

# Clowning in an Ocean of Grief

– Shobi Dobi

Life is full of conflict. There would be no comedy, plays, movies, novels without conflict. There will always be hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and the man made disasters we pray so hard will end. Yet the outcome of conflict, as we learn as artists is resolution. The painting is done with a struggle and there is beauty in that struggle and its resolution. It's the resolution that is important to mankind and the growth of civilization. Life goes on, not in spite of the tragedy, but because of it.

Today the speed of communication forces us to live through human tragedy in detail for hours and days. We grieve as a nation, as a people, as a world. Is there a place in this grief for a clown?

## ***It's Time to Turn up the Volume of Our Lives and Live a Little Deeper in Our Souls.***

All death is here to remind us of how precious life is. No day is ever promised to anyone. We hospital clowns walk in this awareness every time we go into the hospital. It is a part of our "practice."

I don't think that hospital clowns have more courage than other clowns, we have just learned how to live a little deeper in our soul. We have learned that we can walk into the room of a person dying and not die ourselves. We have learn to clown for a child who is suffering with all our heart and still move into the next room and play in earnest with a group of children. We have learned how to maintain an open heart and not deny or close off to reality. This is how we endure the pain and suffering in hospitals. We have turned up the volume of our lives emotionally and learned to live with it. Why? Because it feels good to be of service. The tears we have shed of grief have taken us to depths that we would not ordinarily have gone. We have found that the deeper we go into our hearts the greater the love and the joy we can share. We have learned to cherish this hope and joy we bring to the hospital. Is it so different to bring that to a shelter or rescue workers?

## ***Our Responsibility - Ability to Respond.***

The Red Cross will say they only want people with skills in a disaster area. More and more health care workers are realizing the potential and skills of the clowns. We are Light Workers in every sense of the word. We bring a glimmer of hope, we lighten the situation, we bring a smile and sometimes even laughter. We are an instantaneous symbol that there is love in the world, that there is a river of joy running under all that exists. This is our ability - our ability to respond - our responsibility!

There is necessary respect for time in any crisis. The sharp edges of shock need a little time to mend. Everyone grieves in a different way with different inner clocks. It is a time not to judge each other, but to listen to each other. And as clowns it is most important to listen to our inner selves.

The child who has lost her family her home and her legs, lies in the hospital in shock. She will not even see the clown enter the room – the first time. But the second time there will be a slight hint of recognition, and the third time, a small wave of the hand and the fourth time maybe even a little smile. Time is what it is all about. Everyone needs a different amount of time to adjust.

How often have you been told that you should not be in a certain room or place only to have the family of a patient or actually the patient themselves ask for the hospital clown. We are on a cutting edge of a fight for humanity. Many people are not aware of what we actually do, but when they see us they know the flag of love we carry. It will take the rest of humanity a little while to catch up. We are needed more than ever by a hurting world. With an estimated 25,000 clown in the USA, we are an enduring force.

What you do **does** matter. You are an important gear in the way the world works. Don't think that your life is insignificant just because you are not at Ground 0 or on the front lines. We can share our skills everywhere we go. You can take your colorful self to the supermarket. Get into clown and just be out there for everyone. It doesn't take courage. It takes love.

"Everybody can be great ... because anybody can serve. . . You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

--Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## ***Exquisite Caution***

Shobi loves to sneak around and be very timid. She learned this from children. She does it because she really doesn't know what is around the next corner. And many places in the hospital and the world are very big and scary to Shobi. However, inside, this also gives her time to observe and time to exercise caution.

I have come to call this "Exquisite Caution" because it is delicately simple, beautiful, and full of grace. This is caution without fear, caution imbedded in deep silence. It is the exquisite caution of the nun, the confident caution of the priest, monk, and rabbi and the delightful caution of a timid clown. You can all imagine Charlie Chaplin making his way through an earthquake area, just innocently finding things to pick up and investigate. He finds a small child playing with a torn doll and sits down next to her and begins to play in the child's fantasy world -- just being his vulnerable self. No big clown gesture, no hoopla. We may not laugh out loud, but our hearts would recognize the humanity and maybe bring us back to a spark of hope – the small opening that reminds us of the joy we all have inside of us.

It is this quietude that surrounds you that will invite trust -- being present, observing without judgment, continually opening to the moment, moment to moment as only the innocence of the clown can do. And it is this exquisite caution of an innocent child that brings a sense of freshness and wonder which lurks in every moment seeking to connect us heart to heart.

