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Clowning with Care in Nursing Homes

with Anita “Toot” Thies

“Stars are lights that shine in the darkness. They don’t make the darkness go away, but they offer hope and encouragement in the midst of darkness.

“They inspire a sense of wonder.
They lift our gaze upward.
They take us out of ourselves.

“As a caring clown, you can bring light into the night. With your smile and caring, you can lighten the spirits of all you meet.

“But the true *star* of your clown interactions is the person you clown for, be they patient, family or staff. They are the focus of all you do. They get top billing. In your eyes, they are the *star* on whom your light shines.”

From The Joyful Journey of Hospital Clowning, Anita Thies, Kathy Piatt and Tammy Miller, p.21

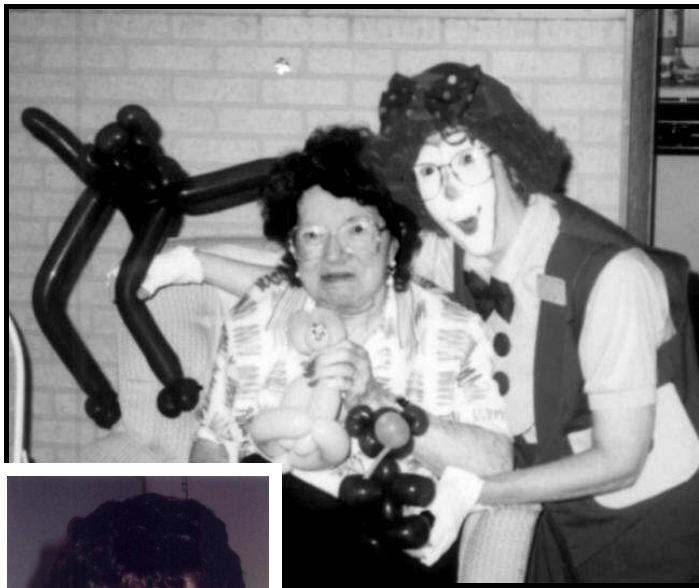


Anita’s book **The Joyful Journey of Hospital Clowning** is now available to read online free at www.worldclownassociation.org

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My Mother Loved to Laugh

By Anita "Toot" Thies



Anita clowning as Toot with her mother. This was taken several years ago when Toot was a white face clown.



We thought you'll like to see the laughter in her eyes.

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

Laughter was a hallmark of my mother, part of her Irish nature. She'd often begin a conversation with "I heard this great joke..." Even if it wasn't great, she would laugh at the end and so would those around her.

One of her favorite songs was "When Irish Eyes are Smiling." Her eyes smiled a lot.

When she entered a nursing home in Florida, the staff asked me to do a clown show in the community room. I used bright colors – the rainbow scarf – and music and balloons. The staff later posted a big picture of me in clown by her bed and they would frequently comment to her about it.

Because I lived in Pennsylvania, I didn't clown frequently at her nursing home. I treasured my extended visiting time with her as her daughter, not as a clown to others.

But I learned from her experience in the nursing home ways to be a more caring clown.

I learned not to judge on appearances. My mom had a degenerative neurological disease called Progressive Supranuclear Palsy or PSP. If you saw the Barbara Walters television interview with the late actor Dudley Moore, that was what Dudley Moore had. Among other things, my mom lost the ability to talk, walk or move her eyes. But until the end, she was alert mentally-she just couldn't communicate.

I would see people who would talk to her as though she was mentally impaired, which she wasn't. I would see people not carrying on the energy of a conversation because she couldn't make eye contact. I would see people who basically "missed" connecting

with her. And I would have too, had I not known her condition and had I not spent time with her and learned to read her in subtle ways.

What this taught me as a clown--since we don't usually know the conditions of those we clown with--is never to underestimate their ability to hear or comprehend.

With my mom, I became the keeper and voice of our shared memories. I carried the energy of the interaction. As a clown, we often do that too.

In the last week of her life, when she lost the ability to swallow, I wheeled her out to the bingo game that she always loved. She watched and listened as the staff played her card for her. I learned from her the worth of living every moment right to the end. In clowning, we need to stay in the moment, as hard as that may be.

For months after my mom died, I didn't clown in nursing homes. Too many residents reminded me of her. I still have times when someone's smiling eyes will capture me. But I approach them now and I often think of the last laugh my mom gave me.

It was the middle of the night--she had died peacefully as I held her hand--and we were waiting for her body to be taken for an organ donation (to the PSP brain bank for research on the disease). But the transport drivers couldn't find the nursing home in the dark and stopped to call for directions from the only place open. We laughed when we heard where they were calling from and I laugh every time I remember it. Just think--a hearse pulling up to Pizza Hut. My mom would have loved it.

