

# The Magic of Magic – Shobi Dobi

Magic has always ridden the tail of religion: or maybe it's the other way around. The love of being mystified and of mystifying others dates from the earliest times of human history. The first cited evidence of the use of "magic" was in 4000 BC in the court of King Cheops, the builder of the Great Pyramid, by a wonder-worker named Dedi.

Magic has traveled the road of mysticism, occult, shamans, witchcraft, and wizards; but today it sits in the realm of science-- for most people know that a conjurer cannot produce a rabbit out of an empty hat, nor swallow sharp safety razor blades. Everyone knows that it is a magical trick and the pleasure is in trying to figure out how it is done.

## ***Ambassador Clowning***

However, there are still countries where magic is very much attached to mystical traditions of religion. Shobi learned this on a clown ambassador trip to Thansa Valley, India in 1995. These people did not have exposure to "Western Magic, so it was frightening and at best confusing.

It was certainly a good test of Shobi's clown instincts (with a great deal of help from the "Universe"). Almost immediately she realized she had to get silly with the magic. Out came a changeable bag - the kind that you can buy at any convention that turns inside out 4 or 5 times. Inside is a squeaky fur mouse. Shobi keeps trying to find the source of the squeak by turning the bag inside out, each time to a new colorful pattern. "Silly clown can't find out where the squeak is coming from." Of course, the intriguing magic is happening at the same time, but Shobi is ignoring it. The bag is miraculously turning inside out over and over to different colors and fabric (actually six times). The silly clown can't figure it out -- but neither can anyone else! I could see the Indian woman looking and studying it with "How does she do that?" My inner clown director thought "Wow, I'm teaching them how to watch magic."

In the routine when Shobi found the mouse, everyone squealed with delight, not fear. You can see this in their eyes. We always read the eyes as a clown (yes?) By this time they have realized that it is not real and they are playing with me. Shobi then puts the mouse back inside and continues to get confused again turning the bag inside out until she gives up (when audience interest is slowing down) and puts it away only to find something else. Anything else I did after that was "safe" and silly. There was still plenty of curiosity, but not fear. Trust was established through play.

## ***Silly Magic***

That was early in my caring clown life and it was a big lesson for Shobhana to learn: Problems solved through play, are problems solved by the heart! By staying with my character and allowing my heart to lead, I discovered how to deal with the situation. Being in my silly character and setting up a trick is as important as the trick itself, if not more important.

Another lesson I learned while ambassador clowning: non verbal can be very funny. Just trying to explain something without words. Not getting across can be funny, if the clown is the butt of the joke. The clown is ALWAYS the stupid one. This is the most important thing about clown magic.

In non English speaking countries, Shobi relies on mime and gibberish with various country accents. (She has even learned the difference between Mandarin and Cantonese gibberish for example). It's a lot of fun to very seriously explain something that sounds like you're speaking the language, but of course you're not saying the words right. I had fun with the Russian orphans. I'd be sitting with them at a table and they'd all be talking, so I'd start talking too. They would politely start to listen, trying to understand what I was saying, (they though I was really trying to speak Russian) so I had to break out in Chinese gibberish so they would *get it* and start to play too. Silly, yes, but silly is what we do. Again performing in character is very important as this newsletter has said so many times. You can get away with just about anything if you have a strong clown character, react out of that character and keep the mutual play alive.

## ***Magic in the Hospital***

Magic has a given. It can't be done alone – it is done in relationship to others. It engages people. They leave their own field of familiar thinking whether that is about fear, pain or worry, and get intrigued with magic. That is the why magic is so successful in the hospital. It gets people to focus away from themselves for a while. It works with children and it works with adults and it even works with teenagers!

Most clowns I know, including me, have a cupboard full of unused magic tricks. Most magic stores and dealers will show you *sleight of hand* tricks that are great, but need a lot of practice, and experience. Tricks that have a "load gimmick," like multi scarves in a change bag or large load mirror boxes are not practical. It is not easy to "load" in a hospital corridor surrounded by busy staff.

I find after experience that simple gimmick tricks work the best - the no-fail kind - change scarves, small drawer boxes, mouth coils, and of course sponge balls. The hospital audience is the easiest to please, except maybe 15 year old boys. Brand new to hospital clowning, Shobi walked into an Oakland Hospital room occupied by three 15 year-old boys "Yo clown, come here" They were polite, but all I had was a teddy bear puppet -- it was a *clown fall*. After years of experience, I don't need the magic to be magical, but a little magic will help "break" the ice, and foster trust and confidence. As for the *know-it-all* young boys, I suggest that you get a couple of really good "knock your socks off" magic tricks. You might want to consult a professional magician - *Shobi* did.)

## ***Empowering Magic***

Empowering people in the hospital is to give them self-respect and power over a circumstance (of which they have little in the hospital). This also alleviates feelings of hopelessness. To have power over anything gives feelings of hope.

Dana Abendschein of the Clown Doc of St. Louis Children's Hospital shares how he used magic to empower kids.

"I have two different ways to entertain and empower kids with illusions:

"One approach is to have the child perform the trick while I watch. One of the first tricks that I learned, and probably everyone knows, is *Professors Nightmare*. When I have the three ropes ready to pull to make them all the same length, I let the child pull one side while I pull on the other to show them the same. The kids get a real kick out of having their hands on the trick as it occurs and the ropes are easy to wash for re-use.

"The second approach is to have the kids *catch* me in a mistake. Another classic is the pull vanisher to make a scarf disappear. Instead of hooking the elastic up my sleeve though, I have it pinned on my back so that when the scarf 'vanishes', the kids quickly see it hanging and bobbing on my back when I turn around. The kids say where the scarf is, but of course I couldn't see it when I turned around!