Use this stillness to rest in the moment. Rest the fear of your reactive mind. Taking a deep breath to clear the mind, soften your belly and ask for the grace to open to higher wisdom. It is my experience that you will get a great deal of help.

When preceding in a risky situation with caution, trusting that Inner Wisdom, you may not see all the levels of your influence. Knowing you are not the doer liberates you from results and reactive thinking. "Oh, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," can be greeted with a knowing smile -- knowing you are only the worldly vehicle of something higher. But keeping this to yourself is the practice of non-doership. This does not mean you are not responsible for your actions, it means you don't take all the credit. The power that flows though you will, in itself, engender such inner awe that another's gratitude is not necessary. This is what renews the clown in his/her

moment to moment travel. It is this quietude, trust and openness that will allow us to enter the traumatic space of disaster.

Whether you are a clown on stilts next to a tank in Bosnia, or the gentle clown ready to lend a soft shoulder during a flood, just look around the disaster. Who is there to hug? Who is there to lend that physical shoulder? The doctor? "Oh, he's doing good work. Can't bother him." It's the same with the rescue worker, the fireman, the policeman. But there you stand in your foolishness with commiserating sadness on your face, kicking at the rubble like the small children around you. You turn and offer open arms. I would fall into them - how about you?

### ***Do I have the right stuff?***

Like any profession this is a question. Just because you're a clown doesn't mean you want to be a hospital clown or an ambassador clown or a rescue clown. But you never know until you try. Shobhana, my non-clown self had been in a hospital once. She had never actually seen or experienced an act of violence, never seen anyone die, or been in battle, war, catastrophes. She grew up in WWII, but safely in the USA. So how was I to know that Shobi could handle a hospital? I tried it!

Our alley one day went to a Shrine hospital. I'll never forget a little girl. She must have had the prettiest face, when she had a face. All her skin was burnt off and she was covered in clear coat bandages, so I could actually see her muscles and red tissue. She looked like a tiny moving cadaver with soda straws coming out of her nose holes so she could breathe. She just stood there all 2 and a half feet of her looking up at me with the biggest brown eyes. And to my amazement I didn't throw up, weep or run away, I clowned. At first she waved with her only usable hand and then she got this very slight smile on her face, which must have been terribly painful for her. I thought "If I can handle that I think I'm going to be able to do this hospital work." Shobi led the way - the beautiful vulnerable sweet little clown knew what to do. My adult persona Shobhana didn't have a clue.

With experience I learned to modulate my clown character. Some circumstances call for more energy than others. This doesn't have to do with how loud your voice is or how large your movement is. This has to do with theater energy. Let me try to explain my experience. When I really, really need Shobi in character I go to a different level. I get more fully into her. I become more her than me. And maybe with that little girl I had to really be Shobi which protected me from me, i.e., it protected me from my reactive thinking -- "Oh, my what will I do, what if, what now," and all the panic thinking that adults do. In a way my clown character Shobi protects Shobhana the adult.

It is also my experience that Shobi when she is fully let loose is always appropriate. This energy brings a heightened awareness -- a sensitivity to my surroundings and to peoples' feelings. So if Shobi is in a state of heightened awareness which makes her more sensitive, why doesn't she weep and run? Because when my heart is open I am fully there. The flight instinct comes from my mind. Shobi comes from my heart which is translated into theater/clown energy. So my cry may come from a feeling of really crying, but it is translated into a clown cry.

So take a deep breath, think soft belly and take a step into our brave new world!

## ***Comments from Friends of the Newsletter***

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### ***Explode in the Liberation of Laughter***

From an email from **Roly Bain**, *Holy Fools*, Bristol England

In a world gone mad we need the clown's insane voice of sanity more than ever. A world clutching for truth and justice needs the jester to bring us to our senses, if not our knees.

If we can discern the lonely clown wandering through the rubble of our shattered hopes and dreams, and we take that clown by the hand, then we shall know in a moment of sublime revelation that all may be well. Laughter not only follows tears, but may accompany them. Faith, hope and love are the things that not only really matter but, like the clown, are indestructible. And so we clowns smile, and gently prepare to explode in the liberation of laughter.

Roly Bain is author of [Clowning Glory](#) and [Fools Rush In](#)

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### ***Spirit of the Loving Clown***

Letter from **Beatriz Quintella** of Oeiras, Portugal. Beatriz just received funding for a new hospital clown program in Lisbon

We are all very concerned about what has happened in America last week, but we believe that now more than ever, the spirit of the loving clown is necessary to the healing process of your nation and the world. Only through the heart you will find a way to cope and love forward.

