

The Importance of Winging it

“Winging It” or “Flying by the Seat of Our Pants” or more recently “Swimming in the Zone” is something every caring clown has experienced. Whether we are a seasoned performer or a beginning clown, we will be students of spontaneity for the rest of our lives. Why is it so important?

For the hospital clown it is our attention to intention that makes the difference. For us there is a difference between *Winging it* and *Swimming in the Zone*. We caring clowns play in an ever flowing river of possibilities which depend on developing our “Wide-angle Observer” and keeping “the back door open” to let in the possibilities of the Universe.



. and Swimming in the Zone

We clowns slip into the hospital through the door of silliness and cause ripples of giggles that change moods and attitudes. We stir up the dust of complacency, and calm the hurricanes of stress. We walk into darkened rooms and fill them with lightness; into chaotic ER's blowing a breeze of calm bubbles; and, across the gray carpets of the endless waiting rooms giving patients feather caresses. There is a trail of bubbles and smiles behind us and things begins to look a little different.

How can such magic happen? Hospital clowns find themselves in an interesting place. We work in a very structured environment and yet our most important skill is spontaneity. We play with the elements of that world in constant change. Every moment in the hospital is full of the unexpected, the newly evolving play of life. A spontaneous life form in a structured environment. Oh my! It's the old round peg in a square hole syndrome. This makes administrators and risk management personnel very nervous, but when they see us in action, they say we are awesome.

Do we plan all our encounters? Do we have a routine for every lobby psyched out in our minds? How can we when we never know which one of the thousand variables lies around the corner.

So we “wing it.” We “fly around by the seat of our pants.” How dare we? In a hospital, in a place where people hurt

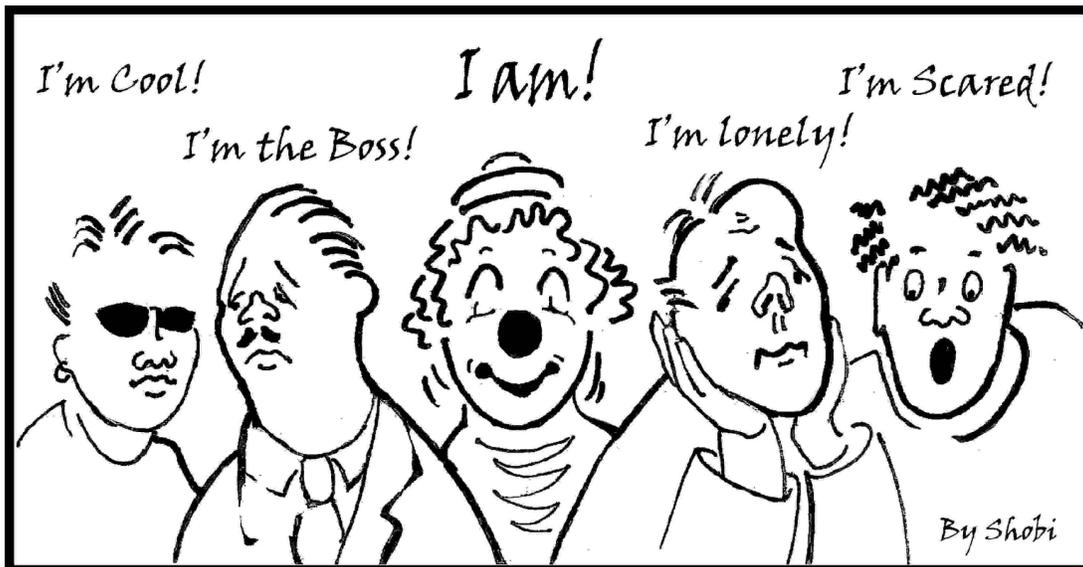
with fear! How dare we?

We dare with the innocence of our inner clown –with the hope that comes through spontaneous clowning. It is with the spark of spontaneity that life becomes “alive.” We sprinkle this magical hope on everyone we see. Our internal clown speaks to the clown that lives in all of us. That vulnerable part of human nature that allows us to fall down and get up again and laugh at ourselves. With this gift we burst on the scene with our “madness” and pull everyone around into the moment of play.

