

Hospital Clown Newsletter

A Publication for Clowns In Community and World Service

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Now Let Us Play!

Roly Bain was only eight when he wrote in his schoolbook that he wanted to be a clown, visit hospitals and make people happy. We all have different very relevant paths to clown-dom. Roly's was through the church. He was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1978. But that clown seed was planted early and sprouted in 1982 as he helped found Holy Fools, a "loose-knit network of loose nits" committed to clown ministry. In 1990 he resigned his parish in London and did a year at Foot Time - a circus school in Bristol. He's been clowning full-time ever since.

In *Playing the Fool*, Roly writes "My constant invitation and chorus, is simply, "Let us play". It is what clowns do -- we play. We play with ideas and situations and see what we can make from them. We play with people who want to play with us, and encourage those who don't want to play not to be such spoilsports and to join in. We play with words and thus make outrageous puns. We play with institutions and traditions and authorities to test their relevance and authenticity. We play with status and the status quo. And I play endlessly in church! It's what churches are for. They are house of prayer but they are also places to play, to take leisure, to simply let go."

Roly plays not only in church, but in schools, prisons, and hospitals. For him clowning is a calling and privilege. It involves a sacred play between audience and clown. Sacred not in a religious sense so much as from the essence of the human spirit -- love.



Roly Bain, England's Holy Fool

2003 Note from Shobi - Editor:

I truly love everything Roly writes. I could go on quoting him the whole newsletter, and I daresay with the kindness in his heart he would let me.

Although Roly is ordained as an Anglican priest, his message is not just for Christians. He serves all of human spirit. His books are full of inspiration for every clown regardless of their religious persuasion. His latest book, *Playing the Fool*, contains his personal experiences as he came to be England's Holy Fool. There are chapters on Humor and Healing, Circus and Sacrament, the Feast of Fools, and Prayer and Playfulness that will amaze you, delight you and inspire you.

It is very difficult for Shobi to write about Roly because he does it so well himself. Every sentence he writes is so full of wisdom and profundity, I have trouble choosing what to include. Following are a few more paragraphs from a brilliant clown with a great heart who is in world service!

2012 Note:

As of 2012 Roly's books are available on Amazon.com. Many of the new copies are pricy as collector items. But there seems to be many used copies available.

Clowning Glory Roly Bain, Patrick Forbes and Chic Jacob. 1995

Fools Rush In: A Call to Christian Clowning By Roly Bain 1993

Playing the Fool by Roly Bain, 2001

BUT you can get a LOT of Roly on his website

www.rollybain.co.uk

Including DVD and his books.

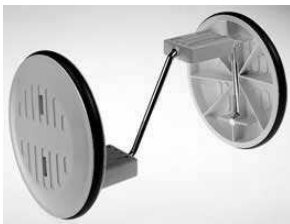
ROLY

From Play the Fool: About his program at Odstock Hospital.

"There is no explicit evangelistic intent, for I go as clown, as vulnerable lover, to see what happens next. As always in hospitals, I wear a white coat but it has big pockets and multi-coloured braiding. Otherwise I retain my normal costume, including my outsized clerical collar, so people make connections as they wish."

By Roly Bain of Bristol, England

I've just finished doing eighteen months of weekly visits to a hospital here in UK and I guess I'm more convinced than ever that it's in the corridors that some of the best work is done. The project has been in four 'terms' of about twelve weeks each with a longer gap before the last batch of visits - and that made a difference too. You have to start building up relationships and expectations almost from scratch after a time away as the turnover of both staff and patient is a fast one. I was welcomed back by many; others were again bewildered at the sight of a clown pedaling around the hospital.



I traveled everywhere on *funwheels* - two wheels connected by a crankshaft - and a rotator, which is a three-wheeled walker that elderly and infirm people often use. Dressed in a doctor's coat with colored trim and the rest of my costume, I was a sight to gladden the hearts and hopes of many. I had six base wards to visit

regularly, including the hospice, the children's ward, an elderly rehabilitation ward and the spinal unit. It meant there was a chance to build relationships, especially in the Spinal Unit where the adult patients were all in for a minimum of three months, usually a year - also in the Hospice where the palliative care involved a lot of outpatients who came and went, before their final stay. Children on traction and those with recurring problems became old friends. Tuesday was clown day and some at least looked forward to it - and many people who said in the corridors and wards, 'It must be Tuesday - Roly's here!'

