

Clown in ward.

The kind therapy of smile

Text by Gianni Bertossa
Photos by Karin Heer



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GentleBooklets It is a series of long-form articles written by different authors. The booklets, designed for a quick read, feature texts and images. We have kindly asked to the authors to comment on the term “kindness.” Authors and photographers have donated their work. The motivations behind the project are the same as those of Gentletude, the desire to spread awareness about the need for “kindness” in our society, a society too focused on personal success to remember the basics of everyday living and respect for the environment that hosts us. Our decision to present these ideas in a series of publications is due to the awareness that, in order to stimulate people to think about these issues, it is necessary to present some concrete examples. In this case, the examples are provided in the texts written by the authors.

An evolving art

I think the figure of the clown was born in the Middle Ages when he takes on the role of jester, high-spirited character called to court to entertain the sovereigns and their retinue.

Later the clown evolves becoming, as well as an entertainer, a true professional employed in circuses and in itinerant.

From a historical and chronological point of view the first known example was introduced in 1780 by the Astley circus, with clown Burt's performance parodying horsemen. In the early Nineteenth Century, Joseph Grimaldi transformed the figure of the scenic clown, converting it to "theatrical" by including the possibility to speak.

Clement Philippe Laurent conceived the fanciful sequins costumes, Boswell is remembered as the first acrobat clown and the Price brothers as the first singers clown. If the Hanlon Lee brothers were credited with the introduction of acrobatic pantomime, in 1864 Tom Belling introduced the figure of the clown's straight man, also called "The White".

In the Soviet Union, during the Twentieth





Century, the politicized clown became famous and the couple formed by Oleg Popov and Alessandra Popovna was one of the most renowned of their time.

Continuity with the Soviet tradition was maintained by Slava Polunin, but she also admits the influence of Federico Fellini and Dario Fo.

An ahead of one's time clown therapy was applied by Angelo Paoli (1642-1720), an Italian Carmelite priest beatified in 2010 for his many charitable activities: he disguised himself as a clown and put make-up on to make sick people smile.

To speak about clown therapy, a medical-psychological approach based on which the clown goes from the purely ironic side to the therapeutic one, we need to wait until the 70s when, in the United States, Dr. Hunter D. "Patch" Adams began to formulate a theory of happiness starting from the negative experience which he lived through during his adolescence.

After graduating in medicine, all along convinced that laughs and smiles can bring huge benefits, Adams began to examine his patients in a clown's costume.

Step by step, his dream took shape: to build a house-hospital to treat patients combining medical therapies and the pursuit of well-being.

With the help of some friends, in 1983 Adams was finally able to realize the Gesundheit! Institute - Institute of Health in the mountains of West Virginia: in this facility the relationship between patients and doctors relied on mutual trust and fun, since joy and creativity became the essential requirements of his care.

Learn the secret of making people smile

Social clown is a job like any other, it is like to be an architect or a sculptor.

The preparation needed to be a clown mostly consist in being able to laugh at oneself, being last in the class and happy about it, the underdog for excellence but especially to have the ability to come out of yourself and identify completely in the clown, forgetting who you are and what you do in life, is necessary.

That is the essence of being a clown. In addition to technical skills, an architect needs the ability to convince people that his project





will become a beautiful house where people will be happy to live in.

Without using words, a clown persuades that his game is honest and original and that when he begins the situation will improve and everyone will be better.

My approach to Clown Therapy was sudden, without much thought.

A first idea came to me when, during elocution lessons, I had to pull my tongue out and make funny faces in order to stress words correctly.

Then, it was fueled by a quarrel with the bassist of a band in which I was the drummer.

The bassist claimed that only him was able to keep time while I was supposed to play alone or rather not play at all and clown around.

I did not take offence, on the contrary I recognized he was right and even thanked him. In fact, the next day I began to inquire about the possibility of a clown training.

I reflected on the possibility of becoming a social clown, responding to my own need and to one which, in my opinion, had become a necessity of society.