Swimming in the Zone

What is it that gives us this special allowance? What we are actually doing is “Swimming in a Zone.” This is what the athletes and musicians call it. It is a realm of motion in performance where it all comes together and everything works. It comes with spontaneity, trust, skill, responsibility, and a willingness to risk. But for hospital clowns we work in a *Zone* where we let the universe float into the back door while our knowledge watches the front. And we do all this within a “blink of the eye” without pondering, without pretense.

This trust in our spontaneity is the caring clown's most important skill, whether you are clowning in a hospital, nursing home, disaster area, shelter or remote village in Outer Mongolia!



To be spontaneous we need to be fearless, courageous, resolute, beyond doubt. Fearless? Ah here is the rub. Fear can fuel anger – add passion to the anger formula and you have hate. We see that every time we turn on the news. In a world so full of fear and terror, it is a wonder we can move a single foot much less a couple of big clown feet! We certainly do have courage to persevere.

Fear can also motivate us. Stage fright is a good example. Sometimes fear can push you to places you'd never imagined you could go. There is fear in every new adventure - fear in every place and new action. We work with our fear. It takes courage to walk into a child's room who is very ill, and courage to walk down to Ground Zero the week of 9/11 right into the terror of the disaster in full clown face. We clowns do it because we have learned to trust our own experience and our "intuition."

Awe is the fluid of the moment that stills the mind

You've heard it said that faith can make fear move over. This faith is trust. Trust transmutes the mundane into spirituality, into awe. Awe is the exact opposite of fear. When we look at something beautiful and our active mind stops – that is awe. When we are struck speechless by the wonders of the world - that is awe. When we greet an old friend that we have not seen in years - that is awe. Awe lives only in the moment. Awe and trust provide a sanctuary for the heart which can be invaded and spoiled only by worry, self absorption. Awe is the fluid of the moment that stills the mind.

How do we cultivate this trust? Self trust comes from experience. There are things we know from experience. And we begin to trust our experience. Trust is a power, a muscle that can be built over time from repeated use. With experience it is not a matter of belief, it is a matter of knowing. It is no longer, "I believe I can do it." It is, "I know I can do it." Just the concept of knowing is very strengthening. Often we don't value our own experience and delegate it to belief when it is truly our experience. Self trust is self respect.

Remember when we were kids -- the first time you ran off the diving board into the pool with your eyes closed? You knew the pool was there filled with water, but it was scary anyway. But the more you did it, the more you abandoned fear and just went for it. That is the experience of having "been there and done that."

In the hospital we have rules and procedures. We know our hygiene protocol. They are all part of the mix that we work from when we "Swim in the Zone" Practice and skill helps us do things automatically and with ease – it takes practice to become mindless. In order to create spontaneously we must have at our fingertips all the materials necessary to improvise, and then with this we can direct our attention toward creating, not managing or coping with the changes that are forever taking place in and around us.

What is it that allows us to be spontaneous with all this equipage? What keeps the clown alert, fresh and spontaneous? The diving board and the pool keep changing shape, color and location.

I remember when I was a dancer. Our choreographer wanted to keep us "fresh" as she called it. So every performance she would add something new to our routine. Once we came on stage and it was covered with balloons. It sure made us alert!

That is sort of what happens to us in the hospital. We know the basic concepts, but the situation is always changing – every day, every minute is a different drama and set. When you are "on" stage and "in" face you are forced to deal with a situation spontaneously, which open up possibilities. But we caring clowns have a stage made of real life human drama. We proceed with trust in our experience.

Swimming in the River of Life

Oh, how we humans, while floating down the river of life, love to find a boulder to sit on and say, "This is it. I don't have to do any more." Our activity becomes judging the bits and pieces floating by, and life just keeps floating by. We stop seeing the river and just focus on our boulder – we fall out of selfless

service and become part of our own agendas and our own desires for an outcome or reward.

We need to trust ourselves to let go of the shore and swim the river. It is trust that allows us to “go with the flow.” There are many boulders in the river to catch us off guard and block our spontaneity. We grab on and are no longer swimming. We “think” we are “right” and have got it – no need to question further. Blind faith, intolerance, arrogance and selfishness are all boulders that block our passage.

