

Leo Rutherford

PLAY-WORLD!

The Healing Power of Laughter and Play

Norman Cousins tells in his book "Anatomy of an illness" how he used laughter to assist in his recovery from a serious and potentially terminal illness. He arranged to have a film projector brought to his bedside and he watched Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy and Chaplin movies and early Candid Camera programmes. He found that ten minutes of belly laughter would give him two hours of pain free sleep and that sedimentation readings taken before and after the laughter episodes showed that there was a positive change in body chemistry. Much has been said and written about the effect of a person's will to live (or die), and clearly laughter made Norman's life worth living when he was flat on his back in constant pain. Without it he might well have given up.

In November 1982, shortly before I returned to live in the UK, I attended a conference on the Queen Mary - now moored at Long Beach, California, as a floating hotel and conference centre - entitled "The Healing Power of Laughter and Play". Norman Cousins was the keynote speaker and was visibly in fine health. Over eight hundred people were there and I gathered the feeling that the concept of laughter, play and humour as valuable in therapy - indeed as therapy in themselves - is beginning to be acknowledged on the California scene.

My interest in humour was stimulated long ago in acting out plays in childhood and my lifelong interest in theatre and, in particular, comedy came with me in my odyssey into the Human Potential Movement when I set about changing my life in the mid-seventies. Humour is, after all, the great transformer. It is the means of changing tragedy into comedy, pain into pleasure, confusion into understanding. All humour is based on pain, tragedy and error from banana skin jokes to political satire. The ancient American Indian tradition of the *Heyeokah* or Contrary is the path of showing truth by affirming the opposite in a humorous manner.

In many ways the psychotherapist and the comedian are brothers. They are both engaged in the same function. They are mirrors - one for society at large and one for the individual or small group. The comedian reflects the foibles and inanities of society in a way which makes this exposure tolerable - through humour; the psychotherapist reflects the traumas and neuroses of the individual client and guides the client to his or her truth.

One of the antecedents of the comedian and the therapist is the Court Jester of the Kings of the middle ages. The Jester was both court comic and (effectively) therapist to the King. He was the one person who could point to the Kings foibles (neuroses) without getting his head chopped off!

Looking further back in time, the tribal shaman can be seen to be a longtime antecedent of the psychotherapist. The shaman or witch-doctor was - and in those ancient cultures still surviving, still is - the psychotherapist/psychic and psychic healer/medical herbalist and priest. He was the connection with Spirit through his ability to go into trance and enter the visionary world, and "see" the needs of his people, individually or collectively. Today these functions have not only become largely divorced from one another but there are many people practising one who deny the usefulness of another. The idea that psychotherapy can be a secular activity divorced from spiritual life is, in terms of the perhaps two million years of human history, an extraordinary and even weird idea! The word 'psychotherapist' contains its own definition - psyche means soul (not mind) and therapist comes from the Greek 'therapaia' - doctoring. So by definition, a psychotherapist is a doctor of the soul, not a meddler in the mind!

During my five years living in California I was very fortunate to meet several American Indian shamans and to study with them. One of the most special characteristics about them is their playfulness and humour and this was spectacularly evident in the two centenarians I met - Grandfather David Monongye, the spiritual leader of the Hopi people (about 101 years old) and Don Jose Rios (Matsewa) Huichol Shaman from central Mexico - about 103. This contrasts with the only white western centenarian I have met - my aunt who died at 101, having been a misery since the age of seventy!

Western psychotherapy and psychiatry have rather tended to be serious, analytical, problem and pain oriented and to obey the churchianity injunction "You have to suffer to feel good"! I remember an encounter

group leader, back in '77, doing his 'beginning of group' spiel and telling us that we **must really** get into our deepest pain, anguish and anger or he (the leader-expert-father) would not accept us. The group had been quite light and open the evening before when we met but it wasn't long before we all manifested misery, sadness, hate and fear and that continued for the whole weekend. (Or maybe longer in some cases . . . I happened to meet one of the participants again in Oregon in 1982 and she was even more miserable and pained than in '77!) In my early days in the Human Potential Movement I used to think that was 'therapy' and I must be a whole lot more sick than I actually felt. I even got to thinking that when I was joyful and happy, I must be avoiding something. . .