But for all the individual encounters at bedsides, and there were lots of them, it's still the corridors that beckon. I think the greatest contribution I made to the hospital, and it soon became my prime aim admittedly, was that I manage to put a smile on the face of the hospital.

Hospitals are so full of fear. Full of huge and forbidding, endless echoing corridors, peopled by clinical dull uniforms rushing at great speed, and unintelligibly signposted. It is a nightmare realm designed so that everyone feels lost and thus at the mercy of strangers whose language we can barely understand. Hospitals can be quite soulless places, vast and impersonal, an alien world - and full of fear.

Patients are full of fear - about what might become of them, about some of the drugs and machines and the forms to be filled in and all the medical paraphernalia, never mind how people are coping at home without them. And there's all the questions they're asked and can't answer, and all the questions they want to ask which remain either unasked or unanswered.

Visitors have similar anxieties, but dare not betray their worries and fears. Many come with laudable loyalty but very little pleasure. Really, the hospital bedside is the last place they want to be. But in they come, fixed smiles on their faces, hoping they'll be allowed out before too many minutes have passed.

Nurses have fears, about things they haven't been able to do or jobs they might not be up to do or things that they did too hurriedly. With the pressures in UK of under-funding and under-staffing, theirs is an impossible job. Combine that with all the high-tech, high stress stuff, and it's another nightmare scenario where they can't possibly fulfill everyone's perceived needs and demands, and they're doomed to failure.

And doctors, of course, have to be flawless and perfect - some of them, sadly, think they are! They have to recognize and diagnose every illness and condition immediately, cure everyone promptly, and restore them to a better health than they ever had before. They must have a wondrous bedside manner as well as clinical expertise. And, of course, no one in their care must die and preferably not deteriorate. Fear and Failure - two big "F" words that are the two curses of modern hospitals.

Then enter the Fool - a much better "F" word! - the vulnerable lover who belongs in the vulnerable places and knows that perfect love banishes fear; who plays with failure and knows that mistakes are merely opportunities - a chance to be surprised and go somewhere different, a new adventure. Failure isn't the great big bogeyman he's made out to be. He's a humble companion on the journey. He's really the great Impostor. Comedy, or at least clowning, is based on failure, on falling - but in comes the clown every time with a smile on his face and hope in his twinkling eyes.

Death isn't a failure, it's natural. Getting something wrong isn't failure, it's merely human. Being ill isn't a sign of failure, it's just something that happens. And we all do what we can do, not what we can't. If you've seen the film *Monsters Inc.* you'll know what the *scream factory* is, and that's the common perception of hospitals, it seems to me -- scream factories! But what the monsters discover during the course of the film is that one laugh is more powerful than ten screams. Enter the clown who simply wants to play.

I had a basic rule of thumb in the hospital - to say "Hello" to absolutely everyone I passed - partly because usually they all ignore each other and there's no contact or communication at all. They're all brief encounters on the edge of a smile. Some people, of course, ignore me completely and pass by on the other side, oblivious to this apparently invisible clown. Some sneer. But most smile, laugh, comment, joke, and are grateful. The response I heard constantly was along the lines of "You've got to smile", or "Thank you for making my day" or "This is brilliant", and I'm glad to report that laughter followed me round the place - it's enormously gratifying and fulfilling to leave laughter in your wake.

One thing that struck me forcibly when I started the project was that it was like walking into a church or a library, where you felt as though you were trespassing, where nobody talked and certainly never smiled, where people whispered and looked daggers at strangers, where people passed like trains in the night, and where people generally only spoke when



the staff could make fools of themselves, at least enough of them to make a difference, and give everyone else a chance of laughter and healing and hope. Clowns make a difference to people but they can also transform institutions. "You make us human. You make us smile," said a grateful staff member.

The Transformation Game

What am I getting at? Well, of course I was there for the patients, but there's a much broader horizon too. Traditionally the clown's task is to bring down the mighty from their seats and exalt the humble and meek. I tried to do both, certainly the latter in exalting, lifting up the patients, cherishing them and nurturing dreams. But equally since in laughter all are equal, some of the high and mighty had to be reminded of that fact. The porter is just as important as the chief executive of the hospital, the patient as important as the consultant. None should take themselves too seriously. While I didn't set out with high and mighty ideals and aims, I merely set out with my usual invitation, "Let us Play." I discovered that once the clown enters the scene, things happen, things change, and I have no control over any of it. What am I getting at? Don't belittle what we do as clowns, and never forget what we are. We're in the transformation game whether we like it or not. Of course, we can't possibly believe that or else we'd start taking ourselves too seriously, but I strongly suspect that's what clowns are for - to transform and heal, and make transformation and healing possible.

