

## The Clown and the Great Turning



*Jump for Joy, Michael Leunig*

Chris Seeley, May 2008  
Writings at the end of the Nose-to-Nose clown facilitation course  
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*The clown shows us our awkward human condition  
and encourages us to laugh at ourselves.  
The clown points out our vulnerability.  
The clown quickly forgets and moves on to the next disaster.  
We try to clean things up but in the process make them even dirtier.*

Wes Nisker

*... we humans stand at a defining moment that presents us with an irrevocable choice.  
Our collective response will determine how our time is remembered  
for as long as the human species survives.*

David Korten

*The old world having passed away, no other world will be possible to us;  
we shall have no world at all, unless we change fundamentally our attitude towards life*

Cecil Collins

*The great fool lives outside the blinding circle of routine,  
remaining open to the surprise of each moment.  
We are the foolish ones, complacent in our understanding.  
We take for granted the miraculous dance of creation,  
but the great fool continuously sees it as if for the first time.*

Wes Nisker

*“Hang on, more is going on here, but people aren't saying it.”  
I wanted to know what they really thought, what they were saying to themselves  
that they couldn't say out loud. People lie constantly, we all do.  
I think we suffer from the absence of the personal.  
When society lapses into the personal it gets all maudlin and inept and clumsy.  
Because we are not used to incorporating spontaneous, natural, truthful response.*

Michael Leunig

*The Great Turning is a name for the essential adventure of our time:  
the shift from the self-destructing industrial growth society  
to a life-sustaining civilization.  
It is happening now.*

Joanna Macy

*Every human being is an artist, a freedom being,  
called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions,  
thinking and structures that shape and condition our lives.*

Joseph Beuys

## May we live in interesting times

As the industrial growth society<sup>1</sup> frays at the edges and starts to unravel, we face an unknowable future. We simply can't know in advance if our many efforts to create new, more resilient world structures will bring about the life sustaining society we need for us and our planet to flourish together. We can't know in advance if we'll be able to change our minds enough to step out of one way of being and into another with good grace and creativity.

*How do we each get used to the idea that we are acting into the unknown?*

*How do we learn to respond to the unexpected complexities of ecosystems collapse and regeneration?*

*How do we stay present as our world shifts shape around us and as we shape it through our actions and attitudes?*

*How do we learn to perceive our utter dependence on and interconnection with the planetary systems of which we are a part?*

We need to craft ways of acting into the unknowable with resilience, curiosity and playfulness. We must improvise, drawing on all the ways that we come to know our world. The expert, linear, left brain, industrial mind can't achieve such an "integrating synthesis" alone, nor can it do so as "an accumulation of different brains. It must occur in each of the brains" (Max-Neef, 200X). This means working in ways that expand each of our ways of knowing – even if we are not "good" at all those different ways of knowing. We need to "hold [our] rational breath" (Rust, 2005) to allow these other (imaginative, right brain, intuitive, unbounded, playful) ways of knowing to flourish and inform us. We need a right brain for a life worth living, and yet, in Western society "we don't just not engage the skills of the right hemisphere, we mock them" (Taylor, 2006). Artist Cecil Collins agrees when he says: "only those who believe that work is the be-all and end-all of life can be exploited successfully in the commercial, political, non-religious conception of life of modern society... Thus is poetic imagination more and more outlawed by subtle neglect, or imprisoned by mediocrity into official forms... (Collins, 2002:97).

*I have to let go of what people think of me.*

We don't have to be "good" to get value from this; but we do need to be radically connected to our process. We need to pay attention. We need to develop *connective practices* (Sacks, 2008) becoming like Buckminster Fuller's *comprehensivists* (Fuller XXXX). We need to evolve the ways of *transdisciplinarity* (Max-Neef, 200X). We need to act with attention, with a sense of intent, with questions and no answers, with conviction and uncertainty. We need to be prepared to risk looking (and being) stupid.

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<sup>1</sup> "Industrial growth society" was coined as a phrase by Norwegian ecologist, Sigmund Kvaløy, and has subsequently been taken up extensively by systems thinker and ecologist, Joanna Macy. It refers to an economic system dependent on accelerating growth.

