

Compassionate Touch *Augmenting Our Practice / Adding to Our "Bag" of Tricks*

The source quoted in this article and the inspiration for writing this article is the book by Dawn Nelson, *Compassionate Touch Hands-On Caregiving for the Elderly, the Ill and the Dying*. This book is available from the author, please contact her at cttrain@jps.net or contact Shobi for details.

I've been a new hospital clown who did a magic trick for someone really sick and seen the gratitude in their eyes. But after some experience, it all left me wondering if there wasn't something more appropriate I could do. I began to see their looks of gratitude as looks of sympathetic understanding of me! More like "Thank you dear, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but . . ." After much reading I came to realize what they are really saying is "Won't you please just hold still and look at me, the person."

Certainly a little "shtick" (as I have learned to call it) can be a way of initiating a personal connection, but it can also be a way of keeping so busy that we don't have to connect - so we don't have to deal with pain and suffering.

Remember your first clown gig and all the things you tried to squeeze into an hour kids' party or a ten minute performance? We all have a tendency to get overly active when we are nervous. With hospital clowning we deal with an audience which could make even the most experienced stage clowns nervous, because we have to deal with our strong reactions to our "audience." But this may not be what patients or even staff need. We need to slow down to the pace of the patient. Listening with all our senses, it may be appropriate to go to a much quieter place. Maybe even just sitting and matching the rhythm of their breath is enough.

" . . . shared breathing can evolve into a surprisingly powerful exercise. It often creates a sense of peace in both participants. It can heighten awareness of the breathing process and of the relationship or connection between two individuals. It may even produce a deep emotional catharsis in one or both people."

When we open our hearts to people who are suffering, we become really vulnerable, not just a "stage" vulnerable clown. We empathize and see ourselves in their place. This is an important part of being present, of giving our attention. This takes inner experience and courage to open our heart to others.

"Opening your heart to another leaves you vulnerable and unprotected in a certain sense. You cannot really open to another without also being open to your own feeling of sadness, fear, loneliness, and anger. Choosing to be open brings you close to those who you want to serve and at the same time, opens the door into your own subconscious. Your openness will bring your own fears into the light of consciousness and perhaps into expression, so that they can no longer be denied.

We often see patients who come back to the hospital time and again sometimes over periods of years. After all the tricks are done, the jokes told, there you are with a patient that has become like an "old" friend. So what do you do now?

"Compassionate Touch is not a set of prescribed techniques to be followed, but merciful and care-full service that unfolds in the reality of relationship."

What people most want when they are critically ill is your presence, not your activity. Holding someone is probably the most

Caution: If touch is frivolous, it may be considered flirtatious and a sexual advance. If staff is unfamiliar with your work, it is always best to have someone else in the room, be it nurse or family. After the hospital gets to know you and you become part of the trusted staff, it becomes easier to do Compassionate Touch. Nurses especially are very aware of the need for this type of connection. Ask permission of patient and staff. After a while staff will even ask you to go visit a comatose patient.

comforting, but if that is not possible or permitted, we clowns hold hands. We put our hand under theirs to support it and gently lay our other hand on top. We give our presence. Just sitting and being present when done with attention and intention becomes an activity. Listen to the hand, it will tell you about the person.

"You can sense a great deal about a person's physical condition by holding his or her hand. You will be able to tell something about the person's strength and energy by the way in which that person returns (or does not return) your touch. The temperature of the skin can give you an indication of how well the blood is circulating and about how active he or she may be."

Get some good hand lotion (ask the nurses which kind or better yet get it from the supply department). Gently massage their hands. If you are in a nursing home you may be able to massage the feet too. We might also encourage family to get involved with touch. Family can have the same nervousness as we do. Part of our service can be to facilitate their compassionate touch. But remember seriously ill people may be very fragile or they may be very sensitive to touch. Proceed cautiously.

Most adults live in a world deprived of human touch. We give more compassionate touch to our pets than we do to each other. We have even developed a distrust around touch. Today with managed care, hospitals find it more cost effective to give a patient a pill to help them sleep rather than having a nurse give every patient a back rub. Oh, how the patients all used to look forward to that time of day.

In a chapter entitled *Characteristics and Abilities of the Compassionate Touch Practitioner*, Dawn discusses Intuitiveness, Flexibility, Sense of Self, Ability to Focus Energy, Willingness to Face Death and Open-heartedness:

"Open-Heartedness: It is essential for the Compassionate Touch practitioner to be open and receptive. The heart must expand to include that which is not only new and different, but also frightening, possibly even terrifying, to the mind. It is useful to have the quality of 'seeing' with your heart, and with all of your senses, when working with the aged, the seriously ill, and with those who are nearing death.

"In truth, compassion is not something we have for another being. It is rather the experience of being. Ultimately, we cannot feel unconditional regard, love or compassion for another, we can only be unconditional love."

"Your open heartedness will bring reality into your hands-on caregiving sessions and into your relationships with the people you touch. Opening your mind and heart to the individual whom you are touching, being with the person just as he or she actually is, and surrendering your ego in service to that individual can significantly affect your life."