor beneath the job and the potential for folly. So, in 1982 my second clown was born.

"Nancy Nurse" is a wild, red-headed clown, armed with a combat belt of weapons for duty -- bedpans, urinals, enema buckets, and over-sized syringes used to fight disease. Her stethoscope is made from a garden hose and a toilet plunger which is great to use on those big-hearted patients. . . it can also be used to relieve constipation! "Nancy Nurse" is bold, outspoken, and in control of both patients and doctors.

As "Nancy Nurse," I became Patty's 'inner jester' after she'd been in nursing for fifteen years! By that time, she had "Been there, done that," and got the T-shirt, if you know what I mean. It was time for her to carry the message she'd learned about humor and laughter to nurses and caregivers around the world. She was eager to do that, but didn't have the confidence that she could always see the funny side of every situation. I told her I'd ride along with her and offer all the crazy wisdom she needed.



Through "Nancy Nurse," caregivers learn to laugh at themselves and gain some distance from the serious and tragic aspects of the profession. "Nancy Nurse" performs a stage show primarily for audiences of health professionals. But, over the years, she began to speak to patient support groups after the workshops with nurses.

• • • • • Nancy Nurse,

Nancy Nurse Speaks Out

"Hey, nursing ain't easy, in fact, life ain't easy. But, you can't let reality ruin your day. Sometimes you've gotta "shift your wit" so you don't have to do it the other way around. Yeah, yeah, I know, patient's whine, doctor's bark, and those blasted "bean counters" from administration are always trying to claim more power over patient care decisions. Well, I say, its time to deal with it! Ignoring it won't help, and I doubt that anybody's going to change. So, here's my plan. . . . If your patient whines like a puppy, then treat 'em like a puppy. Really! Think about it, what do you do if a puppy whines? You pick them up and love 'em and pet 'em and maybe play with them a little. You check to make sure they don't really need to go to the bathroom and you see if they're hungry or in pain. If nothing's wrong, then just assure them that they are safe. Tell 'em to go to sleep and have some exciting puppy dreams.

Now doctors are a different story. The bad news is, unlike the patients' who get better and go away, the doctors keep coming back day after day. The good news is, once you get 'em trained, your life's a whole lot easier. Doctors have always barked at nurses. Don't ask me why, it's kinda like gravity, you can depend on it. Breeds of doctors are just like other breeds of barking species. Some of them are the yappy, nippy kind that start runnin' around in circles when something gets 'em riled up. Others are the mournful howlers--if they want something they don't have, they tilt their head back and howl. It's kinda spooky when that happens during night shift with a full moon. Still other doctors are the ones that snarl and growl. They try to dominate the neighborhood with intimidating behavior. Of course, there are the kind we all love, the cute and cuddly tail wagers that will fetch a chart for you. This type will never chew up your shoes and they are completely housebroken. They don't bark or whine when you're not there, but they're always glad to see you return. This is the type you want to breed (not personally mind you). Put this type in the middle of the whole pack and then praise them, and perhaps the others will notice and change their behavior. It's worth a try."



Sometimes "Nancy Nurse" was asked to make "clown rounds" at hospitals and entertain patients. I learned that the character of "Nancy Nurse" was not as funny to patients, and that some were actually frightened by her presence. "Nancy Nurse" was too big, bold, and boisterous for the delicate art of bedside clowning. I needed another clown for patients and their families--a clown that was gentle, kind, and concerned for the patient and their vulnerable situation.

My latest clown character, "**Nurse Kindheart**" was born in 1994.

"Nurse Kindheart" is a dear, sweet, white-haired, proper nurse with a clipped British accent who embodies all the old fashioned qualities of nursing that are sometimes lost among the technology and bustling activity of the hospital. "Nurse Kindheart" is patient and reassuring as she clucks, "There, there dear, let me fix you a good, hot cup of tea and we'll talk about this problem and solve it together."

"Nurse Kindheart" embodies the qualities of compassion and sensitivity that all patients need and that most nurses still value. The techniques of Western allopathic medicine place great demands upon the professional nurse today. Sophisticated monitoring equipment, complex medication procedures and intricate infection control policies create multiple distractions for any professional caregiver. The home care environment is beginning to look more and more like a hospital room, as patients are being discharged "quicker and sicker."

"Nurse Kindheart" offers a gentle reminder to all caregivers, to be gentle, patient and kind in every contact they have with patients, family and colleagues. "Nurse Kindheart" is the antithesis of "Nancy Nurse." "Nancy" is wild and crazy, bold and brash, oversized and noisy. "Nurse Kindheart" is a true "Angel of Mercy." She is sweet and demure, careful and polite, refined and serene.

... and Nurse Kindheart

"Nurse Kindheart" believes that LOVE is the greatest healing energy there is, so she exudes this to everyone she meets.

Her uniform is crisp and professional, with long sleeves and a pleated bodice. Her hose are white (of course) and she wears sensible duty shoes. Small, pink heart-shaped buttons run the length of her uniform and her shoes display a large pink heart and pink shoelaces. A pink nurse's cap sits atop her snow-white hair, which is loosely tied into a bun. And, on the tip of her nose is a small pink, heart-shaped clown nose, so when she "sticks her nose into other people's business," they know she loves them.

Being an old fashioned nurse, "Nurse Kindheart" realizes the importance of being present and available. She frequently visits her patients to provide peace and comfort. She queries their physicians about the completeness of their orders and insures that they have anticipated any problems their patients might have before their next visit. After all, she tells the doctors,



"I wouldn't want to disturb you late at night with my questions, dearie. You look so weary, you deserve a good nights' sleep and maybe a wee sip of sherry to insure sweet dreams."

