

THE HEART OF CLOWNING: on the use of a clown in the world.

An interview with Giovanni Fusetti

This is a transcribed and edited version of an interview with Giovanni Fusetti, by Matty Miller, in the summer 2006. This interview is part of the paper: **The Heart Of Clowning**, by Matty Miller, for the course **Spiritual Models of Social Action**; Naropa University, Boulder Colorado, Fall 2006. Matty has trained with Giovanni in the Boulder Red Nose workshop in 2006. To contact Matty, or to obtain a copy of the complete paper, please write to mattybird@gmail.com.

What's the use of a clown in the world, anyway?

The clown is an archetypal figure, which has always existed: it makes people laugh because of its accidents and failures and faults. The use of the clown is to remind people about imperfection and disorder, and chaos, and fall, and, eventually, death, in a way which is based on humor.

As members of humanity, we all have one big common problem: we are going to die, one day, eventually. We also have another big skill that can turn out as a huge problem: we are self aware, which means that we can practice abstract thinking and know how things could be. So we have the concept of perfection, and success, and order. And we also know that most of those things will never happen, so we are constrained by life's limitations. Therefore perfection is more of a myth, a reference point. We can either take this very badly and get really pissed off, and fight against gods, and in theatre we call Tragedy; or as the clown does, just fall and laugh about it.

The wisdom of the clown is being able to fall and assume it. It is a profound answer to the main problem of death in all its forms. This is why the clown exists. It is about somebody who takes on himself the limitations, the tragedies, the contradictions, the conflicts, the stupidity, the innocence, the vulnerability, the pain, and the wounds. And consciously plays with them. So the use of clown is to process with humor the tragedy of life.

I like your question: it's good to say "in the world" because clowning is everywhere. In every human society there are individuals who exist with the purpose of making the community laugh. They laugh at the clown and think, 'How can this clown be so simple or so stupid or so outrageous or so naïve or so loud or so clumsy or so pretentious?' The clown is the one who makes people laugh about him. It's a really profound teacher and it's a very ancient archetype.

How far can you stretch the form of clown that you teach? To how many cultures can it be brought and understood?

In every society there is an order. There are rules that the community accepts because they are necessary to maintain the social structure: language, rituals, roles, taboos, etc. Every community has a very precise and specific culture. In every culture, given that there is a set of social rules, there is the possibility of breaking them, and therefore provoking outrage...or laughter.

So, as long as we have separate and unique cultures, there are many different forms of humor. Laughter is universal, but the reasons for laughter are not the same. The idea of laughing because of chaos and disorder, that is universal, but what makes people laugh is different.

The clown is the comic form that takes on himself some sort of disorder and imperfection and makes people laugh. This is universal, but then there are many “clown forms”, which can even have different names: fool, trickster, monkey, coyote...

In our western culture when people say *clowns*, usually in their imagination there is a circus-based clown with baggy pants and big shoes and red nose and poofy hair and makeup with a big mouth and eyes. If you observe the costume it is about something that doesn't fit. It's too big and it falls apart and there's some sort of baggy poverty in it.

So, for instance, that form comes from a time when the bourgeoisie was happening. There was a minority of very rich and powerful and elegant people ruling over a multitude of poor farmers or workers. The stupid one couldn't get there and was badly dressed. So there was a huge set of tramps and hobos and poor and the uncultivated. So there was a comedy based on wealth. Then when the society grew into culture those who couldn't study were laughable. That is a specific comedy based on a specific historic time and culture.

Then, the red nose came as an archetype of the circus clown. This particular type of clown is accessible in Western cultures. Now, because of globalization, Western culture is going everywhere. Things like television and cinema are expanding some good ideas, and also challenging and often erasing local cultures. So we need to be careful with the way we export our culture, including the clown. There are many different experiences of red nose clowns going all over the world, intervening in area of crisis. This can be a very powerful use of clown, bring relief in situation of pain and distress, support the healing of the local community through the power of laughter, and even promote a cultural and artistic rebirth of the communities. But to be effective it needs to be very tuned with the local culture. The danger is to be intrusive with forms of entertainment that are not really accessible, or with cultural codes that are foreign to the community. So I do see this clown form as very delicate form, requiring a peculiar cross-cultural sensitivity. If it is not integrated into the local community it can become another form of, sort of, cultural colonialism. For instance, the very use of red nose and make up, is not necessarily accessible, so it is very important to actually study and work on the laughter of the community and know what would make the community laugh. And you need to know a lot about the community before you know and understand what is comic. Find the clown of the region. Or look for what is common in all regions, what reunites us all as human fellows. When this happens you can see experiences of western actors performing together with local actors, using a very physical and visual comedy that is truly universal.