*Imagine stepping onto an empty stage,  
you have no script,  
you have no idea,  
nothing.  
Breathe.  
Look at us.  
Let us look at you,  
something will happen.*

The way archetypes of clowns and fools<sup>2</sup> perceive and act into the world is a fundamental part of our ability to respond to the complexities and possibilities of the Great Turning. Such complexities are inherently unknowable in advance. We are not in control. We step away from the norms of the industrial growth society. We step together onto the empty stage. We do not know what will happen. We are naïve. This is serious play.

*God let us be serious.  
Face to face.  
Heart to heart.  
Let us be fully present.  
Strongly present.  
Deeply serious.  
The closest we may come  
to innocence.*

Michael Leunig, 2006

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<sup>2</sup> Four closely interrelated archetypes are at play in this arena: the *clown*, the *fool*, the *jester*, the *trickster* (and there's also the character of the *buffoon*). This writing relates to a particular tradition of clowning which is emphatically *not* the painted face gaudy circus clown which has traumatised many people. The highly improvised tradition I have experienced takes the clown out of the circus and owes more to improvisation and to physical theatre, deriving from the French theatre school of Jacques LeCoq, the French clown school Bataclown, the Italian performer Dario Fo and the English clown school, Nose to Nose. It is imbued with the sense of "unconditional positive regard" advocated by humanistic psychotherapist Carl Rogers. American Buddhist, Wes Nisker (2001), makes the following distinctions between the archetypes (according to his definitions, the archetype I am familiar with is like Nisker's clown shot through with glimpses of the great fool):

**Clown:** the most human of the archetypes, the everyman figure, showing us our vulnerability and our awkward human condition and encouraging us to laugh at ourselves. Charlie Chaplin is one such clown. "*The clown has his feet on the ground and his head in the clouds*" (Gladwell, 2002-2008).

**Fool:** Nisker mentions two types of fool, the foolish fool and the great fool. Both are innocent. The foolish fool clumsily tries to live by the rules, but is inept, unsophisticated and silly. The great fool, Nisker says, is a rarity. At home anywhere, this manifestation of the archetype lives different values from the rest of us, shows us the impossibility of knowing anything for certain and stands in awe of the ordinary, seeing as if for the first time.

**Jester:** the wit and the critic who works with words and double entendres to expose the establishment's lies and makes light of the contemporary social scene. A character whose teeth and tongue are equally sharp. The court jester is the king's own fool.

**Trickster:** the rascal of folklore, sexy, uncivilised, primal, who does not abide by ordinary codes of behaviour. Sometimes a combination of god and beast, the coyote, raven, crow, hare and fox, who causes chaos in the world of humans.

In addition, the *buffoon*, one of the characterisations in the Italian commedia dell'arte, is a *boastful coward*.

*There is no scientific evidence that seriousness leads to greater growth, maturity, or insight into the human condition than playfulness.*

John Paul Lederach, 2005

Clowning is “*a celebration of all the things we’d rather not be*” (Gladwell, 2002-2008). By turn, the clown is embarrassed, enthused, naïve, lost, upset, innocent, knowing, frightened, exuberant, desperate, joyful, angry. She knows how to live fully through her emotional responses to the world, amplifying and exaggerating what she feels for all to witness without becoming stuck in those emotions. She knows in her body, as Joanna Macy says, that emotional responses are just “dynamic states, a process of flow through” (Macy, 2008). She sees her emotions coming and going and plays with them. The clown acts as a guardian for our relationship to the truth about our feelings.

*Let go of what people think.*

Today, as “everything gets turned upside down by nature” (Rust, 2008), clowns tumble through experience, letting life live through them as it comes. At heart, they are gentle beings, they suspend judgement, they’re open-hearted, transparent, loyal, forgiving, accepting, vulnerable, sensual, loving, imperfect, modest, relational, fragile and resilient creatures (Nose to Nose Facilitators’ Group, 2007). They live ideas and situations fully, and then let them go, witnessing and remembering the ludicrousness of their situation. Clowns reveal the absurdity of the industrial growth society.

