

## Active Listening . . . . .

We Care Clowns can often get caught up in our antics and easily forget one of our primary duties – active listening. It requires stillness and listening behind the words. We've all heard those crazy tantrums which are often communicating some very simple need, if only someone would really listen!

The following was email from Bud Frimoth, clown and hospice Chaplain in Portland Oregon

“This very thoughtful piece came through my hospice newsletter . . . it is a reflective piece and needs to be read clear to the end. For being one who isn't the most patient person, this is a good reminder to me of really active listening on the part of the chaplain. It reminded me of a patient I once connected thru *'hand dancing.'*”

### *The Dancer* ~ by Amy Jo Jones

Grace\* was yelling at the facility chaplain about stolen shoes when I first saw her.

The facility chaplain didn't know anything about shoes, and could only point out her shoes beside her bed.

He leaned down and spoke as loudly as he could into her deaf ear.

All he wanted to know was if she would come to Bible Study.

Her eyes blazed with fear, uncertainty and anxiety.

Grace was the fourth new patient I had seen that week.

It was only Tuesday.

At this point, one thing became clear:

I could not be a chaplain who dispensed generic blessings and define that as "best practices."

It takes time to listen to a spiritual heart beat.

I didn't know it before, but...

Grace proved to be my regrouping

Slowing down...

Breathing...

Centering myself...

And staying present in the moment to discern spiritual needs...

Grace was crying.

She had two tufts of thinning white hair which were so tangled they looked like two stray dreadlocks.

She was otherwise bald.

I did not know her story.

She needed to tell it- which she did over a course of several visits.

She was deaf and was blind in one eye.

Communication took place with a writing pad and a bold marker in future visits.

Her memory was no longer completely in tact.

Listening to her was like working a jigsaw puzzle.

A piece here... a piece there...

And eventually things fit together.

The only thing that was in tact

Was fear.

This was how I met her.

Screaming about stolen shoes.

Pointing at the window outside,

Saying that the FBI was trying to get in and take her away.

Her room mate screamed all night long, keeping her awake.

She had no room mate.

I wondered about the logic of that statement... as she could not hear.

Maybe it was her own screams keeping her awake.

My heart caught all of her fear.

She did not need to leave this world

With fear in her heart.

Whatever it was...

I walked into the fear of her heart...

The teeth of the storm...

And she allowed me to stay.

I sat beside her and let her vent and lean on me for support... a stranger...

Someone needed to sit with her and weather this storm with her.

I sat with her as she vented every fear she felt.

She began to breathe easier.

In second next visit...

The same fear...

The staff saw her as high need.

She was.

She needed someone to listen to her.

She needed a calm presence in the midst of the storms of her heart.

She needed to voice why she was scared of

the staff who rushed through her care.

(They rush because they have others to care for in an understaffed facility.)

She did not understand this;

her body only remembered the other times things were rushed in having her clothes removed.

She needed to give voice to her uncle...

and how she had never told anyone that she was molested at the age of eleven.

She permanently lived with syphilis as a daily reminder.

I listened as she cleansed her heart and prepared to leave this earth.

I walked on that sacred ground with her.

Sometimes being given that kind of trust can be spell-binding.

What gave her joy?

I asked her this in a later visit.

She beamed. There was joy.

She was a ballroom dance teacher.

She went through the motions with her arms and smiled.

Her posture straightened as she sat tall and with ease.

She was still a dancer.

It was in her DNA.

Sometimes, when I was coming to visit her, I would watch her from a distance before she knew I was there.

She would be sitting in the activity area alone, gazing out the window.

I would see her arms moving gracefully... and smiling...

and I knew she was still dancing.

Others thought she was confused.

She could hear the big bands in her mind.

Her arms opened in joy as she imagined.

She smiled and her eyes sparkled.

She gracefully nodded her head- as if taking a bow- in remembering the times of dancing.

The last time I visited her, she was sleeping.

As I sat with her, she opened her eyes for a brief moment.

Grace smiled at me with a peaceful radiance.

Then she nodded her head in understanding, closed her eyes, and slept.

She rests in peace.

\* name has been changed