

Now Let Us Play

Vulnerability and Playfulness

by Roly Bain of Bristol, England

The Reverend Roly Bain, to give him his full title, was a parish vicar for 11 years, before being given leave by his bishop to train seriously as a clown and enter a full time clown ministry. This he has done with outstanding success in schools, prisons, hospitals, as well as the great cathedrals including Canterbury.

In his book Fools Rush In, he describes his path to clowndom. Presently he is founder and member of Holy Fools, a network of people involved in or intrigued by clown ministry. He is married to Jane and has two children. The following is part of a chapter entitled *Vulnerability and Playfulness*. I thought the article brilliant (as they would say in England). I met Roly in Scotland at the WCA Convention and believe me, he is also a brilliant clown!

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Cheap and cheerful clowning is all very well and serves its purpose, as long as you don't expect too much from it. But true clowning is costly. It is costly because it is founded upon vulnerability and playfulness, and the best clowns are those who can not only play quite openly in all their vulnerability but who can also play with their vulnerability too. It's the vulnerability of lovers who are able simply to be themselves with each other because of their love. It's the vulnerability of children in their readiness to do anything, accept anyone, and know nothing of fear. It's the vulnerability of those who have the strength to allow themselves to be weak for therein lies their fun and fulfilment. Clowning may be costly but it has its compensations!

One of the things that my clown does is to play with failure. I attempt to make a sheet of newspaper disappear by tearing it in half, and then tearing it in half again and again, completely losing track of how many pieces I'm tearing it into. But children are happy to help out an incompetent who can't add up, even if he is rather stupid. We choose magic words, blow a magic blow, and with all the confidence in the world I chuck all the pieces up in the air proclaiming that the newspaper has disappeared. Of course it hasn't and the pieces shower down upon me. The expectation has been that it will disappear because clowns can do anything, clowns can do magic, or whatever. But there is a great delight in my failure because the audience can identify with someone who not only fails but fails publicly and really doesn't seem to mind. The clown reminds us that we're allowed to fail, that we can learn from failure, laugh at failure and move on. And if the clown fails at the next trick too then we move on again until in the end he succeeds and everybody cheers -- and are themselves cheered in the process. In a society that is geared to success, even success at all costs, the clown is a necessary counterbalance to that mentality. Here stands a walking disaster, a happy failure, a total misfit who is yet capable of all things and seems to be in touch and tune with things that others never even dream of.



But of course it can go wrong and does go wrong if we lose that element of playfulness -- the weak remain weak if they're not happy in their weakness and cannot play with it and in it. As a clown I often used to get beaten up by children, and there are often one or two children who can be quite vicious with punches and kicks. Because I wear big clown boots children love to stamp on my feet to see if they are really that size. In other words, they know that I am real if I hurt. There was a time when I allowed kids to do that to me and just suffered in silence -- a misguided idealism thought it right to allow them to fulfil their needs at my expense. But nobody needs to inflict violence on somebody else, whatever their pent-up frustrations, and nobody wants or needs martyrs when martyrdom is quite uncalled for! Reducing the violence to slapstick is more what is needed. Pretending to stamp back on their feet brings play into the frame, transforms the original intent, and makes playmates of the aggressor and his intended victim. On a practical level, once play is established not just the rules but the game can easily be changed.

Children are very perceptive when it comes to pinpointing weakness in others, whether children or adults, and are happy to go for the kill. That instinct needs no encouragement from anyone, least of all clowns. Children need to see how far they are allowed to go, and they don't necessarily want to go as far as you let them! Clowns need to nurture the child's sensitivity to weakness but try

to ensure the response is one of sympathy and compassion not one-upmanship or opportunism. The clown embodies and offers a world where different rules apply, a world that has been turned upside down and inside out, a playful world where the only rules are the law of love. It's a place where everybody wins and everybody loses, all at the same time. It's the world where the first are last and the last first, so that when the first become last they become first again! But nobody's counting, because everybody counts – everyone is important and each is loved.

“Where there are places that angels fear to tread, the clown steps up as the eternal volunteer, saying “Here am I, send me” for nothing is too fearful or too sacred or too much for him. Clowns are both fools and angels. . . .”