It was a kind of wilderness experience. I suppose it's all part of the clown as shaman tradition, and it certainly makes sense. It is precisely because we play with our vulnerability and laugh at our failures that we have such power. We inhabit and speak of a mystical world where all things are possible and nothing is ever as good or as bad as it seems.

I enjoyed Odstock Hospital enormously. It was quite exhausting - it's much easier to roll up and do a show, but this was reacting and provoking for five hours at a time. And yet I know it benefitted me, and I hope it benefitted them. I daresay I'll be back!

– Roly

"Clowning from the soul suggests a profoundness that all clowns and storytellers must seek if they are not only to tell their story but discover it. Clowning from the soul speaks of spirituality as well as compassion, and suggests it comes from the depths."

From Roly's chapter on *Humor and Healing*

[At the Odstock Hospital] "I arrived unannounced in one adult ward, and there was a man in bed in a room of his own just near the entrance. There was a flicker of interest as I pedaled slowly by, so I reversed and just waited by this door. I wasn't invited in, so didn't go in, but he was friendly and wanted to know what all this was about. We had a long conversation and he became quite animated. I didn't do any clowning as such but it was appropriate on this occasion just to talk and to listen as he talked about himself too, and his predicament. There are times when all you're there for is to talk and, even more important, to listen. There are times when you just sit and hold hands and say nothing at all, but just by being there it makes a difference.

spoken to. It needed someone to speak, and fool that I am, I decided it was up to me. Thus the pedals and the greetings. I instituted "the most wonderful smile in the hospital" award, which I chose to give the cashier at the little bank that opens twice a week on the premises. I made sure I loitered often by the Reception at the main entrance and welcomed people to "my little hospital." I played around in the canteen and by the shop. We spun plates and blocked corridors in the process. I had fun.

My basic premise was that I was there to enjoy every moment and every moment's possibilities - I needed to remind myself of the fact rather often! And I knew that I was probably the only person on site with that aim and purpose in mind. But it's contagious!

You see I'm foolish enough to believe that clowns make a difference. It often takes the professional fool to turn up before the rest of them are prepared to make fools of themselves. But wouldn't it be wonderful if

“Clowns talk to anyone and will spend time with them, because they are foolish enough to touch the untouched and the untouchables, being no respecter of reputations, whether good or bad. We take people at face value. . .

“But rarely does the course of clowning run smoothly. In another ward I was having a great if raucous time with a couple of people in opposite beds, when I turned to the lady in the adjacent bed and only half-seriously apologized for all the noise. “I should think so too!” she snapped back, for she wasn’t in the least amused. You do have to be sensitive to everyone in any situation, and you have to be appropriate to them and their circumstances. Having said that, it’s no good treating the hospital ward like a library and tiptoeing round ever so carefully, disturbing no one and just minding your own business – that’s how everyone else behaves and that’s not why I’m there.

“There were a number of rejections and refusals through the week, which is inevitable, and a lot of the time I just felt terribly vulnerable, but there is no ministry without that side of it. I went into the Burns Unit on a particular invitation to see a young boy of about nine who had severe burns all over his body. He was surrounded by family when I put my head round the door, and he took one look at me and was pretty scornful. The family looked at me with even greater derision, as if to say “What have we got to laugh about?” But I hung on for a while, and as I turned to leave the boy thanked me quite genuinely for coming to see him. Sometimes you just have to take the flak; it’s what you’re there for. The clown’s fate and calling is to be the scapegoat. All ministry is carried out with a certain amount of trepidation. Nevertheless, a bit of creative anarchy and a lot of laughter remain exactly what the doctor ordered, even if clowns need both the will and the stamina to deliver them.

“Each person in any hospital is an individual with individual needs, and needing to be treated as such. A person in bed shouldn’t suddenly be treated as a case of whatever the illness happens to be – she’s still Shirley or Mum or Gran. The doctor in his menacing white coat isn’t just a doctor, he’s Doctor Hopkins, with a wife and a sick child at home. Clowns take the time to call people by name and to listen too. They invite us to play, and somehow embody our hopes and our fears. We know they understand because they show us our selves and help us to laugh, because of and despite everything. They’ll share and provoke both laughter and tears, break the taboos of our imagination and making, and take us to places we never dared dream of. Now that’s what I call patient care! Clowning with passion and compassion works wonders.”