Every community has its own clown. Clown is a social role. Somebody has to have it. It's something like the village idiot of the past, or the poor, or the clever one, or the monk. You can see this in a group for instance. In a group there has to be somebody that is the most stupid of all. And if there is not, some sort of opportunist, or victim, will be pushed in that role because the community needs that in order to transform some sort of anguish about imperfection. If this happens unconsciously it can be really painful and can get into marginalizing people really badly. People fall into homelessness for many reasons. They fall into this role that society needs which is: you are homeless so you remind me that I have a house. It can be really tragic if there is no awareness about that.

What becomes the clown archetype to a population of homeless people? Do they see humor in the same forms?

I worked for a couple of years with the homeless when I did my civil service in Italy, where I was involved in a number of theatrical projects with homeless people and they loved to laugh about themselves. Even in that community there was one who was considered more stupid than the others. I was amazed by their tough and precise and sharp humor. They could be really nasty

sometimes. Humor is double edged. You can kill people laughing at them. But then the clown comes back and if somebody assumes that role all of a sudden it becomes very, very powerful. If he is not afraid of being laughed at there is nothing you can do about him. And this is why kings and presidents and people in power always have fear about clowns and buffoons and people who don't give a shit about power, they just laugh at it. This is the worst attack to power.

I heard you saying that it is difficult to do the Red Nose workshop in marginalized communities? Can you tell me more about that?

Very essentially, when you work with a clown you address people to work with something very personal and very individual, and often people touch areas of their lives that are perceived as wounds, or faults, or strange, or awkward, or difficult on an emotional level. So, the point of departure is to focus on individual identity. This requires a rather strong sense of self and the idea of being able to be very different from others and unique.

At the intensity of the Red Nose workshop, this doesn't really work for children and adolescents because they are in a phase of life where they are actually building themselves on an identity that works. They are sort of building up their sense of self and its too early to tell them that nobody will ever be perfect, and we're all going to die one day, and we all have things that are a little unusual and unique and funny and sometimes tragic and painful and vulnerable, etc. So it's too early in the process of their evolution. When you're young you just want to be good and perfect and accepted and build your ego very well. And you want no limit and independence. Later on, as life provokes you, you can start listening to doubts and think: "maybe I'm not perfect" and you can start looking into your wounds to become an adult, accepting limits and interdependence. In other words, you need to develop your identity and individual power, which includes your ego, before letting it go to serve a higher purpose.

In marginalized communities, usually there is a lot of pain about being cut off and not recognized, and often oppressed, sometimes even violently, by other communities. To work on an individual clown in a group that is already being marginalized and laughed at is a sort of advanced work. So if you want to work on the clown, you have to first be very supportive of the group identity, to actually work on something like the "group clown". If I had to do something like that, I would start with working towards building confidence in the sense of identity, of the value and positive resources of the group, and the link between people and the connections and the community. There is community work to start with, and only then you can touch the idea of, for instance, "Why do people laugh at us? What is our problem? And what could be funny about our problem? How could we use humor to address our oppression and marginalized situation?"

Thinking about Black Americans or Native Americans or homeless people, there certainly are archetypes of comedy in their world, I'm sure there are, but there is so much pain before, that you can't really start straight into it. It would be somehow unbearable.

A metaphor could be: if you have an accident, first thing you want to recover. If you are still bleeding, you first need to stop bleeding, and have a consistent dose of care and hugs and support and then you can go back and say, "What is the individual responsibility?" And then you can start understanding, "Oh that was silly of me; maybe I played a role in that accident or that disaster." And process it at a deep level.

If we want to transform wounds, first we need to still be alive, and with a minimum amount of health and wellbeing in order to do the work.

So the structure would be: first you want to feel the group power and the group care, group identity, and empower it, and then you can touch the group comedy; what could be funny about the group, seen from the outside, for instance, and only later on can you address the individual clowns in the group.

How can the form of clowning that you teach become engaged in social action?

There is a continuum of levels in my experience.

