

From The Joyful Journey of the Caring Clown, edited by Anita Theis

Chapter 4

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Gifts from My Mis-Takes: Developing the Quality of Our Caring Clowning

I want to share with you more of my process of being a caring clown than to give you advice. So many clowns come to me with the fear of making a mistake. Mistakes are gifts. In theater terms, a "take" is a little act. So this being said, I want to share with you some of my "*mis-takes*."

I tell you these not to discourage you, but because they made me do some deep reflections and gave me some important lessons in caring clowning. They also made me recognize my own fear of suffering and death and to clown to the healthy person and not the dis-ease. In total, they have made me a more spiritual person and a stronger person - a caring clown who does not run from suffering.

Once called "Old Age Homes," nursing homes today often have residents who can no longer take care of themselves at home and require full time care. That doesn't necessarily mean "old." I found this out on my very first outing. I visited many residents that day, but it is the *mis-takes* I really remember, because they were gifts in disguise.

The usual pattern at nursing homes, as I was to learn from experience, is for the staff to gather all the residents into a common room for the clown to entertain. I had been doing hospital clowning for a few years and was used to going from room to room. So when I finished my little meet and greet show, I asked, "Are there any residents here who can't leave their rooms?" The response came: "Oh yes, they're over in the East Wing." I asked, "Is it OK for me to go over and visit them?" "Oh they'd love it," the staff person answered, pointing me in the right direction.

With the confidence of a fairly seasoned hospital clown, I bounced over to the East Wing. It looked like a hospital corridor; however, there were no unit or charge nurses, no staff sitting around computers, no doctors walking around - nobody to ask whom I should see or not.

So I peeked into the first room and waved a greeting. "Would you like a visit?" I paused and posed and observed the room. The patient was a woman in her mid-twenties. There was classical music playing. The room had been well attended to with photos and flowers. I saw that the woman had some evidence of a muscular dis-ease. She seemed to take me in without a frown, so I tiptoed in with my usual cautious shy Shobi character.

Then I started to do a little magic show with my Mini Puppet. The woman's whole body began to jerk and she began to squeal. I had no idea if this was delight or horror. Was she happy to see me or terrified? Whom do I ask? What do I do?

We Are Not Perfect

I went into the hall - still nobody around. I never did find a staff person to ask. In retrospect, after so many years of hospital clowning, I would have done the same thing. Did I learn something? Yes, I learned I was not to beat myself up if I didn't come up to my own expectations.

This is important in working in nursing homes. We are not perfect; sometimes we may be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Most of the time we have no idea of the ripples of joy we are spreading until someone tells us much later.

The Magical Realm of Being in Character

I continued to clown on the East Wing and most of the rooms were no different from doing a hospital clown round. Then I came to a large room down the hall with three wide-awake elderly gentlemen all sitting up in bed. I waved at the door and they all smiled and one waved me to come in.

"Finally, I am going to be able to really clown with someone," I thought. So I bounced into the room. But to my utter surprise one of the men yelled really, really loudly "Get the #*\$%&\$* out of here!" I reacted in clown character, jumping about a foot straight up in the air, because it really did surprise me! "Okey-dokey" I chirped, and hopped back out the door.

Don't Take It Personally

I stopped outside the room to recoup. After all it was really the first time Shobi had ever been yelled at. I expected my little girl clown to cry.

The interesting thing was I didn't feel affected at all. To my amazement, the angry words just bounced off. What I learned was that by keeping in character, I didn't take it personally.

This *mis-take* reinforced my belief in having a strong clown character. My personal ego was not involved in the incident. My clown character, Shobi Dobi, lives in a child wonder-filled life that is not affected by most of the adult confusing world.

Our characters can be a small quiet clown or a singing clown or a dancing clown, but all in the magical realm of being in character. As we all know "things go better in clown," and here I sensed a defense in being in a clown. It was almost like wearing armor or is it amour - love?

Exquisite Caution

I'm not speaking about doing something irresponsible like going in really big and loud and giving someone a heart attack. I went into that room with quiet caution. I call it "exquisite caution" because it is delicately pure in heart and intention.

Our Spirit of Service

This *mis-take* got me thinking about selfless service - service without thought of reward. In my search for understanding, some months later I had the good fortune to take a weekend workshop with Frank Ostaseski, founder of the Zen Hospice in San Francisco. (You can read his complete article, *Our Intention in Service*, on my website www.hospitalclown.com)

Paying Attention to Our Inner Appearance

Our spirit of service takes the same quality of mindfulness we pay to our outer clown. We pay attention to our costume, make-up and skills. As caring clowns, need to pay the same attention to the development of our inner clown: the development of kindness, sensitivity, gentleness, compassion and non-attachment to rewards for service.

