

"I'm in Heaven when you smile"

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CREATIVE USE OF CLOWNING

by

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"I'm in Heaven when you smile" — Some thoughts on the creative use of clowning

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With his bright red nose, blue hair and blue beard, *Hubert the clown* appears three times a week at Winnipeg Children's Hospital. There he visits children, parents, and staff, leaving behind a trail of laughter, love, and comfort. Hubert is hopelessly confused and very naive. Helping Hubert is an aspect of "therapeutic clowning" which lies at the heart of the hospital clown program. Hubert has a whole bag of tricks he would love to perform ... but he just can't seem to make them work. For some strange reason these same tricks work only when children participate and if by chance a trick does work for Hubert alone, The Amazing Hubert is ... amazed himself. When it comes to juggling, Hubert has to be taught the whole concept.

"No Hubie, you don't juggle the tennis balls in the container. Take them out first!"

A simple feat like giving his doll *Tutu the clown* a bottle can involve all kinds of shenanigans. And look out because that bottle could end up in anyone's mouth before someone straightens Hubert out.

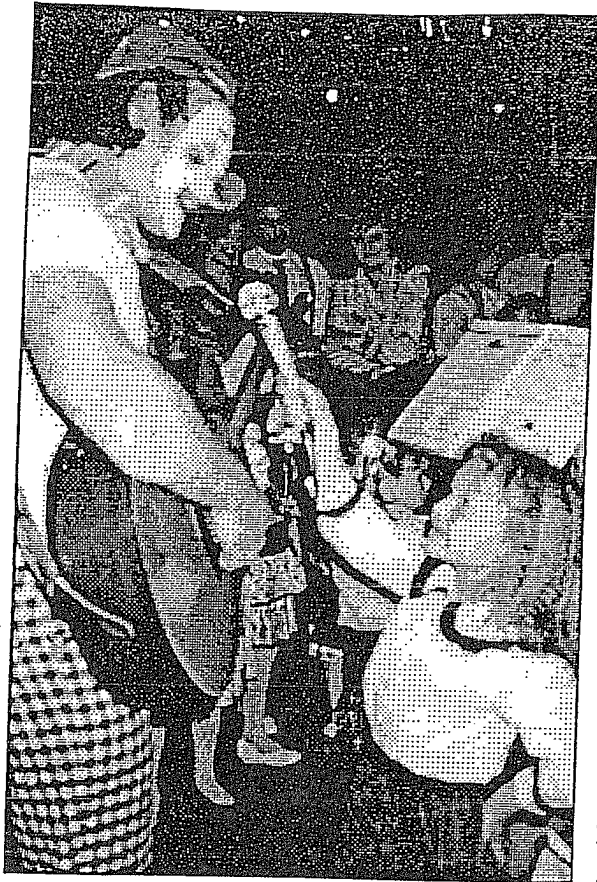
The clown program is part of the Child Life Department at Children's Hospital and is a very good example of the creative use of clowning in a child-centered program. As a child life program, *Hubert the clown* is used to help reduce stress and anxiety in hospitalized children and their families. Because of this, the program is not only entertaining but therapeutic as well. The focus of the program is not on the clown and his activities, but rather on the child and his or her needs. Hubert is there only to serve the child through appropriate means such as entertainment, diversion, and comfort. Nurturing self-esteem and encouraging personal growth are two goals of this program that would be appropriate goals in any child-centered program.

The possibilities for using clowning within an existing program are endless. Day-cares, nursery school and elementary classrooms are very natural and

exciting settings for clowns. I have even given a clown workshop to a group of AIDS educators who wished to use clowning in their schoolroom and adult presentations. Clowns will be appropriate where one would like to enhance self-esteem, to nurture a special sense of wonder, or to provide opportunities of self-expression.