*Feel the magnitude, the hugeness, the importance of what it is to drop the project of making a perfect self. And all the self-righteousness that comes along with that baggage... We become whole, not perfect, not infallible, not pure.*

Joanna Macy, 2005

*Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in longshot...*

Charlie Chaplin

## First and second innocence

The clown breaks the rules of social convention not because she doesn't see them, but more because she sees right through them. She plays subversively back and forth across the boundaries of what's "normal". She's naïve and knowing *at the same time*. She is innocent *and* experienced. She knows and lives by the rules *and* she transgresses them.

Clowns are not afraid to "step aside from the obedience and acquiescence of the industrial growth society" (Macy, 2008) – or, if they are afraid, they shows us this, and then act anyway. Clowning "*strips away the illusions of the mind and the world we live in*"; it is a practice for "*inoculating ourselves with lightness, for building up emotional immunity and for creating more neuroplasticity in the brain*" (Bryden, 2008). Clowns are flexible. They see the world afresh, with awe, wonder and gratitude, as if for the first time. They are child-like, but they are not children. They have experience in the world, and see things as they are, like direct witnesses, unafraid to confront the absurdities, tragedies and delights of the world. Clowns like to witness their thoughts and responses to the world, and, what's more, show those around them what's going on for them by amplifying their emotional responses.

*How though might a clown respond to the tragedies of Burma and Elizabeth Fritzl's terrible incarceration by her father?*

*Does there come a point where the clown archetype can no longer illuminate tragedy?*

*When can the clown help us to face what is unbearable?*

*... and when can the archetype no longer do that?*

*All we need to do is see the clown's responses to terrible circumstances.*

*We see it in her eyes.*

*She doesn't have to do anything.*

*In the clown's expressions, we see our sadness, our horror, our confusion and our shame mirrored back to us.*

Clown and educator, Cath Bryden says: "when one meditates, one confronts oneself. When one is clowning, one is confronted with the self as it is mirrored back through play and contact with the other" (Bryden, 2008). This witnessing stance, for both the individual and on behalf of the collective has a quality of wholeness to it – of seeing wholes and systems rather than parts. Ecological thinking requires that we develop this kind of systemic thinking and this ability to "stand outside of where we are" (Gladwell, 2006).

The kind of knowing innocence the clown has might be called a "second" innocence, one that is learned through the experience of living life, warts and all<sup>3</sup>.

*"what a long detour humanity has to make to arrive as it were at the same spot from which it set out – or more strictly, above the spot from which it set out, for the*

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<sup>3</sup> Thank you to clown and theatre director Robert McNeer for alerting me to this concept.

*movement from childhood to art is not a circle but a spiral, a passage from a first innocence, through adversity, to the second innocence of universal forgiveness” (Goddard, 1951: 274-5).*

*“The ‘second innocence’ should be our goal, our ambition. This innocence has to be earned, whereas the first one has to be lost. At the same time, a system develops between the two until we reach the second innocence, which, contrary to the first, is not innocent of itself... despite not being innocent, the second innocence is not guilty either” (Cixous, 1991: 70).*

Zen teachings have a similar approach to “comic moves in relation to the sacred” (Hyer, 1970:5) – a first move or mood is *pre-rational*, like first innocence, represents the “innocence and immediacy of infancy”, a second, middle mood is *rational*, representing “the tendency to split up the world into knower and known, subject and object, mind and body, good and evil etc” and a third mood, which like second innocence is *supra-rational*, representing “the experience of transcending the dichotomies and estrangements of rationality in a recovery on a higher plane of that freedom and spontaneity and naturalness which is the special virtue of the child” (Hyer, 1970:5).

Cultivating this *second innocence* is essential for the Great Turning because it allows us to step back from the self-destructing madness of the industrial growth society and see it for what it is *with equanimity*. Second innocence is neither sentimental nor purely naïve. “Apocalyptic streaks” and “brimming with glee” can manifest at the same time in the same person (Macy, 2008).

*The art of the clown is more profound than we think: it is neither tragic nor comic. It is the comic mirror of tragedy and the tragic mirror of comedy.*

André Suarès

*“Amusez-vous, merde!” says Gaulier to his students. Having fun in this context is not a spectacle or escape, but rather the deadly game of living with loss, living despite failure, living even despite the humiliation of trying endlessly. It is this idea of “amusez-vous, merde” – live and love in the shit – which I understand as Boal’s approach to happiness: a tenacious, nonsentimental insistence on life within loss that is honest, ready to risk failure, and absolutely courageous. As witnesses, we inevitably fail. But how do we live? What are we like to have tea with?*

Julie Salverson

Joanna Macy likens the figure of the clown to that of the *Bodhisattva*, which means “enlightened (bodhi) existence (sattva)” or “enlightenment-being” in Sanskrit. In Tibetan Buddhism, a Bodhisattva is anyone who is motivated by compassion and seeks enlightenment not only for her/himself but also for everyone.

