

# Called to Clown

at Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children,  
Wilmington, Delaware

by Jan "Jaepers" Kerr

What better way to spend a day than in the company of children! So fresh from the heart of God, they come to us with wisdom many times far beyond their years, complete honesty and innocence, and hearts filled with love and acceptance. There are no pretenses about them. They are unique. "What you see is what you get." Being in their presence has been a life-changing experience for me, and I have found that what I give to them comes back to me 1000-fold.

"Jaepers" was born three years ago, but Jan Kerr came into being six decades before. My career experiences were in medical administration in a clinical setting. After the loss of my small son, 32 years ago, I began working with children (Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Junior Church, summer camp, etc.). God has a miraculous way of bringing something new...something good... out of adversity.

While recovering from a debilitating bout of spinal stenosis four years ago, I endeavored to find a new way to use my gifts and talents to the fullest, given my physical limitations.

God truly has a sense of humor! All signs pointed to a clown ministry with children, and the opportunity presented itself at the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Delaware. I have thrown myself into my newly chosen career with children, and it has become my purpose. In addition to years of working with and loving children, I bring to this place the completion of a clown training program and the gifts of training from my church in listening and comforting those who are in crisis....ill or suffering loss. It is not by chance that I find myself in this place, but by the grace of God.

Although I am still a "baby" clown, with little history at the Hospital, there are several small children whom I have gotten to know particularly well, due to multiple hospital admissions. I am touched by these children who are so physically challenged. They look at me with solemn faces. There is a mystique about them. My first thought was what an incredible job their physicians, nurses and support staff are doing with these children to bring about the healing of body and spirit (and they are). I also thought that these children must have unusual families who are so brave and encouraging (and they have). But, there is something more. I believe that these children have come to terms with their broken bodies through their protracted illnesses and deformities and have learned to accept the things they cannot change. What they accept, they overcome.

It's Monday morning. I walk into the Hospital lobby and am greeted by their receptionist and a large, stuffed collie dog sprawled over the high desk. A little boy is running in the door ahead of me. He turns and waits for me, staring at my huge, bright shoes. I stop to speak with this little bundle of curiosity. He thoughtfully studies my feet, then squats down on the floor and plays his own magical tune with his little fists



on my hot pink lollipop toes. He finally stops, steps back and claps his hands in joy! A new day is beginning!

I travel to the Emergency Room, Day Medicine, Outpatient Check-In, Orthopedics, Casting, and Prosthetics, greeting hosts of children and their parents. Next, I come to the Dialysis Unit where I meet eight-year-old "Myla," who sits in a huge chair in the midst of tubes, connectors and lines. Everyday is a challenge to her and to other children like her. They carry heavy burdens. I tell her that I've brought my three tree frogs to meet her, and I share Richard Snowberg's story about them.

The story is: "I've brought my three tree frogs to visit you today. I always carry them in my pocket. (These frogs all look alike.) I take them out and introduce them by name, Fredda, Fergi, Franco. I tell the child that we can tell they are tree frogs by the spots on their backs. I tell them that Fredda usually likes to nap in the morning and I put her under my chin, that Franco just likes to sit and stare about and that Fergi likes to explore. I toss Fergi into the air several times and he hits the floor. I am beside myself! "Oh my, do think Fergi will need a hoperation?" And I pet him and tell the child that it looks as though he will be all right. Then I count them, "One, two, tree frogs." This is repeated several times, all the while they child is protesting that I am counting wrong. The child insists on correcting me and counts them, "One, two, three tree frogs."

Richard Snowberg, *The Caring Clown*, pp41-42, published by Visual Magic, LaCrosse, Wisconsin, copyright 1992.

Then I count, "One, two, tree frogs." "No," she says. I count again, "One, two, tree frogs." And, again I count them, each time the pitch of her voice going higher. Then, she very slowly counts, "One, two, three frogs." I tell her I *can* quite understand what the difference is between the way she counts and the say I do. "Wait," I tell her. "I'd better put on my listening ears." I go over to my tote bag and find my big ear. I 'rough up' my hair and put on my listening ears. She hoots with laughter. "Now, tell me again." And, so she does, "One, two, three frogs." Children know immediately whether you love them. "Got more?" she says.

I show her touchable bubbles. She tells me that she can see herself dancing in a bubble. "Do you think I could really dance pretty?" I gently ask her if she is able to walk, to which she responds in the affirmative. "Then, Myla, you can dance; dance is just moving to music. Look Myla,

we can dance with our hands." I put my hand opposite hers, and we move in synch as I sing "Moon River". She is laughing so hard that we can barely 'dance'. Soon, I tell her that I have to visit other boys and girls, but thank her for sharing her day with me. "Are you comin' back?" I tell her that I will check the Dialysis schedule to see when she will be in, and I will come back to see her, maybe not on her next visit, but I will come back.

