

LOOKING FOR YOUR CLOWN AND FINDING YOURSELF

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In this article I will attempt to answer two questions:

- Who is the clown?
- Why and how does seeking our clown allow personal development and a move towards self-awareness?

Who is the clown?

I do not wish (and it would be too tiring for me) to write about the historical origins of the clown, or archetypes of the collective unconscious or of psychoanalytical interpretations. I will go straight to the essential which is my own experience of clowning. Something which may seem obvious but isn't, is the distinction I draw between "*THE CLOWN*", who is on stage in front of an audience and "*the person*" who is behind the red nose and gives life to the clown.

The clown is essentially an emotional being

Clowns feel and express powerful and intense emotions. They respond to events which often seem to us, normal people, trivial. If all of a sudden a beam of sunlight crosses the room, one clown may become happy as if this was the greatest and most wonderful thing that had ever happened in his or her life, another however might become completely and inexplicably depressed. Whatever their reactions, clowns are expressive and fragile in their emotions: they stay very close to what is happening inside them without worrying too much about whether it makes sense or is the right thing to do.

For a clown, the emotional state generated by an event is perceived as an overwhelming experience; it is this obsessive and frantic perception of feelings which forces the clown to identify with the world around: the clown is in empathy with the world. The clown is a professional empathiser.

Identification with an object, identification with the other

If someone's crying, the clown might be overcome with sadness and not know why, simply through empathy and mimicry. This fusion with feelings often drives clowns to repeat the actions, sounds, words, and movements which give them pleasure. This is called the taste for excess and exaggeration.

The clown lives "the now" of every second

The intensity which clowns experience is due to the fact that they live the present moment of each second. Feelings and emotions in the present are the most important things in the world for them, and they are not preoccupied by what the next second will bring. Clowns take time to savour the extraordinary inner treasures of the moment (Except if their present feeling is worry, then they will be worried, really worried sick. Clowns will settle into the state of being worried with serenity!) Staying close to the present allows clowns to live out their emotions to the full. They are unrepentant optimists and have got all the time in the world to wait for things to turn out the way they want.

The clown lives through what is "real and objective"

The clown isn't on some fictional stage playing Hamlet. No, he or she is here with us, the audience, in a room or elsewhere. Clowns see us, and through eye contact share with us their every thoughts and feelings. This is what makes clowning different from traditional theatre. Clowns have a very objective relationship with the world.

The clown's present reality is shared and lived with us. The clown is also a super concentrated source of sugary fantasies. The slightest event, the slightest emotion evokes within the clown all sorts of fantastic images which then bring him or her to embark upon fantastic adventures.

The clown's (controlled) slips of imagination ... into absurdity

By diving into the world of the imagination, clowns are at its mercy. Like rally-car drivers, clowns skid through their imagination. They leave the road, go careering through fields, jump over ditches and join the road again further down. Clowns are ace racing drivers. Their folly is based on non-sense : Absurdity does not frighten clowns in the least. Non-sense is a rational form of madness, it's a logical delirium.

Essential moments in clowning : breaking the thread

Clowns may be fools at the mercy of their imagination and they skid on the ice of delirium....But do not be misled! Clowns are well aware of the road signs. When leading us into some make believe airy-fairy world, clowns do not really want us to believe in the world they are creating, because they only half believe in it themselvesand let's face it, they don't believe in it at all. (What we should believe however is the way in which clowns live through their fragile constructions.)

Clowns live all their pathetic or disastrous adventures in front of us and with us. They never try to mislead us (this would be presumptuous, for the various stage-props are ridiculous) because they never mislead themselves.

Clowning requires keeping a close watch on the subtle line that exists between reality and an imaginary world. This is done by stepping back and taking one's distance from time to time. It is a crucial moment in clowning. We call it breaking the thread or distanciation.

Just look at a child playing and it becomes obvious. The child is both within reality and within an imaginary world. Clowns find their own solutions to stop madness from driving them completely over the edge of the road. (It would create real unease for an audience if it thought the clown was really mad)

It is important to realise that when feelings and emotions in clowning become too strong, clowns have the freedom to play with them. It is this "breaking free" which releases relief and laughter from the audience, because it de dramatises a tense situation, it exorcises tragedy. (The person behind the red nose will also experience this relief for him or herself.)

Clowns thus are able to break free from the dramatic tension they create. Their own feelings, those of their partner and of the audience do not restrict them. This is because clowns are capricious, fickle, manic depressive, versatile and free beings. In other words, clowns live in the present.

