

Courage and the Open Heart

It takes courage to be a hospital clown. To walk into an ICU room, a pediatric ward, never knowing what to expect--to hear cries of pain and see death. Whenever I think it is too much I read the following. It is such an example of courage and the open heart.

"...here, in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, you see incredible beauty and unbearable pain. And you have to figure out how to be with both.

"We began this new practice of holding infants when the time would come for them to die. So at the end we'd take them off the monitors and into our arms in a rocker.

"It tears you apart because holding them, sometimes you can feel them go. And the death itself is different. On the machines, it's monitored as brain death. In your arms, it's the heart and the breath.

"You feel ten dozen things at once . . . Terrible sadness, . . . Something like awe and wonder . . . patience too . . . And peace of mind, because you're doing the best you can and humble, to be present at such a moment. All of the above, often at once.

"You come to see that you're sitting with all of it on behalf of the child . . . it's a final act for them . . . You're offering whatever peace you've come to. And it creates such intimacy, impossible to describe, you're so right with them.

"It's unbearable and beautiful at the same time. How do you explain that? . . . beautiful, because you see that you can be, we all can be in the presence of great pain, but still appreciate life, even in its last moments. Especially then." How Can I Help?, Ram Dass & Paul Gorman, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1985



From Soyol Rinpoche The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Sogyal Rinpoche, Harper/Collins, 1992

"Be open to your grief [and suffering], as open as you are to . . . enlightened beings . . . You may even come to feel mysteriously grateful toward your suffering, because it gives you such an opportunity of working through it and transforming it. Without it you would never have been able to discover that hidden in the nature and depths of suffering is a treasure of bliss. The times when you are suffering can be those when you are most open, and where you are extremely vulnerable can be where your greatest strength really lies.

"Say to yourself then: 'I am not going to run way from this suffering, I want to use it in the best and richest way I can, so that I can become more compassionate and more helpful to others.' Suffering, after all, can teach us about compassion. 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. 'Grief,' Rumi wrote, '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."