

# JOURNEYS OF TRANSFORMATION

**Kate Smith**, *Integrative Arts Psychotherapist and Drama graduate, writes about clowning, theatre and psychotherapy, exploring the idea of 'Sacred Arts' – creativity as spiritual practice.*

It was my love of play and spontaneity that lead me to discover clowning as a vehicle for transformation and change. I was seeking a drama-based practice to support my personal development and strengthen my multi-arts psychotherapy work. I started training with Didier Danthois last year, beginning a creative process that is already changing my life.

Didier Danthois has dedicated over twenty-five years to his 'Art of Sacred Clowning' and the embodiment of 'The Fool at Heart'. His approach to teaching sacred clowning includes meditation practices along with playful improvisation. He talks in terms of being fully present to each and every experience, "giving space" and "coming home to our being". The clown is discovered within, not a role to be performed. Breathing techniques are used to relax and release any physical or emotional tensions. We are encouraged to heighten awareness of the body in movement and stillness, and to learn how to observe sensations, emotions and thoughts without becoming engaged. This is preparation for being able to play freely with experience, rather than over-identify with it. It also cultivates the quality of listening to your spirit, using the mind to receive rather than control.

Receptivity is central to clowning improvisation; there is a sense of *being moved* rather than moving, of trusting and receiving whatever happens with authenticity and awareness. "Receptivity is the artist holding him or herself alive and open to hear what being may speak... whatever vision may emerge" (May 1994:80). To obey the spontaneous impulse to action I had to learn to stop thinking and allow myself to be played like an instrument. I wondered who then is doing the playing, who knows the tune? It felt like surrender to a mystery that connected me intimately to everyone and everything.

For the 'visionary' painter Cecil Collins (1908 – 1989), the fool represents "eternal innocence which sees clearly... a wisdom and compassion that heals with fun and magic" (Collins 1947:99). Recovery of this quality of direct perception leads to a transformation in consciousness that he describes as recovering 'the lost paradise'. Artists often refer to a special way of seeing involved in creating art, which becomes a transpersonal experience. "When I SEE, suddenly I am all eyes, I forget the Me... and dive into the reality that confronts me" (Frank 1973:102). I believe that this potential of the creative process to facilitate transpersonal experience is a major part of its power for transformation. Ken Wilber describes how this experience of transcending the individual ego, can ultimately lead to the realization of non-duality or unity consciousness (1997:284).

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Encounters of this nature are often described as ecstatic or blissful, but surrendering to the unknown, to the greater power of creative potential can feel very threatening to the ego and all it holds dear. As Art Therapist Shaun McNiff acknowledges, "the ways of transformation and therapeutic change are not always easy or pleasant. Psychological transformations... often involve the destruction of existing attitudes and behaviours" (McNiff 2004:268).

It takes courage to dive into the experience fully, and in opening to creative inspiration we become vulnerable. "The fool is interested in life... in love and... beauty. He is therefore, in a state of creative vulnerability" (Collins 1981:73-4). The sculptor Edward Robinson beautifully describes "a vulnerability that grows no scar tissue, tears off the bandages by which society cushions us against our ultimate inner terrors, and by choice keeps its wounds open... to the unknown, to the unlimited" (Robinson 1993:74).

I experience this vulnerability in clowning as exquisite shyness and an open-heartedness through which emotional states flow and change in an instant. It is beyond ego, with an archetypal quality blending childlike wonder and wisdom. Creative possibilities are infinite in this state and everything I encounter becomes fascinating, as an object of beauty in itself and with symbolic resonance. As a fool I played with my feet, much like a young child exploring with curiosity and delight at first, then tenderness as I discovered my soles. Totally absorbed in an experience that seemed timeless, I found myself cradling one foot like a baby and crying tears of love and loss for the child I had miscarried. Through touching the soles of my feet I poignantly touched my own soul, releasing and transforming my sorrow through sacred play.