We may be moved by their emotions, carried along by their imagination, concerned by the complex and dramatic events they struggle with, intrigued by the logic they develop and profoundly relieved through the laughter, the somersaults, the breaking free from events or the winking of an eye which defuses the tragic.

Deep down the clown is a vulnerable being

All the threads I have introduced and attached next to each other form an indissoluble whole: the weft of the clown's character. It is on this frame that each of us will then weave, in our own fashion, our unique clown character. (Naturally this character will evolve as and when we discover meaning and get nearer to ourselves through the creation of that character).

But let's take a closer look at the character's underlying colour.

Clowns are primarily and fundamentally fragile and vulnerable (it is through this that clowns will draw their strength). While society expects us to be beautiful, intelligent, in control of our emotions and successful in our projects, clowns are not ashamed to show their physical disabilities, their simple-minded nature (not to mention a charming foolishness), their uncontrolled and overwhelming emotions. Naturally such a constitution drives clowns from one failure to another (up to the final success, of course). Clowns are not like the unruffled heroes of some Hollywood cowboy movies but more like eternally awkward and hopeless cases of failure.

It is precisely for this that we love the clown! For us, within us and with us the clown plays at Losers Win. The more it goes wrong, the greater the success, because it is by drawing on their weaknesses that clowns become strong. (Where there's muck, there's gold...) Why is this so?

First and foremost it is because clowns are not ashamed to be themselves, and to present themselves to us as profoundly human and close to our nature that they strike a chord in us. They also carry the responsibility of their nature without letting anyone else bear its weight.

It is this self-acceptance that makes clowns committed optimists. They are losers with a winner's soul, they stubbornly go through countless ordeals until they find their own solution within the confusion of their problems.

By taking a step to the side, clowning shows us how vain, derisory and hopeless are the efforts towards success. It is through failure that clowns show their wisdom. Though they embark on their projects with great emotional intensity, there is deep inside a serenity, a detachment which fills us with peace. One realises that one doesn't laugh at clowns but through them.

Clowns win in the end because they ridicule social pressures and show us that happiness is possible without necessarily conforming to the norms of beauty, of self-control and of logical intelligence extolled by the white clown. In destroying the myth of superficial appearances and giving us the right to be ourselves, the clown makes us (and the person playing him or her) feel better about ourselves.

It is clear why the clown is so much loved by children - and by the child within us - he or she is on their side in the fight for acquiring an identity and in the face of pressures to conform as an adult.

Why and how does the search for one's clown allow personal growth?

Having introduced the character of the clown I will now present my thoughts on the relationship between searching for one's clown and personal growth. (It sounds better than therapy).

Seeking one's clown does have therapeutic effects. Though it cannot, I think, be considered a true form of therapy, it can accompany, help, and prepare one for such an experience.

Why and how?

Seeking one's clown is primarily working towards self-expression

Finding one's clown isn't a matter of "learning to do funny things", rather it consists of discovering within oneself a clown as unique as each of us are.

Self-expression, which constitutes the basis of this search, requires first the creation of conditions that will allow a breaking free from inhibitions, a loosening of control, a letting go of creativity. All of which are basically the conditions needed for play. As Winnicott (1971) says "It is in playing and only in playing that an individual is able to be creative".

Under those conditions, where everything is allowed, creating a secure environment is essential. It will exist when it becomes established that there is no judgement (of others, and of oneself by others), no comparing, no systematic attempt to intellectualise what has happened. This means that what is expressed cannot become the object of an analysis or interpretation unless the person concerned clearly expresses the desire for it. Thus we believe that what is expressed has a value in itself, simply for having been expressed.

Guy Lafargue (1984) writes: "Artistic, poetic, physical or intellectual creation is clearly ambiguous in that while revealing the latent content of lived experiences, it also protects the individual from an excess of feelings. This it does through a partial discharge of dangerous emotions. This is possible only when the individual feels a sense of security in the creative situation."

A second condition for creating a secure environment for expression, which is linked to the first, concerns how we invest our identity and our selves in the work. Discovering the clown's fundamental characteristic of vulnerability means that before beginning work we should abandon on the one hand the stereotypes of the clown which are perpetuated through mass culture and on the other hand we need to progressively leave aside too-dearly held perceptions of our selves as successful, effective and strong individuals. There is in all this a risk-taking which is rewarded by the pleasure of expressive creativity.