. . . Clowns haven't got time to take themselves seriously, there are too many games to play. The clown sees everything as if for the first time and responds accordingly. Blessed by that naivety and the newness of things, he never knows what's going to happen next, but it never deters him. Unencumbered by past histories or politics, he is open to all possibilities. Present him with a simple problem and he seems to have all sorts of trouble solving it. Yet, more likely than not, for him they're not problems but opportunities, and there are all sorts of games to be played along the way. And maybe he's solved the problem anyway by transforming it from a problem into a game, and we wonder why we thought it was such a problem in the first place. The clown represents the triumph of hope over experience. It is a hope that hurts because it is grounded in the clown's vulnerability, but it is the genuine article. Being vulnerable means taking risks, maybe with one's life or lifestyle, but certainly with oneself. We all build up patterns of behavior and daily routines that are safe places to be because they provide the security of familiarity and home comforts. Our character has developed in fits and starts and we've ended up with what we are thanks to a mixture of self-repression and society approval as well as genes and circumstances. To explore our vulnerability is to be very unBritish because it means getting to know our emotions again, especially the ones that we aren't too keen on, rediscovering maybe the passion and idealism of our youth as well as the playfulness of our childhood, and trying to jettison some of our security blankets as we grasp new opportunities. Part of the job of finding the clown in you is to discover whether that clown is angry or sad or happy or proud or whatever. To be a clown is not to stick on that red nose and “Smile, please”, as many people presume and demand; it's to be true to your own foolish self. That might be the complete opposite of what you have become in “real life”, and indeed the opposite is a good place to begin the search, but somewhere inside there's a clown waiting to come out to play. It's important to know that he does want to come out to play because otherwise it might be a bit scary and we don't want to let the cat out of the bag, never mind skeletons from the closet. Yet there's nothing to be frightened of in giving oneself away – there comes an enjoyment in the giving, and nothing is lost if we only let go. There's a clown in there, not a monster, and sometimes we can hear him coming a mile off, sometimes he's suddenly there beside us, but the clown is a vulnerable lover, and he's good to be with – he's good to be!

To learn to be vulnerable might be to experiment with clothes that are different in colour and style from what you've always worn, or clothes that are wildly inappropriate or simply unfashionable – we behave differently and people respond differently to us. Clown costumes certainly fit the bill, but we can try it less obviously too! To learn to be vulnerable might be to experiment with what we could be rather than to make do with what we've become. That may mean doing those things that you've always wanted to but never dared, maybe for reasons of finance or social approval or family or business commitments or whatever the convenient excuses have always been. To learn to be vulnerable might be to express our anger or fears or grief or exhilaration or wonder or whatever it might be that somehow has always seemed a bit excessive or unnecessary or a bit too frightening to fit into cosy and mundane worlds. Having got to know those parts of us then we can play with those emotions and they lose their nightmarishness, and bring colour and spontaneity and even a bit of daring unpredictability into our lives. To learn to be vulnerable is to be prepared to be hurt, for that is the cost of loving – you can't have love without hurt. Sometimes it's only the hurt of grazed knees or dented pride, and sometimes it's the agony of a broken heart. Yet love can still kiss it better and be warm in its embrace, healing and hurting too, ever patient, giving all the time and space that's required.

On the whole I guess we would rather be vulnerable in private because that seems safer to begin with, and it's true that we need safe places to explore in. A workshop is a gathering of people who come to participate in a learning experience under the tutelage or direction of an “expert.” They are thus safe places in this respect because we join with kindred spirits and there is a trust and mutual encouragement that we might not find elsewhere. It also helps to come together with strangers because it protects our anonymity and we're less burdened by our own history, we're less worried about what others might think in the future; and yet we part as friends who know far more about each other after a couple of days than people back home whom we have known for years. Those whom we spend a lot of time with sometimes know the least about us, but that may be because that's the safest way to have a relationship with someone. Workshops provide a safety net rather than a safety curtain. A safety net is a reassuring place to fall into when risks are being taken, so that they don't seem quite so life-threatening after all; a safety curtain protects us from any risks, real or imagined, and provides us with a convenient screen to shield us from ourselves and from other people.

Being vulnerable in public is the stuff of dreams and nightmares. I used to have a classic dream where I was the ball boy for the FA Cup Final at Wembley Stadium, with a crowd of a hundred thousand packed in, but somehow I didn't have any clothes on – everybody else did! There weren't any places to hide and there wasn't a fig leaf in sight! Or again, more recently, I'd climb into the pulpit to preach a sermon and find that my script had vanished and that I had absolutely nothing to say. Yet the voyage to vulnerability charts the discovery that there is far more to you than meets the eye, and far more in you than you ever thought. It's the digging up of buried treasure and talents, the revelation of untold natural resources. We can only be brave enough to live and behave as though there's nothing to hide once we are fairly confident that there's nothing much that's left hidden, and what there is, is less than frightening! Only a fool attempts it, of course, but the risk is

a worthwhile one - and risks must be worthwhile rather than simply gratuitous.

