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Unmask Yourself

“I quite agree with you,” said the Duchess; “and the moral of that is—‘Be what you would seem to be’—or if you’d like it put more simply—‘Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.’”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

My friend Tim is a clown. I say this with the utmost respect and admiration because he was a genuine bona fide clown, back in the 1980s, for Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. He even went to clown school to learn the nuances of clowning, or at least to learn what didn’t already come naturally to him. Yes, there really is a clown school. Over 60,000 hopeful clown candidates apply every year for this prestigious twelve-week course. However, only sixty are hand-picked to be a part of this special and exclusive club, where they learn the fine art of pie throwing and the timing of a well-placed banana peel slip, how to juggle, how to walk on stilts, and how to earn a thunderous guffaw from a crowd.

Now, as a professional humorist and writer, Tim is a clown of a different sort—a comedy historian, standup comic, and all-around funny guy. As prolific a writer of jokes as there ever was, if you ask him for ten gags, he will come back with fifty. Having been a member of Jonathan Winters’

roundtable breakfast for writers, he also wrote for Pat Paulsen, who once ran for president. He carries in his wallet a great keepsake given to him by Eleanor Keaton, wife of the late and great comic Buster Keaton, who some would say is the greatest physical comedian (and comedy director) of all time.

“Eleanor was so sweet and kind,” Tim recalled, “and the opportunity to reminisce with the wife one of our most quintessential clowns was so impactful. She shared with me Buster’s thoughts on the comedy of his day and on his getting sober and how the clown in him, back then, was effortless and free. To this day, I still have in my wallet a blank check she gave me, with her address and phone number on it. It’s my reminder to be great, to strive, and to remain true to who I am.”

However, if there is one thing I know that I learned from Tim, it’s that many clowns are not always who they appear to be on stage. Behind the face paint, rubber noses, overinflated shoes, and squirting lapel flowers, clowns are often very different people than their stage personas.

When I was about nine years old, my Uncle Jack would come into town and take all of us to the circus. A line of elephants, trunk to tail, would slowly parade down the middle of Pine Avenue in Long Beach, California, on their way to the big top tents, while a small man wearing all black scurried about behind them with a very large shovel. And trailing them, the best part: a dozen clowns all stuffed inside a single Volkswagen Bug, with faces, elbows, and butts all pressed firmly against every window.

I looked forward to this event every year with bated breath, but at that age my understanding of the world did not include the reality of who those people actually were behind their bright colored costumes, much less the understanding that they were real people with their own lives.

I learned later, listening to Tim’s stories, of the lonely nights traveling on the circus train among the other clowns. Each of them had their own issues, desires, and dysfunctions, and many of them were quite sad and lonely people.

As human beings, we are all clowns, whether figuratively or literally. The face paint we show the world is often very different from our authentic inner selves. When meeting strangers, it’s tempting to put on a mask, a face that looks more confident or successful than your own. It’s tempting to paint on a big sunny smile and hide your eyes behind some big glasses. But if you do this, you’ll only invite other people to wear their masks too. And you’ll create another obstacle to really connecting, because you’ll constantly be worried about upholding the image you’ve created, making sure your mask

doesn't slip. You'll be concerned that the other person might glimpse the real you, and you're convinced the real you is not interesting or funny or successful enough. You'll be afraid of being unmasked, which will make you unavailable for what's possible in that moment of connection.

Authenticity is one of the most powerful things you can bring to a new connection. Unmask yourself, be genuine and transparent, and you'll free yourself from the need to worry about anyone else unmasking you. You'll have all of your energy and attention available for listening to the other person and getting to know him or her. And you're much more likely to meet another authentic person, because when you unmask yourself, you invite others to leave their masks at home as well. Be yourself, whoever you are. People would rather meet you than your painted face, however bright and beautiful your clown smile is.

FUN FACTS

In clown school, clown cadets take a pie-throwing class, in which they are taught to hurl shaving-cream-filled pies in such a way as to make cleaning up more efficient. After all, an elephant slipping on a pie is not all that funny (maybe a little?), and with two to three shows a day, expediency for the next show is always part of the job. Pie throwing is a very serious skill to master. A well-placed pie in the face is a funny thing, but breaking the nose of one of your fellow clowns is not.

One area of professional clownery that I find very intriguing, and something you should ponder, is how clowns work a crowd. If a clown performs what is called a "108"—this is a technical term for a very large slip where both legs fly vertically into the air, then said clown lands flat onto his or her back hopefully with a loud thump—and does not look at the crowd, it is nothing more than acrobatics. But, if he or she does a 108 while looking out into the eyes of the audience, that is something entirely different. The first is merely an act and the other is an "act of comedy." The clowns that do their job the best "relate" to the audience by communicating directly either through physical or verbal actions as opposed to just going through the motions like an athlete.