

Heart Matters

[Excerpted from the book *Wie der Humor in die Kinderklinik Kam.*
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Medical clowning, therapeutic clowning, hospital clowning, healthcare clowning, clown doctors, dream doctors, giggle doctors: there are many names for the activity of donning festive attire, applying makeup and attempting to ease the suffering of various vulnerable populations through humor. Those costumes may or may not include a white doctor's lab coat but most certainly, every makeup will incorporate some form of red nose, ranging from a grease-painted pea size dot to a red rubber bulbous honker. Likewise, skill and experience levels vary dramatically; highly trained, paid professionals who have devoted their lives to the performing arts and are totally integrated into clinical teams on one end of the scale and untrained, inexperienced, well intentioned, good hearted volunteers on the other.

My invitation to this world began with a unique telephone call that would change my life. I was sitting at my desk in the administrative offices of the Big Apple Circus in the spring of 1986 when the phone rang. It was Virginia Keim, from Babies' Hospital in New York city. She was in love with my alter ego, Mr. Stubs, a raggle-taggle, Emmett Kelly inspired hobo clown I created with the Big Apple Circus. Evidently, Mr. Stubs had waddled from the ring directly into her heart. *Ginny*, as I would come to know her, invited me to appear in an event called Heart Day, a celebration for all the young patients. I accepted. In preparation, I toured the facility in plain clothes for an afternoon with Linda O'Neil, a dark haired and light spirited nurse. We visited the in-patient services, out-patient clinics, the Intensive Care Unit for seriously ill children and, of course, nursing stations, waiting areas, hallways and elevators. For me, dominant images included shiny floors, shiny halls, shiny walls, whispered conversations, slow elevators, tense waiting rooms, rolling carts, rolling beds, a gaggle of white coats and a sea of sinks; here a sink, there a sink, everywhere a sink, sink.

In 1977, my friend Paul Binder and I had founded the Big Apple Circus as a not for profit organization dedicated to serving communities in which we performed. At this point, a little history will be helpful. Circus began in 1761 in London with equestrian demonstrations. In order to compete with other entertainments, they soon introduced variety artists into performances, including acrobats, jugglers and clowns, and in so doing, created classical circus. One of the comedic tools of the clowns, was parody: Lights dim to a soft blue glow. Lyrical music bathes the ring as fog

transforms sawdust into clouds. Red, velvet curtains glide open and an ethereal ballerina dances atop a loping white horse, a sublime moment. Immediately afterwards, a fool in a tutu circles the ring on a donkey attempting to execute the same movements to the same music. Parody.

I shared my hospital observations with my two Big Apple Circus clown colleagues, Barry Lubin, who portrayed a feisty old woman character named Grandma, and Jeff Gordon, a fall-down-go-boom physical clown named Mr. Gordo. We employed the art of parody to integrate medical information into sketches. First, we identified the authority figure, which was easy. In the circus it is the person in the red tailcoat, master of the ring; in the hospital it is the person in the white lab coat, master of the sinks. Then, we asked ourselves, “What do doctors *do*?”. We concluded that doctors’ question; doctors log information on clip boards; doctors examine; doctors make you wait; they test; they consult; they prescribe, send samples to laboratories, receive results, collaborate with other doctors, perform surgeries, operate complicated machines, study x-rays, peer through microscopes and send bills. Of course, physicians perform many other tasks but from a clown’s eye view, these actions lend themselves to loving mockery. We immediately donned lab coats and *medicalized* our names. I became Dr. Stubs; Grandma was Chief Dietician Grandma and Mr. Gordo, well, he was a natural Disorderly.

2. Heart day

“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”

Mark Twain.

The day I was born was January 15, 1947; the day I found out why was May 18, 1986. Patients, families, clinical staff, jammed themselves into Alumni Auditorium of Babies Hospital at 168th Street and Broadway on a spring Manhattan morning. Heart Day is here. Nobody is aware that three professional idiots from the Big Apple Circus in full makeup and dressed as healthcare personnel await their entrances. In my right hand, I hold an old black leather doctor’s bag, a gift from my brother Kenneth who had died of pancreatic cancer a few months earlier. However, instead of serious life saving equipment, it now contains a stethoscope that blows bubbles, an oxygen tube tuba, a large fake spider, a whoopee cushion for hearing tests, colored juggling balls for eye exams, several red noses and of course, Leonard, my trusty rubber chicken companion.

A famous journalist introduces me. He cites the prestigious journals in which I am published; he details several surgical innovations I have initiated; he shares how grateful he is to have studied under me at school and he delivers all this information with absolute sincerity, straight. In short, he sets me up. It is one of the finest introductions I have ever received. When he concludes, everyone expects a heavy, pompous piece of medical furniture to roll onto the stage. Instead, Clown Dr. Stubs shuffles to the podium in his crisp medical whites. Laughter abounds. Dr. Stubs begins, “It’s great to be in charge of another hospital. And now that I’m the boss, I’m making a few changes around here. It has come to my attention that children are eating at regular intervals. Well, from now on, they can eat *anytime* they want and *anything* they want as long as it comes from the four major food groups: popcorn, pizza, chocolate cake and beer.” Parody. Chief Dietician Grandma demonstrates popcorn-devouring techniques. Disorderly Gordo dispenses an entire roll of toilet

paper into the air with a leaf blower, an essential skill for all well-trained Babies' employees.

Prior to the performance, we identified a little girl who had undergone a heart transplant. Her physician, Dr. Rose, sits in the audience. We invited them on stage and assist her as she attempts the world's first red nose transplant. Examining his schnoz with a pair of hotdog tongs, I ask, "How long have you had this tiny, pale little thing, Dr.?" "About forty-two years." "Let's bubble down!" We fill the air with soap bubbles. His pulse is slow, so I activate the high tech cardiac accelerator, a large, hairy spider, which I dangle in front of him. Wearing a cat mask, Disorderly Gordoan conducts a thorough CT scan. Purrrrrrrfect! Finally, we tease his funny bone--it's healthy. He is fully prepped.

We extend a bedpan filled with red *donor* noses. "Doctor, as you can see, there are many styles here. So, take a deep breath, relax and pick your nose." At last, good-natured Dr. Rose points to a robust specimen and the child carefully positions it on his face. "This is the critical period where the nose may begin to reject you." We wait... Silence...Yes! It takes. The world's first red nose transplant is successful! As the audience erupts with applause and the little girl beams, the shimmering light of play envelops everyone. These are the most fulfilling twenty minutes of my professional career. My life and the world of pediatrics will never be the same.

Bibliografia

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Biografia

Michael Christensen

Michael Christensen è clown, acrobata e giocoliere statunitense. È colui che nel 1986 ha posto la prima pietra per la nascita dell'attività di clown ospedaliero professionale, metodicamente organizzata in tutto il mondo con la sua "Clown Care Unit" negli Stati Uniti, diventando il primo clown dottore della storia.