Guy Lafargue writes: "Therapeutic work attempts to recognise a symptom in its linguistic and creative form, but in such a way as to allow the individual to experience it as a creative achievement...." "Establishing a space for creativity means giving the individual the possibility of exploring a territory in which he or she unconsciously turns away from the symptom in the context of a highly structured activity such as the progressive construction of meaning"

Like the work on dreams done in Gestalt, or on deep relaxation in Sophrology, or on automatic writing by the Surrealists, this work when carried over into a theatrical form of expression leads one to seek a release of the imagination through verbal or physical delirium. In this way the raw messages from the unconscious will be revealed. (Phew!)

It is for this reason that we greatly value improvisation, and that we give a lot of importance to the body. As the body's spontaneous language is generally less well controlled than speech, it more easily expresses our authenticity (as long as we allow it to do so). If the conditions I have just mentioned exist, characters fundamentally close to each individual will then come alive through the exercises and the improvisations. The mere awareness of this is already a therapeutic process.

Madness and the clown's imagination

The expression of the clown's personality does not appear by "itself", out the blue. It comes by means of a substance which is the clown's madness.

In our work, we look for this madness and we try to make it blossom. However it is not an uncontrolled form of madness but has a logic of its own that I have already mentioned. One might as well call it a paranoid delirium! Or according to Seglas (1895!), it is the development of "structured and persistent delirious ideas,....., a peculiar interpretation of the relationship between the outside world and the personality of the suffering person." Further: "It is the coherent development of a dramatic event, with an unshakeable, clear, perceptive and convincing argument!"

This quote describes well the clown's madness. First the clown's eccentric and personal way of relating to and interpreting reality. It is this that makes us able to understand clowns even in their madness. Clowns see the reality that we see (objects, places, events, partners, the audience) in a peculiar and strange manner but it is intelligible.

I also believe that this intelligibility comes from the fact that clowns do not follow aimlessly every image or fantasy which appears to them. The clown's madness is structured. (One could even say it is theatrical) Also, let us not forget that the clown is living through an adventure and acts and experiences emotions in relation to events as they fold and unfold each other. Absurdity and nonsense in no way excludes the need for intrigue.

Finally, the therapeutic value of seeking one's clown is not limited to the timely expression of such or such an emotion or of such an image, it is also found in the fact that this search is structured within a logic that is unique to each individual and which will uncover features of that individual not only within an emotional context but also within the action of drama.

To end this paragraph I feel I need to remind you that although the clown can be paranoid, it does not mean that the person or individual is necessarily so! I shall come to this point later.

Living with the present moment

As I mentioned earlier we work a lot with improvisation. The great difficulty of improvisation work is that it requires us to be aware of things that are happening in the present. Which is just as well because the clown is someone who lives in the present. But the experience of improvising often brings with it the very fear which can inhibit expression. It is the fear of showing ourselves, of offering ourselves to be seen.

When experiencing this fear, we should simply be receptive to how it transforms our perception of the place we are in, to the partner we play with and the audience. Images, movements and emotions will appear and connect us with this fear. Clowns play with this confusion of emotions and reality.

If the person fears a situation, the clown can express this fear (and play with it); If the person experiences pleasure at being there, the clown can show this pleasure; if the person "does not know what to do", the clown can show how he or she lives the fact that the person does not know what to do (through gestures, voice and words) and in the process the clown will be doing. To express emptiness is already to express something.

Improvisation consists in coming on stage empty (predisposed and receptive to all that can happen) but charged with all of one's imagination. People we worked with have all noticed the extraordinary potential that this charge carries. Thus, to the fear of "not finding anything to do", is gradually substituted an awareness of the fabulous riches just lying there to be harvested.

From feeling inhibited in our body, we become gradually more confident in what it can tell us. Even when we experience a feeling of gaping emptiness, the body becomes our most trustworthy and reliable partner. The slightest event can from that moment become the thread upon which a complete improvisation can be woven. In such a way then, a breath of wind in a room can give a refreshing feeling on the skin. If we listen to our body instead of ignoring it, emotions and images spontaneously come to mind. A spontaneous gesture, if you trust yourself, does not need to mean something immediately. Let it grow on you, be receptive to what it is telling you. Emotion and meaning will come as an added surplus. "Be content in the present"

Connecting with the present emotion is therefore an essential aspect of improvisation in clowning. This connecting becomes both easier, and more difficult when improvising in twos for example. Easier because the other clown is an immediate source of inspiration, as an originator of proposals. More difficult because, however receptive one is to the other, this other still needs to express him or herself very clearly. This requires in turn that this other is clear in his or her own head about what is going on. Working in twos can be defined as: "Listening to oneself - listening to the other"

This is the way that clown improvisations brings us towards a truthful relationship with the other, based upon clarity and a flexibility of emotions.

