

# Hospital Clown Newsletter

## The Gentle Art of The Caring Clown

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# Celebrating the Child

"Honk! Honk!" Hubert is coming around the corner in the quiet hospital corridor. Bashful and a little shy this six-foot clown shuffles with the little steps of a small child. His curly bright blue hair and beard, his gleaming eyes, and his gentle smile gives off the appearance of a cuddly soft teddy bear.

He stops in front of a door "Honk!" goes the horn. He gives a shy little wave to the child on the bed inside. Motioning in mime, he offers to come in. The child shakes her head "no." Hubert takes a step back into the corridor and takes out some balls and does a little juggling outside the door. He asks again in mime if he can come in. This time the child whispers to a parent and they motion to Hubert to come in.

Hubert enters slowly and quietly. He juggles again and loses one of the balls. "Where is it?" he mimes. The child giggles and points to the TV. (The juggling ball is one of the sticky balls and is stuck to the TV screen) Hubert looks around and bumps into the door. Giggles. "Where?" he mimes again. The ball drops off the TV. Hubert picks it up but drops his hat. And then with a series of fumbles with hats and balls he has the child



giggling. Hubert mimes exhaustion and waves goodby. He walks into the bathroom and closes the door.

"Hubert's lost in the Bathroom. Oh my!" (Knocks can be heard on the door.) Finally Hubert reappears miming embarrassment. "Where is the door?" The giggling child points to the door. Hubert mimes his thanks and then walks into the door. Oh! Oh! Bang! Whoops! More giggles. He waves goodbye and backs carefully out of the room. In the corridor he is greeted by a little girl who takes his hand and leads him to see her sister in the play room.

The little girl is on the playroom floor. She sees Hubert and retreats fearfully behind her teddy bear. Hubert takes a step back and goes down on his knees, as he mimes fear of the bear. "Oh look, Hubert's afraid of your bear!" The children in the room then proceed to assure Hubert that the teddy bear will not hurt him.

Hubert celebrates the child by being as the child. He is their friend and their playmate. He skips with the child into their playful fantasy and points out new and wondrous things.

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**Hubert, the Clown**

**David Langdon of Winnipeg, Canada  
Clown Child Life Specialist**

# The Gentle Art of Hubert the Clown . . .

By David Langdon



David Langdon has been working as a clown child life worker for the past nine years at the Children's Hospital at Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg, Canada. He clowns two or three days a week on the floors, and the other days works at the hospital's closed-circuit TV station. The hospital serves not only Manitoba, but the Northwest Territories and northwestern Ontario. Also, they often get children from Saskatchewan and Alberta, especially for their Bone Marrow Program.

David also teaches theater arts at Theatre Craft in Winnipeg.

Every Clown needs a "Clownology" (a cosmology or world-view). Understanding the world view in which you operate as a clown will give your work definition and purpose. What kind of universe does your clown operate in and most importantly what is your clown's function in that universe? Exploring these questions will give focus to your clown work and open up many possibilities that you may have not seen before. What do you see as the qualities of Clown? For instance you may see Clown as primarily a comic or even mischievous character, this may lead you to focus solely on producing laughter. However, you may discover that you are missing the many possibilities of intimacy available through empathic and compassionate qualities in your clown. Happily we don't need to all have the same "cosmology" or work in the same tradition, but our work will benefit from our purposefulness.

My clown, Hubert, is not a doctor character drawn from the culture of the hospital. I understand why there's the clown doctor tradition in playing and satirizing the doctor. I have great respect for those who work in this tradition, but it is not my approach or my "Clownology."

I'm not coming in with a performance. I don't set things up so that I am the performance and you are the audience. Play, not parody or performance is Hubert's mode of relating. He is simply Clown and as Clown, he is as out of place in the hospital as any child. Hubert has no other reason to be in the hospital other than the fact that there are children present. Metaphorically speaking Hubert has followed Child to the hospital. This is my clownology and it compliments the tradition passed to me by Karen Ridd (See HCN Vol. 3.No.2 - Robo the Clown).

*From the Child's world, the Clown is an extremely powerful figure. Clown lives in the realm of play -- a creative realm, where life is wonder-filled with promise and abundant fantasy. Clown celebrates the child -- pays homage to the Child. Clown nurtures, protect, amuses and comforts the Child. Clown brings life and opens a wonderful variety of possibilities into the present moment. Where Child has been wounded or threatened Clown seeks opportunities to draw Child to the path of healing and sanctuary. Rather than having child dance to his tune and leading children on like a Pied Piper, Clown follows Child.*

*Clown seeks out every Child even those hidden in the adult. Clown lifts our heads, presents alternatives and whispers "pierced but not slain," leaving an opening to escape into play.*

Hubert celebrates that Child. He is like a tool that they may or may not choose to use. Despite boredom, loneliness, fear, and/or pain, he brings Child back to the Moment. This glorious revelation can transpire. In the Moment anything is possible, for the Moment is the biblical "twinkling of an eye." However, to do this work one must learn to be still, to listen, to receive and to submit to that Moment.

By coming in as Clown, I'm setting up all kinds of possibilities. The tradition that we work under here is to bring in something that is wonderful and special of the child's world into the hospital. The child just happens to be in the hospital. I want to connect the child with who they are, not who they are in the hospital. Symptoms and complications arising from the child's condition will present themselves, and when they do we will incorporate them into our play. But Hubert's focus is upon the child, the family, and not upon the illness which brings the child into the hospital. As a Child Life Specialist, I have an understanding of the effects of hospitalization on children and their families. I have a knowledge base of child development and medical protocol and procedures. There is, however, a very interesting dualism at play here.