"Nurse Kindheart" remembers the good old days when nurses cared for patients in large wards filled with ten or twenty beds. It was much easier to help each other back then, when several nurses worked together in one big room. Today, with all these private rooms and specialty units, it requires greater effort for nurses to stay in touch and help each other during the shift.

Performing before an audience of 500 nurses on the opening night of the Journal of Nursing Jocularity Conference, I was seated on stage giving "report," a mostly verbal routine with an accompanying slide show. Within the course of five minutes, it seemed that everything that could go wrong, went wrong. The house lights went on and off at wrong times, a helium balloon blew-up in front of the slide projector, my reading light on stage went out and left me in the dark. But, because my character was strong and I was immersed in "being that character," I was able to spontaneously create comical ad libs, much to the delight of the audience. When the lights went out at the wrong moment, "Nurse Kindheart" requested, "Could the dear, sweet person who did that, please place your hand back on the switch and do it the other way again?" When the balloon blew in front of the slide projector, she calmly remarked, "Well, now, it appears we're having an eclipse." And when all the house lights went out, leaving "Nurse Kindheart" completely in the dark, and the audience gasping in sympathetic pain for my predicament, she commented, "Don't worry dearies, I've done enough night shifts to be able to figure things out in the dark. Do you suppose this is why Florence advised us to always carry the lamp?"

Recently, I spoke at the Maine State Nurses Association. At the last minute, I offered to bring "Nurse Kindheart" to the luncheon and they agreed. As I entered the room in my costume, they mentioned, "Oh, by the way, the President of the American Association of Nurses, Virginia Betts, is here. She'll be speaking after lunch." "Nurse Kindheart" immediately said, "Oh my dear, the Queen of Nursing herself. Well, I've got a message for her straight from Florence." As I walked toward the head table to deliver that message, I didn't know exactly what I would say to this prestigious spokesperson for nursing. I stopped to glance at a program and noticed her topic was "Cutbacks in Healthcare--How to Survive." What did my character believe about health care reform? The message came to me. "Florence wanted me to tell you why nurses are called 'Angels of Mercy.' It's because everyone expects us to do everything on just a wing and a prayer."

Nurse Kindheart Speaks (with a kindly British Accent)

"People need to know that someone cares about them, they need to be very certain of this. It is especially important when people are sick. It's important for the patient to feel cared for AND it's important for the caregiver to feel cared for. Too much time is spent these days using machines and drugs to combat illness. And that's just what it is, it's combat, it's a war against disease.

Unfortunately, the patient's poor body is the battlefield. We can no longer continue to drop these atomic bombs on the enemy just to prove that we're more powerful than the disease. We must learn to use our negotiation skills to impose economic sanctions, and avoid the blood shed if at all possible. Every soldier needs time away from the battlefield for Rest and Recovery. This is true for patients as well as professional and family caregivers. Everyone needs a safe space where they can relax and feel nurtured. So we must offer our caring with a kind heart, compassion and love.

Love is the power that heals. I decided to join up with Patty when she began speaking to patient support groups and doing hospital clown rounds. The outrageous, irreverent "Nancy Nurse" was just a bit too wild and bawdy for the fragile emotions of many sick people. When you're in the hospital or sick at home, you really want and need kindness and compassion. Someone to look out for you and protect you from insensitive people. Well, I fit that description to a 'T,' so I offered to travel around with Patty and help her out."



In 1983, I started my own business, "*Jest for the Health of It!*" For the last 16 years, I have presented workshops, keynotes, and seminars throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia and even Africa!

Many experiences stand out in my memory as I look over my years of leading workshops, but one is especially vivid. It happened in Los Angeles. One hospital sponsored my workshop, and invited nurses from nearby hospitals to attend. There were about two hundred nurses in the room. Everything went smoothly during the morning sessions, and after lunch I appeared for my "Nancy Nurse" performance. Now, most clowns have been taught to "play off" the people that laugh the most. These people are somehow connected to your character in a vital way and will continue to laugh, even louder, if you play to them. One silver-haired nurse sitting near the front row was laughing so hard, she was crying. The more she laughed, the more I fed her lines, and the more she laughed. I was so involved, I didn't notice several other people watching us in gasping disbelief.

During the break, a few people approached me announcing they'd just witnessed a miracle. They explained that the woman who was laughing uncontrollably had recently retired from her faculty position at a nearby nursing school. For 25 years she had taken student nurses for their clinical assignments to the hospitals where many of the participants worked. The miracle? Nobody, in the past 25 years had ever seen this woman laugh, much less smile.

Jest for the Health of It, is a company dedicated to the promotion and development of therapeutic humor, Patty teaches and consults with health care professionals, patients, caregivers, educators and business executives. Her lecture topics focus on the utilization of humor to reduce stress, cope with change, recover from illness and improve the work environment. She assists in the development of humor programs, laughter libraries, comedy carts and clown visitation programs. Patty is the past president of the *American Association for Therapeutic Humor* and was featured columnist for the *Journal of Nursing Jocularly*. She is the author of more than 50 professional articles about humor and health and has been featured in countless articles in leading magazines and newspapers such as *Psychology Today* and *USA Today*. Her books include the following:

Heart, Humor and Healing, quips and stories gathered from patients, doctors, nurses and clowns.

Compassionate Laughter: Jest for Your Health! provides convincing evidence that laughter is powerful medicine for our body, mind, and spirit. A must for every Hospital Clown's Library!

Laugh! Jest for the Health of It, a thirty five minute video by TouchStar Productions, features Nurse Kindheart and Nancy Nurse. In "down-to-earth" romp through a series of entertaining and comical interruptions to illustrate the inner healing resources through the power of humor.