There are three main clown types. As clowns are not known for their ability or desire even, to stick to the rules one will find many exceptions, permutations, and combinations of these clown types. Firstly, the whiteface clown is adapted from the French comedian *Pierrot* character and as the name implies, has a whiteface. This is adorned with moderate and usually very artistic lines and designs about the eyes, nose, mouth and cheeks. Being a smarter and/or empathetic character the whiteface clown often plays a straight role when appearing with other clowns. The August clown is perhaps the most bizarre clown type. She/he has oversized facial features such as an extended forehead or bald cone-head and wears oversized clothing and shoes. Lou Jacob's famous circus clown, *Bozo the clown*, and *Ronald McDonald* are all examples of Auguste clowns. The Auguste clown is usually very clumsy, slow or oafish. The last clown type is the character clown. *Red Skelton's Freddy the Freeloader* and Chaplin's *Little Tramp* are both character clowns. Most female clowns or should I say, clowns which are obviously female in gender are character clowns. These clowns are most humanlike and therefore use less make up than the other two clown types. Character clowns are becoming very popular in venues such as the new vaudeville circuit and amongst buskers.

I believe the character and therefore heart of a clown is most important in developing a clown. If you have a character that is appealing for children to be around then you are on the right track. But what is appealing to children? Do they want a clown that is a smart aleck or an acrobatic wonder? I have found that



Humphrey the clown (with large nose) and friend.

children really enjoy a clown that is vulnerable in some way. This very naturally serves the clown's goal of empowering others as the clown allows his/her weaknesses to be seen by all. This empowerment may be expressed when children teach, correct or direct the clown. For example, Hubert is so naive he can't even find his way out of a room without walking into the closet or washroom instead of into the hall. Hubert needs direction and care. *Humphrey the clown*, Hubert's cousin is a very meek and hesitant character whose tongue often trips on his wording. In his own words, he would love to be "better articulate (oops), more better at communicating (sorry, I mean), he would like to not misspeak when ... oh help!!!!"

Not just any strong personality type will do though. A clown character must be a product of what I call "clown consciousness." This is a particular way of walking through life and all its absurdities without being destroyed by them. Clowns may suffer many setbacks or misfortunes. They may find themselves in hopeless or even dire straights but will surmount all difficulty by simply retaining hope and faith in the power of love. To a child, the clown is someone who

loves to play and goof around as they do. Like a child, a clown cannot always control their play opportunities but they will find some way to play within the limits set on them. To an adult, a clown may be a touchstone to that child that still lingers within, longing to be set free from the incredible burdens that we place upon ourselves. To someone else, a clown might just be a funny looking character, that for no logical reason makes them laugh. Clowns are liberators. They set souls free and inspire in us an unconditional self-acceptance. Clowns proclaim it is okay to be imperfect. In fact they let us know it's fun to be mortal and thereby free us from the unrealistic expectations we toil under.

If you are considering clowning with your children here are two methods that can be used separately or in combination to find a clown character that is unique and part of your inner being.

Clown meditation

Find a comfortable sitting position, close your eyes and imagine you are in a long hallway with many doors. As you walk along the hallway you come to a doorway which has drawn you to it like a magnet. With much excitement you open the doorway and stepping inside you see a clown sitting on the floor. What does that clown look like? How is she/he dressed? As you are observing this character, she/he begins to move and slowly rises to its feet. Shaking your hand and leading you to the doorway your newfound friend takes you by the hand. The two of you explore the hallway until you come to a doorway and opening this door find a room full of toys. Your clown and yourself begin to play with various toys and with one another. What do you choose to play with and how do you two play together? Let the fun continue for sometime until you have exhausted yourselves. After resting on the floor together imagine taking your clown by the hand and leading him/her out into the hall and back to the room in which you first met. It is time to say good-bye. Let your clown sit on the floor and waving good-bye to you slowly fall asleep. Close the door and slowly open your eyes. Take some time to take note of your clown's appearance, personality, and impression on you.