Anita Thies began clowning in the early 1980's. She clowns in hospitals as "Dr. Duck" and in churches and nursing homes as "Toot." She attended Clown Camp® in 1996 on a Mark Anthony Scholarship and was invited back to teach there in 2000 and 2003. A co-founder and past president of the Happy Valley Alley of WCA, she teaches nationally on caring clowning, clown ministry and the role of humor in healing. Her current major focus is leading the creative ministries organization Cheer Leaders for Christ where she serves as President and editor of the quarterly national newsletter. Email: anitathies@yahoo.com www.Geocities.com./toot_the_clown

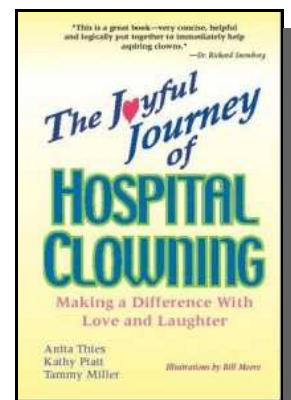
The Joyful Journey of Hospital Clowning

by Anita Thies, Kathy Piatt, & Tammy Miller, illustrations by Bill Moore

The 84-page illustrated text offers inspiration and practical advice on all aspects of hospital clowning.

Here's a book we all need to have on our shelves. It is a very concise complete picture of the hospital clown community in the USA today and contains many useful tools for working in hospitals. Now available

to read online at www.worldclownassociation.org



Clowning with Care in Nursing Homes with Anita "Toot" Thies

Plug In and Stay CALM

In preparing for a visit to a nursing home find your source of inspiration "*Seek Ye First . . . the Source of Love*" in other words "plug in!" To sustain this heart to heart connection with residents in a nursing facility Anita finds strength and inspiration in the Spirit of God "in you and around you."

Anita says she looked for a nursing home equivalent of the reminder of what Shobi calls "think soft belly" as a way to center and keep focused and also to teach essential principles. She chose "CALM" to emphasize Connecting in A little way with Laughter in the Moment. She adds that in calmness there is great peace. And Shobi adds: from this place of peace and quietude, gentle compassion flows naturally.

As Anita and Shobi shared experiences, we built on ways to be "CALM" and offer you these ideas from both of us.

Be CALM

Connection

When the resident is bored or apathetic provide stimulation and connect with entertainment. Engage them in play.

When **lonely or sad** connect with friendship by listening to their stories to renew their own connection with their own memories. This honors their life and their memories, empowering them with their own sense of self worth.

When **helpless** (and hopeless) provide support and encouragement Eye contact, smiles, and gentle touch can make a personal connection. Be generous with your gentleness and love.

When **isolated** connect them with the world of the living by providing fun and laughter. Also make connection with family. A clown can provide a place where all members of the family can engage together. This is most often done through play. The family and extended family of the residents needs the clowns' support as well.

ALITTLE goes a long way.

A little makeup . . . goes a long way. A gentle face for close up work. A kind face with all too human features shining through. A sweet face with years of sweet smiles.

A little energy . . . goes a long way. With vulnerable people, read their energy levels. Be careful not to overwhelm them with your energy. Instead "dance" with their energy. Pull it out and react to it. Turn pessimism into optimism, bitterness into hope. Go to where they are and bring them gently to you.

A little love goes a long way.

"Sadness is like an empty room" which "closes down the heart and envelops us in dreary isolation." Even efforts of friends often "do not touch the core of our isolation . . . When for a brief moment, someone is able to break through and touch us, it seems

like a ray of sunlight that fills our entire heart. We know that moment, that we are alive and our heart will heal.

"To the bringer, it seems like no more than consolation. But to the person wrapped in a shroud of sadness, it feels more like joy.

"It is the affirmation and connection that reunites them with the human family

"Almost always it is something small. Those lost in a deep sadness will not assent to great efforts. They are bound to the sadness that engulfs them. But they will permit the small acts.

"And though these small acts may seem like nothing to the giver, they have the possibility of being miraculous touch that heals."

--Kent Nerburn, *Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace: Living in the Spirit of St. Francis*
Harper Collins Publishers Inc. NY NY, p. 62 1999

Laughter

"Laughter is the most beautiful and beneficial therapy God ever granted humanity. It is often just as sacred to laugh as it is to pray." – Charles R. Swindoll

Laughter is so contagious. It need not be boisterous, it can be sweet little giggles. This is the presence of joy that ignites that lightness in others.

