CLOWNS, CONNECTIONS, AND CASTANETS:

WORDS FROM THE HEALING DOC
“This is not just any industry. It is a ministry,” Carl Hammerschlag told a room of home care and hospice nurses at the historic Mayflower Hotel. The Yale-trained psychiatrist, author, and Caring Award winner had come to speak on the last day of the NAHC March on Washington & Law Symposium this spring. Twenty years working with Native Americans has made him an expert on how to survive in rapidly changing cultures, so he had much to offer an industry that faced the prospect of unsettling change. But the “healing doc,” a tall stork-like man with an infectious smile, hadn’t come to discuss health care’s fiscal crisis or payment cuts to Medicare providers. “I am not going to talk about the dark clouds that face us,” he said. Instead, he had come to tell tales to tickle your funny bone and also bring you to tears. He had come to recall his mother’s death and recount his exploits with Dr. Patch Adams, the famous healing clown. Most of all, he had come to remind the room why healing is “a sacred obligation.”

Most people need to be reminded because we don’t talk much about the spirit of healing. “As a matter of fact, we don’t talk about healing much at all,” Hammerschlag pointed out. But he had explored healing in three acclaimed books, Dancing Healers, Healing Ceremonies, and The Theft of the Spirit. He had practiced it in decades spent striving to bridge the worlds of science, spirit, and culture. All his experience and study had shown him that the healer’s duty is to make people whole. “We are here to provide some contact and connection with people at their time of greatest vulnerability,” Hammerschlag said. “We provide hope in days of darkness. We provide some light in the proverbial dark tunnels of adversity. We are healers, and healing is different than curing. Most people who place themselves in home care and hospice will not be cured” since they suffer from chronic conditions. “But they can be healed.”

How do you help people do this? You do it by showing people how to “become the principal agents of their own lives,” Hammerschlag said. This was the mission of Wilma Rudolph, once considered the fastest woman in the world, he explained. After winning three gold medals in the 1960s Olympics, she traveled around urging children to play sports and stay in school. At 53, she was diagnosed with brain cancer, but she kept on talking to kids and telling them the lessons she had learned in life and track, Hammerschlag said. “The most important lesson she had learned was not to drop out of a race, so she told those kids, ‘You are in the race of your life. If you finish school, you make a difference in your life forever.’ And when the kids came up to her afterward, she glowed with the wonder that she could not only touch those children but be touched by them.”

When she died at 54, “she was healed even if she was not cured” Hammerschlag said. “Healing has something to do with an imprint on the walls that reminds you that everything comes and goes. It’s never what we take with us. It’s always what we leave behind,” he told the room, “and it’s critically important that we touch people in ways that remind us of our noblest selves.” For healers to find the heart and soul of what matters, they have to approach each day with joy. “We have got to lighten up,” Hammerschlag exclaimed, despite concerns about how we’re going to survive. “The greatest act of revolution in contemporary life — and in health care — is to find a way to come to every day with joy,” he urged as he showed a slide of a man with a wry smile, white hair, and a very robust mustache.
“This is Patch Adams,” Hammerschlag said, “undoubtedly the world’s most recognizable humanitarian clown.” Movie goers in the U.S. know him from the Robin Williams’ film about the doc who used humor to heal. People worldwide know him for founding the Gesundheit Institute in 1971. Since then he’s led volunteers to various far-flung countries where they dress up as clowns and bring humor to orphans, patients, and the poor. Hammerschlag is part of this traveling troop of pranksters and he’s been Patch’s friend and fan for decades. “I went to see him about 20 years ago,” Hammerschlag recalled, “and he had just gotten a costume of a toilet. I looked at this and said, ‘I’ve got to put this on! This is what I do! This is who I am! I’m a psychiatrist. People come to dump on me. This is my professional preoccupation!’” he exclaimed. And soon the crowd whooped with laughter as Hammerschlag flashed slides of himself dressed in a white Lycra costume with lock nuts around his waist and faucets on his chest.

With the toilet tank pulled over his head and nothing but his eyes to be seen, Hammerschlag thought they might go to Capitol Hill and talk about problems in health care. “But Patch thought this was a bit too revolutionary,” he recalled, “and suggested we go to Virginia’s largest mall to buy a pair of white bucks to go with this costume. We agreed that I would not speak. The only thing I would do was make toilet noises. For a psychiatrist to be given license to make these kind of noises was an extraordinary act of liberation. My mother, of course, was horrified.” So were the salesmen in the first store they entered. “The next store we went to prides itself on customer service,” Hammerschlag said. “Patch said to the shoe salesman, ‘I’d like to buy a pair of white bucks for my toilet,’ and the salesman said, ‘Would you have your toilet sit down sir.’ This is customer service, and we walked out with a pair of white bucks.”

The bucks completed his ensemble, but Hammerschlag looked even more striking in the next slide, showing the sprawling slums of Iquitos, Peru. In it he posed regally, decked out in a pink tutu, pink tights, and red rubber nose. “This is my clown persona in the jungles of Peru. I go down to Iquitos with Patch where we work with the poorest of the poor,” Hammerschlag said. He admitted he can’t communicate with them through words because he doesn’t speak Spanish well, but he had found another way of reaching out. “All of us who are in health care know that how we touch people makes a difference in their lives, whether they can hear us or not,” he explained.

“You can’t look at a dude who is 6’6” dressed in a pink tutu and tights looking like a flamingo and not laugh. So you have to be willing to somehow equalize the relationship between you and the people who place themselves in your hands.”

