

## Deep Clowning ~ by John Glick, MD



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Sasha was 8 years old. It was the third day after his surgery for Pott's Disease, tuberculosis of the spine. He was in pain and very weak. I was the clown his nurse had pulled out of the hallway of the Moscow Orthopedic Hospital to play with him. I lay down ever so gently beside him, so as not to disturb his wound, or the IV carrying a blood transfusion into his thin, pale arm.

We played with finger puppets, making silly noises. His lion kept scaring my rabbit. We were laughing (softly) when into the room strode the surgeon making his rounds. I began to gently leave the bed, but the surgeon, in English, told me "No, please. Stay. I heal the body, you heal the spirit."

So there it is, "body and spirit," the partnership of doctor and clown. The doctor, clinically objective, at the bedside, working on the patient. The clown, playing with the patient, in the bed, exploring the subjective experience of being human.

It's difficult to delineate skills for this kind of clowning. There are those who give lists (props, costumes, tricks, techniques; the do's and don'ts of clowning.). Having made many "mistakes," I found my way to the heart of clowning through the wrong turns, the botched interactions, the "oops, sorry." Mistakes guide me, humble me. I've learned to not be afraid of making wrong choices. After all, a clown has an immunity of sorts. I am supposed to turn left when everyone else turns right, look up as others look down. Crawling in bed with a seriously ill 8-year-old surgical patient would be a mistake in most settings. Here, it helped.

I believe there are many clowns who have traditional clown skills, but are less effective than those who, though having fewer of these skills, do have what might be called meta-skills that make them not only great clowns, but healers of spirit.

The most important meta-skills (there are many) are bound up in a person's humanity and character. The most important is the capacity to love, to love not only what is easy but what is difficult, particularly the kind of difficulties experienced at the bedside, in the bed, of the suffering person.

Other meta-skills are compassion, mindfulness, trust, humor, playfulness, courage, spontaneity, humility, honesty. All stem from the capacity to express and receive love. Remember, this kind of clowning is not performance, but service. In deep clowning, the gesture is made towards the suffering one, a gesture where creative spontaneous play, based on love, can for one moment bridge the distance between two people, a giver and receiver, now both together, sharing. That gesture can, for the suffering one, be a triumph over suffering, a momentary break from victim-ville, a healing.