

Embracing Failures: lessons from clowns

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I've fallen in love with the clowns at my work. They're therapeutic clowns, actually. I followed them around a few weeks ago as they made their rounds through the units (they indulged me) and in our debrief afterwards I cried from being completely overcome by the amazingness of what they do. I tried to offer some insight into the beauty, joy and absolute love I saw in their work, but barely spluttered out a few words before my breath caught in my throat and I sobbed.

And, like true friends, they offered me a kleenex, some chocolate and a carrot. I knew it was love.

Part of what was so beautiful was their ability to read and navigate other people. And the ripple of joy and genuine caring they left behind them as they worked. I witnessed a moment when a beautiful girl in CCC (complex continuing care) was so overjoyed to see them when they arrived on the unit. A wheelchair user with very limited movement, this girl's face and limbs burst open at the sound of these clowns. And as the clowns moved on to play with another child, this girl's mother moved over to her and touched her face and began to whisper and smile with her daughter. She could see her daughter's joy and moved to be with her, and share that spirit with her. It was like a trail of 'clown-ness' was left in their wake with this mother/daughter.

But what was also remarkable to me was how absolutely ridiculous these clowns were. Completely silly and embracing – dare I say it – failure.

Now, failure is not a new concept in theatre and performance – we hear this all the time right from our early germinations of theatre artist training: "Take risks!" our teachers shouted at us. "Be brave!" This is no small feat, of course. And in a clinical setting, where everything is controlled so no one will trip in the slightest (and that's not necessarily a bad thing!), the absurdity of clowns who seek out and gently nurture those feelings of ridiculousness and failure was refreshing. They put you at ease with your own ridiculousness and failings, perhaps, because they display and embrace their own so fundamentally as part of their practice.

I learned yesterday that I was not successful with a fellowship application I had submitted to SSHRC. I won't deny I am/was bummed. Like most applicants I had worked really hard on that (bloody) application – and of course fewer than a fifth of people are successful – but I even failed miserably with a terrible ranking. Oi!

But truthfully, most things I've failed at. Like, most things – really. So, this is different? And, if I channel my inner clown, "oh well!" There's perhaps something completely ridiculous about desperately hoping for positive results for an award everyone knows is a crap shoot based on which

two people read your application. It is, in a word, silly. Ironic too, given how seriously the academy takes itself. Is it possible to work joyfully, embrace the ridiculousness of one's own failures, leaving a trickle of joy with others, in a world that is so caught up in its own seriousness?

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