

The Sacred Clown

By Dagen Julty, "Happy Dan, the Music Man"
from Shutesbury Massachuset

Clowns have been entertaining us for most of our history as human beings on this planet. Up until very recently their role has been clearly defined: the clown was the counterpart of the community shaman. A shaman is what we would now call a "spiritual leader." We have no basis for understanding the function of the original clown because our relationship with our spiritual leaders has changed dramatically in these modern times. We still have priests, rabbis, gurus and "enlightened" teachers in our culture but we have lost a clear understanding and a healthy respect for spirituality primarily due to our distance from the natural world. Long ago, we all were united by our spiritual beliefs and our shared rituals of sacred expression. Our spiritual leaders gave us direction, guidance, and insight. They taught us the techniques of inner growth and accompanied us in our spiritual path. They unified the community by speaking the common wisdom.

Nowadays, the role of the spiritual leader - the shaman - is often vague, marginal, sometimes eccentric, and always up for scrutiny. Our religious lives are a private affair and shared at most with a closed community of fellow worshipers. At some time in our lives, we have all grapple with isolation, confusion and spiritual frustration. From a global perspective, this amounts to a spiritual crisis. The consequences of this crisis are clearly evident in our uncertain moral values, our sense of alienation within the world community, and our blatant disregard for the natural world.

The clowns of today would benefit greatly from understanding the true function of our predecessors. These are our roots, this is our tradition! There is much information available in the library and on-line.

Historically, the clown was known as the "backwards shaman." His role (clowns and shamans were exclusively male) was to offer another point of view, often in the form of confusing contradictions. They embodied the "shadow" element in order to balance the light that was presented by the shaman. Clowns would often mock the sacred and be downright irreverent, even blasphemous, in order to shock. This was with the intention of inviting their people to decide for themselves what was really true. People get stuck when they are afraid of change. The original clown would facilitate change by using "reverse psychology" to get the energy moving. They would do this theatrically, by acting out the hopes and fears of the people while never showing if they were being true or false. These clowns were feared and respected by the community and were afforded a high status. By having actual contact with both the darker, mysterious side of life as well as the uplifting inspiration of the shaman, the people were better informed about the whole picture. Thus, they were invited to make a conscious choice for themselves between the dark and the light.

This is an essential process in our spiritual awakening. We see it acted out today in young people's attraction to the shadow side and then their eventual conversion to the light. The original clown made this whole process smoother, easier, and more acceptable. The original clown would reinterpret the wisdom and inspiration of the shaman in the accessible languages of humor, magic, theater, song and dance, stories and practical jokes. The underlying



messages of both the clown and the shaman were the same: faith, reverence, respect, community values, personal integrity - the values that a functional society is built upon. The "clowns" were teachers, tricksters, spiritual leaders, entertainers, and fools all rolled up into one lively and highly respected personality. They were honored as community leaders and their work had a significant impact on their people.

In the modern pursuit of materialistic values, we have lost our moral, natural and spiritual values as well as our social fabric. We are a society of reckless abandon crying out for nurturing, understanding, and inspiration. These cries are heard most clearly in the hidden voices of the sick, the forgotten, the downtrodden, and of the very young.

These "contrary shamans" were also called "sacred clowns." It is no accident that we are seeing a resurgence of this tradition in the form of the caring clowns that visit hospital rooms, death beds, orphanages and impoverished foreign communities. Our work is not only essential but it is timely. The ancient voices of the Heyokah, the Koshare, the Trickster, the Hano, and many, many other spirited merrymakers from around the globe, throughout history, are returning to us in these desperate and pivotal times in the form of the caring "sacred clown."

Not only should we feel honored, privileged, and proud of our work, but if we take a moment to reach back in time, we can feel guided and blessed as well!