Variations of this meditation can be done as you return to the sleeping clown and explore other rooms off the hallway of your inner self i.e. a room containing a favourite childhood haunt, (a room full of art supplies, or a room containing an authoritative figure from your past). Your awakened clown will surprise you in these various rooms.

The second method is a more conscious approach to discovering the clown within and may be used to flesh out or develop the clown you first encountered in the Clown Meditation.

The more conscious than method #1 approach!!!

Take a quality that you perceive as being a weakness in your own personality or physical being and play with it (i.e. shyness, confusion, sadness, etc.).

Try to express this quality to the extreme (THERE IS NOTHING SUBTLE ABOUT CLOWNS!!)

Experiment with giving this quality expression through posture, movement, and gesture.

If your clown is not a mime clown try to find an appropriate voice for this quality. This voice needs to be one that you can maintain. You may want to experiment with noisemakers (kazoos, slide whistles, etc.) or with using gibberish.

Try to find a hat or costume piece (a vest, a tie etc.) that would compliment the character you are building.

Your costume may involve only a few pieces or may be quite elaborate. You will know when it is right. Remember costume pieces must be durable and allow for ample body movement.

YOUR CLOWN CHARACTER WILL GROW!!

Developing a character may have its landmarks but it is still fundamentally a process, not an event.

* With young children, you may want to consider painting your red nose on, as opposed to using a sponge or rubber nose which can be frightening to preschoolers.

* To best facilitate the limitations of staffing in a child-care setting, you may want to use water soluble face paints as opposed to grease paints (which require 45 to 60 minutes to apply and about 20 minutes to remove). You could also think of using only a few facial markings (on the nose, cheeks, eyes etc.) on a bare face. Dispensing with the whiteface may give you a shorter more reasonable make-up time as well as make the clown less frightening and therefore more accessible to younger children.

Now that you have discovered your clown, what can you do with him/her?

Some common tools of the trade are bubbles, balls and/or bean bags, a hidden horn, magic tricks, and face paints. Bubble blowing is a wonderful activity when clowning with the very young and very shy. bubbles can be appreciated from a distance and have

an attraction that draws children when they are ready to get close to the clown. Balls and bean bags are great for juggling and playing catch (a very accessible interactive game). If you don't juggle yet don't let that stop your clown from trying. *Hubert the clown* spends about seven minutes trying to figure out how to get his tennis balls out of their plastic container and into the air before he actually juggles them. A hidden horn can be honked as the clown pretends the sound is coming from various sources. Magic tricks are not as difficult to master as one may assume. Before discovering my clown *Humphrey* I had not performed magic at all. Libraries have lots of books explaining various levels of tricks. While you are practising these tricks you might want to use what I call "Clown Magic". This is magic which is totally transparent and ridiculous. Making an object disappear by dropping it behind another object the clown believes in the magic while the onlookers have seen through the trick. Face paints are wonderful for opening up the clown experience for the children. There are many brands of water soluble paints that are both easily applied and removed. Letting the children design their own clown faces can lead to dressing up their clowns with costume pieces (i.e. hats, shoes shirts) and a clown parade.

However your clown interacts with your group, utilize the opportunities you have to empower them and build up their self-esteem. Let them correct your clown and thereby reinforce some of your current lessons. Be vulnerable with them and they will appreciate seeing you as a playful child like themselves. Above all else ... HAVE LOTS OF FUN !!! You don't have to be constantly putting on a show. Children love just being with a clown. The environment in which you are clowning and the children with whom you are clowning will provide numerous opportunities for improvisation (or just plain goofing around.) Rapport is where it's at. Best wishes in your clowning and as Red Skelton always says "May God Bless."

Some useful resources

Be a Clown: The Complete Guide to Instant Clowning by Turk Pipkin, Workman Publishing, New York, 1989.

Creative Clowning by Bianco, Kessell et al., Java Publishing Co., Colorado Springs, 1988.

The Klutz Book of Magic by John Cassidy and Michael Strand, Klutz Press, Palo Alto, 1990.

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