Clowns live an objective and commonly shared reality. By staying in the "here and now", clowns cannot escape from the reality of their experiences, and what's more clowns never leave the presence of the audience. So "Here and Now" is the clown's motto.

The skills required for improvising as a clown carry extraordinary therapeutic value. After all that has been said one could come to the conclusion that the clown is quite simply mad. Through the expression of our symptoms comes a growth of awareness and the therapeutic effect. One might also say that the skills required for improvising in the "here and now" are enough to define the "therapeutic effect". But something essential is still missing, that is breaking with the thread or distanciation.

Breaking the thread, Distanciation and self-awareness

We saw in the first part how clowns distance themselves from madness, feelings, logic or with the rhythm of bodily movements. We saw that the theatrical function of this distanciation was to exorcise emotional and affective charges created by the clown and that finally, through the relief this procures, to bring laughter to the audience.

How does this bring about a growing-awareness and a development of the person?

Throughout an improvisation, the person produces within and around him or her self emotional energy. This the person does through the risk of expressing something personal and authentic. However at the same time, clowning imposes certain technical constraints and these confront the person with reality. The reality of being on stage, of improvising, of being with other clown-seekers, of being successful or failing. All this, let us not forget, the person does while playing. This confrontation sets limits to the person's madness or delirium and "rescues it".

In fact, neither the person nor the clown get into a true state of madness. To do that would be loosing touch with reality without the possibility of knowing that one has lost touch with it because reality would become an illusion. Being aware that one is mad implies one no longer is.

The clown-seeker uses delirium like Salvador Dali used critical paranoia. According to G. Bertrand (1980), this is "a spontaneous method of acquiring irrational knowledge based upon an interpretative association of delirious phenomena ". In paranoia, Dali attempted to use raw messages from the unconscious, the logic of the absurd, coherence within incoherence, but he refused to let himself become a prisoner of the system and kept the right to just observe its worst aberrations. Artists play upon these two levels: by imitating psychosis, they release great and shadowy powers from within themselves, but by moulding them through artistic expression, they escape from their control and are saved.

All this leads me to think that in clowning the "moulding of artistic expression" is the boundary which theatrical expression sets through distanciation. This moulding of artistic expression provides a safe space which allows self-expression. Self-expression grows with the capacity of the person to use that space for a playful exploration of his/her symptoms. (And to find pleasure in the process, which is quite something!) The rules and convention of theatre are, I believe, similar to the notion of control in therapy, where violent emotions and powerful feelings of pain can be generally expressed without the patient acting out.

The person seeking his or her clown feels real feelings, and at the same time plays with these. This is a point which puzzles a lot of people at the workshops. Janine is improvising and she decides to act out a meeting with her father. Feelings of desertion surge within her. The emotional energy becomes intense and makes the audience uneasy. The audience (unconsciously) would welcome a break to bring relief. (Otherwise this isn't clowning anymore, but drama!)

Janine comes back from her improvisation. She is disturbed and cries. She is angry with us: "You told me: feel your emotion and play that. That's the result". We answer: " Janine, it is possible to be both authentic and play at the same time. Step back from yourself. It may sound contradictory but in this kind of work, the more you are able to play with your feelings, the more you are giving yourself the chance to be true to yourself."

A few days later, Janine did a moving and extremely funny improvisation on the same theme. The reason clowns are not mad, paranoid or hysterical, is that they are able to distance themselves from what is happening to them.

So, is the clown a "polymorphous pervers"? Ah ha! Good question! My feeling is no. The clown isn't a child but an adult, and what's more a particularly well-balanced adult.

Conclusion

Because the rule that allows us to break free from our symptoms of being an unloved child while on stage allows us to reveal our basic vulnerability and humanity. Clowns say to their audience: "The person behind this red nose is like this and I accept this. The person is like this and laughs at himself or herself." Clowns are adults because they assume responsibility for their existence, they do not try to find excuses anywhere and are answerable only to themselves. Clowns confront life with all the strength and optimism of their nature.

While I say that clowns "confront life", I don't hesitate to say that they confront death also. I said earlier that it was by drawing upon their weakness that clowns become strong: This is also true for the person. Through self-acceptance and the pleasure it gives, clowning helps the person behind the red nose to progressively create himself or herself while producing his or her symptoms. To finish, I would like to ask one last question: If the search for one's clown has a therapeutic effect and if the person works with this (and/or by other means), his or her clown character will also evolve and perhaps in the end die.

Does therapy consist in finding the clown's own death? Will my clown one day drown himself? So far the question remains unanswered...