Developing a spirit of service for the caring clown is not a privilege, but a responsibility. There are many spiritual paths to the heart. We caring clowns share two. We are clowns and we work with

those who are suffering. We perform and we serve. However, this sense of selfless service is what makes a caring clown different from a theater clown.

The caring clown develops a more selfless vision of clowning. We so often give up attachments to results of our performance, as a patient falls asleep in mid show, or any number of interruptions. We are there for the patient, not to show off a performance. We often never see the results of our actions until days or months later, if at all. By the nature of our job, we do not even expect results from our actions. This is selfless service.

To Help or To Serve?

When we say, "How can I serve you," we offer what we have. It is not about status. It is about compassion. Egos are not involved here.

"How can I serve" is a different attitude than "How can I help?" This is not about helping a situation. We feel powerless when we can't help enough. To help means there is something wrong which needs fixing. That is a judgment. Too often when we help there is someone who is needy. We try to fill that need and we become needy also. To help is action often full of pride, self importance and a need for recognition.

Words are important in framing our attitudes. It is very important to replace the word "help" with "serve." In the beginning it is best to say it out loud in a whisper to yourself, as it is impossible to get more than one thought out of the mouth at one time (unlike the mind).

Selfless service is an attitude which takes the vigilance of self-inquiry to master. It is important to watch how we offer our service. We need to be honest with ourselves and others about our intentions, and to know when we feel we need a reward and admit it. This seems obvious, but sometimes we want to do so much good that we overlook our real intention. It happens. It is human nature. However, if we don't recognize our feelings, resentment and bitterness can turn off the inspirational creative juices. It can lead to burnout and compassion fatigue. And it can close the heart - the very vehicle of the caring clown. It takes a mountain of our own good nature to lift us above complaints that can pollute the awareness of selfless service.

Shobi's Practice

This is Shobi's practice. Before I walk into a situation - a room or a lobby - I take a deep breath, I enter the room on the exhalation and take a clown pose. Exhaling on entry relaxes everyone in a room, on a stage, anywhere. Taking a big breath is what we do when we are frightened and excited. A big "ta tah" can work in the circus, but we are talking about a nursing home. When we exhale on entry or even walking up to a person, it is relaxing gesture. This is quite the opposite of what most of us do by habit. Again, it takes some vigilance to change this habit. I call it "Pause and Pose."

During the clown pose I think soft belly, which relaxes my abdominal muscles. "Soft belly" is what Steven Levine uses in his hospice workshops. When I think soft belly, it pulls me out of my reactive mind and allows me to work out of my heart.

I make eye contact with the person(s) in the room. We've all heard it many time - eyes are the windows of the soul. For a caring clown it is most important to look beyond the body and into the soul, i.e., clown to the person inside not the disease. So it has become my practice to not look at someone, but to look into their eyes.

As I survey the room, I ask myself "How can I serve this situation?" I don't expect an answer in my mind; it is the attitude change that I am asking for. It clears my mind for intuition or one might say help from higher places. The answers come in my spontaneous clown reactions. Experienced caring clowns know we get a lot of help from higher places, and I am not referring to administration. You might think, "This will take too long," but remember again we are in a nursing home, not on stage. With repeated use, all of this practice becomes a habit.

When our mind is engaged in "How can I serve this situation," it leads to positive actions - not helplessness. It may mean getting out of the room or blowing bubbles, waving, holding a hand or giving a hug. Listen to the heart and allow a spontaneous response. The appropriateness that comes is always a surprise to me. I have learned to trust that higher connection.

We See This During a Disaster

To serve is to give, to share what we have. This service is cooperation without judgment. We see this happening during a disaster - what is usually competition becomes cooperation. We support one another. Everyone pitches in to serve as best as they can regardless of title or rank. There is no place for pity and there is no status, everyone is equal. This is equanimity in service. When we are free from placing conditions on our work, it becomes selfless service. It is unconditional love and unconditional service. This kind of service is an act of love and a true act of compassion.

Selfless Compassion

There is a companionship of mutual respect, dignity, wholeness and love in this compassion. This selfless compassion is what moves us into the spirit. Selfless service is mysteriously purifying. It continually replenishes our self-respect, as well as, respect for those around us. It puts us into the flow of the "divine."

Selfless service allows a rich nectar to flow into my heart. It is grace in action. Inner knowledge sprouts from our hearts, creating rivers of love that can wash away fatigue and replenish the heart's compassion. Within the heart of the selfless server, love is boundless.