With a little thought many simple "tricks" can be adjusted to empower patients in the hospital - not just children. For example, every clown must have one of those drawer boxes. You put in a penny and close it then open it and it's gone. Simple "gimmick" Now be the brunt of the joke. The patient puts in the penny, the clown opens it and it's empty. The patient pulls opens the drawer (you do the gimmick) and there's the penny. The doctor/nurse/parent/sibling opens it and it is empty. The patient opens it and again there's the penny. I have one large enough for stickers which the patient can then give away. Children want to do it over and over again. I don't need to tell them the gimmick - they enjoy the play and the power winning over the clown and everyone else.

Another simple way to let the child be involved is with *touchable bubbles*. Shobi blows regular bubbles and catches one (with a clear plastic cylinder). Then she blow some "touchable" bubbles (make sure you blow them up as they take 10 seconds to "fix") then the kid can catch them. A warning: Touchable Bubbles leave a little residue. I tell children they are "boogers" and you know how kids love anything to do with body parts and excretions. But I have found that adult patients don't like the "residue" getting on their beds. Also be careful not blow or let the bubbles get into the eyes. It can be very painful. And the residue has to be removed.

*Mouth Coils* are wonderful and colorful in the hospitals. I love pulling them out of my mouth and pleading with doctors to help me. D'Lite thumb tips which light up take a little practice, but are worth the effort. Card tricks even the ones bought at Toys R Us can be fun. And don't be surprised if you get shown a trick or two. (Decks of cards can be donated from casinos)

### ***Magical Therapy***

The use of magic in therapeutic setting is coming into many fields besides clowning. The following is from a book about using magic in classroom settings and therapeutic groups by a school counselor.

#### **Guidelines for Using Magic with Children**

- Before doing a trick, always obtain the child's consent. This will prevent him/her from feeling manipulated or "tricked." In my experience, the majority of children/teens will happily agree to see a magic effect.
- Use magic that the child can touch, feel and play with.
- Use magic that facilitates interaction between you and the child (as opposed to the kind of magic that is performed on a stage).
- Be cautious about using magic with children who have poor reality testing or psychosis.
- How do I respond when a child asks me "How did you do that trick?" Generally speaking, sharing secrets to magic is not appropriate. A significant part of the fun depends on safeguarding the mystery. It is often a good idea to establish your "policy" about secret sharing in advance. "Now I'm going to show you that trick I promised. Please keep in mind that

when I show you magic, I can't give away all of the secrets because that would spoil the fun."

- When working with children who are highly suspicious or guarded, you may want to show them the secret to the trick after you perform it. This can build trust and a sense of sharing

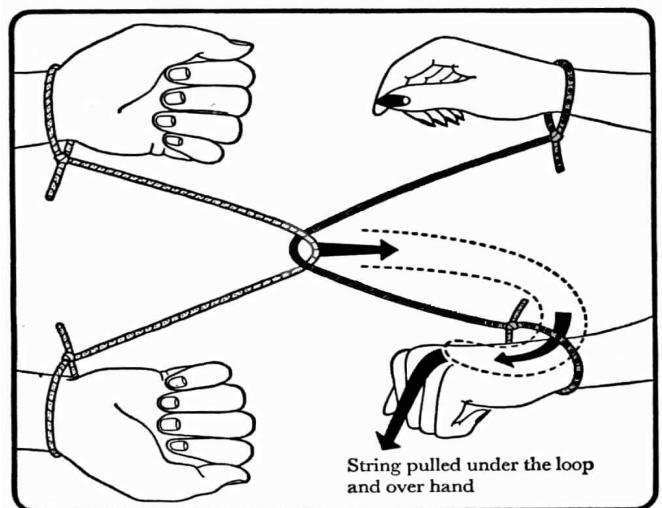
Brian Gilroy, *Counseling Kids: It's Magic, Manual of Therapeutic Uses of magic with Children and Teens* - [magicforcounseling.com](http://magicforcounseling.com)

### ***Giving Away the Trick***

Anyone who has ever had a class in magic knows that we are not supposed to give away the "gimmick" that makes the trick. I like what Brian Gilroy says about "I'll show you a trick, but I can't show you how to do it or it will take the fun out of it." But children over 7 really want to do magic. They want to be able to show off to their friends and parents that come to visit. This is empowering. It also engages them and gets their minds off their problems.

Shobi remembers Brian who had a bad reaction to Chemo. She walked into his room and her heart fell -- his whole mouth was one big blood blister. I had intended to show him my new magic trick the *Square into a Ball* by *Magic by Gosh*. I felt so bad for him, I not only showed him how to do it, I gave him the whole trick. I was told later that he spent the next two days learning it so he could show the staff and his friends.

I think any professional magician would do what Shobi did. So there is plenty of room for discretion. There are universal tricks that everyone knows that can be given to children and adults that no magician own or would deny a patient (young or old ) Here's one from Houdini himself.



Houdini's Book of Magic: The Master of Magic Reveals His Secrets. Compiled by Ben Hamilton. I found this little old book in a London bookstore. It contains some of Houdini's magic tricks and also his patter.

Houdini's Patter "The Ancient Chinese used to tie their prisoners together like this – until an ancestor of mine came along and showed them that you can't tie down a Houdini!" "Can you untie yourselves without cutting the rope?"

In fact you can! Take the centre of the string holding your wrists, pass it through the loop of string on the other's left wrist and bring it down over the left hand, you will find yourselves separated!

You have to try it to believe it!