## Holding intent in clowning

*The Fool is not interested in saving the world.  
She is simply being herself, one step at a time.  
One of the most potent places we have left  
to reconnect to this place inside ourselves  
is by spending time outdoors, in wild places.  
It brings us back to simple pleasures.  
It's a place in which we can fall apart and come back together.*

Mary Jayne Rust

Like the Bodhisattva, the clown holds an underlying intention of compassion and goodwill. He does not impose a predetermined desire for “saving the world”. If he acts in ways that may seem like they will contribute towards the great turning, this emerges as a by-product from his desire to live life fully in the present moment, and by showing us what he pays attention to.

*What qualities of being emerge in us when we attend to world as clowns?  
How might this be of service to the great turning?*

There is a distinction between our ordinary human intentions of creating space to do clowning together (and thereby inviting the chance of deeper, ecological knowing to manifest) with the emergent sense of intent held by the clown herself, who innocently responds to what is coming up in the moment, and who is “*simply being herself, one step at a time*”. The clown does not hold a sense of purpose, but, through her purposelessness, she reveals recognisable truths about the ridiculousness of our situation as a species which destroys the systems on which it depends.

In the spring of 2008, the Hayward Gallery in London held an exhibition called “Laughing in a Foreign Language”. One of the exhibits, by artist Julian Rosenfeldt, is a video of a clown figure stumbling aimlessly and endlessly around a lush rainforest.

*Julian Rosefeldt's video installations give a contemporary twist to Greek myth of Sisyphus, who is condemned for eternity to roll a huge stone uphill, when he reaches the top the stone always rolls back down again.... [They] present surreal fantasies in the purposeless existence of Everyman, mirroring the absurdity of life and the vanity of human endeavour... we are given brief glimpses of a tragic-comic character dwarfed by nature. The three-screen video projection transports us into the depths of a tropical rainforest. Nothing seems to happen. A leaf falls. There are muted sounds of invisible jungle creatures. Then, in the far distance, a figure emerges. He slowly stumbles into view, crosses from one video screen to another, and disappears. Again, nothing seems to happen. A leaf falls...*

Hayward Gallery, 2008:112



The clown's actions are as futile as our own. Rosenfeldt's clown gets nowhere, but he acts anyway, he carries on with patience, goodwill and humility. Educator, Bill Torbert says that we act with a "stumbling gait" in life, struggling again and again to learn from our experience (Torbert, 1991). We stumble, not because we don't try hard enough, but through the impossibility of the task. He suggests that we cultivate holding a stance of "intentional attention" (Torbert xxxx), which I interpret to be an intense interest in this business of being alive along with a forgiving, reflective witnessing of how we attempt to live life well. I would suggest that we need such a stance in order to thrive within the industrial growth society, which can only survive if enough of us take it seriously.

*...to be a success in the mechanical jungle of the contemporary world, the Fool must not exist in men, for the Fool is interested in life, in being alive, and not in power, nor in the accumulation of knowledge, nor in the passing of examinations, nor in being clever.*

Collins, 2002:96

## Receiving the world



*A person kneels before a duck to reflect upon the troubles and joys of life,  
and offers thanksgivings and expressions of hope.  
The person is praying.  
The mind is on its knees.  
This is the yearning of the spirit which leads to love and the creative world.*

Leunig, 2006

The clown sees the world as teeming with life. Everything has its own brand of consciousness which can be impersonated or embodied (“Look at me, I’m a purple pencil!”) or conversed with (“Hello, rock, how long have you been there?” - “15 million years. I’m bored now”). The clown has a subjectifying eye which makes all sorts of things come alive, animating them just as a children do with their favourite toys. Ecologist Stephan Harding says that “children pass through an animistic phase in their early years, during which they relate to objects as if they had a character and as if they were alive” (Harding, 2006:21). We could consider this to be a “first animism”, like a first innocence. In Western society, this first animism gets suppressed. But the clown archetype invites us to maintain a vibrant, playful and imaginative animism beyond childhood – a “second animism” born of the sheer wonder and exuberance of being alive in this self-conscious human form at this, or at any time.

