

Clowning Helped Set Me Free

by Laura "Pixie" Haldane



I didn't want to become a clown. I just wanted to learn how to lighten up and to do something good.

My first clowning experience was a trip to China with 40 clowns and Patch Adams in September 2000. The invitation said "No clowning experience, just a desire to spread love and have fun in a silly costume." I had the desire to spread love and fun and I wanted to learn how to do it.

Most of my life people said "You're too serious." Others said, "You seem aloof and unfriendly." In reality, I've always valued and enjoyed humor, and I love people. While dismayed by these misperception, I understood them. I tend to worry and to focus my attention on meeting responsibilities. I grew up in a time and a place in which the rule was you do your chores first and then you may play. Today, the chores never get done. I've had to learn to set them aside occasionally. Otherwise I'd never get to play.

The appearance of being aloof and unfriendly came from my silence. For about 25 years, silence was my protection and my prison. I was afraid to talk. I was afraid of the panic attacks that came from nowhere and flooded my mind making it impossible to think. Panic constricted my chest and I couldn't breathe. If I managed to say anything, my voice was strained and shaky. I was afraid of what people would think if they saw me panic for no apparent reason. On the occasions when it happened I was mortified. I imagined people thought I was crazy. Talking was risky, so I kept silent.

I don't mean to say that I never talked to anyone. Talking to family and close friends remained safe. But categories of people and situations that I associated with panic attacks were not. For example, talking to strangers carried a high risk of having an attack. It became something I avoided, which made the period following moving to Arizona in 1981, 2000 miles from family and life-long friends, one of the darkest times in my life. You can't make new friends if you don't talk to people. The desperate loneliness and isolation I felt were eventually my incentive to get help.

I didn't start clowning until many years later. By that time I'd made considerable progress. I had friends and I'd done a lot of talking as an academic advisor and college instructor. I'd stopped having panic attacks. The fear of them, however, while lessened was not

gone. I remained cautious and still avoided some situations. I often had to muster up the courage to talk.

When I clowning in China I found myself singing, laughing, hugging and playing with other clowns and Chinese people. It was incredible to me. The heart-to-heart contact I felt with people on that trip was deeply moving to me—a person who had spent many years feeling isolated and alone. Feeling connected to other people impelled me, upon my return home, to begin clowning at a nearby nursing home. I wanted to make sure no one there felt forgotten and alone. Clowning was a way to do this.

Clowning on my own after the China trip was not easy. I wanted to quit several times. I was confident I was doing something good and I felt I was being called to clown. Still, I prayed on more than one

occasion imploring God to please not ask me to be a clown. I don't like being the center of attention. I don't think I am funny. And mostly, I was tired of doing things that were hard to do because I'm afraid of doing them. I wanted to give; I just wanted it to be something easier.

Despite the prayers, I continued to feel called to clown. And I couldn't get away from it. My compassion for lonely people in a nursing home kept calling me back. Their smiles and appreciation rewarded me. They started becoming friends who looked forward to my visits. Kind feedback from other clowns was encouraging. My husband (Johnny Sunshine) started clowning with me at the nursing home. It was fun doing it with him. Clowning became easier.



Pixie putting on her driving shoes and in her new car

It was about two years before I began to realize that clowning was making me less fearful. I had noticed early on that as *Pixie*, my clown character, I was less afraid and more willing to take risks than I was as Laura. I discovered later that I was becoming less fearful as Laura, too. Every once in a while I'd astonish myself by doing something with little anxiety that had previously been petrifying.

How could this be? For years I had been facing my more anxiety-provoking situations by spending hours preparing for them. I planned and rehearsed what I was going to say. I gave myself pep talks and did relaxation exercises. This kept my level of anxiety at a manageable level so I could do what I needed or wanted to do. Now I was facing the same sorts of situations amazingly calm.

I know the key to overcoming fears is to confront them. You have to do the very things you are afraid to do. Sometimes you have to do them over and over again until the fear finally loses its power. Clowning gave me an easier way to confront fears. *Pixie* is essentially my playful self at 7 years old. I wasn't afraid of having panic attacks at 7; it was long before they started. *Pixie* is less inhibited. She doesn't worry so much about making mistakes or appearing foolish. These are expected clown behaviors. She says and does things that Laura is afraid to try. So, *Pixie* has been going around opening the closet doors and looking under the bed and Laura has been able to discover there are no horrific monsters hiding there.

More than that, I have received so much love, acceptance, encouragement and support as *Pixie* that I now feel the safety that comes from being among friends. The possibility of a panic attack is no longer terrifying as I know that if it happens I'll still be accepted and loved.

Two and a half years ago I set out on a journey wanting to spread love and fun in a silly costume. I continued clowning as a way to give to others. It took some time, but I've now come to see that clowning has also been a gift to me.