

The Joyful Journey of Nursing Home Clowning

BY Anita Thies

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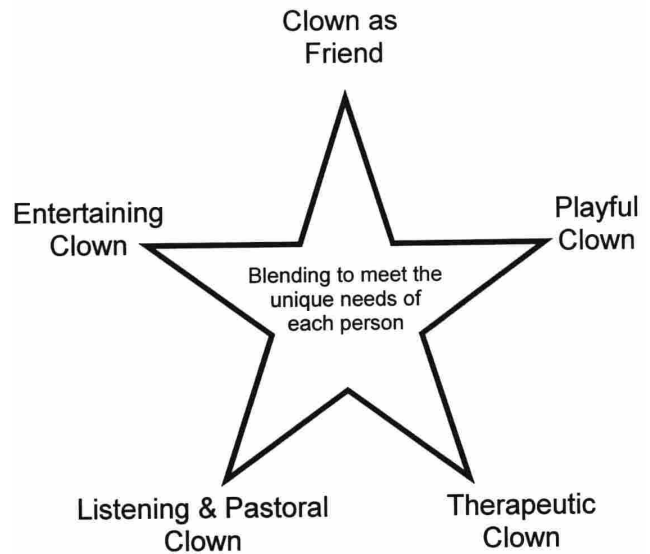
Here is a marvelous new book put together by Anita Thies who also did the Joyful Journey of the Hospital clown.

Here are some excerpts from the book:

Five Roles for a Nursing Home Clown by Anita Thies

In coming chapters, a variety of clowns will share the emphases they bring to nursing homes. The diversity of their work reflects the many roles a clown may have in connecting with the needs of residents.

The star model (See below) for caring clowns offers a framework for seeing these roles as "touch points" to meet the unique needs of each person you encounter. One role often leads to or blends with another, for instance listening is therapeutic and play develops friendship. The resident is always the "star" of your interaction.



Nursing Home Clowning for You? by Anita Thies (pp. 8-9)

An aging woman once said she felt like a "girl" with a grandmother's face. If you'd like to see that face crinkle into a smile, perhaps nursing home clowning is for you.

An elderly man once said he felt like a "boy" yearning to play. If you'd like to bring out that playfulness, perhaps nursing home clowning is for you.

No other place offers you so many ways to be a clown and to share yourself. You can entertain residents in community rooms, in hallways or by bedsides, bringing laughter to their lips and a sparkle to their eyes.

With your caring clown visits, you can be a special friend they long to see. You can hold their hands and listen to their stories which are their truest treasures. You can seek to connect with those whose eyes and thoughts seem far away. You can join them in the moment and fill that moment with your care and presence. And in giving of yourself you'll make an amazing discovery: Without your ever seeking it, they will give you acceptance and appreciation. They will share their life with you and give you the greatest of gifts: their unconditional love!

These roles help address what some call the three "plagues" of the elderly: loneliness, boredom and helplessness. For the lonely, you can be a Friend and Listener. For the bored, you can bring stimulation and fun as Entertainer and Playful Clown. For those feeling helpless, you as a Therapeutic Clown can give them choices and bring to them the physical benefits of laughter.

In every case, your personal attention and sensitivity to them can lift their spirits and help their "star" to shine.

Below is Anita with Violet Weeden - the photo tells it all.



Going Room to Room By Carole Johnson (pp 64-65)

When I approach someone in a room, I always make eye contact first and say something like, "There's a clown here. Do you mind if I come in?" Many people can't see you from a distance or even realize what you are.

When I come up behind someone in a hallway I warn them by saying, "There is a clown behind you." I know that a clown is about the last thing they expect to see and I never want to scare them!

If there are visitors or staff members in the room, I have to be sensitive as to whether they need privacy or would welcome a diversion. Many times I have provided visitors as well as the resident a time of shared laughter.

When I enter a room, I like to look for something to comment on to start a conversation. If there are any decorations I say something about them. If there are photos on their bulletin board, it gives me an opportunity to talk about their families.

The main thing that I do on my visits is have a conversation with the residents. Many of them get few visitors and are lonely. A kind listening ear is one of the best things you can give them.

I don't ask people their name. Sometimes they don't remember and that would embarrass them. I look to see if their name is posted outside the door, and then I am able to call them by name.



To Dance with Their Spirit: Will You Wait for Them?

From *Korey Thompson* page 140-141

Clowns engage the dance of our spirit. Regardless of the venue, feeling safe and loved is an invitation for our spirit to come out to play.

Whenever someone inquires about clowning with Alzheimer's patients, my first question is, "What draws you to clowning with people who have dementia?"

Clowning in any therapeutic setting is a specialize field. It's not focused on the clown's traditional tricks or snappy appearance. IT's all about the person you meet and whatever their needs are. In this venue the clown must be flexible in clowning style and willing to not take themselves too seriously.

The essence of clowning with dementia patients is the same as any kind of effective interpersonal interaction. A good clown helps set the stage through proper pacing, a playful attitude and visual stimulation. I will suggest some ways to tailor these elements to dementia work (play) later in this article."