*If we think the world is a dead machine, we’ll kill it and ourselves along with it.  
If we think the world is animate, we’ll bring it, and ourselves, alive.  
Animate earth  
Anima mundi  
Psyche cosmou  
The soul of the world*

Others, like Jungian psychologist James Hillman (1992), suggest that it is not so much that we make the world come alive through our animism, but that which we experience as animism is instead the world speaking through us. Clowns wait for something on stage to “talk to them”. They allow themselves to be called, to have their attention taken by a rug, or a plant, or a mote of dust, or another clown, or a squeaky floorboard. They don’t go looking for trouble, trouble comes to them. Something will happen...

*We loosen our grip.  
We open our hand.  
We are accepting.  
In our empty hand  
We feel the shape  
Of simple eternity.  
It nestles there.  
We hold it gently.  
We are accepting.*

Michael Leunig, 2006

The clown perceives the world directly through all their senses; the feel of a blanket, its smell, texture, rustle, colour and even its taste. They suspend judgement about what it is and what it might be for. They wait for an image to reveal itself to them from what they are encountering. Many times, the audience “sees” the same image the clown does (“it’s a baby”, “it’s a dog”). Sometimes the audience see images which are hidden to the clown.



Sooner or later, the clown needs to name the image and stay with that image, play with it, taking themselves and the audience out of a kind of suspended animation and into action. We need the image to be named. “Look at my dog”. And we still know that there is no dog, that it is only a blanket. A dual reality exists. It is a dog and it is a just blanket. Both are true. As soon as the clown admits this – “I know there is no dog, I’m just playing, isn’t he a good dog?” - we feel a wave of empathy at the insight.

*The Emperor has no clothes.  
This brand or that will not make us happy.  
A better car doesn’t mean I’m a better person.  
The trappings of success are just a game.  
The Emperor has no clothes.*

The clown also makes direct contact with the audience, looking at them, listening to them, responding to them as a source of information. The audience informs the clown. Together, clown and audience perceive our shared humanity.

*We gaze at each other.*

The participation of the audience is as active, involved and engaged witnesses, witnesses to the stumbling gait of this being human. Together, through the clown, we celebrate all those things we’d rather not be.

*The clown kisses goodbye to the industrial growth society in one instant,  
and in the next we see her caught once more in its grasp.  
Then we see her seeing herself being caught,  
and in that moment of her self-recognition, we laugh.  
Given the space to be touched, people will be moved.*

Artist Frederick Franck writes and draws eloquently about the seeing of things. He says: “I have found that in order to SEE I must allow my eye to rest on a commonplace thing – a face, a stone, a weed (of course the category ‘weed’ was invented by the Me, and a dandelion is in no way inferior to an orchid!) – in order to experience with all my senses, with nerve endings bare... I take hold of the thing, until it fills my total capacity for experience. Once I have taken possession of a hill, a body, a face, I let go, let it go free again, as if I were releasing a butterfly. Yet it remains mine forever... From morning till night, my eye draws The Ten Thousand Things” (Franck, 1973:124-5).

Receiving the world through the archetype of the clown invites a deep appreciation for what is around us. It is all absurd and to be fully lived. Our consciousness shifts within the framework of clown. Clowning trains us to experience the world differently, with utter engagement and lightness, beyond our “restless grasping and clinging... the sense of gaiety and festivity that lies on the further side of fear of death and attachment to the forms of life” (Hyers MC, 1970:18).