For me trust, practice and skill work like this. When I plant a seed, I trust it will sprout leaves. I am responsible for watering it, fertilizing it, taking off the dead leaves and caring for it. I cannot pull it up, make it grow, flower and bear fruit. That comes from Nature, the Universe, God - a higher power. We hospital clowns are responsible for knowledge of hospital issues, protocol, hygiene and confidentiality. We are knowledgeable and maybe even skilled at song, juggling, magic or puppetry. We are responsible for keeping our skills tuned, but it is left up to the spontaneous play when it will be performed or presented.

And will it bear fruit? We cannot even be attached to the outcome as so often it happens after we have left. Part of giving up the shore is giving up expectations and rewards. The beauty of the caring clown is our other directed focus. We become non doers, the partner to selfless service. **We swim in the Zone for the pure joy of being there.**

In the Moment of Equal Vision

Ever notice how when you are clowning in the hospital and deeply into your clown character and being spontaneous that you treat everyone the same. The doctors, scrub nurses, orderlies, housekeeping, security guards all are equal in the clown’s eyes. We are not judging. We observe with a neutral mind.

The “space” of the *Zone* becomes familiar and teaches us to listen to the Universe. This is part of the moment to moment spontaneous training. We develop the discipline of listening to others, to paying attention to words, people and events that come to us without judgement. We are not thinking “What is wrong with that person?” We are observing our own reactions without judgment. Very often our own mistakes (I call them Miss-takes) can send us a message. I have often said in my workshop “I have to listen to what I say, because often I’ve never heard it before.” People laugh, but it is true.

There is a part of us that observes everything we do. I used to call this the Inner Director, an actor’s term. Searching the Internet one night late I came across *Wide Angle Meditation*. “Ahh,” I thought, “that really explains it.” It’s a *Wide Angle Observation*. The *Wide Angle Observer* hovers behind our action like a warm embracing cloud. It becomes the partner to the spontaneity of the hospital clown. It allows us to perform safely and yet it allows us to go for it and take risks.

Swimming in the *Zone* is spontaneous performance arising out of the collection of knowledge with the back door open and the *Wide Angle Observer* guiding the way. Whew!

This *Wide Angle Observer* exists in equal vision –seeing everyone as extensions of its own self. Everyone has a common denominator - the spirit, the soul, the Self. Equal vision is seeing similar things in dissimilar situations.

We often say heart to heart clowning. We go to the heart of everyone. But our peripheral vision is mindful and observant. If we are full of our own purpose, our own goals, our own needs, we move away from this observer. So when we are being spontaneous, there is a part of us that is watching everything – not judging but observing. Somewhere the appropriateness just happens.

When we learn to pay attention to the moment, we get relief from the badgering of our reactive minds -- our “knee jerk” reactions. The reactive mind is the selfish mind – the mind which focuses on our own survival and needs. Spontaneity teaches us to go beyond judgement, beyond comparison, beyond reactive thinking. We are involved in a moment in time free from the spoilage of the mind – a place of innocence. That is the place of innocence where clown reflects the world.

The *Wide Angle Observer* is not to be confused with one’s critical judgmental mind. I have a little guy sitting on my shoulder that is always whispering in my ear “You can’t do that, you don’t know how. You’ll get into trouble.” I pat it on the head and chuckle. I have learned from experience not to get angry at these little mind critters or they will stay around forever.

Our *Wide Angle Observer* is there to see what is going on. You walk into a room. Pause and pose. And in that second the *Wide Angle Observer* is taking everything in – not judging, not instructing, just observing. It’s like adding the knowledge of the moment to your mix of information. I always say when entering a room or situation, “Pause and Pose, take a deep breath, think soft belly (it will quiet your mind) and then proceed with caution.”

Seeing everyone and everything with equal vision lifts us into oneness. There is love in this oneness and stillness. We move into a connection with the Universe. We open ourselves to that universal guidance. We know when this happens. It is our experience. It is the *Wide Angle Observer* who opens the back door and also watches the front door . . . and we are *swimming in the Zone*.

We can then proceed with spontaneous action. Spontaneity allows the goodness of the Universe to shine through us. Because we caring clowns jump off the diving board of compassion, selfless service and equal nonjudgmental vision, this door to the Universe is open. It is like being kissed from the inside and also given a gentle shove at the same time. Through experience we not only learn to trust that “shove,” but we are renewed and refreshed by taking a long *Swim in the Zone*

~ Shobi