I read that there were clowns who went to hospitals, nursing homes or in facilities for people with disabilities and so I gave birth to my character, “Popotto.”

Training courses are numerous and various. There are academies with many specialties, but you can become a self-taught clown going to the circus, the theater and following footages or interviews on Youtube.

I thought a structured training program addressed to professionals would be better for me; it provides a theoretical basis, practical exercises and group works with even a diploma at the end, therefore I decided to attend a training course with Peter Honegger.

Let's the magic begins

My action as a social clown is intended especially for the elderly, often in nursing homes or geriatric wards, but also for children and young people, both in schools and during parties or events.

My intervention can simply begin by drawing attention with a vocal sound, a whistle or a trumpet after making sure that there are no other distractions, other noises that could disturb the action.





A table tennis ball stuck together with a transparent thread by a piece of adhesive tape is the first step towards magic.

Throw the ball on the ground and run after as if to take it; and like magic, through the invisible thread the ball comes back and moves the first step towards the world of smile.

In the specific case of the elderly, the approach seems to be more complicated.

Often sick, they feel less inclined to accept the clown figure and it is hard to get them to believe that they can have fun with “childish amusements”.

The clown’s intervention with the elderly has not the function to amuse and entertain.

For example, when you talk to people affected by dementia, you need to try living with them in a world which is confusing for us but represents reality for them.

The clown always agrees with the patient’s idea when he or she insists that the summer is not as hot as the previous year, even if at that moment you are in the depths of winter.

The clown takes very seriously the subject of the conversation and does not try to convince the person of the opposite, in fact, he

suggests to go for a walk in the park without forgetting his or her swimsuit, which is then a coat.

Unfortunately, the worst threat to the elderly are monotony and loneliness.

Despite they are kept busy with projects and group activities, many of them prefer to stay apart when suffering from advanced dementia or hearing loss. It is for these ones that the clown is particularly important, keeping them company, amusing without words, showing what is inside his suitcase, maybe singing a little song.

For what concerns the activities with children and young people, the therapeutic approach gets a different shape, becoming more playful. For a moment the educational aspect disappears and gives way to a restrained transgression, such as making a blowgun out of a pen and using a chewing gum.

With me, children have the opportunity to play musical instruments, to try them and even form some little orchestras.

To use a metaphor, it is as if I open a door to a world of fantasy which, once crossed, makes room for games and fun.





Being a kind clown

I believe kindness in the work of a clown who is active in the social field results in minutes, hours of patience and a lot of positivity.

I like talking about “the philosophy of patience”, the basis of any approach to any subject and pillar of all my actions.

When one visits old people, perhaps depressed, none expects the clown to cheer them up.

The clown’s task is to awaken their curiosity through sounds, facial expressions, words and surprises.

The philosophy of patience is the time needed to get their attention, to involve them.

I think that patience is kindness.

Patience with the meaning of giving time to understand the game, especially to older people who no longer have the ability to understand quickly the message.

It takes some patience as well as good improvisation skills, slowing down the game and repeating its steps several times.

Positivity is another decisive factor, both for oneself and for the person to whom one relates.

The mistake you could make is to surrender to the disease or the negative situation, not being able to find a way out.

To be able to laugh at your suffering or someone else's you need to have a "vision of the heart of things", typical of the Eastern philosophies. In India people that have this vision are those who follow the "laughter yoga", activity in which you learn to laugh without a specific topic: just laugh.

Breathing, stretching and clapping are the exercises combined with pantomimic movements useful to stimulate the laugh.

These exercises help to have a positive, free and creative basis to bring the participants to a genuine and liberating smile.

In other words, in order to achieve self-awareness one requires to be joyful.

This is the most important thing in my job: the inner positivity that arises in support of other people.

You can be no clown without positivity

It is a ground rule. We have to start from the assumption that negativity does not exist, people are the way they are and we need to accept them regardless of their suffering or





their bad-temper.

An example is what happened to me on December 31, 2013, during the New Year's Eve party at a nursing home in Zurich.

