

Clown Chaplaincy ~

the Spiritual Service of Love and Joy

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What is Clown Chaplaincy? It might best be described as a spiritual service of love and joy which transcends the barriers of traditional religions by going directly to the soul through the vehicle of compassion and laughter. Clown Chaplaincy as taught through The Chaplaincy Institute For Arts & Interfaith Ministries is an interfaith, nondenominational seminary which teaches chaplains and interfaith ministers the skills of clowning as a method of pastoral care for use in hospitals, education, and correctional institutions as well as many other settings. We also train clowns and performers to use their art and talents in a new paradigm of creative ministry.

Why train Clown Chaplains? I am an Interfaith minister and an artist. In June of 1995, I met Patch Adams M. D. at a Healing Arts conference where I was presenting an arts project I had just completed for the Children's Hospital of San Diego. After my presentation This is what Patch said to me "It is not enough to make art about Joy, you must BE JOY!" as a sacred mandate which I did not know how to fulfill, or even how to begin, so I signed myself up to go to Russia and learn from the master. I joined an international group of 27 doctors, nurses, teachers, and artists all surrendering our personal paths of seriousness and professionalism , to seek as pilgrim clowns the fire of hope and joy and healing that we had each had reignited in our hearts by some encounter with Patch.

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We left the airport in our clown clothes and did not take them off for the whole two weeks. On the day we entered the burn hospital Patch addressed our bus load of clowns. He said " burns can be very hard for people to deal with because they are so disfiguring and people are in so much pain. " He said "particularly hard can be burns where people have lost their faces. " He said " just look into their eyes and see the beauty in there and just love them. Tell them with your eyes that they are beautiful, and that you love them. " I have never heard a more perfect description of compassion.

In the tiny room of the burn hospital a little boy was shrieking in pain from the burns over half of his body. Patch and another doctor hovered over his bed crooning, but because of the burns on his back he just faced the wall and wailed. I somehow felt that I should draw for him, and leaning over I placed the paper where he could see it and began to create. I drew a smiling crescent moon with a little clown dancing on it's tip, and as a rainbow appeared, he stopped crying. Patch leaned over to me and said "What you are doing is Real Magic. Don't stop. " I drew for an hour, taping visions of birds, and stars and smiling cats to the wall he was facing, and in the process of drawing for him I remembered my own reason for existing and what chaplaincy and ministry could be. It was to "BE JOY, and to create more beauty in the world.

In that hospital room two new visions of creative ministry were born. The first is my personal chaplaincy/ministry as part of an educational performance duo named "Real Magic " Our swing music for kids brings the uplifting power of music into hospitals, nursing homes and educational/community settings. Also born in that hospital room was The Chaplaincy Institute For Arts & Interfaith Ministries,(both are programs of Healing Through Arts) and the vision that many clowns really had a spiritual vocational calling to use their skills to ease suffering..

During the course of the trip to Russia I listened closely to the things Patch said starting with "NO WHINING " and moving to the statement that "We need to perform public acts of happiness. He said "Joy is a political act " a radical, healing, life affirming, life transforming act. " I would also say that creating joy is a deeply spiritual act. In the face of the greatest suffering I would watch Patch reach out with gentleness and attention and create an exquisite moment of joy. I once asked Patch about religion and he answered "My religion is friendship. " He would talk of his vision of bringing thousands of clowns to areas of war and of surrounding the conflict with red noses and balloons. The only anger I have ever seen him express has been moral outrage over violence, injustice, political abuses of power, and how stingy we are with loving each other and ourselves.

I learned what it means to really be a minister and chaplain not by sitting in a church or listening to a rabbi. I learned the true meaning of ministry from a clown and by offering my skills to a suffering child.

A friend who met Patch recently said "He seems rather manic, " and my response was, "he is a man driven by a vision of healing. He is "A CLOWN ON A MISSION, " a healer of the body and the soul, and the soul of the institution of healing. He is a visionary, a missionary. It is in this spirit which the concept of "Clown Chaplaincy " was created. Many of us have become disillusioned or have been injured by traditional religions, yet we have experienced that magical divine spark renewed in the process of clowning. We have been tickled back into health, and reconnected to our souls. Our sense of purpose as human beings has been restored through love, & laughter. Our world needs visionary individuals and institutions modeling and manifesting hope, compassion, and community. While many institutions recognize the special gifts that clowns can bring, most ask that the services be offered for free.

Clowns deserve to be paid for their services, and they also need proper training for work in healthcare, dealing with death, dying and illness, or the psychology of suffering and working in correctional settings. While hospitals are not always willing to pay for a clown, they will pay for a chaplain. The Joint Commission For Hospital Accreditation passed a mandate in 1998 requiring healthcare facilities to provide pastoral services to those that they serve. Why not dream into a radical new form of fully ordained interfaith ministers and chaplains who are also clowns of the highest order? Why not open the world of clowning to full training as ministers of Joy?

This is the program we are creating through the educational programs of The Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministries.

If this calls to your soul you can visit our website,

www.chaplaincyinstitute.org