

Clowning in the Wake of Katrina

From Shobi

We caring clowns tear, we fear, we doubt, but hovering around our shoulders is spirit --. Spirit of Joy, Spirit of Compassion, Spirit of truth and attitudes of respect, humility and service. Very noble thoughts from a clown you say. Have you ever seen us work? At first people said, "Are you kidding? The last thing these people need is a clown.." They just don't get it until they see us.

So just how do we approach those traumatized by a natural or man made disaster? We approach with an attitude of respect, humility, and service.

Respect

We enter their space as if it were their home. It doesn't matter if it is hospital bed, a gurney, or a cot in a shelter surrounded by cardboard boxes, a mud hut or a piece of the road. It is their space and their home. Often it is the only home they have at the moment or will have for quite some time.

We find a way to knock - get a bell, ring a triangle and say "Hello, Can I come in?" But first: *Pause and Pose*. It has been my experience that a pause is helpful before asking or miming permission to enter their space. We are an unexpected entity in a shelter and a friendly non-aggressive pause and pose will allow us to present ourselves and give the person a chance to see us and maybe even understand us.

This is a simple nonjudgmental respect. This is respect for an individual as a human being who has laughed, cried, and sang the same as we have. This respect comes from empathy, not pity.

Humbleness

An odd word for a clown, but not a hospital clown. If we remember where we are and what we are doing, how can we not be humbled by the situation? I've also called it *Exquisite Caution*. Why exquisite? The dictionary defines exquisite as "something of great beauty and delicacy and intensely felt." A clown walking into an intense situation as a shelter or hospital needs this delicacy. It is the beauty of the hospital clown to be this way. It is also an action rid of arrogance. Boisterous clowns don't belong in these situations. If big loud gestures and noise are appropriate, that will come later in an appropriate time and space.

I long to accomplish great and noble tasks, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.

– Helen Keller

The very fact that a clown can walk into a hospital is awesome, into a shelter even more awesome. There is a gift in this humility. The gift is the ability to see the wonder of human nature with equal vision, uncluttered by judgements and our own egos.

Attitude of Service

Walking into a situation we can ask ourselves, "How can I serve this situation?" If we think "How can I help," we are assuming that something is wrong. If there is something wrong, then something needs to be fixed. We are making a judgment which pushes us out of compassion and into pity.

Please see "Our Spirit of Service" and "Exploring our Intention in Service" on HCN website - www.hospitalclown.com

Playing the Moment

-- Shobi

Playing the moment is probably the most important thrill a clown can have and it is the most important lesson for a hospital clown to use. It is the basic rule of improvisation -- to play with your environment.

From Moshe:

"Humor is an essential ingredient of life. A lot of humor in the USA seems to be verbal jokes, yet there are many ways to create laughter. Often Clowns create laughter directed at themselves, at their mistakes or misfortunes, whereas often stand-up comics might create laughter at others expense. I prefer humor that has no victims. A lot of humor is just around reactions to things that are happening. It is about playing that moment."

"My first bonafide clown episode or "YooWho moment" didn't occur until about a year after I completed the clowning workshops in 1984. I was clowning for about 300 people in downtown Edmonton, Alberta when in the middle of my performance; a truck driver climbed into his cab and started the engine. At first I panicked, but then I boldly marched up to the truck and shook my fist at the truck. We had this face-off. At that time, I didn't have the guts to climb on the cab or anything, but it was still a nice face-off. It was the first time I played the moment. Pochinko would always tell us to play the opportunities as they arise."

In this newsletter, I've called it seizing the moment. What is so incredible is that it surprises you. I think everyone who has experienced playing the moment will remember the first time it happened. It will continually surprise you when it happens, and it rewards you with exhilaration as it happens most unexpectedly.

Shobi remembers well one time as I was leaving the stage in a school in Mexico, I bumped quite by accident into the wall and knocked a piece of the molding off. I felt bad that I had done this and went right into my clown reacting and playing it for all it was worth. I was the last one off stage, so it was uncomplicated. I tried to put the molding back without anyone seeing me, but it kept falling off. My intent was very focused, but I was quite aware of the attention I was getting from the audience.

The other clowns kept calling me "Let's go the bus is ready." So I'd hold the piece and try to run, but it kept falling. All with exaggerated emotion, shame and fear of being caught by a teacher. Of course the school faculty kept saying "Don't worry about it, it falls off all the time," but I ignored them and hid the molding behind my back. So I found a place to hide it under the curtain and was shamefully sneaking off the stage - all in big Shobi Clown. The kids (1500 of them) thought that was hilarious. Of course, here I was a stranger doing something that they might have done and was trying not to get caught.

Seizing the moment takes a combination of innocence and awareness. Playing the moment takes some chutzpah sprinkled with some risk. Chutzpah is a Yiddish word defined as "daring, boldness or unmitigated effrontery."