Moment

"Slow down – you move too fast. Ya gotta make the moment last." – Simon and Garfunkel, 59th Street Bridge

Clowning as service is always moment to moment. You never know what comes next. In the nursing home, pause and pose. Take the time to "take in" the situation, the environment, the residents. Give them time to register who you are. Approach slowly, speak clearly, Too rapid an approach may overwhelm them. They may need time to see or hear you, AND understand you.

In the moment you can observe the room and residents. You can quietly "plug in" – open your heart to the universe and get guidance. By quietly posing you can observe and sense the little clown antics which will be appropriate.

And the moment is the gift you give. They live in the moment and it is the moments you are present with them in gentle, attentive caring that make all the difference.

"The goal of communication with the Alzheimer's/dementia residents is not orienting them to reality, but entering into their reality as much as possible."

"Residents with loss of memory and/or cognitive functions value the immediate moment. Making that moment wonderful (less lonely, boring or helpless) is the ministry."

Pastoral Care Volunteer Training Manual,
Rev. Paula Curtis-Burn, Director of Pastoral Care
Windy Hill Village of the Presbyterian Homes in Philipsburg, PA

24 Practical Easy Things You Can Do During a Nursing Home Visit

This article is based on a workshop given by **Anita Thies** at Clown Camp UW - LaCross, 2003

Shown entertaining a resident is the WCA Happy Valley Alley Kazoo Band at Brookline Nursing Home, State College, Pennsylvania

The clowns are from left: Doris "Cookie Cupcake" Carter, Janise "JC" Crow, Sarah "Bangle" Crow, Barb Woodring, Kathy "Petals" Barr and Connie "Freckles" Peters.



Stimulate and Interact with Sound and Sight, Music and Colors

1. Play a funny looking kazoo

What music do they like and remember? Lawrence Welk? Frank Sinatra tunes? Bing Crosby? Classical music?

One woman responded to the kazooing of the Nutcracker Ballet used with leaping balloon mice.

Stimulate their memories with music. Some favorite singing songs usually include:

Let Me Call You Sweetheart
You Are My Sunshine
Bicycle Built for Two
Take Me Out To The Ball Game

2. Give them something to hold and play as part of the band or festivities:

Rhythm Makers / Emptied plastic medicine bottles filled with rice.

Drums Paper or plastic plates for drums or cymbals (have them hold a plate in one hand and tap it with their other hand while you play a song such as Mexican Hat Dance).

Cracker Jack boxes for drums or marimbas or blown up "exam gloves" for a soft drum.

Use a long 260 balloon for gentle waving exercise or for leading the clown orchestra, or a round balloon attached to balloon sticks for gentle waving and keeping rhythm.

Create a Festive Atmosphere

3. If the home permits balloons, make festive hats

4. Give them a clown nose and have a mirror so they can see themselves. Recreation therapy staff and nurses also like the noses. Or give them a clown nose on an artificial flower stem.
5. Stickers are fun for residents and staff. Be careful where they are put. Sometimes cleaning staff objects to them being put on objects as they are difficult to remove. Sometime you can put them on tongue suppressors or clothes pins and put into planters or clipped onto objects. Staff likes to wear them on their uniforms, but residents like to be able to see them. Smiley faces stickers are favorites.

You are the festive atmosphere many times, you must carry the entire energy level while they watch you. You ARE the fun. It's the "we're having fun together" idea but often you must carry it all.

Entertain

To entertain means to focus attention. Your entertainment will help them "escape" from their boredom and routine if only for a moment as you focus their attention away from their surroundings and themselves.

6. Entertain with very simple skits.

Speak slowly and loudly and if in a community room, try to use a microphone. Many skits are performed too quickly for residents to comprehend or are too complicated to begin with.

Some classic simple clown skits are done slowly so residents can see them. Of course the more trouble a clown gets into in a skit the better.

Classic skits that everyone knows are still fun. Like *Banana Bandana* or *Little Sir Echo* (See page 6)

Barry DeChant's [The World's Funniest Clown Skits](#) are great for nursing home. Available at www.TMeyers.com for \$15.

7. Entertain with a "magic cake." Most nursing homes have monthly community room gatherings to celebrate birthdays. A good prop (though pricey) is the dove pan cake Magic Prop. A foam cake can be produced after much clowning around with unusual ingredients.
8. Entertain with the rainbow scarf. This is colorful (15 feet) though again it can be expensive. (Some clowns make theirs out of rainbow striped material).
9. Entertain with storytelling and puppets.
10. Entertain with a clown dance. A rendition of a classical ballet (gone wrong).
11. Entertain with a country hill billy band.

