

Clowning in a World of Hurt

By Shobi Dobi

In our life as a clown sooner or later we will be asked to clown at a funeral, a death bed, a shelter, a disaster area. A few years ago the family of a fellow clown asked my clown alley to come “in face” to his funeral. We handed out flowers to people as they came in. During the service a soprano began to sing “Amazing Grace.” However, by the second verse her voice was stressed, you could tell she was beginning to cry and choke up. Spontaneously, without even looking at each other, the row of clowns in the back very softly began to sing with her until she recovered and finished. It was very touching, but more than that, it is really what we caring clowns are about -- soft support - it is the gentleness of the caring clown.

I live in California, so I have always have my earthquake kit in my car and a bottle of water in every room in my house too. Most of the disasters I have experienced were before I became a clown. But one day stands out in my memory. I won't go through the “where I was when the 1989 earthquake hit San Francisco story,” but I will tell you what I did. I had what the newscasters were calling *survivors' guilt*. On TV they gave out a list of numbers to call to volunteer. I went to the Red Cross Headquarters in Oakland to sit in the volunteer room waiting until someone needed me. Eventually, I was asked to sit at the front table at reception -- the Triage Person. “But I don't know how to do this!” I pleaded. My only instruction was “Just don't turn anyone away.” It was so amazing. I would just listen to the people who came up one after the other and then “runners” were assigned to take these people to others who could help them with their specific needs.

But this was the amazing part. I had a big box of sandwiches under my table. It was a bottomless box as some volunteer kept filling it up. Everyone who came up was offered first something to eat. There were homeless people who came by and others who would come staggering up -- People who were used to being turned away, if not pushed away. Before they could get a sentence out of their mouth, someone would give them a cup of hot coffee. They would say meekly “I understand you got food here.” “Sure do” I'd reply and hand them a sandwich. “Would you like another?” I would keep handing them sandwiches and they would stuff them into their pockets and backpacks and then a “runner” would lead them off to find them shelter. People came by to give food, children brought their favorite toys to give, people brought dollars and checks, coffee and fresh baked cookies. And no one was turned away. I thought “Why can't it always be like this!” Everyone was willing to help, no one better than anyone else. Amazing how status crumbles naturally in a disaster. The best of us comes out in tragedy. Competitiveness becomes cooperation. Everyone wants to help – unconditionally.

Now vicariously though the speed of communications we live through human tragedy in detail for hours and days. All this instantaneous news coverage has stimulated Shobi's imagination Patch Adams right now is setting up a program that will have its own 747 airplane dedicated bringing in clowns to such areas. Can I clown in a disaster area? I won't know until I try.

We are just beginning to understand the positive effects of humor and clowning on health. As a clown I have gone places I never

would have imagined I could go. I never would have gone into the room of a dying person – until I was asked to do so.

Children are our greatest teachers in these situations. Children when their pain is managed will play until the moment they die. I remember being trapped in a hot airless room in India on my way from Moscow, Russia to Delhi, India. We could not land in Delhi because of fog, so the plane landed in Calcutta, India. We were put into this hot sealed room as we were all “foreigners” who had not gone through customs. It was interesting for me to watch the reactions of the passengers to this stressful situation. The monk played cards with his Russian buddies, the Moslems found themselves a corner to say their prayers, but the children all found something to play with and they played the whole time -- for hours! . And the adults who watched them began to relax and smile.

Once on an ICU floor lobby an adult came up to Shobi “I don't think it is appropriate for you to be here, my family is making some very serious decisions.” Shobi whispered pointing to some children “I'm just going to go over to those children and play quietly with them. O.K.?” The adult looked over to the children and nodded approval. After a while the adults in the family asked me to come over and check out their hearts with my “amazing stethoscope” The “serious” family later came over to Shobi and said “Thank you for helping us make our decision.” The lesson I learned was: If you can find a child to play with, the adults will follow along. Where there are children to play with, the clown is safe. When approaching a frightened child, we allow the humor to come to us, as we allow the child to come to us. It is the same with adults in sensitive situations.

How do we as clowns train to be sensitive? It all goes back to the character and improvisation training. How are we quiet in our clown characters? Every performer knows the value of “nursing the moment.” It is the quiet, soft times on stage that are most poignant. Many performers do exercises practicing the degrees of their emotions and gestures. Can you be a quiet happy? Say a 1 as well as a 10 happy? Be a 1 sad or a 6 sad? The energy is not less and the focus may be more important. Imagine the focus and quiet grace of Emmett Kelly, the great circus clown, slowly sweeping a spotlight under a rug in center ring.

A quiet time is a time to go into your heart and let your inner clown direct. When the fire engine comes down the street, it doesn't means panic and drive, it means get out of the way. In the hospital when a code blue is announced, it does not mean leave the floor, it means get out of the way. Like every other situation in the hospital, stand back observe and open your heart. Let it all come naturally.