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### ***How Can You Laugh at a Time Like This?***

Email from **Allen Klein**, MA, CSP

"Comedy is tragedy plus time." — Carol Burnett

"Waitress wanted. Must be able to swim under water." That was the humorous sign posted in the window of a restaurant submerged in water during the mid-West floods several years ago.

A few days later, a billboard appeared down the road. It too added some humor to the soggy situation. "The weather lately," the billboard read, "gives a whole new meaning to Roe vs. Wade."

And, after a major earthquake hit San Francisco, one man put a sign on his damaged house that said, "House for rent. Some assembly required."

While the people above were able to find some humor in their catastrophe, the tragic events on September 11th were so horrendous, with so many lost lives, and with such widespread consequences, that humor, even with all its beneficial coping traits, took a while to return. . . . In spite of our overwhelming loss, deep down we know that laughter provides relief. We know that it helps us cope. We know that if we can laugh, we will somehow get through it.

And if we can't laugh now, perhaps some day we might. Who, for example, would have thought that anyone would ever be able to laugh about the Holocaust where millions of people were killed? Yet, here we are today with the hottest musical comedy on Broadway, "The Producers", being about Hitler.

Humor, no matter when it comes, helps us bear the unbearable. A small bit of humor even helped some people in the World Trade Center triumph over tragedy.

A group of office workers, who were running down flight after flight of steps, didn't know if they had the strength to make it to the bottom. They stopped at the eleventh floor and couldn't go on. Then one woman suggested that they pretend it was New Year's Eve. En masse they began a countdown with each flight of stairs and shouted out "...10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1." Encouraged by this bit of levity, they all made it to the street and to safety.

Allen Klein is the author of The Healing Power of Humor, The Courage to Laugh and The Lift-Your-Spirits Quote Book. For more info about Klein or his books go to [www.allenklein.com](http://www.allenklein.com)

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### ***Praying for Us to Help Them Laugh***

An email from **Laine Barton**, of New York City

... Yesterday I clowned in the hospital and we literally got pulled into rooms. In the ICU the staff moved to us in a loose circle. I could see them praying for us to help them laugh, and we obliged; we made their desks into an impromptu stage.

Tomorrow I go to a fire house right near the devastation and entertain children who have lost their families, their homes, their school. I am so happy to be able to be there. These firemen, who have lost so much, continue to be heroes and give and give ... now to the children.

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### ***A Wake Up Call in the War on Humanity***

From a phone conversation with **Patch Adams**

The events of September 11 are all part of the giant umbrella of Man's inhumanity to Man. This is all a consequence of evil. All evil is on the side of evil. Evil begets evil, violence begets violence. When we rain violence on another country, we receive it back. When we cause terror, we will receive it back.

This is all a part of the war that is being waged on humanity every day even before September 11. When over 20 thousand children a day in our world die of starvation, it is a war on humanity. When teachers in this country have to have a second job in order to survive, it is part of the war on humanity.

This is a wake-up call for all of us. People have sobered up a little since September 11, but we need to understand our political history. Our government has been waging war on humanity long before September 11. We need to take a close look at our part in this war. We need to see how we have contributed and caused suffering to millions of people. We need to be responsible for our own actions, when pointing a judgment finger at others. Putting this in perspective the consequences of evil are the consequences of evil. We need to find the evil in our own government.

But understanding our history is not enough. Until love and fun become the ethic of our society and not money and power, we are going to be suffering. We need to practice fun and love all day, every day, in every aspect of our lives - in the grocery store, in our schools, in our places of business, in our hospitals, in our government -- everyday all day long.

### **Blessed to Go Out into This Hurting World as Clown**

Email from Aviva Gorstein (Dr. HuggaBubbe)

The following article appeared in the Metropolitan Diary section of the New York Times a few days ago, and it really hit home with me. Since September 11th, while going on our "merry-go-rounds" at both hospitals, I've noticed an interesting thing. When I've been "in the moment" with folks as Dr. HuggaBubbe, the hugs seemed a little stronger and lasted longer; the smiles seemed to come more readily and the laughs seemed heartier. As I've left the hospital, my heart and soul seemed immensely comforted. This article beautifully expresses what I have felt and experienced. I feel grateful indeed to be blessed with the opportunity to be able to go out into this hurting world as Dr. HuggaBubbe. I want to share this article with you. The design of the words in the following essay is exactly as it appeared in the Times.