Korey explains an example of one of these elements:

. . . . Medical research in dementia indicates it can take up to 90 seconds for the brain with dementia to process a question or an instruction. In our sound0byte culture, a minute and a half is a long time to wait for a response The temptation is to repeat the question or instruction in the meanwhile and perhaps with increased volume. Unfortunately this only tends to restart the 90 second clock again and the heightened volume or urgency of the request becomes part of the message, too.

So a clown needs to know how to wait with grace and without anxiety. Kick back into a relaxed but "attentive" pace while you wait. Sometimes I will cock my head gently to the side (a non-confrontational pose) and quietly hum to the music or say "ummmm... " in a way that is not intrusive. When folks perceive

you're staying with them in their space and at their pace a meaningful response is more likely.



Gifts from my Mis-Takes (in part) *-by Shobhana Schwebke

The Gift of Presence pp 36-40

My very first mis-take was on one Christmas day. I was clowning in a room with a grandmother and her grandchildren, when I noticed a very elderly lady curled up in the next bed. I thought, "Oops!" So I pulled the curtain between the beds and sat down next to her.

I positioned my face where she could see me and I noticed a small hint of recognition. So I sat down next to her and not knowing what to do, I just watched her breath. This just seemed like the natural thing to do. She then began softly singing Christmas carols in some language I didn't recognize. I hummed along with her for a long while – tears flowing down across my makeup as her hand tightened around mine.

I had done something that I learned as an art therapist. That is to go to where the patient is. In this case I changed my whole attitude and sat down next to the patient because that is where she was. It is very important with elders and with persons with advanced dis-ease to go to their comfort range. We may need to get very quiet, very small, and very slow. We may be able to coax them into a little game, a little smile or a little play. Then again we may not. But we need to go to their space, make eye contact, and listen with our eyes, ears, and hearts.

That was my very first day as a caring clown. I didn't know it then, but what I was doing was practicing conscious breath.

The Magic of Conscious Breath

This is a technique which I learned at the Zen Hospice in San Francisco and I have been teaching it in all my workshops ever since. At first it was because all the nurses in my workshops would say, "Do you realize how important this is?"

Then I began to get such positive feedback emails. "My dad was dying and I taught all my relatives how to do the breathing and we took turns. My dad died so peacefully." Again and again I would get emails. So it not only works for caring clowns, but also for our friends and relatives.

Most people are very uncomfortable around those dying. It is our own fear of death we are facing. So when we are uncomfortable we get busy. Fix the flowers, fluff the pillow, talk of happy things, and on and on with the avoidance of death. All the while the dying long for our presence.

This technique is so simple yet so powerful and it gives one a way to be still. Stillness is the basis of listening. If we can quiet ourselves, we can open up and listen not only to the person in front of us, but to any universal power that may influence our stillness. Attention to intention is also a very important caring practice and the basis for many healing practices. This exercise is designed for the care giver to give complete attention, and loving intentions and therefore their presence to a patient.

If possible sit heart-to-heart, i.e., sit with your left side on the left side of the patient. Think soft belly, relax, and take a deep breath allowing your breath to massage your belly. Allow the patient's hand to rest palm down on top of your palm. Gently support their hand. Now watch their chest as their breath goes in and out.

Match your breath to their breath so you are completely synchronized. You may need to slow down or speed up depending on the patient. If their breath is stressed and uneven yours will be also, but you can slowly quiet the breath.

After some minutes take your right hand and gently place it over their forehead -- a half and inch over the forehead so you are not touching the forehead. The patient will feel the energy and heat from your hand. During all this time you are matching the breath. After a while take your right hand and put it gently on top of the patient's hand, again keeping the breath matching. All this is done with the intention of opening up your heart and giving this person your love. Putting the hand over the forehead may be omitted especially if you are new at a facility.

It seems like such a simple thing, but breath is the very engine of our lives. There is a profound peace that comes from having someone sit with you like this, not only for the clown, but also for the patient. I always have everyone in my workshops try this as the care giver and patient. There is great comfort in having this stillness with someone. It is a profound companionship. After doing it over a period of time, sitting with a dying person becomes a great privilege.



I even taught this to the orphaned boys on a boat with Maria's Children in northern Russia. I thought we were going into a nursing home and I wanted the boys, ages 12 - 18, to be comfortable being with someone who is very old and frail. As it turned out we went to a

children's hospital. So much for communication! But I will never forget watching one young clown, Kolya, as he sat very quietly with a frightened 3-year-old just watching her breath. (See photo above) The child stuck to his side like glue the rest of the time we were there. He showed me that it is not just for dying or frail people, but young children also respond to this technique.

I have been told by other participants in my workshops that they even tried this technique with staff and family members who were upset. While listening to them, they would be aware of breathing with them. Then by slowly calming their own breath they would get them to slow down their breath also, just standing next to them.



This book is a must read for all caring clowns. It is full of advice experiences, stories, props, skits - a caring clown treasure chest.

The book is US\$14.95 plus shipping (US\$3 in USA and US\$4 to Canada) For US mailing, send a check for \$17.95 made payable to Anita Thies to: 761 Cornwall Rd., State College, PA . For Canadian mailing send a money order or check drafted on a US bank for US\$18.95 For Asian and European orders email Anita at: anitathies@yahoo.com

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