I check my watch. Everyone has probably had their breakfast, been bathed and is ready for visitors up on the inpatient floors. My first stop is to see "Marcie," a little three and a half year old oncology patient, who loves clowns. We are old friends. I kneel so that we can look into each others's eyes. She is walking around her bed, her movement limited by a nasal tube. She continues to silently study my face. I am her subject, and she gives me an approving smile. We do more origami animals today, and she is delighted that she can name all of them. I tell her a story about one of the animals. She watches me and speaks to me with her eyes. After a time, I tell her that I must leave soon to visit other little children. She turns, steps closer to my face and throws me a kiss. I sing the chorus of "Tony Chestnut, I Love You" to her, pointing to her toes, knees, chest and head...then my heart. I make my way out the door as I continue singing to her, both of us waving. There is a glory about this small child and on everything around her.

It's about lunchtime, so I head for the cafeteria. Sitting at a table with another volunteer, I hear gales of laughter echoing about our side of the room. A small boy is sitting two tables away and has caught sight of me. He is screeching with laughter, the laughter spreading all around him, rippling from table to table, until it trickles off into smiles across the room. Just what we all needed!

I travel on, this time to visit "Dirk." My experience with him today is probably the most profound I've ever had in my long career with children. He's an eight and a half year old oncology patient. (This is not my first visit with him.) Today, he has one of those 'multi-million-dollar-questions' for me! His mother steps out of the room to do an errand. He is quiet and thoughtful. "Do you know whether there is a roof in the sky above where the planes fly, or does heaven have a floor?" "I'm not sure about the floor, Dirk. What do you think?" My mind flashes back to Evelyn Roberts' book for children titled, "Heaven Has a Floor." He begins to speak to me of eternal things, line for line as I remembered Roberts' work. I ask him if he has read the book, and he assures me that he has not. He talks on and on. His voice grows softer and softer and trails off. He is sleeping. My knees will no longer hold me.

*"Do not forget to entertain strangers for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."*

*-- Hebrews 13:2*

These very ill children serve to remind me of so much that I often lose sight of...there is purpose in pain and suffering...there is refining in it...there is strength. Their bodies may know brokenness, but not their spirits.

I walk away from Dirk's room. Tears are welling up in my eyes. Tears of sadness for the suffering that these children...so

young...so innocent, yet so wise...experience. But my tears are not just of sadness, but also grateful tears of wonder...wonder of being 'called' to be a clown and being able to bring joy and comfort to so many.

I've reached the first floor, and I stop to talk with another volunteer. In the midst of our conversation, "Watch, watch!" I look down the long corridor to see a small boy, running at 'breakneck' speed toward me, arms outstretched, coming in for a 'power' hug! He lands, wrapping his arms around my legs. Everyone in sight is clapping and cheering his feat.

I check out and walk through the sliding doors. A little girl's mother runs after me. "My daughter missed you when you made rounds. Could you please come back and see her" She just got back to her room." I muse, "Who needs stewed chicken for dinner tonight? Pizza will be great!" And, back we go.

I'm down from the floors again and out in the parking lot. I look back at the Hospital, and think of all that it means...to the children being treated here (Dirk, Marcie, Myla, Brianna, Jacob, Morgan)...to their parents...to our community...to the community at large. I stand on hallowed ground.

Note: The accounts of visits with these children are true, however, the names used are fictitious. Jaepersclown@aol.com

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*Listening with Questions, So People Will Talk* – Shobi

Did you notice how Jaepers turned Dirk's question back to him so he would reply?

"Do you know whether there is a roof in the sky above where the planes fly, or does heaven have a floor?"

"I'm not sure about the floor, Dirk. What do you think?"

Jaepers, by simply turning it back to the child, respects the child and honors the child's vision.

So often we think we have to have answers. But for adults and children not having answers and turning it back to them, is a way of empowering the patient -- to give them the time to tell us their story, their feelings, their fears and hopes. Empowering patients gives hope. This skill is a very important part of being a hospital clown.

Ask simple questions first to give confidence and establish communication. Creating a safe place and establishing trust is important with any caring clowning, but especially with children. So ask simple questions, that can be easily answered. Then ask open ended questions. "I don't know, what do you think?" As opposed to "How does that make you feel, dear," which can be interpreted as pity, patronizing and too personal.

It is also a matter of respect for the patient and trust of your inner clown. We need to see with the equal vision of our clown soul. This means an empathetic response. Listening with full attention. The intention behind attention is a very powerful spiritual force. Take some time to wait for an answer. Be still, but be present.

Remember to take a deep breath and soften your belly before your reactive mind starts to clown chatter again and you fill that beautiful stillness with less meaningful tricks and shtick.

All great performers know the power of the pause in action. Stillness and silence can be very full of meaning and intention. When the reactive mind stills, powerful forces in the universe will come to your aid. Take the time to pause and listen to your clown heart. Amazing things will happen.