

Our Spirit of Service *from Shobi*

Development of a spirit of service for the hospital clown is not a privilege, but a responsibility. There are many spiritual paths to the heart. We hospital clowns share two. We are clowns and we work with those who are suffering. We perform and we serve.

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 and we, as hospital clowns, need to pay the same attention to the development our inner clown. The development of kindness, sensitivity, gentleness, compassion and non attachment in action.

This is what makes a hospital clown different from the theater clown. The hospital clown needs a sense of service -- 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 a doctor walks into the room 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.

Why Selfless Service?

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. We need more money, more time, and more equipment. To help is action often full of pride, self important and a need for recognition.

To serve is to give, to share what you 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 - 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 service is an act of love and a true act of 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." 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.

By Serving Others, We Serve Ourselves

Hospital clowning is a job. It is performing in a workplace. Just because we are funny, it doesn't mean we don't fall prey to the same attitudinal problems of our cyber-paced society and the same job frustrations and compassion fatigue as other caregivers.

It takes a mountain of our own good naturedness to lift us above complaints that pollute the awareness of self-less service. "That person makes me so mad." "No one appreciates me." "I can't help." "I'm too tired, scared, inadequate" and on and on it goes. In these cases we focus on ourselves instead of those suffering.

If we expect rewards and don't get them, resentments can arise. 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 hospital clown.

With a positive attitude of service, we serve ourselves and can escape the feelings of helplessness that come from feeling powerless in a situation.

When we serve, offering ourselves, our cooperation, our love, and expect nothing in return, the reward is often a surprise. How often do we receive from patients and staff that which is not verbal and not spoken -- that which only we see? It can be the quiet smile of a dying patient, the sudden twinkle in the eye of an exhausted nurse or the very small wave of a tiny hand of a tiny sick child.

If we practice selflessness, our service is strengthened. It is like a muscle, the more we exercise it, the stronger it gets. It also becomes our way of serving and our way of clowning in the hospital. The attitude becomes part of our gentle demeanor, part of our vulnerability, our open heart.

Compassion and selfless service is a practice -- a process; it is not something we have or don't have. It is a continued effort. It is this practice which can shift an attitude.

We have control over very little in our lives, but we can control our attitudes. Whether we are rich or poor, healthy or in pain, volunteer or paid, we are in charge of our attitude. A shift to a positive attitude can lighten our load, physically, mentally and spiritually.

Selfless service is an attitude which takes the vigilance of self inquiry to master. It takes watching ourselves, catching the gossip of our mind before it pollutes our service. As words are very important in prayer, so are they important in framing our attitude. It is very important to replace the word "help" with "serve."

With this vigilance it is important to watch how we offer our service. Be honest with ourselves and others about our intentions. 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.

The Practice of Selfless Service

This is the practice Shobi uses: When I walk into a situation -- often a hospital room or a lobby -- I take a deep breath. As I exhale, I relax my abdominal muscles thinking *soft belly*. Soft belly has an uncanny way of opening the heart. It is what Steven Levine uses in his hospice workshops. Then I survey the room and ask myself "How can I serve this situation?" The task takes only seconds actually. With repeated use this practice becomes a habit. It clears my mind for intuition or one might say help from higher places. Experienced hospital clowns know we get a lot of help from higher places and I am not referring to hospital administration.

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 at a child, 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.

Selfless service allows a rich nectar to flow into my heart. It is the panacea for pain, suffering and fatigue. Within the heart of the selfless server, love is boundless. -- Shobi Dobi