About thirty guests of the facility were gathered in the multipurpose room decorated for the dinner party. A festive menu, games, singing and a surprise: me.

The welcome, at first a little stunned, immediately turns into disapproval.

Some stood up and left to watch television, others began to talk to each other mumbling about the silliness of having a clown invited, in their opinion a kind of entertainment not suitable for old people.

The first sketch I proposed was appropriate for their age and their knowledge.

But I did not get any reaction, quite the opposite.

Therefore I acted the second sketch, nothing once again.

I changed the music from Frank Sinatra to local folk music but nobody seemed to be interested.

Finally the hocus-pocuses were moving the situation forwards but by that time the group dynamics was created and the few who had

stayed to watch the show out of curiosity or kindness little by little began to rise. In the end, only three ladies were sitting at their place. Was it a defeat? Not at all! There's no space for defeat, because defeat is part of the magic number.

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning, the man behind the figure of the clown was a loser, last in the class, but without any doubt he is also someone with a deep empathy, who is able to really understand other people almost to the point of feeling their pain and joys.

For this reason the character of the clown is kind. If he is not, then he is not a clown either.

The clown appreciates every small and insignificant detail, everything becomes beautiful and interesting, and his attention is focused on the fact that everything is important and worthy of attention.

For example, when I arrive in a place I begin to look at an corner and to admire it.

That spot becomes important and beautiful even if it is only a corner; it is not a painting, not a landscape, nothing to admire but

to the clown it is something unique.

The clown was born gentle but he also needs to learn to be it.

The first step towards kindness in my job was to learn how to give priority and to be the last. I act like an old school gentleman, I exaggerate with compliments, hand-kissing, gifts, paper flowers or a bouquet of fragrant rosemary wrapped as if they were the roses. The clown's kindness is the same of a regular man, nothing more.

This is what I learn everyday and everyone can learn it without great techniques or big efforts.

If we stop for a moment and slowly begin to turn on ourselves, we can discover a fantastic world around us of which we are an integral part, where we share our lives and on which each one of our actions has a consequence.

Well then, why not to choose gestures that can make someone happy?

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AUTHOR

Gianni Bertossa, clown Pepo Popotto

Gianni first produces under the pseudonym of Jean Baptiste, a naive painter.

His paintings are multicolored but they do not have success.

And after a quarrel with the bassist of the band in which he was the drummer, who accused him of gesturing too much and not dealing enough with the rhythm, Gianni decided to leave the band and combine the two activities, colorful and gesticulating, becoming clown. The training at Peter Honegger's school, drives him to professional work which, together with his activity in the social field leads him to perform in various areas of support in the city of Zurich and the surrounding areas.

The clown Pepo Popotto is active for years now in nursing homes as well as in facilities and special schools for disabled people.

www.geroclowns.ch

PHOTOGRAPHER

Karin Heer

Karin is a fashion photographer, but maybe she should be called a photographer of the world. In fact Karin does not only take pictures of fashion and beautiful dresses worn by gorgeous models but of everything that deserves to be immortalized. Each of her works reveals her passion for nature and spirituality. Every time when possible she sets her photos in natural backgrounds or she adds natural elements.

At first highly digitally processed, her works become softer and more original as a result of her New York experience in 2007. Upon her return home she began to collaborate with the Annabelle magazine in Zurich, with which she still is active as a part-time photographer. Moreover, she is a contractor in a collective artist studio. In addition to being a photographer, Karin is also a hatha yoga teacher, a discipline she teaches during her courses in Zurich.

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GENTLETUDE

Gentletude is a neologism composed of the words “gentilezza” (gentleness/kindness) and “attitudine” (attitude). It pursues the aims for a better world without violence, arrogance and rudeness. A world where caring and paying attention to others, common sense and balanced competitiveness are the most important things. The production provided by the association was completely free, based on the Commons Creative Criteria. Gentletude in Italy is a non-profit organization (NPO), and in Switzerland is a non-profit association.

Contact Gentletude on the website: www.gentletude.com

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