# ... Celebrating the Child

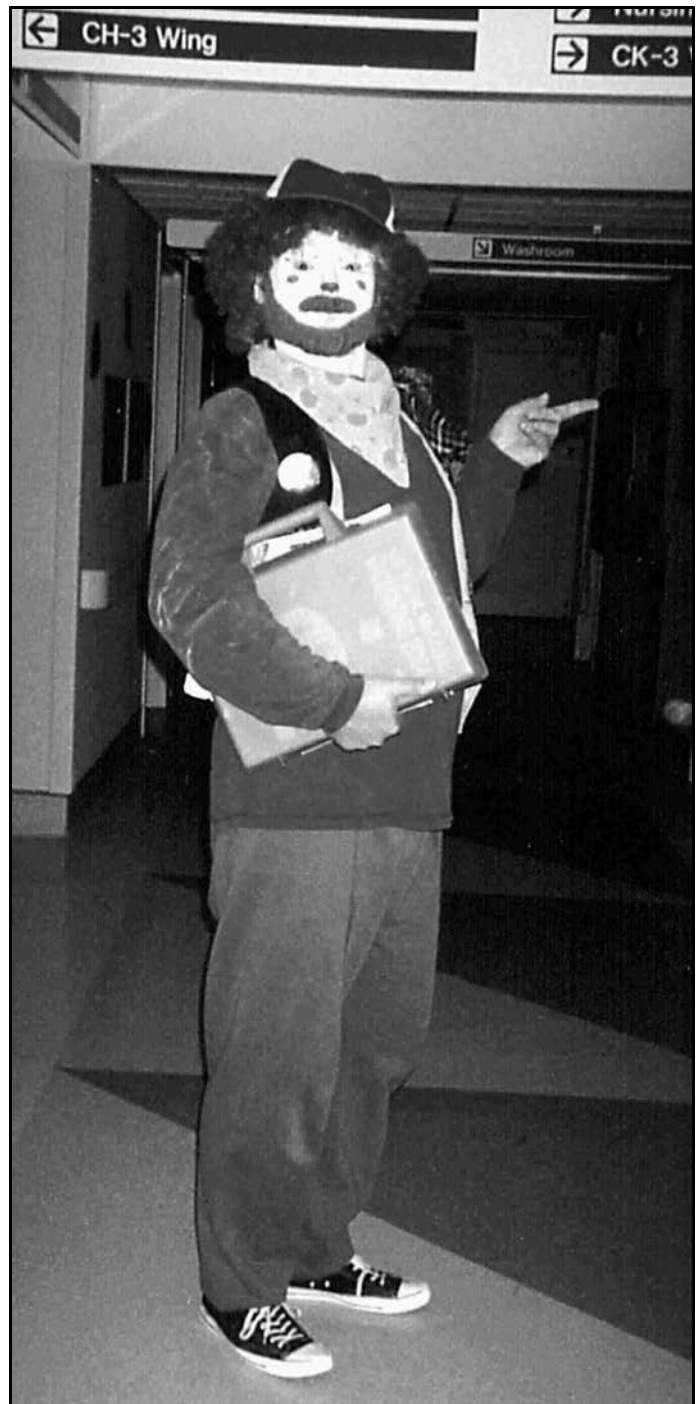
As David, the Child Life Specialist, I need and use the information I have about a child's situation through charts, Cardex and communication with the rest of the health care team, but as Hubert I frequently see as little of these elements in the child as possible. For example, Hubert often helps children during invasive procedures such as radiotherapy, iv starts, lumbar punctures, and physiotherapy. This involves being with the child in the present. Sometimes Hubert acts ignorant of what is going to take place, giving the child an opportunity to inform him. If they are sad, Hubert enters their sadness. He acknowledges their feelings and waits. Many times this is all a child needs in order to move on, to allow themselves to be distracted or entertained. The child has been respected and honored by the clown. This is love in action and in my humble opinion it never fails.

Hubert presents the child with opportunities to seek something new and life-giving in the presence of hardship. Because the possibilities are presented in a playful manner, they are more accessible. Play is a wonderful sanctuary from failure and disappointment. Play lets children explore possibilities safely. Often I see the parents have something huge and dark removed from them when they see their child play.

Hubert seeks to mirror back to the child their uniqueness (the child's beauty and value), so that the child may embrace themselves, embrace what may have been forgotten or misplaced in the hospital. This can take place when Hubert delights in a child's laugh or creative ideas. To show someone delight in their qualities is a very powerful act. It opens the door to deeper levels of communication and intimacy. Often this precipitates a wonderful shift through which the child or parent become the focus of attention, the one being affirmed and embraced by others. The child is in the spotlight and it is very obvious to them that are being celebrated. They often become very free and more committed to the creative play that is taking place.

Intimacy and relationship are Hubert's goals. This is why Hubert is a non-verbal, extremely gentle spirit. His main goal is to connect with the child wherever the child is at. This way the child is not alone. This requires Hubert to be receptive to and aware of the Moment, the here and now in which the child resides.

I find mime very helpful in establishing relationship and intimacy. Many of our children at Winnipeg Children's Hospital do not speak English as their first language. Some of our children do not speak English at all. Others cannot speak and still others are temporarily without speech due to an invasive procedure. Mime provides clown and child with a common language.



I believe mime empowers children as they are very good at reading it and translating it to the more linear thinking adults that are present. Mime provides a wonderful flexibility and freedom. Hubert and child can pursue and explore any idea that arises during their time together. Mime demands full attention and total involvement. You can't daydream while miming. Mime also has a very creative and unique beauty that instills wonder. It is quiet in nature and is often very calming and peaceful.