*This work makes us happy. This work makes us alive. We make the world alive.*

## It's just not funny: unwinding the industrial growth society

Where did all the time go? The ever-quickening pace and expectations of the industrial growth society strip away our lives in endless rounds of meetings and emails and reports and simply trying to stay on top of things. We live in an acceleration frenzy. We run to stand still. We get driven by a fear of not keeping up. Time fragments. We squeeze more in. Joanna Macy says that we experience “an enormous despair over being so rushed that we can hardly live or enjoy relationship... there's a real sense of grief about being hurried out of our lives, and not being able to explore life fully” (Macy, 2008). We become possessed by the ticking away of linear time and forget what it is to live in cyclic, *resurrection* time:

*There is time and time.  
There's time that moves in straight lines,  
That is counted in breathe and heartbeats,  
In cradles and graves and diminishing days.  
From this time choose a year, any year,  
1750 perhaps or 1849 or 1905 or 1938  
A year that's gone and will never reappear.*

*And then there's time that moves in circles.  
Time that always is, over and over,  
That is measured in heat and chill, in light and dark,  
In seasons of love and hunger.*

*From this time, choose an afternoon, a midwinter's afternoon.  
The pale sinking sun has failed to thaw the ground.  
The ragged hedges and bare trees are rhymed with white frost.  
Water is glass.  
Earth is stone.  
Breath is cloud.  
Night begins to tighten its hold.*

*Now, let any one of those lost forgotten years meet this moment  
Let the time meet the season  
... It's always the same*

Hugh Lupton, 2007

In life, we are assailed with possibilities, with advertising, with ideas, with “newness”, with “stuff”, with “things to do”, all clamouring for our attention.

*Thoughts and images in endless procession steal our time because they steal our attention.*

Needleman, 2003:98

We see this replicated on stage. The possibilities are endless and we can fall prey to trying to do too much, and then paying nothing the full attention it deserves. Improvisations get manic and panicky, unconnected and disconnected. Things get fragmented and don't get developed. We are unable to realise the courage of our conviction. Thoughts start to lead as opposed to a more holistic, emotional, embodied response.

*On stage, unchecked, unnoticed, this gets painful to watch.*

*In life, unchecked, unnoticed, this gets painful to live.*

*If my rushed day to day life was an improvisation on stage, it just wouldn't be funny.*

Clowning provides an environment with the permission to stop in the midst of it all. To feel in our bodies how it is to experience one thing at a time, fully. Clowning invites us to slow down, and even do nothing at all, just be there on stage, living and breathing and paying attention, ready to receive, ready for action.

*Come onto the stage.*

*Do nothing.*

*Look at us, let us see you.*

*Receive what's around you.*

*Don't bring any ideas.*

*Wait until something reveals itself to you.*

*It could be an accident.*

*Yes!*

*Stay with that first thing.*

*Stay with it.*

*Then act, with conviction.*

*Action!*

## The roles we play



Saul Leiter, *The Waiter, Paris, 1959*

*Let us consider this waiter in the cafe.*

*His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid.*

*He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too quick...*

*his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer...*

*he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things...*

*the waiter in the cafe plays with his condition in order to realize it*

Sartre, 1943

Clowns on stage play roles. Like children at play, they might swap roles around – “now it's your turn to be the waiter, and I'll be the customer” – “OK, then”. They maintain and show their awareness of “just playing”, and live the double reality of the game or the role they're playing and the underlying truth of their living their lives as clowns with goodwill and humility.

*We're playing at being consumers in the industrial growth society.*

*Just for this while, we're playing this role as humans, just at this juncture.*

In ancient Japan, “the convention [was] that the higher classes are merely playing at all they do. The polite form for ‘you arrive in Tokyo’ is, literally, ‘you play arrival in Toyko’; and for ‘I hear that your father is dead’, ‘I hear that your father has played dying’. In other worlds the revered person is imagined as living in a sphere where only pleasure or condescension moves to action” (Huizinga J, 1970: 54)<sup>4</sup>.

*How do I play facilitator?*

*How do I play consultant?*

*How do my clients play manager, director, officer etc?*

*How do we play consumer?*

*How, with the encouragement (and brainwashing) of brands, do I buy the outfits and props to play the roles of adventurer, traveller, worker etc?*

*What are the old roles to let crumble, to lay down gently?*

*What are the new roles I want to play (at, in, around, with)?*

On stage, clowns play roles. One improvisational structure is called *Professor and Assistant*. The clowns each play the one of the two roles. We invite them to become the professor and the assistant, without knowing what the professor will lecture on. The professor has no idea. It is all a sham. During the impro, we see the professor’s brittle reality unravelling. Eventually, the clown who’s playing the professor can stand it no longer and names the reality of the situation – “I don’t know what I’m doing”. Or the assistant names it – “You don’t know what you’re doing, do you?”. The edifice of the professor’s reality collapses.