Invite Play (Elicit participation)

12. Do wheelchair "dancing" (for example pretend to polka). Gently hold their hands.
13. Play with an invisible "dog" on a leash. Get residents to play along with imaginary dog.
14. Play "catch" with bubbles. Be aware of the slipperiness on floor with too many bubbles.
15. Play "watch" the bubbles with touchable bubbles (These bubbles linger longer in the air and you can actually catch them. Be aware that these bubbles leave a residue that most adults don't like.)
16. Play with a puppet. Invite residents to have a conversation with the puppet. Give them little finger puppets so they can also respond.

Elicit Giggles

17. Be a detective and look around for the "lost smile" of a resident who is frowning.
18. Take a pretend picture of a smile (can mime a camera with hands or use toy camera).
19. Do "giggle check" with toy stethoscope. (Careful with appropriate touch- position the stethoscope in the air well in front of them and say "I think I hear a giggle" and that will often elicit one).
20. Pretend to tickle yourself or someone else. (Careful again with appropriate touch--just saying "ticki ticki" while you tickle the air, will draw smiles.)
21. Make a joke about something funny on your outfit: "diamond" necklace (diamond deck cards strung on a string), "24-carrot" necklace, or a silly hat. Use sight gags using word play.

Human Touch

22. Place your hand palm up for the resident to rest their hand on. You may also place your other hand on top of theirs. Residents like to have their hands, wrists and lower arm gently stroked (do not pat) Check with staff. Rubbing their hands gently with hand cream may be a possibility.
23. Paint some colorful designs on their hands with face paints or body paint.

Listen

24. Sit quietly and listen attentively to residents.

Older people love to tell their stories. Let them!

Basic Etiquette Of Making Visits

1. Please knock before entering someone's room – this is their home. (A closed curtain is the same as a closed door.)
2. Use the resident's last name until you have permission (or the familiarity) to do otherwise. **Resist the urge to use terms of endearment (honey, sweetie, dear) because they are diminishing.**
3. Introduce yourself every visit with your name and function (don't assume they remember you from one visit to the next) and be sure your name tag is clearly visible.
4. Talk to the resident directly and not through other caregivers.
5. Try to converse at the same eye level as the resident.
6. Speak slowly; use good articulation and a lower range of voice, and good eye contact. When speaking with a resident with hearing loss, lean into the ears rather than shouting louder.
7. Always get permission to touch – and do so gently.
8. Be sensitive to fatigue/pain. Offer to return another time.

From Pastoral Care Volunteer Training Manual,
Presbyterian Homes, Philipsburg, PA

Little Sir Echo 😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊

This classic silly skit always draws a laugh if done with lots of clown gestures, facial expressions and movements. It is the clowns' antics that carry the skit not the punch line! It takes three clowns. Clowns A and B enter the stage as if touring the Grand Canyon and looking over the gorge. Clown A talks about Grand Canyon and how echoes return the words that are shouted out. Clown B wants to see how it works. There is a sign saying "Great Echo Cliff. Hear Your Echo Voice - 25 cents." Clown C is hiding "out of sight" behind door or curtain.

Clown A: *Wow, just look at that. The Grand Canyon.* [Sees sign]
And this must be the Great Echo Cliff. Let's put in a quarter and see how it works.

Clown B: *Okay. It sure is big. How do echoes work?*

Clown A: *You shout out something and it bounces off the other side of the canyon and comes back to you. Let me show you how it works.* [Deposits coin into box and shouts.] *Hello!*

Clown C: [offstage acting as voice of an echo] *Hello!*

Clown B: *Wow. That's neat. Can I try one?*

Clown A: *Sure, Shout one out.*

Clown B: [Deposits coin then shouts] *Cucumber!*

Clown C: [Echo] *Cucumber!*

Clown A: *I'll do another one* [Deposits another coin] *Chicken!*

Clown C: [Echo] *Chicken!*

Clown B: *Let me try another one* [Deposits another coin and shouts]
Baloney! [no return echo, just silence.]

Clown A: *Try it again.*

Clown B: [Deposits another coin] *Baloney!* [no response]

Clown A: *Why don't you try something different, Maybe a whole sentence.*

Clown B: [Thinks suspiciously and then deposits another coin, and shouts] *I'm the funniest clown in the world!*

Clown C: [Echo] *Baloney!!* [peeks out from off stage, sneaks over to take money from box. Clown B sees Clown C, knows it's a fraud and chases Clown C with Clown A following.]