

Beyond Goofy

by Shobhana "Shobi Dobi" Schwebke

We are all goofy -- we are clowns. But what happens in the hospital after "goofy" or because of "goofy?" What doors and windows, minds, eyes and hearts open because of "goofy?"

What a merry predicament it is, a clown in the hospital. It's a set up that gives staff, patients and relatives permission to play and to have fun. Being fun is the sharing of humor; being funny is presenting humor. We do both, in a flick of the eye or a drop of the hat. We stumble and fall, but we always get up. We play in and with our vulnerability, but we always seem to recover and carry on because our world is new in every moment and every moment has the opportunity for hope.

There is a "calling" to be a clown - an inner calling not unlike the priest or nun, actor or musician. It is a strong inner connection to a spirit of joy and it is because of this inner connection that we bring theater, magic and fantasy into the hospital room. A clown in performance is in an imaginary world of exaggeration. We maneuver in this world spontaneously. To do this we have to remain true to our instincts and our own internal spirit. How else could a hospital clown function, except spontaneously. We never know what territory we will cross - ICU, lobbies, hospice, offices, clinics, as the entire hospital is our domain. Most of us are not doctors or nurses, or therapist, so we don't administer anything except humor. Humor is our very base of operation. It is the given before we connect, it comes with the "nose." We are in a sense the symbol of humor. And when the gentle smile on the hospital clowns' face radiates from their inner joy, it is as contagious with its warmth as laughter.

The imaginary place of the hospital clown is not insulation from others' suffering; but there is a kind of protection in this connection - it is more like a heart-to-heart open exchange. I speak out of my inner clown and my inner clown seems to be connected to a higher spirit. When I am in "Open Heart Clowning" Shobi does things that Shobhana has not thought about. I've learned to trust that connection. It's as if we gather all we sense, stir it in a big bowl of our own joy, and dish it out with smiles. My responsibility is to keep in character and keep that connection. When the heart is open, love goes both ways. It is give and take. I give to the patient, but I also receive it back. So although I am empathetically involved in suffering, we are in a common bond of comfort. When this heart-to-heart connection happens, it is so magical the resulting compassion dissolves the fear in that present moment, then love drives the courage we need to do this work.

Because we are not asking for anything or administering anything in the hospital, often we step into that warm and fuzzy place of a trusted friend. How often after doing a goofy magic trick with a patient, an adult will just open up to me and a real bond is made. There is something intimate in this very arrangement. After all here we are both in a sense naked. The clown is as vulnerable as the patient - what a sweet meeting

ground. I often see these patients afterwards in outpatient clinics. My heart jumps with recognition and our smiles connect like old friends - like we've lived through something together, and we have! In the same way children share stories and secrets with my puppets and we all become family. A child will often let a clown in close where only their beloved teddy bear can go. Where else in the hospital can they find a friendly living teddy bear who dispenses only unconditional love and silliness.

In our light way we touch down where we can and open gates for others -- the therapist, the x-ray technician, the doctor, the chaplain, the neurologist, counselor, nurse or parent. The clown sees everyone as equal, doctors, interns, orderlies, nurses, cooks, patients, and managers. The ripples from a drop of humor spread wide as well as deep.

Once a tearful mother asked me to visit her daughter. She was in isolation and had recently had neuro surgery I peeked into the room and asked the nurse if I could come in. She casually waived me in. The mother was stroking her child's hair "My daughter is just staring ahead and look I only cut part of her hair off." The mother showed me the side of her daughter hair that was long and flowing. The other side was shaved where surgery had been done. The daughter was hooked up to some instrument panel a technician in the room was working. I looked over at the tech again to see if it was all right for me to advance in front of the bed. The technician nodded approval. The mother was sobbing "She doesn't even recognize me." . Then for some reason I just knew this child was being stubborn. It was a gut feeling. So Shobi bounce in front of her and blew some bubbles, but lost her hat in the process. The child started to smile. She was not only watching me, she began to giggling. The technician got very excited and started telling me where to stand and when to move. "Do something funny now over here." "Now be funny over there," "Now don't move." After being the technician's puppet for a while, she commanded, "You can leave now." So I waved goodbye. And the child gave a little wave of a finger. There was a lot of excitement around the room, but Shobi was already being lead away by a small little bald-headed boy pushing an IV.

Most of the time we don't know what rippling affect our little silliness has in calming situations and opening doors for others to do their work. We are not attached to results. The play of the moment is what is important. Days later the child told me she had been angry at her mother for cutting her hair. How did I know that?

The more I travel and visit hospital clowns and hospital clown programs, the more I am convinced a new clown archetype is developing. I don't think the health care community is fully aware of the potential of the clown in the hospital. I think the caring clown's presence provides a gate - a facilitated opening which, in time, the health care community will value as a key to setting an essential environment for healing of mind, body and spirit.