One of the things that I sometimes encourage people to do in church is to share the Peace. Lots of congregations do it, where people shake hands with and greet each other in appropriate ways, strictly speaking offering the Peace of the Lord to each other in the process. It varies enormously from place to place as to how much warmth and gusto it has, ranging from the very formal with minimal movement to a complete free-for-all with absolute bedlam. What I as a clown suggest to the congregation is that, instead of shaking hands with people in the normal way, they have three choices: they can shake their hands above their heads, shouting "Cooeee," or they can shake their hands in front of them imitating the gestures and sounds of a seal, or they can stand up (which is why they have to stand up for Peace), bend over and waggle their hands behind the like a dog's tail, shouting "No, no, no!" Everyone must choose one of these (the first is always the most popular) and then, when given the cue, all we have to do is find people doing it differently from us and greet as many of them as we can. It's utter stuff and nonsense, and some people love it while others can't cope with it at all. But what it does allow is for people to be playful, foolish and vulnerable in public with approval, indeed encouragement. Very often I can see people eyeing each other rather tentatively as I'm showing them what to do, just checking out how far other people might go before deciding for themselves. When it works, everybody goes for it with a certain wild abandon, before inevitably realizing where they are and reverting to type, especially when the organ starts for the beginning of the next hymn. But it changes the service: it changes the expectations of the congregation and the whole feel of the place. People have been happy to make fools of themselves in church, to play, to move, to feel and to react. We then begin to worship with more of ourselves – maybe not with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, but at least with more of ourselves than hitherto.

One of the clown's tasks is to help adults to play. It is best to have an all-age audience or congregation because the children give the adults licence to play. If the children are enjoying it, then the adults feel that they can join in too. They may excuse it on the grounds of just joining in "for the sake of the children", or they might secretly hope that nobody notices or minds them hooting and laughing and shouting at the back because they'll be drowned by the children or because the focus is on the children anyway. But that giving of permission is important. It's the same as any parent and child. A woman who at work is the most straight-laced, super efficient, even enormously dull person in the office is reduced to a blathering idiot rolling on the floor when she gets home to her tantrummy toddler or cooing baby. A man who goes everywhere by car and hasn't taken any exercise in years is suddenly an eager footballer when occasion and child demand it. They are given the licence to play, a licence that many yearn for. Countless are the people who look forward to parenthood because that will give them the chance to do the things they haven't been allowed to do since their own childhood, and some of the things their deprived childhood didn't allow at all. They can go to the zoo and the swimming pool and the swings, buy train sets, dolls' houses and computer games, and get away with all sorts of things because "we're only playing." It is a glorious liberty. I'm sure some friends of ours only come round to play with the children's toys – they don't really want to see us at all until they have had a go with the trains and built some Lego houses! The reverse may also be true – some people do claim to hate

children, but there can't be any playful people who do. I wonder if the churches that don't welcome or want children in their services are simply frightened of being asked or even tempted to play. . .

If the whole congregation begins to play then worship really takes off, it lifts off and enters the world of mystery and transcendence. One of the things that grounds worship before it even starts is people taking themselves too seriously, and "religious" people are sadly rather prone to it. But if their attention can be shifted away from themselves and their concern about their own appearance and performance and their standing and status with God, then their fellow worshipers and even the Holy Spirit can begin to squeeze into the picture. You can't begin to take God seriously if you take yourself seriously, because self always gets in the way and takes priority and precedence. Prayer isn't a top-level board meeting between two frightfully important people, it is a form of play in which friendship is formed and trust is forged, and it must be entered upon playfully lest it be reduced to the muttered mumbo-jumbo that the world presumes it to be already. If prayer is embarked upon with too earnest and self-centered intention it becomes a merely human activity, an earthbound phenomenon. Pray playfully and we enter a world where different rules apply. Prayer isn't straightforward and yet it is simple. The great paradox of prayer is that we pray to a God who is already within us and who prays with us and through us; he knows exactly what we need and want even before we do, yet he still wants and needs our prayers, still wants and needs us, still wants and needs people to play with – people with whom and through whom he can make things happen. In play, as in prayer, anything can happen!

The world of prayer is the clown's realm. It is the world of miracle and truth where all that the clown touches is transfigured and transformed by the irrepressible hope of laughter and the deep compassion of his tears. The exercise of prayer is marked by its sense of expectancy but is devoid of demand – preferential treatment and preferred objectives run contrary to the rules and ethos of the game. In prayer the clown within us unites with the divine in praise and adoration, penitence and thanksgiving, laughter and tears. Prayer is to be lived and revealed in, rather than said nicely. Yet maybe too often we end up saying our prayers rather than praying, clinging to the wreckage of dull custom rather than sailing off to uncharted waters. The prayer of the vulnerable lover is not a shopping list or a news bulletin or choice titbits of half-baked theology or moralistic judgements; the prayer of the vulnerable lover leaves everything in God's hands, starts from scratch, and offers "Here am I, send me!" The prayer of the vulnerable lover has no strings attached, no limits to its intention, and no advice to proffer. The prayer of the vulnerable lover derives from a willingness to play, a longing for the Kingdom and a simple love of God. In prayer the Clown enters the imagination of men's hearts and drags them out to play. The traditional invitation to prayer is a somber. "Let us pray", with all its grave connotations and implicit instructions about posture. We all know exactly what to expect, when to join in (if at all), how long it will take, and so on. But what is the invitation were rather "*Let us Play!* ?"

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To purchase *Fools Rush In*, by Roly Bain is a brilliant book, presently out of print, but you may be able to purchase one from Roly directly. Contact: Roly Bain, The Vicarage, The Street, Olveston, Bristol, U.K. BS35 4DA