

# Drawing Out the Spirit

An Editorial by Shobi Dobi

I received a letter from Mama Clown in which she told me of an incident at one of her workshops. She told the story of the little girl she visited in the hospital who was dying. (HNL Vol. 2 No.4). The little girl asked, "Mama Clown, what's heaven like?" Mama Clown in her clown character told the little girl about clown heaven. "Mama Clown, can I go to clown heaven?" "Sure, but you'll need a red nose" So Mama Clown painted a red nose on the little girl. The little girl was so excited, she made the nurse paint a red nose on her every day in case that was the day she died. The parents buried the little girl with a red nose. Mama Clown had gone to the child's level of understanding. She connected with the child in a world the child could understand and be happy in. It also gave everyone including the parents a way of talking to the child about her death without fear. What an incredible gift!

When Mama Clown was telling this story at a convention, someone walked out in a "huff" explaining, "You should have told the little girl about the salvation of Jesus!" Well, Mama Clown had no idea of the little girl's religion. Had she preached any gospel, she would have stepped out of her bounds as a hospital clown. Every chaplain I have told this story to has agreed that what Mama Clown did was true to the spirit of all religion. Mama Clown drew out the spirit. She connected with what the little girl understood and gave her the gift of talking about her experience. If her parents choose to tell her about their religious beliefs there was an opening for them to enter. Mama Clown had made that opening possible.

Clowns are of the spirit. We share our spirit and our joy in a way so unique to a clown. We touch others' hearts through their inner child. As Hospital Clowns, we are really facilitators of the spirit, not ministers of religion. We are more like the chaplains that minister equally to the dying regardless of their religion or faith. As clowns we are the trusted friends of the inner child. We go to the inner child and bring them into our own joy. This is a great responsibility of the heart. Are you spiritually in your mind or in your heart?

I remember once asking a spiritual teacher "Can I join your path?" He replied "You must seek your own. I won't deny you the joy of your own search." "But where is my path?" He pointed at my very own feet.

Once someone called me and asked, "I understand you meditate. Can you tell me where I can find a Christian meditation group?" Without thinking the words came out of my mouth "If you can tell me where I can find Christian sleep." I've thought a lot about that statement the past few years. Meditation is a state of the human spirit. It belongs to everyone. It's the words used that differ. Metaphorically speaking, God/the Universal Consciousness is like air. Some put a church around air and say, "This is my air, the only air." Others put a Mosque around air or a temple or a shrine. Air is air. Breath is free and belongs to everyone, as does meditation. There is no exclusivity on air or breathing. The building surrounding it is the way we get to

air. It is our spiritual path. There are many names to the path into meditation. The paths are more of the setting of the room which allows the spirit to enter. The spirit is free.

By inflicting our own agenda on people when they are most vulnerable -- being near death or suffering, we do a great disservice to ourselves and to them. We also miss the opportunity to be of "real" service. If we practice unconditional love and listening without judgement, often a person suffering will be allowed the space to find their own spirituality. It is the greatest service we can offer-- to help foster the environment of trust to allow this to happen -- an environment to call out the spiritual.

Although I do follow a particular religious discipline, the world is too full of wonderment for me to limit my spirituality to my interpretation of my religion. Can I of the single mind understand the religions that have passed through so many minds? Can I take my perception of a religion and categorize the wonders of the world? It is pondering these questions that have led me to say that I will not let religion limit my spirituality. I prefer to see the wonders of the world through the eyes of open hearted spirit and love. It is the clown in me that has heightened this experience because my clown connects me with my inner joy, which is the pulsing wave of the spirit of love.

*"The acceleration towards enlightenment on our planet continues to rise and is now spreading into every embodied life stream on this planet. We cannot push our realizations on another, but through the expansion of our love, we create a magnetic frequency that draws many other souls into their own gentle awakening."*

- Aeolia

Often when the mind is stilled, the heart will speak in ways we have not known before. Many times I have been just listening without thoughts of my own, without trying to think of how I can help, but just listening with a still mind. Most often the patient will tell me of their spiritual beliefs. This in itself reinforces and strengthens their own beliefs and spirituality. If in a particular day my mind is agitated, I will match the rhythm of my breath to theirs, or inwardly imagine them enveloped in a bubble of golden love. But essentially the practice is to be in what I have learned to call "open hearted listening" It is amazing especially in a hospital how few people really take the time to listen. When you do listen with stillness allowing the patient to tell their story, it is also allowing them to reinforce their own spirituality. In desperate need or near death people are very open to finding their spiritual path.

Frank Ostaseski, Director of the San Francisco Zen Hospice told this story at one of his workshops. One of these hospice residents was sitting in the garden. He had not spoken to him previously so he went out to the garden and sat next to him. The man looked up at Frank and said quite defensively "I don't

believe in any of your Buddhist stuff -- ‘matter of fact, I don’t believe in anything!’” So Frank just sat with him for a while in silence.