To be able to access creative vulnerability in the presence of a group of fools takes courage, but creates a playground of profound intimacy, free from social etiquette or habitual personas. In meeting another clown awkwardness and fear become part of the play. Didier overcame his stage fright before performances by clowning with his fear; "fear is... a key in the transformative process of opening up to a sacred attitude, bringing humility and simplicity to the heart" (Danthois 1999:9).

As a spectator, witnessing someone go through this process of inner transformation can be deeply moving because we can identify with their journey. "The sacred artist is a master of resonant action... their experience becomes our experience" (Matanovic 1983). I believe this is true of any great art. Paradoxically it is both transpersonal and intimately personal, enabling us to realise the inter-connectedness between all human beings.

Peter Brook describes the work of Jerzy Grotowski as 'Holy Theatre' "because its purpose is holy". The intended purpose is to effect a transformation for performer and spectator alike. "The actor invokes, lays bare what lies in every man and what daily life covers up." (Brook 1968:67). Grotowski (1968) differentiates between the ego-based artistry of the 'courtesan actor' who collects skills and techniques to build their repertoire, and the 'ripening' of the 'holy actor' by a complete psychological stripping down to eliminate all blocks to the spontaneous

authenticity of expression. This uncensored and often confronting style of performance Grotowski describes as "a form of social psychotherapy" (1968:45), in that it challenges the spectator to also get beyond their 'everyday mask' or persona, to connect with their true nature.

Both Holy Theatre and Sacred Clowning have particular relevance to the psychotherapeutic process. The theorist Donald Winnicott says that in essence, psychotherapy is to do with two people playing together. "It is in playing... in being creative that the individual discovers the self." (1971:72-3). Play gives us the freedom to explore the whole personality. Didier, who is also a psychotherapist, explains how "clowning has shown me a way to bring more lightness into what can sometimes be very heavy work." (Danthois 1999:11).

Bringing a sense of playfulness into clinical work can be transformative, enabling exploration of what is and the creation of new possibilities. I recall how supporting a client to play with the physical expression of his shame and urge to hide (curling his body into a ball), ultimately lead him to find a stance with straightened spine, shoulders back, his head raised and saying "Here I am!" Shame was transformed into presence.

To be able to laugh at life's difficulties and our struggles in being human with empathy or comical puzzlement brings humility, grounding and psychological resilience. In sacred clowning, the fool can celebrate the divine in anything and laugh at the silliness of everything. The English word 'Silly' originally meant *bless-ed*. Humour can also facilitate the integration of fragmented parts into the whole being. I laugh with my own therapist about my personal dramas, in a way that feels loving and supports me to change by helping me accept myself as I am. The *Paradoxical Theory of Change* in Gestalt Psychotherapy, as defined by Bessier (1970:77-80), states that change occurs when you are consciously able to become what you are rather than trying to be what you are not.

This authenticity and acceptance must extend to all the parts of ourselves that perhaps we would rather not acknowledge – the rage, despair, jealousy, shame and meanness we prefer to deny. For

Grotowski, our search for fulfillment through the arts is "a process in which what is dark in us slowly becomes transparent" (1968:21). The 'holy actor' "reveals himself and sacrifices the innermost part... the most painful... not intended for the eyes of the world" (1968:34). He uses the metaphor of 'burning away' the actor's body, freeing it from all resistance to psychic impulses until nothing separates the spectator from the intimacy of the performer's raw expression (1968:33). Burning to purify is an aspect of the ancient art of Alchemy, which for me is the ultimate metaphor for profound psycho-spiritual transformation described by a creative process: turning lead into gold.

For Jungian psychotherapists Alchemy is often used as a metaphor for the therapeutic process: "The many burnings and cleansings, the meltings and hardenings... to dissolve and then to regather" (Sommer 2004:29). Each stage in alchemy symbolises the creative and destructive process of psychological insight and change.

