



CLOWNING AROUND with cancer

BY PATTY WOOTEN

I AM A CLOWN. Seriously. I went to clown school in 1974 after a series of traumatic life events left me fearful and depressed. Clown training develops your ability to be silly, playful, and foolish. I've also been a registered nurse for 40 years. Twenty-five years ago I blended my nursing with my clowning and developed a career as a therapeutic humorist and professional speaker. Little did I know how these skills would help me cope with the diagnosis and treatment of stage III follicular lymphoma.

My diagnosis in September 2009 challenged me. I could “talk the talk,” but could I “walk the walk”? I must admit, some days it wasn't easy to see the funny side of life. But then something funny would happen, reminding me of the value of recognizing the humor in my journey. During my bone marrow biopsy, for example, my nurse encouraged me through the painful moments by repeatedly saying, “You're a real trooper.” Later, as I was leaving, she approached me, planning to say, “You've been a real champ.”

But her memory of using the word *trooper* lingered, and she came out with, “Patty, you've been a real tramp.” Oh my, did we have a good laugh!

A clown looks for opportunities to be outrageous. When my hair began to fall out, I knew I couldn't change that, but what I could change was how I approached my inevitable baldness. I scheduled a chemo-cut party with my stylist and invited my friends. My stylist cut my hair into a mohawk, spiked it, and dyed it rainbow colors. I figured if I was going to lose my hair anyway, I may as well have some fun with it as it left the scene. Following on that theme, I wore clown wigs and funny hats to all my appointments. My playfulness encouraged others to be lighthearted, too. The smiles and the giggles we shared lifted my spirits, allowing me to feel like a kid—energetic and hopeful.

And kids themselves are a great source of humor. When my son told my six-year-old grandson, Max, that Grandma had a “serious illness,” this bright-eyed first grader cried out, “She doesn't have swine flu, does

she?” Innocent comments like these are filled with infectious clown energy as are slips of the tongue like those made by my nurse. That same energy fuels our willingness to take risks (my mohawk) and be outrageous (my mohawk, again).

So, as Sondheim famously said, send in the clowns and don't bother they're here. We can't always change our external reality, but we can change our internal response to the situation. Pay attention to the funny things that do happen, and enjoy the hilarity—it can neutralize the stress. As scientific evidence continues to link positive emotions with vibrant health, let's all remember to honor our “inner clown” and continue to seek joy in the face of adversity. **CFThrive**



Patty Wooten is a nurse-humorist and an award-winning speaker. She has authored three books, has performed in 11 countries on five continents, and has worked with Norman

Cousins and Patch Adams. She is a founding member of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor and received its Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002. For information go to her website: PattyWooten.com.

TIPS TO GROW YOUR INNER CLOWN

- ❁ Give yourself permission to take an intermission.
- ❁ Find time to play, to laugh, and to enjoy the comical moments in life.
- ❁ Be outrageous; it's the only place that isn't crowded.