#### **For No One Knows What Tomorrow May Bring**

You must allow yourself to LAUGH  
And not only to laugh, but to laugh  
HARDER, LOUDER AND LONGER  
Than you ever have before.  
You must allow yourself to SMILE  
And to smile  
WIDER, STRONGER AND MORE OFTEN  
Than you ever have before.  
When you EAT, you must TASTE your food  
When you BREATHE, breathe DEEPLY  
When you HUG, KISS OR SHAKE HANDS  
Do it FIRMLY and with COMPASSION  
And when you say I LOVE YOU  
MEAN IT  
It is your LIFE, now you must LIVE it  
For that is the greatest HONOR you can give to anyone  
Who never had a chance.

David Willems

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### ***A Breath of Support in a Crying Time***

From: Connie Coble-Roe September 19, 2001

I was in southern Costa Rica on a medical mission for the Guaymi Indians with a small group of medical personnel from our church when we received word of the terrorist attack.

We had no access to accurate news or the ability to leave the country until Sunday. Many of us wanted to be home with our families, but we stayed and completed our work since we couldn't leave the country. We were teamed with a group of people from San Jose, Costa Rica who were sharing their faith with the Guaymi while we provided medical care. Upon receiving word of what was happening in the United States, we closed our makeshift clinic, joined hands with our Costa Rican team members and had a very tearful prayer time, with our Costa Rican friends being every bit as distraught as we were.

Each morning we worshiped together with our new Costa Rican friends. Here we were, people from two cultures with communication difficulties, able to overcome our differences for a common goal, sharing spiritual and medical care for a group of people living in extreme poverty. Yet at the same time, people in our own country were being torn apart by terrorism.

The love, support and compassion that was shared between two cultures in Costa Rica, like the sharing we clowns did with the people of China, is what we need to strive for. We clowns do have the ability to help, so we need to make the most of that gift.

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This came From a Friend of a Friend of a Friend, anonymously

### ***Somehow New York is still . . . New York***

Hey . . . just checking in to let you know I'm okay . . .

We are all hanging in there and trying to get back to normal. Between the obvious situation and the new bomb scares every day it can get a little stressful. But I'm glad I'm here. This is my home and I need to be here with my people. I just can't leave.

I have a "trinity" of places I go when I'm too edgy to sit in my apartment. West Side Highway where the rescuers drive in and out . . . the Salvation Army and the Armory. You find your emotions running all over the place - I've been volunteering at the armory. That is where the families with missing people go - it also houses the national guard and the army. You simply can't imagine what it is like.

I was walking down the street toward the armory and you begin to see the sheets of paper with pictures of the missing taped against the corner of the building . . . I turned on Lexington Avenue and looked up and it took my breath away. The entire building was covered with pictures . . . candles on the ground . . . and then you see the people in line waiting to find out about someone they have lost - the sheer numbers are staggering. It is really just indescribable.

I was sorting through the donations people were sending in -- hilarious. One woman sent a mink coat - someone sent dirty sneakers, T-shirts with armpit sweat stains - let's see what else - oh yes - half a tube of tooth paste! Everyone in my part of the armory was laughing hysterically. It was kind of nice to have something to laugh at . . . hearts in the right places - heads somewhere else . . . meanwhile 50,000 people in lower Manhattan have been displaced and we are trying to find places for them . . . now I understood why people from out of state were being discouraged from coming in unless they had a specific needed skill.

Yesterday we went back to work - tried to be normal - I was walking home and had stopped at a light near my apartment on 47th and 8th Avenue - I noticed the guy standing next to me was wearing a New York City fire department T-shirt . . . I asked him how he was holding up - thanked him. He started sobbing . . . sobbing and hugged me . . . he was on his way to my local fire station. They had lost 14 men. He'd been working nonstop since the attack - he said it was like hell - body parts everywhere. He told me he felt sick every time he had to go in . . . that the only thing that kept him going was the people cheering the rescue workers on when they walked out of ground zero . . . the prayers and good wishes they were getting. He said "please don't stop doing that - don't stop cheering us - if you do - I don't know what we'll do."

I went to the firehouse with him and lit a candle at the vigil. As I was walking back to my house, I kept wondering if NYC would ever be the same again. Just then - a drag queen came roller blading by, dressed as Wonder Woman - handing out donuts to the people waiting at the vigil. It made me smile . . . **Somehow New York is still . . . New York . . .**