Clowning works at so many different levels at the same time, from the most simple to the most profound. Clowns aren’t just for children, that’s for sure, but clowns do allow everyone to be childlike

This painting of Roly Bain by David Cobley shows him performing on a slack robe.



Prisons - More Dehumanizing Places from [Playing the Fool](#)

“I visited a lot of prisons as clown. Between September 2000 and May 2001, I went to thirty-three of them, thanks largely to the Faith and Foolishness Trust which supports my work and ministry. The Trust received a grant specifically to pay for me to go into prisons and to schools who can’t afford me, for prison chaplaincy budgets are even worse than school ones. The prisons are all quite different in that some are open, some closed; some male, some female, some mixed; some for remand prisoners, other purely local, some specializing in vulnerable prisoners; and each has a different category of security. But they’re all the same in terms of the needs of the prisoners, for in essentially dehumanizing places there is a crying need for laughter, and laughter, of course is the great liberator –it brings freedom.

At one prison in the North-East, two officers were assigned to me, because the authorities were worried by the props I was taking in. Prisons tend to get twitchy when you want to take ladders and rope inside! [One of Roly’s main acts is done on a circus “slack rope” - a slacktight rope. See above.] Both officers were very stand-offish to begin with. One took one look at my props and then at me, and in all seriousness said to the chaplain who was there to greet me that he was sure the sign outside said that this was a prison. When the chaplain replied that the prisoners there were only human too, the other officer jabbed his finger in the direction of the prison wings and swore that there were no humans in there at all.

“Anyway, as it happened they were very helpful unloading all the props, and very friendly too. They loved the show – we had to do it twice, once for the ordinary prisoners and once for the vulnerable prisoners who had to be kept separate. The two officers were really involved and laughed uproariously, regardless of the fact that they were with all these prisoners that they apparently despised. At the end they shook me warmly by the hand, wished me much luck, and thanked me for a wonderful morning. They had become more fully human that morning, and at least for a while had enjoyed themselves in the company of other humans who for that short time were their equals. Laughter is a great leveler.

The Laughter of Play

“It is a great achievement really to make prisoners laugh, and even more to help them cry. It depends on the regime, of course, and some prisons have much better vibes than others, but it seems to me that laughter and tears are a great threat because they dissolve the defense mechanisms that have been so carefully constructed and seem so necessary to survival in imprisonment.

“In Winchester Prison, a youngish man confessed that it was the first time he’d laughed since he’d been in. I don’t know how long that had been, but as he left to go back to his cell he was still smiling. Another prisoner was tearfully grateful that now he could see light in his darkness, that there truly was light at the end of the tunnel. But almost all prison congregation are quite hard to begin with because they have to give themselves permission to respond and react. Faced with a clown, they are hesitant to commit themselves.

“The easy way out is to laugh at me – there are always a few who make that obvious. But by the end you hope that they’re laugh with you, and most of the time that’s true. You take them on a journey, help them tunnel out of the prison they’ve made for themselves, and by the end they’re feeling human, sometimes for the first time in years.

“One prison chaplain at a female prison was so thankful, not least of all because the women were able to laugh at such silly things, as she put it. It was the laughter of play, a laughter of childhood – and given the childhood of many of them, that was miraculous.

“At the same prison, the last of four services was for the detox unit, and a rather shrewish looking woman in the front row raised her eyes to the heavens as I entered and said loudly, “for God’s sake, I’m twenty-eight years old.” By the end she was enjoying it!”

From the Chapter on The Calling of Clowns

“The clown gets to the heart of things. His secret is his simplicity. KISS is the clown’s mnemonic: Keep it Simple Stupid. Yet the clown isn’t simple at all, if by simple we mean stupid. The clown plays the fool. He doesn’t need to know what happens next nor even why he’s saying what he’s saying. He concentrates on the simplicity of the now on the present moment in all its sacredness, and the rest can wait til he gets there. Perhaps in that childlikeness lies the secret of his wisdom, for it is that which gives him the capacity to see and even make all things new. There is a wisdom in naivete that returns us to the gods, and in my experience it is something of this that has brought me and others much closer to God than I or they would otherwise dreamt of.”