Being Real - Know Thyself

Back on that East Wing with my "*mis-takes*," I entered a room with an intense odor. The man was having trouble speaking, but beckoned me to come close. As he was whispering, I bent over him so I could hear him speak. There was a horrible smell coming from his body and I gagged.

I was horrified at my reaction and did a little dance turn to try to get back into character, but I was having trouble controlling that gag. Again there was nobody in the room. He kept whispering so I got close enough to hear what he said: "Would you close the bathroom door?" I immediately did this, but that was not the cause of the odor. I found out later that it was from some sort of cancer. But at the time I was so embarrassed for not being able to control my gag. I thought "Another failure to bring cheer to a room."

We All Have Our Weaknesses

This weighed really heavy on my heart for a long time, making me do lots of research and again I learned many lessons. First of all, we all have our weaknesses. Some clowns will faint at the sight of blood. I don't. But I gag at vomit, body excrement and foul smells. I can't stop my gagging. Some clowns cannot be with a suffering child because they have a child; some of us see our own elderly

parents in all suffering elderly patients. I don't have problems with human beings only animals. I can't stand to see a suffering animal.

We all have our ways. It is important to realize our own feelings. Only then we overcome them or work around them. There is so much need in the world for a caring clown, so we can each find the right place that works for us.

Resisting the Instinct to Flee

This *mis-take* was still on my mind. I wanted some more compassion way of being in this situation. At the time I was reading *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, by Sogyal Rinpoche. (Harper, San Francisco, 1992, page 316) I came home and opened it up and read about this technique for arousing compassion for a person who is suffering: ". . . imagine one of your dearest friends, or someone you really love, in that person's place. Imagine your brother or daughter or parent or a best friend in the same kind of painful situation. What more would you want than to free them from their torment?"

So I learned to take advantage of the clown's performance freeze or pause, look into the patient's eyes and see my best friend. Mother Teresa described lepers she cared for as "Christ in all His distressing disguises."

On a More Practical Level

Not being a saint, I sought out a more practical level, which I am not afraid to use. I now have a little spring skunk that lives in a bedpan on my cart. I also travel with a little skunk on a key chain. Pulling out "Flower" shifts the embarrassment of both patient and clown shifts the focus to the play with the puppet. We can both laugh about human discomforts and the sometime horrors of disease. And not the least unimportant, humor can help the patient feel not so alone and isolated.

On an Even More Practical Level

As I am in the habit of asking everyone for advice, one day I asked my dentist about this predicament. He said "I keep a small bottle of orange extract nearby. When a patient has very bad breath, I just dab of it under his nose." So I also carry a little bottle of it in my pocket.

The Gift of Presence

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 advance dis-ease to go to their comfort range. We many 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, made 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.

Stillness is the Basis of Listening

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 on right) 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 calm their own breath they would get them to slow down their breathing also, just standing next to them.

On a caring clown trip to Mexico I did a workshop at the beginning of the trip and taught this breathing exercise. Larry Jubal Davis of Selah, Washington whose caring clown trip to Mexico who was on his first clown experience, recalls this experience:

"At a Guadalajara hospital, I approached an elderly woman. Her daughter was on her right-hand side. She was in quite a bit of stress. You could tell by the circumstances that her time was coming to an end. She was mumbling and her eyes were opening and closing. A nurse was on one side of the bed and her daughter on the other.

"I was at the foot of the bed and asked permission to hold her hand. I went around to the left side of the bed and picked up her hand and placed it on top of mine. I leaned over so she was able to see my face. Her daughter was telling her that I was a clown, but she did not respond in any way verbally.

"With her hand on mine, I placed my fingers on her wrist (pulse) and began to just look at her, took in her breath and watched her breathe. I watched her gestures and synchronized my breath with hers. As soon as I got my breath to synchronize with hers, she began to relax and after about two minutes of her relaxing, I placed my other hand over her forehead without touching it. I kept watching her breathe. Her eyes closed and she relaxed and started to breathe very freely.

"It kind of surprised me that this had really happened and I lost concentration on her breath so my breath became out of sync with hers. She immediately tensed up and started mumbling again. I concentrated again on synchronizing our breaths and she immediately relaxed. I removed my left hand from her forehead and placed it gently on top of her hand. It was amazing how she relaxed. Her daughter even relaxed. I stayed in breath with her for another few minutes. I then stroked the top of her hand and put it down. As I left her bedside, it seemed like her stress was relieved.