There is a cycle one can get stuck in. 'I - me and my pain . . . go to therapist/group for catharsis and relief . . . be acknowledged for 'really working on myself' . . . feel better for a bit till something else happens . . . more pain . . . another group/session and more catharsis . . . another round of acknowledgement and 'love' etc. . . and so on'. One gets rewarded for feeling bad and so it becomes "good to feel bad"! Another crazy knot is formed.

The work in Bandler and Grinder's Neurolinguistic Programming shows us how we anchor each other and ourselves into states of mind. We are hypnotised all the time - so all the Mystics and Masters assure us, though not necessarily in those words - (Gurdjieff called our waking state of consciousness "waking sleep") - and in therapy situations where we are asking for help and guidance we are literally asking to be put into a different state of mind. The therapist can anchor us very easily indeed - and if s/he anchors us into pain and misery, then that is what we are likely to experience . . . and therapy can go on a very long time if it helps create the very feelings it is supposed to be alleviating!

All spiritual teachers and enlightened beings I have had the good fortune to meet have proved to be light, humorous, joyful jokers! For example - Grandfather David and Don Jose as mentioned earlier - also that great cosmic joker Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and the Lama Sogyal Rinpoche whose laughter still rings in my ears from an AHP workshop in January. Yet many in the therapy and helping professions in our culture seem to manifest something of an agony column attitude to life.

Looking at 'heavy' and 'light' in terms of tragedy and comedy, Joseph Campbell in "The hero with a thousand faces" tells us that . . . "divine comedies . . . in the ancient world were regarded as of a higher rank than tragedy, of a deeper truth, of a more difficult realisation, of

a sounder structure and of a revelation more complete. The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth and the divine comedy of the soul, is to be read, not as a contradiction but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man . . . Tragedy is the shattering of forms and of our attachment to the forms; comedy, the wild and careless, inexhaustable joy of life invincible".

Well . . . I am unequivocally a seeker of the "wild and careless, inexhaustable joy of life invincible"! . . . so in October '83, after I had newly settled in London, I founded PLAY-WORLD! as my contribution to this end. I sought to create a method which is growthful and catalytic to help people to find lightness, love and laughter while keeping their feet on the ground! At Play-World though we look at aspects of personality and act them out - and some of the games we play in the ongoing workshops can be a bit devastating in what they reveal - the bulk of the work is about connecting with that part of ourselves which is beyond personality. It is about re-identifying from 'i' the individual separate ego-self, to 'I' the fragment of the Divine, connected to all, and part of the Universe. Once upon a time we were all children and we knew that holistic state of consciousness, called in ancient myth "The Holy Grail". We just were . . . ('Save ye be as little children, ye shall not enter the Kingdom', said the Shaman of Nazareth!) . . . then we were "growed-up", taught all sorts of right and wrong ways to be, to be competitive, that its a dog eat dog world, to be judgmental and categorize everything, that we are all separate and afraid . . . and we lost that special sense of oneness and wonder. In coming to the Human Potential Movement and spiritual movements, we consciously - or unconsciously - seek the Grail again. In the ancient myth, Parsifal has to remember to ask the question "Whom does the Grail serve?" Finally he remembers and the answer comes - "The Grail serves the Grail King". The Grail King is our high self. The "Fisher King" - our personality/ego-self - is healed when we truly begin to serve the High Self . . . the God Within.

Looking at this process of self re-identification in terms of stages in a group, one can put it into five stages like this:

Stage one: . . . Shyness, fear, inhibition, uncertainty, insecurity etc . . . in a word - self-consciousness. A State firmly rooted in 'i', the ego.

Stage two: Bravado, showing-off, strutting etc. . . the reverse side of self-consciousness and no more happy or joyful.

Stage three: Losing oneself in the here-and-now activity. A state which can feel like chaos inside at first, but which is the beginning of really letting-go. I have experienced it like a little voice inside which says "Screw it, I don't care anymore!" . . . and then I am just here-now, just being, just engaged in the dance, game, activity - just for the sake of it. No pretence, no resistance, no fear . . . (then I realise where I am and "normality" comes flooding back!)

Stage four: When one begins to BE moved, when the dance begins to dance the dancer, the game plays the player . . .

Stage five: Only the dance is left . . . there is no dancer, player, actor . . . just THE PRESENCE . . . EXISTENCE . . . HERE-NOW . . .

When people ask me what I do for a living, sometimes just for fun I tell them "I am a therapist who helps sane people go crazy!" To find one's truth in a mad world, to find "the inexhaustable joy of life invincible", doesn't one have to be a little crazy?

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