After about ten minutes Frank found his attention focusing on a bracelet the man was wearing. Frank commented without thinking, “That’s an interesting bracelet you’re wearing” With that the man began telling Frank all the curative powers of the different metals in the bracelet. One comment lead to another, and pretty soon the man was telling Frank about all the spiritual things he believed in. He then talked about his childhood. Frank sat and listened as he set out his whole spiritual belief system. The man became eager and quite animated about it. Frank said if he had tried to preach his own religion, the man would have just closed up and surrounded himself with a brooding wall of silence. By just listening, the door was opened to many free exchanges between the two for weeks before the man finally died peacefully one night in his sleep.

Faced by death and suffering people often find inner courage and faith they had never know before. By just listening we may allow a connection to develop that will bring back out their own religious and spiritual roots.

There is also the issue of respect. As clowns in community service we must respect others’ privacy and their own beliefs. Unless we are in a very specific environment where there is no doubt of the religious affiliation of a patient, we must be very careful how we conduct ourselves. And is not respect a pathway of love? Is it not an opening to another’s world with kindness, compassion and unconditional love? Open to all love, no matter what the walls of the church or temple are made out of. Air is air and love is love.

Lolli and Pops, Ken and Stella Thiessen (See page 15) are a wonderful clown couple I met in Winnipeg who regularly clown in a local hospice. They told me this experience.

One day while in a woman’s hospice room, the son sitting next to his mother, got up and stormed out of the room. They couldn’t imagine what they had done to affect the man. Moments later they were asked to come to the administrator’s office. They pondered all the way about what they could have possibly done wrong. In the administrators office, he pointed to the gold crucifix that Lolli was wearing. She was surprised, because it is her habit to wear the cross under her costume. “I guess it just popped out with all our clown antics.” The man who got upset was Jewish and thought they had come to convert and preach Christianity to his mother when she was dying. Of course, the Thiessens are always very careful and the administration knew this, but it is a good example of how little it takes to get yourself into trouble.

There are situations where it might be appropriate to give out angels or a “God Loves You” sticker. Alex Chamberlain wrote: “When appropriate I use the glow in the dark eyeballs with children (usually). I once gave one to a child who was frightened at night, and told him “God will keep an eye on you.” They perched it on their bedside stand. It seemed to do the trick.” A minister I know in Georgia who has a hospital clown

troupe has what he calls his “God pocket.” He says if he sees an indication, like a crucifix or a picture, he may offer a “God Loves You” sticker. Otherwise, it is the policy of the troupe to minister heart to heart without reference to a particular religion in the spirit of a true chaplaincy.

I quote a lot from The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying by Sogyal Rinpoche not because I am a Buddhist, but because the book is full of practical suggestions, information, and meditations on understanding death and being with someone who is dying. We in the United States have far too long had a taboo on speaking about death and dying. I have always said I will not do that in this newsletter. I have had clowns say in my classes “I just want to go in and make people happy. I don’t need to know all this spiritual stuff.” However, someday you are going to walk into a room and have a person die. If you have not had a running dialogue with yourself on death and suffering you will handle this situation in your clown character, but how will you handle this situation in your spirit. And by contemplating and preparing your own spirit you will become a better clown and a more compassionate person.

*From The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*

*“I have been amazed again and again how, if you just let people talk, giving them your complete and compassionate attention, they will say things of a surprising spiritual depth, even when they think they don’t have any spiritual beliefs. Everyone has their own life wisdom, and when you let a person talk you allow this life wisdom to emerge. I have often been very moved by how you can help people to help themselves by helping them to discover their own truth, a truth whose richness, sweetness, and profundity they may never have suspected. The sources of healing and awareness are deep within each of us, and your task is never under any circumstances to impose your beliefs but to enable them to find these within themselves.*

*“Believe as you sit by the dying person that you are sitting by someone who has true potential to be a buddha [enlightened being]. Imagine their . . . nature as a shining and stainless mirror, and all their pain and anxiety a thin, gray mist on it that can quickly clear. This will help you to see them as lovable and forgivable, and draw out of you your unconditional love; you will find this attitude will allow the dying person to open remarkably to you . . . Through the strength and peace and deep compassionate attention of your presence, you will help them awaken their own strength. The quality of your presence at this most vulnerable and extreme moment is all-important.*

*“I never go to the bedside of a dying person without practicing beforehand, without steeping myself in the sacred atmosphere of the nature of mind. Then I do not have to struggle to find compassion and authenticity, for they will be there and radiate naturally.*

*“Remember, you can do nothing to inspire the person in front of you if you do not inspire yourself first.*

*- Sogyal Rinpoche*