The first level is people who want to train to be performance clowns. These are artists who are in love with this style, this genre, and their project is to make shows where the clown character tells stories. So they use that form of comedy to make people laugh in a way that is based on humanity and something about vulnerability and stupidity. Sometimes it is geared more towards children audiences with something like gags and really basic things that children adore. Or sometimes somebody goes towards more dramatic writing—the clown as a lone human being; a clown reflects on things perceived as difficult in life. And sometimes these shows can be very moving and touching and harsh.

Then there are artists who work on the clown with the commitment to bring her into society in an informal way. There are two big movements. One is the hospital clown--clowns that have training in things like psychology, relationships, process work, basic medical care, and other hospital work. Their purpose is to bring laughter into everyday life in the hospital, so they work specifically on routines based on hospitals environments, like rooms and doors and objects, and play a slapstick kind of routine with objects that are usually scary. Their clown is a doctor, often called Doctor Clown. Their work is to bring laughter, to be in character and to “de-germitize” the whole cycle of hospital life. It started in this country, in New York with the Big Apple Circus, at least twenty-five years ago, and now it’s all over the world. Some hospitals have touring acts. Another one is called Clown Without Borders. It comes from the vision of clown as sort of a peace corps. Clowns on missions in the world, particularly in areas where there is pain and suffering.

There’s another group that takes political action through clowns. It started in England with the Clandestine Insurgent Clown Army and they have spread Clown Brigades all over, including in the States. They are packs of clowns trained in nonviolence, and ready to go and face the police and officers, in all sorts of public event or protest. This is a big movement of clowns and activism coming out of theater.

Then there is another level, which is people who work on clown towards self- healing or self-development or therapy. In Italy they call this Clown-Terapia or Riso-Terapia which is like laughter therapy. So you use a clown technique to approach difficult things about your life, and to find where you can laugh about it. This can be either very simple or huge, specifically as a way to actually access deep wounds and transform them. As long as you can play with something you start detaching from it. So, for instance, if you feel a wound, a trauma, or something painful, the first step towards healing is being able to have a little distance from it and to put it into a metaphorical space, to represent it. And in the representation you can laugh at it or provoke laughter about it. That’s a huge healing tool. Usually the first step when we touch a deep emotional wound is wave of tears. But then, staying with them, in the sacred space of the stage, we cross the river and we reach laughter. This is one of the most precious moment of my work, when I accompany people from tears to laughter. It’s profound an irreversible transformation. I’ve been working a lot with this, and it is a specific way of using clown towards healing. It is very intense individual work, and its also developing. You can use clown in combination with other psychological therapies and psychotherapy techniques. For

instance, I use it a lot with Gestalt therapy and bodywork based on Bioenergetics. Within the clown frame there's a very big opportunity for emotional release and a very profound healing, actually.

I think the most simple of all is just people wanting to laugh, and wanting to take themselves less seriously. Sometimes I do very short workshops and often when I ask "Why are you here?" many people say, "I want to take myself less seriously. I want to be able to laugh about myself." I think everybody has that intuition that life is difficult, yes, but it doesn't have to be dramatic. If there is a way to go through difficulties with humor, somehow things don't change, but they also change completely. And this a clown where he still dies, but he dies laughing.

There is a Native American joke about it, between wolves and coyotes. And they say when it steps on a trap the wolf, which is a hero, I would say, will bite his paw off and run away without a leg and die. The coyote will stay there and laugh himself to death. (howls) And in fact it's not laughing, it's howling, it's pain, but the coyote has a particular sound that sometimes really sounds like laughing. He's very naughty, he steals things, and because of that he became an archetype and became sort of the clown of many Native American areas. So the coyote laughs himself to death and he doesn't make any effort to solve the problem, but stays there and laughs. Its stupid, but in fact he dies less horribly than the wolf.

For me this is the essence because in the end we have to die—we will have problems; we will have difficulties. It's normal, it's about life; it's conflict and misunderstandings, and some wounds are irreversible. Most people when they arrive at some sort of personal work realize that missed something in their childhood. We've all had fairly dysfunctional families--most people. And when they realize that you can say, "Oh shit, if I had a better father, a better mother." That is the hero, the "Oh shit, my life is fucked because I didn't get enough of that." Then you can just be miserable for the rest of your life, and die sad and regretting. Or, and this is the clown way, you say "Okay, well that is what happened," and assume it completely, eventually laugh about it, and all of a sudden you will be living much happier with the wounds that become scars and you can paint them. They never go away, but they turn into something else.