Patience to wait for inner guidance, patience to wait for the “right” moment, the “correct” response. The patience to listen to your inner resources that direct your inner director, your “dual perspective” as actors call it. Take the time to rest in the love in you heart. It takes trust. It is here that a connection is made with something higher than the tragedy -- our inner director also has a director call it what you may — God, Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, Universal Consciousness. Being aware of this connection, takes some vigilance, it is like a muscle that becomes strong with use.

Exquisite Caution



This is caution without fear, caution imbedded in deep silence. It is the exquisite caution of the nun, the confident caution of the priest, monk, and rabbi and the delightful caution of a timid clown. You can all imagine Charlie Chaplin making his way through an earth quake area. Just innocently finding things to pick up and investigate. He finds a small child playing with a torn doll and sits down next to her and begins to play in the child's fantasy world -- just being his vulnerable self. No big clown gesture, no hoopla. We may not laugh out loud, but our hearts would recognize the humanity and maybe brings us back to a spark of hope -- the small opening that reminds us of the joy we all have inside of us. This is hoping humor.

I remember asking Arina Iscaason, my clown teacher, what if I begin to cry when a child cries. She responded "Then you will cry together" It is the together part that the caring clown brings. The "we are not alone in this tragedy."

It is this quietude that surrounds you that will invite trust -- being present, observing without judgement, continually opening to the moment, moment to moment as only the innocence of the clown can do.

And it is the exquisite caution of Charlie Caplin picking up an ordinary object from a pile of

debris from a disaster and examining it with the wonder of an innocent child. It is this sense of freshness and wonder that lurks in every moment seeking to connect us heart to heart.

Use this stillness to rest in the moment. Rest the fear of your reactive mind. Taking a deep breath to clear the mind, soften your belly and ask for the grace to open to higher wisdom. It is my experience that you will get a great deal of help.

When preceding in a risky situation with caution, trusting that Inner Wisdom, you may not see all the levels of your influence. Pride in your results can engage your ego, and flood your mind with reactive fear. Knowing you are not the doer liberates you from results. "Oh, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," can be greeted with a knowing smile -- knowing you are only the worldly vehicle of something higher. But keeping this to yourself is the practice of non-doership. This does not mean you are not responsible for your

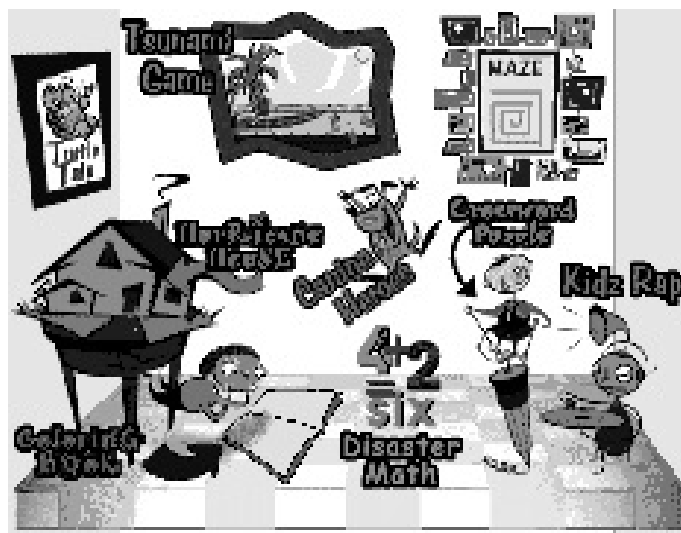
actions, it means you don't take all the credit. The power that flows though you will, in itself, engender such inner awe that another's gratitude is not necessary. This is what renews the clown in his/her moment to moment travel. It is this quietude, trust and openness that will allow us to enter the traumatic space of disaster.

The child who has lost her family her home and her legs, lies in the hospital in shock. She will not even see the clown enter the room -- the first time. But the second time there will be a slight hint of recognition, and the third time, a small wave of the hand and the fourth time maybe even a little smile. Time is what it is all about. Everyone needs a different amount of time to adjust.

Whether you are a clown on stilts next to a tank in Bosnia, or the gentle clown ready to lend a soft shoulder during a flood. Just look around the disaster. Who is there to hug? Who is there to lend that physical shoulder? The doctor "Oh, he's doing good work. Can't bother him" It's the same with the rescue worker, the fireman, the policeman. But there you stand in your foolishness with commiserating sadness on your face. Kicking at the rubble like the small children around you. You turn and offer open arms. I would fall into them - how about you?

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Julia and Robbie,
The Adventures of the Disaster Twins
A Softbound Book



Robbie and Julia are twins and they live in Eenietown. They have a dog named Skipper. They are regular kids except for one thing. Nearly everyone in Eenietown calls them the Disaster Twins. Why? Because whenever Robbie and Julia go out, natural disasters seem to follow. Fortunately, the twins and their family are prepared! By reading their stories, children can learn what to do during natural disasters and how to be ready.

The publication is on the website, and available **free**.
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