*The fool is “a hinderance to an ambitious career”*

Collins, 2002: 96

Once more, we feel relief and recognition in the naming – this is like us in life, if only we could admit that we just don’t know, that it’s all gone wrong, that we’ve made a mistake. Such a naming is a radical act of dissent and resistance. We’re back to the emperor’s new clothes again.

What we enjoy and identify with is seeing the clowns working to hold the fiction while acknowledging the reality of struggling to be fully human. This is a manifestation of the stumbling gait. In clowning, we call this *le jeu en jeu* (the play within the play).

*How does the play within the play manifest in life?*

*How is this awareness in service of the creating of a life sustaining society?*

*How do we allow the clown part of us to name what’s really going on?*

*How do we allow the resurgence of the real?*

The play within the play works well when the clowns don’t get stuck in character. Getting stuck on stage kills the impro. Believing our own fiction, taking ourselves too seriously, getting caught by the false promise of lifestyle advertising, falling for the

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<sup>4</sup> Once more I am indebted to Robert McNeer for showing me this.

illusions and socially accepted formulae of the industrial growth society – these take our life force and kill the planet.

*Now people living in a desert of a thousand machines and gadgets show the huge unhappiness of emptiness. What need have they of the magical vocation of the priest and the artist, of the poet and the Fool?*

Collins, 2002: 99

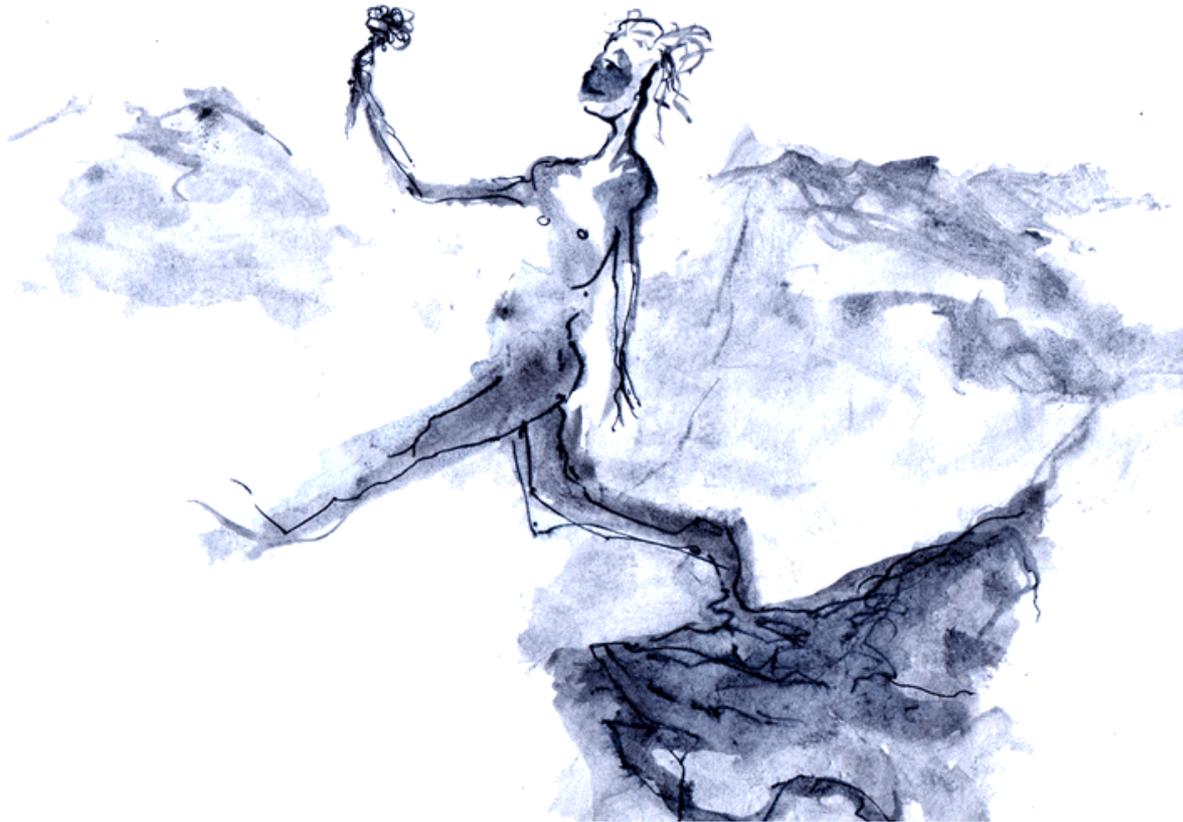
What works well is when the underlying reality is allowed to float back up to the surface and be seen. How do we meet or encourage this resurgence? What highlights this dynamic? First, we see the person on stage. Then we cross back and forth over the line between the clown and the fictional role. It is important to keep this *movement fluid* and hold onto both realities, looking for the sparkle of play in clown's eyes (from Nose to Nose Facilitators' Group, 2008).