There is a profound truth in this: on a psychological level wounds will not disappear, what could be will never be, scars remain. The hero will kill himself for this loss, the clown will dance with it.

And this for me is a very big lesson from the clown—healing is not about taking the wound away, but transforming it. The clown dances with the wound. You can't change your history, but you can transform it and make use of it. This is an alchemical process.

It's seems that in order to create social change, you have to heal, also.

Yes, it's a necessity of these times. But remember: healing is not about erasing wounds, but painting scars. And you have to heal those who ask for healing—this is a shamanic perspective. It's tragically important. You can't and you have not to give healing to those who don't ask for it. There is a shamanic proverb that says, "If somebody knocks at your door and asks for help, tell him to go away. If he comes back the second time to ask for your help, tell him to go away. If he comes back the third time and asks for your help, tell him to wait." This is a shaman's proverb. It means you have to commit to your healing, and you have to take individual responsibility in asking for it and investing in it; investing energy, time, and at this time of history, energy is expressed also by financial exchange. That is necessary in order to do a real healing.

If you want to heal people who don't want to be healed because they need that story, you're doing two things. One is that you're basically lacking respect for their history and their self; and then

you're wasting time and energy, which are precious. So you're doing a bad service both to yourself as a healer, and to the person. It doesn't mean to be mean to everybody. But if you have particular healing skills or abilities you have to be very careful in when you use them, and how to respect the other person's right to not be healed because that is part of a his personal process. If you think about your own personal process, the you know, as everybody does, that sometimes we need to go until a certain level of an experience in order to hit the switching point into something else. If we encourage people to avoid going where they need to go, we are actually preventing people from getting real healing.

I come from a Catholic background where this idea of doing good things for the world was very powerful. The idea of a mission, also, was very powerful and it's totally dysfunctional. So I grew up doing all sorts of social work that was completely inefficient and hurtful to everybody. Like volunteering to go and help people who were not at all asking for it, so we were simply manipulating these good people. The homeless, they have a strong reason why they are there. The only option is to completely recognize them where they are. If they ask for something, listen to that, and if you can give something, great, but also ask something. Creating an exchange, creating participation., that is the only way that they can maybe find the taste of being reconnected.. They need to be disconnected. They are homeless; it's a very important word that means "without home." It means that home was unbearable; home was something horrible for them so they prefer to be home less. Most people feel like home is nice, its good thing, but everybody can also feel, if they're really honest, some times when home was unbearable, some times when your family was unbearable, some times when your partner was unbearable, where intimacy was absolutely the worst thing in the world, and then you can understand why people are homeless and have a compassionate look and respect them.

What gives you hope?

First I would say that to be hopeless is blasphemous and self-indulgent. It means to give more priority to your personal self than to the fact that there are millions of amazing things happening all the time. I'm really sad about many things that are happening—like the wars and global injustice, the crisis of the environment, global warming, the way children are educated... all this makes me furious. Do I feel hopeless... No. I don't really feel hopeless. I feel very sad, which is different. Sometimes I feel desperate; I might feel very angry, furious, like "Ughh !!!!". But in fact, and this is a clown approach, everything is perfect exactly as it is...it's not even perfect, it is. Reality is.

So if I get hopeless it is because I have an idea of how reality should be and I don't give any respect to what's happening. So on a spiritual level I am really going far away from having any sort of faith in the movement of the spirit, or whatever you want to call it; and on an individual level I am indulging in my own fear of transformation and my lack of courage. I'm putting myself before anything, which is also self-indulgent.

We should make a party every morning because somebody like Gandhi existed. We should wake up and say, "Wow Gandhi was walking on this planet. What a great planet we live in. What a beautiful humanity" If one person did something extraordinary, he celebrated the whole humanity. So if that happened, that is possible. We could all be like Gandhi, or at least try. And then somebody did something like Hitler; that also happened. But that is your personal choice, and you have to take personal responsibility, and decide which part you are. When we think of how horrible life is because of Hitler, we are doing what Hitler did. Choices are powerful. Hopelessness is lack of faith. And lack of faith is highly destructive.

But I think we need to go even further than hope: the clown manifests the beauty of humanity in the present moment. Life is beyond hope. It is. This is the clown way, the Tao of Clown: faith, and commitment, and faith and commitment and failing and falling and letting go, with pleasure...and this brings more faith...and commitment...over and over.

Intimate necessity.