And you have to willing to think with your heart, not your head, Hammerschlag said, showing a slide of him with a busload of kids. “That’s our task as healers,” he said, “to open ourselves to the people we care for and let them see a piece of ourselves that we don’t ordinarily show because we’re afraid to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is the kind of thing that makes us feel unsure, weak, and afraid somebody could do something terrible to us. Vulnerability is seen as the equivalent of somehow being taken advantage of, getting hurt. Ridiculous! Vulnerability is simply an opportunity to learn something new. It’s an opportunity for new growth, and you need to allow yourself to be vulnerable if you want to see the familiar in a new way. Otherwise you’re going to keep doing what you’ve always done. You have to take some risk to be vulnerable. You have to be willing to make some change. This is how we open our hearts” — as Hammerschlag did when he went to an AIDS shelter in Peru.

The next slide showed him cradling a gaunt woman in his arms. “This woman will be dead two weeks after my visit,” he said. “The incidence of disease in Belen, which is the slum of Iquitos, is startling. The Amazon is being decimated and deforested. All of its native people are coming upriver, but they live in the floodplain and are flooded out every year. Disease is rampant: gastrointestinal disease, neonatal disease, infant mortality.” There’s also an astounding amount of AIDS, the disease that had struck down the young mother of two who Hammerschlag embraced. “Look how thin she is,” he exclaimed. “And I walked over to her looking like a huge bird that is playing a kazoo and clicking castanets, and dancing.
flamingo. I helped her sit up in her hammock, and she smiled,” Hammerschlag remembered. “If we can make one patient smile, even when they are dying, it reminds us of our humanity. It reminds us and them that you still have the capacity to move beyond any and all limitations.”

Glen Campbell did, Hammerschlag said as she showed a slide of the great country pop star. “A couple of weeks ago, he appeared at the Grammies,” Hammerschlag said. “When they get ready to introduce him, I find myself getting a bit concerned because a year ago Glen announced to the world that he has early onset Alzheimer’s. This guy’s younger than I am, and I thought, ‘Oh my God. He’s going to go up on stage and forget the words.’ But he performed flawlessly, and if he had not sung the words the audience would have sung with him. So my terror was, of course, a projection of my own fears of getting Alzheimer’s. If I did, could I be that open and reveal my frailty to the world?”

Hammerschlag wasn’t sure, but he did know he wanted to have Campbell’s radical self-acceptance. “I want to give up the idea of what I have to be or do in order to feel good about myself. I want to be able to sing my songs and tell my stories to the end because that’s how I feel most alive.”

The Rhinestone Cowboy is rocking on to the end, and “he reminds us that it doesn’t matter what you got,” Hammerschlag pointed out. “It matters how you come to what you got. Success in life has nothing to do with being dealt great cards. All of us are going to get dealt a card we don’t necessarily want. You have to learn how to play the hand. Success in the card game has to do with learning how to play a poor hand well. What kind of choices are you going to make about how you come to your life? How are we going to deal with problems and still be able to do our work with joy? The healer’s task is accept what we cannot change and still find a way to touch those who place themselves in our hands in ways that let them continue on the healing journey,” Hammerschlag said as he showed a slide of a loved one shortly before she reached the last leg of the trip.

“My mother at this time was 90 years old,” he said. “She was a Holocaust survivor and one of the seminal influences in my life. She had chronic congestive heart failure, was placed on medications of every description, and was slowly getting increasingly short of breath. The medications were changed. She was breathing with oxygen. She moved from her one-story walk-up in Leisure World in California to a place where she didn’t have to climb. She could walk some steps and would have to take a rest, but her mind was quick and she still played bridge. She could still bake bread on the Sabbath, and she still loved to see her son.”

With still so much to live for, she decided to ask the doctor about having heart surgery. “The doctor said, ‘the operation could be successful, but you might not be successful,’” Hammerschlag recalled. “He told her ‘there’s an enormous morbidity rate doing this kind of surgery in older people. And lots of them lose their short-term memory. Almost everybody does for a couple of weeks or months, but some people lose it for a long period of time.’ And my mother asked him a question you want to ask the doctor as well when you confront this issue: ‘What would you do if it was your mother?’ The surgeon, bless his heart said, ‘If it was my mother I would tell her not to do it. I can give you medication. It will ease the shortness of breath, but there is no guarantee if I do this procedure that you are going to come out with as much as you got.’ My mother didn’t hesitate for a second. She wanted to play bridge and Scrabble and watch Jeopardy on TV. She wanted to bake bread. She didn’t have the surgery.”

A few months later, her heart finally began to give out, Hammerschlag recalled. “By then she was sundowning to such an extent that she was hallucinating. It was very difficult
for her so the doctor changed her medication and she was admitted to the hospital. She does not do well in the hospital, and the hallucinations become more intense. She says to the doctor, ‘Listen, you know the only thing I have to look forward to is my next breath. It’s not enough’” and the doctor agreed. “He stopped all the meds, said, ‘I will keep you comfortable,’ and he did. I sat with her all night, and I sang to her as she drifted off. My mother died while I was holding her hand,” an experience Hammerschlag won’t forget. “Just to be with someone who gives us life at the end reminds us what it means to be alive,” he said. Nobody makes it alone. The nature of our biology is always to be connected to somebody other than ourselves.”

That’s why it’s so important to connect with things that fill you with joy, Hammerschlag told the spellbound room. “It doesn’t matter what it is, but anything that fills your cup and reminds you that you are connected with something other than yourself is critically important. It doesn’t take much time to connect with somebody in ways that remind us of what we like best about who we are and why we make a difference in the world. For those of you in the home care and hospice profession, the gift of your heart and soul is going to touch people in ways that make their lives complete. As healers you make people whole. Connect with them in ways that make them think they are your relatives. Connect with everyone in the world as if they are your relatives and we can deal with anything we face. I honor the work you do,” he said in closing. “You’ve got what it takes and remind us all of what we want to be.”