

Spirituality and The Practice of Clowning *By Alex Chamberlain*

Alex Chamberlain is an ordained Presbyterian minister. He was introduced to clowning when he attended a one-day workshop on clown ministry while visiting his home church in Rochester, NY. "I did little with clowning while in parish ministry, but it really 'rang true' when I became a hospital chaplain in Rotorua New Zealand eleven years ago."

Presently, Alex serves as a full time chaplain at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise, Idaho. Here he also clowns for staff and patients on a regular basis. "My primary clown character is Dr. Pildare, since my name is Richard Chamberlain, it's a natural. Alex is a nickname!" At the hospital "I always carry balloons and props in my sport coat when in my straightforward chaplaincy role." Alex gives talks to health care providers and local businesses on the benefits of humor. He is a member of AATH.

I am a Christian whose life has always been open to joy. This has included: the dry wit of my father, the silliness of the teen years, playing drums in a church musical, hiking in the Grand Canyon, and being a parent. All have joyous moments. I have also been blessed with a vocation as a Presbyterian minister, whose ministry now takes shape as a full time hospital chaplain and part-time hospital clown.

A recent bit of correspondence from Shobi brought to my attention some clowns' struggles with how their personal faith and spiritual understandings of life dovetail with their clowning in the hospital setting. For example, a clown was presenting a workshop and shared an incident where an ill child asked about heaven. The clown replied that clown heaven was where one only needed a red nose to enter. A Christian clown in the audience was upset by this, feeling that this was at odds with the Christian doctrine of the afterlife. It was this person's belief that this response was too shallow and at odds with her own faith. I will share some thoughts regarding how I view this topic, with the hope that we can all find a way to have congruence between our spirituality and our clowning.

As a hospital chaplain I make a point of always respecting the person in front of me. Even if I do not agree with their religious point of view, I make a point of attempting to connect with them on some level. As they have so many people inflicting treatments and asking probing questions about bodily functions, I always make sure that I not only have their permission to enter their room but make it clear that they set the tone for our conversation. If they want quiet, they get quiet. If they want to discuss faith matters, we do that. I always consider it a privilege to pray with them when they have indicated that this is something that they value. In a place where so many patients feel powerless, I make it a point to empower them in their relationship with me. They set the agenda.

When clowning, I am still a Christian and a chaplain within my heart and mind. Those aspects of my life inform my ability to respectfully enter a person's situation and provide opportunities for joy. I love the quote by Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." Compassion, love, empathy, weeping with those who weep and laughing with those who laugh

... for me they all bear witness to Christ's love whether the other person is aware of my motivation or not. These values consistently infuse my presence, whether in clown face (Dr. Pildare) or sport coat and tie (Chaplain Alex).

When Dr. Pildare is asked a theological question, especially by a child, I will stay in clown character. For example, if asked what I thought of heaven I might make a grand gesture and break into a big smile and tell them that it makes me want to do jumping jacks (and then I would break into a dance). I would then turn it back to them and ask what they thought of it. I would make it playful and fun, helping them dream and think out loud in a way which would be healing for them. Spiritual care at its best helps someone find their own answers and anchors, for that will be more authentic for them than something I attempt to impose upon them.

Way TOO BIG for My Little Clown Mind

If the conversation looks like it is developing into a theological discussion, I will stay in character and ask them if they would like a chaplain or minister to discuss these things with them, because this is getting way TOO BIG for my little clown mind. If an adult says, "Yes," I will then make a referral, or return out of clown face to engage them in a direct manner. If it is a child, I will secure the parents' consent before referring or returning.

Ecclesiastics 3 states that "*There is a time for every matter under heaven*", and having a hospital clown quote Scripture and shift to a faith discussion could be disorienting for any patient, but especially a child. It could be as confusing as a minister officiating at a funeral deciding to juggle as people filed past the casket! It sounds to me like a clash of purpose and method which do not fit the circumstances.

I am aware that some clowns are evangelists at heart and in practice. On the street or in another setting, where people can choose to engage you or not, a clown can be a wonderful persona for introducing someone to the Gospel. In that environment they have the choice of watching and listening to your message, or not. In the hospital, however, a person doesn't have that choice. The subculture of the hospital requires that we be especially respectful of the patient's vulnerability.

What goes for not washing hands between patients or giving latex balloons to infants, also applies to our ability to respect another person's faith. If we cannot enter that subculture and observe the rules, the risk is that future visits by hospital clowns will be jeopardized. I have heard of a hospital in a city which has a large Jewish population which has decided to stop their hospital clowning program when a clown presented the Christian gospel to a Jewish patient. I know that if I were a patient, I would find it problematic if a Hindu clown came in and offered a statue of Vishnu and chided me for not believing in reincarnation!

Hospital clowns, at their best, will respectfully enter the other person's frame of reference. To offer the love of God as you spread joy does not, it seems to me, require that you present it in the wording and framework that you employ outside of character.