"What really happened was I connected with more than just with breath. It was like I was able to feel the stress and anxiety that was within her. I took some of that on into me, and when I entered into the hallway I was overwhelmed from the experience and had to get some assistance from some of the other clowns with hugs. I was able to deal with the experience. It was an experience that I will not forget."

How Can I Clown Where There is Suffering?

Another *mis-take* that made me ponder happened while visiting a nursing home at a Clowns International Festival in England. I passed the room of a man hooked up to several machines. His eyes were red and he looked so uncomfortable. My own empathy pained me right to the core. Was I supposed to go in and try to comfort this man? Did he even want me there? I felt the hurt so deep that it stopped me in my tracks. Was it my own fear of suffering? How can I transform this and clown? I never got to go into that room as the clowns with me pulled me off to a waiting bus. I did wave a little and smiled, but I didn't connect.

That look in that man's eyes has stayed with me for a long time, so I wrote to several caring clown friends for advice and I took encouragement again from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, by Sogyal Rinpoche who wrote "If you suffer, you will know how it is when others suffer. And if you are in a position to help others, it is through your suffering that you will find the understanding and compassion to do so. . . . So whatever you do, don't shut off your pain; accept your pain and remain vulnerable. However desperate you become, accept your pain as it is, because it is in fact trying to hand you a priceless gift: the chance of discovering, through spiritual practice, what lies behind sorrow.

Sogyal Rinpoche quotes Rumi "Grief . . . can be the garden of compassion. If you keep your heart open through everything, your pain can become your greatest ally in your life's search for love and wisdom." [Rumi (1207 -- 1273) a 13th century Persian mystic and poet whose passionate poems of love and joy have been revered through the ages. UNESCO has declared 2007 Rumi year.]

Accepting the Place of Grief in Our Hearts

I realized it was not just my own fear of suffering, but the depth of the suffering I felt. It was a deep profound grief. I believe that is why grief has been given to us. It makes us live a little deeper in our souls. We would not go that deep into our hearts on our own. But once we have accepted this deep place, and sit in its stillness, we realize it is lined with soft fragrant rose pedals, and the view from that place is extraordinary.

So the next time I was in a situation with a profoundly suffering individual, I was a little more prepared. I looked right into the patient's eyes, and gave him the sweetest smile my Shobi could conjure up, and I sent him all the love through my eyes that I could. I was quiet, I was still, and I did nothing but stand there and breathe - breathe with him. Tears filled our eyes as they continued to meet. It was so sweet. He knew that I knew, and there was that moment of connection. He shook his head a little in affirmation. I gave him a homemade little angel for his bed table, "Someone to look after you." And I left. Later when I peeked into his room as I always do on the way out, he was quietly asleep.

Stilling the Reactive Mind and Finding Inner Stillness

I have often said my reason for being is to glow. Clowning is a wonderful jewel though which to glow; however the clown is just the light bulb, not the source of energy. It is important that we are aware of allowing that light and lightness inside to shine through.

So often in a nursing home, we want to do something and we don't know what to do. So instead of being still, we get busy. We do a show, make a balloon, tell a silly joke and do anything but be still and make a connection.

We have all experienced how the mind can instantly say, "What if that is me in 30 years!" "What if that were my child?" The mind is a genius at multitasking. It can clown and think of many things at once. This is a "knee -- jerk reaction." When the reactive mind kicks in, it boomerangs and strikes back at us with fear and it shifts our focus off those we are clowning for and onto ourselves.

I have a very active mind -- much like my little dog - always curious, always going in many directions at once. If I get angry at my reactive minds, it just gets more active. Sometimes I gently visualize my mind as this little dog and pat it on the head with love, but more often I sit quietly watching my breath and the energy in my body softening my belly. This quiets the mental noise and allows me to be aware of the wonderful miracle of human existence. This is my practice. We all

develop our ways of connecting through the doorways of our bodies. Every religion has its path to that stillness.

The World on the Other Side of Our Senses

I visualize my being like a great ocean. So much can be happening on the surface, but beneath it is a still vibrant calm. Nothing that goes on can change that stillness as anything that reaches that depth becomes part of the vibrant calm. It is this vibrant calm that I bring into my caring clowning. The stillness flows outwardly as gentleness. Inner stillness and gentleness is beautiful presence in a caring clown, it spreads compassion in all directions.



There are many articles free to download on my website www.hospitalclown.com. I don't consider them mine. They come from the universe in what I've begun to call the "hole in my mind." So I don't feel I own any of it.

I am just a clown vehicle and as I always say, "My clown car is fueled by love, gives off joy for exhaust, and drives on a highway of compassion."

How much better can life get? Well, maybe flying! And I know there are plenty of caring clown angels already doing that!

