

Our Spirit of Service

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

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.

To Be Paid or Not to Be Paid

There is Sufi saying "Praise Allah, but tie your camel to the post."
In other words bring the practice into the world.

For a year now, I've been trying to address this subject. When money enters the equation of life, everything seems to go a little haywire. So this is not a definitive answer as much as to raise awareness and stir discussion

There are many clowns who prefer the freedom of being a volunteer. But, not everyone has the luxury of having time to volunteer.

Being a volunteer has great advantages. Shobi has never been paid for any hospital clowning. I started in the volunteer department at Kaiser Hospital in 1994. Being a volunteer, no one supervised me, told me what to do or where to go. I had full reign to develop myself in areas that I would have not imagined. By not having a defined role, I could allow that Higher Power to direct me. I am very grateful for that opportunity.

If you do volunteer, define and be clear as to what and where you will clown and what you do. I found myself volunteering at Hospital-sponsored fairs where they contracted other clowns and paid them. I did not get paid. I was resentful. I was not clear. I overheard someone saying. "We'd like Shobi to be at our open clinic, do we have to pay her?" I was so full of the love of just doing it, that I would do anything. But underneath it all a resentment was developing that I had to deal with. It is how I learned about the practice of selfless service. It showed me once again that nothing in our lives really goes to waste - it is all a learning experience.

In my hospital, I have now made it clear that I am free for the patients, but not for parties that have a budget. Hospitals do have money! So I recommend. Always ask when someone approaches you to do a picnic or fair that has the ring of a "freebie" "What is your budget?" You may want to do it as a volunteer, but this way you are clearing the table for truth. Both sides will be comfortable. I think we have to be up front about it. If we do a job for free, you may be taking work from a "working clown" who needs it to make their living.

Many volunteers set up some sort of compensation at the hospital. At my hospital volunteers get free lunch, transportation, staff over the counter prescription rates and a break on health insurance, as well as, being covered by workman's compensation insurance. They also have a volunteer auxiliary fund that will pay for supplies as face paints, give-aways or special devices as button machines, Polaroid cameras, etc.

Being in my position as Editor of this newsletter, I receive a lot of information. In watching volunteer programs come and go all over

the country, it has become obvious that programs that rely on volunteers start out with a bang, but soon struggle to keep their commitment. After all volunteer work does not hold the commitment of a job. Paying the bills takes precedence. It is important to set yourself up as a program whether you are paid or if you are working by yourself. It will take more commitment to put it in writing, but you will receive more respect as a professional because of this commitment.

With a salary or a wage comes other disciplines that may not be there in volunteer work: Commitment to time; Continuing Education: Authority -- others telling you what to do and when; Accountability -- showing what you do and how you do it and in many cases how often and with whom.

Defining Our Roles and Salary

My experience from writing this newsletter is enough to show me that there is a broad scope of talent and diversity among hospital clowns. There are as many ways to be a hospital clown as there are clown characters. But the hospital needs definition. How do we define ourselves without limiting our effectiveness?

There are clowns who are amazing performers who don't do well in a one-on one hospital room and there are hospital clowns who don't perform on stage. It is a tough call for the hospital. How will they know the difference between a trained Clown Child Life Worker and someone who has just bought a clown costume at the Halloween sale. One is truly worth a salary; the other may not even be any good as a volunteer, then again maybe he/she will. There is no criteria, no credentialing group (yet).

Questions hospital administration ask: How do we pay for that kind of service? How do we know who is good? What are your credentials? How do we supervise you and your clown group? How do we evaluate your program? How can I show tangible results of funds expended to my board of directors?

We Clowns Are a Work of Art

We have just discussed our work as self less service. Now we return to the world and are asked to put a monetary value on this work. It is not that much different from when I was an artist. How do you price a painting? A work of art. We clowns are "a work of art!" It is the market that determines the value of the painting and the work of art. It is our job to present ourselves to the hospital and tell them what we are worth.

Most people have an unreasonable idea of what a clown does. I've had businesses call me and want to hire me for \$10 an hour. You can't even rent a clown suit for that. Hospital administrators will say "What! You want me to pay a clown more than my experienced nurses?" They are all thinking of hourly wages, not realistically what a clown does. How many hours does it take to get ready?. Let's say two hours to get ready and one hour to get out of costume, clean props, puppets etc. So if you put in 5 hours then you already have 8 hours of work.

Clowning is a performing art. We are "on" all the time we are in costume (If you are not, you are not a very good clown) I have taught 8 hour workshops and not been tired afterwards. I have put 7 hours in at the hospital and been exhausted beyond my feet, heart and mind. I come home and go to sleep. Yes, it is good sleep, the rewards are those of the heart. But it is exhausting emotionally and physically. We just can't be put in the same category as hourly or

wage workers. You wouldn't ask an actor to act on stage for 8 hours, or a dancer to dance for 8 hours, or your horse to race for 8 hours. There is nothing wrong with explaining this. It is a matter of getting respect for our profession.

In professional (paid) hospital clown programs the clown put on makeup at the hospital. Many have hours they put in out of costume, as in treatment and staff conferences. We all know that a clown in the hospital never goes anywhere fast. It takes Shobi 1-2 hours to get from the pediatrics floor to her car if she is in costume. She has to get on the elevator past the lobbies and all those people who call out for attention. We cannot ignore them. So if Shobi has to be out of the hospital at 3 p.m., she'd better start leaving at least by 2 or go into the nurses lounge and get out of "face."

Very Round Pegs in Square Holes

A hospital administrator once said to me: "If you [clown] made everyone on a bus happy, it doesn't mean that the bus company should hire you." My reply "They might, if all their passengers were going to ICU or to get a heart transplant or children with cancer or . . ." "O.K. I get the picture," he responded, "but how many people a day can you see?"

Hospital Administration needs to be educated on many levels about a clown's work. If they ever saw one of us in action, they'd know how difficult it would be to take a tally. In the lobby there are 4 children 5-6. "How old are you little girl? Oh you want to see my puppet?" Let see where was I -- there are 15 adults. "Hi there let me dust you off with my feather duster while I tally up this lobby." This kind of split focus is impossible. The clown says. "I need to be in my spontaneous clown character in the hospital, I can't pay attention to how many people I see a day. Most often I don't see results, sometimes I hear about things that happen days later. How can you measure the smile of a child or dying person with a dollar amount or number on a statistic sheet."

So the visual dichotomy of a clown in a hospital (serious vs. comical, the head vs. the heart) is more than a dichotomy in the personnel department. We simply do not fit. It's like trying to put a round peg in a square hole. We need to work on answers together.

How do you pay for a clown in hourly wages? The answer quite obviously -- you don't pay by the hour, but by the day. Definition is SO important here. A day for most hospital clowns is no more than 5 hours "in face." More than that and you are pushing your fatigue button hard!

So what do you get paid for the day in the hospital? What do you get paid in a day to do clowning in the commercial world? What is the average in your area? In the San Francisco Bay area for multiple hours of clowning, the price is \$50 to \$90 depending on what you do. For five hours of walk-about clowning in the commercial world I would get at least \$250. That seems very reasonable to me. In San Francisco I can go into an office and make \$200 as a legal secretary. It takes a whole lot more energy, talent and skill to be a hospital clown. This is my experience.

As caring clowns are recognized as a vital part of the hospital environment many changes will come. Certification, education, training, registration, and maybe even a Master of Performing Arts in hospital or therapeutic clowning. I have seen it happen in dance (Dance therapists) art (an art therapist). But I sincerely, hope we never lose our innocence, our playfulness and our art.

-Shobi Dobi