For Jung himself, the four stages of alchemy provided the inspiration to define the Individuation process. Individuation is the process by which we mature and become full human beings. Jacobi (1973) summarises the four stages of individuation as a process of becoming conscious, first of the shadow, then of the anima or animus, and then the archetypal spirit (wise cosmic father or great earth mother). The final stage; which I think bears most relevance to creativity; involves becoming conscious of the Self. Jung's notion of Self is as an archetypal, transcendent, organising factor in the psyche, not only at the centre but also the whole circumference of being, embracing both conscious and unconscious aspects (Stevens 1995:217).

Jung explains that "the ego is to the Self as the moved to the mover" (Jung 1975:259). We can link this back to the idea of the artist surrendering to the creative process or the sacred clown surrendering to the mystery of experience, and the sense of agency greater than his or her ego being responsible for creative inspiration. I am proposing that because the creative process (at its highest levels) demands this collaboration between ego and Self, the artist has the potential for *Self-Realisation* through their art.

"For the conscious personality the birth of the self means a shift in its psychic centre, and consequently an entirely different attitude toward, and view of, life - in other words a 'transformation' in the fullest sense of the word" (Jacobi 1973:127)

The work of an artist or performer fully engaged in his or her own process of individuation, offers spectators both inspiration and challenge. I believe that is why 'Sacred Arts' have such a vital role in today's society.

In his book 'The Mission of Art', painter and performance artist Alex Grey makes the point that the more universal religious and mythical subjects of art in previous centuries have now been replaced by work that reflects the individual sensibilities of artists and the society in which they live. He celebrates this greater artistic freedom, but points out that "some popular art reflects the spiritually blind zeitgeist of alienated egotism, soulless materialism, moral degradation (and) violence" (2001:52). He argues for creativity to be approached as a spiritual practice, although he accepts the need for this 'negative' art as part of a collective alchemical process of integrating the shadow into the human psyche. Whilst I appreciate art that confronts us with our own darkness, I am less tolerant of what I perceive as superficial and narcissistic qualities in the arts, so widespread in popular culture. Like Grey, I too hope that art can "become a healing path... projecting an ideal of what we and our wounded world may become" (2001:67).

Cecil Collins makes a similar observation, how in the past "there was some kind of agreement as to the nature of reality... Today there is no point of orientation" which has led to a fragmentation of society and over-emphasis on ego-driven productivity. (1964:103). For me, the orientation we now need to find is centred within our-Selves and radiates outwards, placing us in dynamic context with others and our shared world. It is an orientation centred in heart and mind, spiritual in essence. I believe a 'sacred' approach to the arts helps us to develop greater awareness centred in Being and the capacity for deeper relationship, while retaining the symbolic depth and inherent mystery of life.

The creative process involves imagination, presence, play, curiosity, receptivity, vulnerability, fear, courage, frustration and joy. It demands of us, both surrender and nurture, integration of conscious and unconscious aspects of our being, and contact between ego and the greater Self. It brings us into intense encounter with the world and ourselves, an experience that changes us by the very nature of the psychological process that creativity entails.

The sacred artist in society can inspire us to realise our human potential, by celebrating the beauty within us and our world, and offer gifts that can challenge us into changing perceptions. Art can serve a transcendent function in society, finding creative ways to unite apparent opposites as part of a greater whole.

Albert Einstein said: "The most beautiful and profound emotion that we can experience is the sensation of the mystical" (*as cited in his obituary, New York Times 19/4/55*). I believe that the creative process, when approached whole-heartedly, becomes a spiritual practice. Didier Danthois told us during training, "the role of the artist is to communicate the mystery – by being it". My respect and love for him as a teacher recognises the profound presence he brings to his art. It is through our own journeys of transformation, our ongoing process of Self-realisation and spiritual development, facilitated by the creative process and communicated through the arts, that we hold the power to inspire others and transform our world.

### **Kate Smith 2008**

If you are interested in training with Didier Danthois please see his website for details: [www.sacred-clown-as-healer.co.uk](http://www.sacred-clown-as-healer.co.uk)

Kate trained at the Institute for Arts in Therapy and Education: [www.artspsychotherapy.org](http://www.artspsychotherapy.org)

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