

Clowning in a World of Hurt

By Shobi Dobi

In our life as a clown sooner or later we will be asked to clown at a funeral, a death bed, a shelter, a disaster area. A few years ago the family of a fellow clown asked my clown alley to come “in face” to his funeral. We handed out flowers to people as they came in. During the service a soprano began to sing “Amazing Grace.” However, by the second verse her voice was stressed, you could tell she was beginning to cry and choke up. Spontaneously, without even looking at each other, the row of clowns in the back very softly began to sing with her until she recovered and finished. It was very touching, but more than that, it is really what we caring clowns are about -- soft support - it is the gentleness of the caring clown.

I live in California, so I have always have my earthquake kit in my car and a bottle of water in every room in my house too. Most of the disasters I have experienced were before I became a clown. But one day stands out in my memory. I won't go through the “where I was when the 1989 earthquake hit San Francisco story,” but I will tell you what I did. I had what the newscasters were calling *survivors' guilt*. On TV they gave out a list of numbers to call to volunteer. I went to the Red Cross Headquarters in Oakland to sit in the volunteer room waiting until someone needed me. Eventually, I was asked to sit at the front table at reception -- the Triage Person. “But I don't know how to do this!” I pleaded. My only instruction was “Just don't turn anyone away.” It was so amazing. I would just listen to the people who came up one after the other and then “runners” were assigned to take these people to others who could help them with their specific needs.

But this was the amazing part. I had a big box of sandwiches under my table. It was a bottomless box as some volunteer kept filling it up. Everyone who came up was offered first something to eat. There were homeless people who came by and others who would come staggering up -- People who were used to being turned away, if not pushed away. Before they could get a sentence out of their mouth, someone would give them a cup of hot coffee. They would say meekly “I understand you got food here.” “Sure do” I'd reply and hand them a sandwich. “Would you like another?” I would keep handing them sandwiches and they would stuff them into their pockets and backpacks and then a “runner” would lead them off to find them shelter. People came by to give food, children brought their favorite toys to give, people brought dollars and checks, coffee and fresh baked cookies. And no one was turned away. I thought “Why can't it always be like this!” Everyone was willing to help, no one better than anyone else. Amazing how status crumbles naturally in a disaster. The best of us comes out in tragedy. Competitiveness becomes cooperation. Everyone wants to help – unconditionally.

Now vicariously though the speed of communications we live through human tragedy in detail for hours and days. All this instantaneous news coverage has stimulated Shobi's imagination Patch Adams right now is setting up a program that will have its own 747 airplane dedicated bringing in clowns to such areas. Can I clown in a disaster area? I won't know until I try.

We are just beginning to understand the positive effects of humor and clowning on health. As a clown I have gone places I never

would have imagined I could go. I never would have gone into the room of a dying person – until I was asked to do so.

Children are our greatest teachers in these situations. Children when their pain is managed will play until the moment they die. I remember being trapped in a hot airless room in India on my way from Moscow, Russia to Delhi, India. We could not land in Delhi because of fog, so the plane landed in Calcutta, India. We were put into this hot sealed room as we were all “foreigners” who had not gone through customs. It was interesting for me to watch the reactions of the passengers to this stressful situation. The monk played cards with his Russian buddies, the Moslems found themselves a corner to say their prayers, but the children all found something to play with and they played the whole time -- for hours! . And the adults who watched them began to relax and smile.

Once on an ICU floor lobby an adult came up to Shobi “I don't think it is appropriate for you to be here, my family is making some very serious decisions.” Shobi whispered pointing to some children “I'm just going to go over to those children and play quietly with them. O.K.?” The adult looked over to the children and nodded approval. After a while the adults in the family asked me to come over and check out their hearts with my “amazing stethoscope” The “serious” family later came over to Shobi and said “Thank you for helping us make our decision.” The lesson I learned was: If you can find a child to play with, the adults will follow along. Where there are children to play with, the clown is safe. When approaching a frightened child, we allow the humor to come to us, as we allow the child to come to us. It is the same with adults in sensitive situations.

How do we as clowns train to be sensitive? It all goes back to the character and improvisation training. How are we quiet in our clown characters? Every performer knows the value of “nursing the moment.” It is the quiet, soft times on stage that are most poignant. Many performers do exercises practicing the degrees of their emotions and gestures. Can you be a quiet happy? Say a 1 as well as a 10 happy? Be a 1 sad or a 6 sad? The energy is not less and the focus may be more important. Imagine the focus and quiet grace of Emmett Kelly, the great circus clown, slowly sweeping a spotlight under a rug in center ring.

A quiet time is a time to go into your heart and let your inner clown direct. When the fire engine comes down the street, it doesn't mean panic and drive, it means get out of the way. In the hospital when a code blue is announced, it does not mean leave the floor, it means get out of the way. Like every other situation in the hospital, stand back observe and open your heart. Let it all come naturally.

Patience to wait for inner guidance, patience to wait for the “right” moment, the “correct” response. The patience to listen to your inner resources that direct your inner director, your “dual perspective” as actors call it. Take the time to rest in the love in you heart. It takes trust. It is here that a connection is made with something higher than the tragedy -- our inner director also has a director call it what you may — God, Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, Universal Consciousness. Being aware of this connection, takes some vigilance, it is like a muscle that becomes strong with use.