

## Taking Time . . . . . Taking Risks from Jeff McMullen

The watch was invented in 1904, and since then everything seems to be getting faster, except the clown's approach to a child, the quietude of a dying person's room, the time to ponder a risk, the gentle approach of a caring clown into teddy bear range of a dying child.

This story exemplifies the concerns the hospital clown faces. Jeff McMullen is an international clown and teacher who worked in his early clown years as a Ronald McDonald clown.



He is also a former Ringling Clown. This is his experience.

Reprinted with permission from his book Just In Time ...Just Isn't Enough! *A guide to help identify and achieve your goals.*

A number of years ago (1983-1997), I had the opportunity to play the character of *Ronald McDonald* for the McDonald's Corporation. My marketplace covered most of Arizona and a portion of Southern California. One of our standard events was "Ronald Day." One day each month we visited as many of the community hospitals as possible, bringing a little happiness into a place where no one ever looks forward to going.

I was very proud to be able to make a difference for children and adults who are experiencing some "down time." The warmth and gratification I would receive stayed with me for weeks. I loved the project, McDonald's loved the project, the kids and adults loved it and so did the nursing and hospital staff.

There were two restrictions placed on me during a visit. First, I could not go anywhere in the hospital without McDonald's personnel (my handlers) as well as hospital personnel. That way, if I were to walk into a room and frighten a child, there was someone there to address the issue immediately. And second, I could not physically touch anyone within the hospital. They did not want me transferring germs from one patient to another. I understood why they had this "don't touch" rule, but I didn't like it. I believe that touching is the most honest form of communication we will ever know. Printed and spoken words can lie; it is impossible to lie with a warm hug.

Breaking either of these rules meant I could lose my job. Towards the end of my fourth year of "Ronald Days," as I was heading down a hallway after a long day in grease paint and on my way home, I heard a little voice, "*Ronald, Ronald.*" I stopped. The soft little voice was coming through a half-opened door. I pushed the door open and saw a young boy, about five years old, lying in his dad's arms, hooked up to more medical equipment than I had ever seen.

Mom was on the other side, along with Grandma, Grandpa and a nurse tending to the equipment. I knew by the feeling in the room that the situation was grave. I asked the little boy his name. He told me "Billy." I did a few simple magic tricks for him.

As I stepped back to say good-bye, I asked Billy if there was anything else I could do for him.

"Ronald, would you hold me?" Such a simple request. But what ran through my mind was that rule. So I told Billy I could not do that right now, but I suggested that he and I color a picture.

Upon completing a wonderful piece of art that we were both very proud of, Billy again asked me to hold him. By this time my heart was screaming "Yes" But my mind was screaming louder. "No! You are going to lose your job!"

This second time that Billy asked me, I had to ponder why I could not grant the simple request of a little boy who probably would not be going home. I asked myself why was I being logically and emotionally torn apart by someone I had never seen before and probably would never see again. "Hold me" It was such a simple request, and yet . . . I searched for any reasonable response that would allow me to leave. I could not come up with a single one. It took me a moment to realize that in this situation, losing my job may not be the disaster I feared. Was losing my job the worst thing in the world? Did I have enough self belief that if I did lose my job, I would be able to pick up and start again? The answer was a loud, bold affirming "Yes!" I could pick up and start again. So what was the risk? Just that if I lost my job, it probably would not be long before I would lose first my car, then my home . . . and to be honest with you, I really liked these things. But I realized that at the end of my life, the car would have no value and neither would the house. The only things that had steadfast value were experiences.

Once I reminded myself that the real reason I was there was to bring a little happiness to an unhappy environment, I realized that I really faced no risk at all . . . I sent Mom, Dad, Grandma and Grandpa out of the room," and my two McDonald's escorts out to the van. The nurse tending the medical equipment stayed, but Billy asked her to stand and face the corner.

Then I picked up this little wonder of a human being. He was so frail and so scared. We laughed and cried for 45 minutes. And talked about the things that worried him. Billy was afraid that his little brother might get lost coming home from kindergarten next year, without Billy to show him the way. He worried that his dog wouldn't get another bone because Billy had hidden the bones in the house before going back to the hospital and now he couldn't remember where he put them. These are problems to a little boy who knows he is not going home.

On my way from the room with tear streaked makeup running down my neck, I give Mom and Dad my real name and phone number (another automatic dismissal for Ronald McDonald), but I figured that I was gone and had nothing to lose, and said if there was anything the McDonalds' Corporation or I could do, to give me a call and consider it done. Less than 48 hours later, I received a phone call from Billy's mom. She informed me that Billy had passed away. She and her husband simply wanted to thank me for making a difference in their little boy's life. Billy's mom told me that shortly after I left the room, Billy looked at her and said, "'Mom, I don't care anymore if I see Santa this year because I was held by Ronald McDonald."

Sometime we must do what is right for one moment, regardless of the perceived risk. Only experiences have value, and the one biggest reason people limit their experience is because of the risk involved.

For the record McDonald's did find out about Billy and me, but given the circumstances, permitted me to retain my job. I continued as a *Ronald* for another year before leaving the corporation to share the story of Billy and how important it is to take risks.

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