*Play dead.*

*Play alive.*

*Just play.*

## What makes us fully human?



Simon Blakemore

*[Improvisation is] the spontaneous response to  
the unfolding of an unexpected situation...  
At every moment in our lives,  
we are having to adjust to whatever happens around us.  
The more unexpected the happening,  
the more spontaneous and frank the response is likely to be...  
If we are open and receptive,  
we can make discoveries both about ourselves and others from these moments.  
If we are less receptive, the tendency will be to reproduce what we consider to be socially  
accepted responses and these become standardized and stereotyped...  
Society is nearly always unwilling to recognise anything or anyone that seems different.*

Hodgson & Richards, 1966: 3,19

The highly improvised, transparent and vulnerable nature of the clown archetype offers one way of experiencing and making manifest our grief for the earth, and our joy at being alive at all. It's one way of responding to the bittersweet realities of our times; the tragedy and the comedy, the agony and the ecstasy at the same time. Amplified. Exaggerated. Fully lived.

*Just look what we've done to our home.  
What have we done?*

Viewing life through the clown's gaze encourages us to see and to break the rules, to point out the absurdities of the Western project and help the industrial growth society crumble away.

*Everything we know, everything we believe, and everything we are is destined to evolve or dissolve into something else... given the brevity of our existence and the fact that we don't know what it means or what we are supposed to be doing here, perhaps our only recourse is to learn how to be in the moment with what is before us.*

Nisker, 2001

At the same time as transgressing "normality", clowns say *yes* to new ideas. The existential "yes!" of improvisation is a gift to the change in consciousness we need for the great turning. It acclimatizes us for saying "yes!" to life - in gratitude for being alive at all. If we are to move from the industrial growth society to a life sustaining society, we need to cultivate this underlying "yes-ness".

*You be the professor now  
- Yes!  
Let's climb the mountain  
- Yes!  
But you don't know what you're doing  
-Yes, that's right!*

Clowns are is exuberantly alive and utterly engaged with this process of living – for good and for bad. Clowning offers us safe structured spaces to experience what it is like to radically free ourselves from the mindset of the industrial growth society which drives us off of the land, away from connection and out of our minds. The structure of clowning gives us freedom, rather than the enclosures of the Western project, which take it away. In clowning, we taste liberation. We roam as freely across the stage as we once did over the land. For a while, we become wild again, part of the wilder-ness.

*The Fool who, wearing her fantastic garments of love, makes her wild and painful gestures of tenderness before the suffering of all the living ones in the Universe... the Fool, who in an ecstasy of happiness bows down with her gay garments, down into the dust, with a humility that touches the bottom of the abyss of life.*

Collins, 2002: 100

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## Events

Gaia's Playground, May 2006, 3 day experimental course (with Vivian Gladwell),  
Hawkwood College, Stroud, Gloucestershire

Introduction to clowning, November XXX, 2007, one day course, Centre for Action  
Research in Professional Practice, School of Management, University of Bath

Clown and sustainability, XX 2008, evening talk, Emerson College

Clown and ecology, XX 2008, Evening talk (with Vivian Gladwell), Emerson College

The Fool and the Great Turning, October 2008, 1 day exploratory course (with Joanna  
Macy), Holy Names University, Oakland CA