

# The Clown

## Talk in a school chapel, 1975

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It's about this clown. This clown was beginning to have doubts about his act.

I'd like to tell you about this clown and about the doubts he was having about his act.

Though mind you, I'm not sure. I mean, I'm not sure that I'd like to tell you. Perhaps I wouldn't like to tell you. Perhaps I was telling a lie when I said just now, about fifteen seconds ago, that I'd like to tell you, about fifteen seconds, well, more like nineteen seconds ago now, twenty-three by now, I daresay. How many seconds since I started this, er, sermon? I suppose no-one's been timing me?

I suppose someone may have been, actually. But please don't get up and say so, it would be bad for my morale.

Anyway, about this clown, about whom I'd like to tell you. Or maybe about whom I wouldn't like to (there's some uncertainty) tell you and the doubts he was having about his – it occurs to me that perhaps I am confusing you. Perhaps, perhaps, you are being confused by me.

Alternatively, or in addition, you may be feeling one or more of the following: angered, bothered, concerned, discomfited, enervated, flouted, galled, hassled, irritated, jostled, kicked, larruped, marooned,

numb, overcome, petulant, quickened, rising, strong, trampling, unbowed, vengeful, wicked, xenophobic, yea-saying, zealous.

But about this clown, who was having doubts about his, er. Roughly, his doubts fell into four groups, they fell into four groups. Well, they didn't exactly fall.

If I am confusing you by the way, please don't do or say anything which might be bad for my morale. For example, please don't turn or look away, please don't start humming the Apostles' Creed under your breath, please do not ponder aloud with your neighbour the ways in which circuses are, and the ways in which circuses are *au contraire* by

and large not, similar to religious services in public school chapels.  
Please. Thank you.

Do you know that poem by e e cummings which begins thus:

When God decided to invent  
the world he took one breath  
bigger than a circustent  
and everything began

But anyway, about this clown, who was having doubts about his act and whose doubts fell into four groups. Well, they didn't exactly fall. They sort of flopped around, like a load of toads having a loose scrum.

His doubts, this clown's doubts. His first load of doubts was about whether he could still get people's attention, and could then entertain them. Now, these weren't really serious doubts, not in themselves. Everybody has problems, and compared with some problems that can be had, this particular problem of the clown wasn't terribly dreadful. For example I heard the other day about a boy who had been rusticated from his school. Why, his father asked. Well, father, the chaplain was smoking. But that's not sufficient reason to rusticate a chap. Well, father, it was me that set him on fire.

I was in this country pub late at night, very dark outside. A terrible screech of brakes outside, and a man dashed in very distraught, Have you got, he said, a black dog in this village with a white collar? No, people said. Have you got a black cat in this village with a white collar. No, they said. Oh dear, oh dear, he said, I've gone and killed another vicar.

Talking of vicars, there was this vicar at the fair. He was at the shooting range, and he won, and the prize was a tortoise. He took it away, very pleased, and came back later and had another go. Again he won. This time his prize was a goldfish. No, he said, I want the same that I had last time – one of them nice meat pies with the hard crust.

Talking of goldfish, there were these two goldfish. Do you believe in God, the one goldfish asks the other. Of course, I do, says the other goldfish, who else do you think changes our water?

Oh. He could still – after a fashion. Yes he could still – entertain people, the clown, some people. That in itself was not the problem. The problem

was that he had to make more and more effort to entertain people, which meant his act appeared to get more and more, er, irrelevant.

He strove more and more for effect. The make-up was spread on his face as if from a concrete-mixer. His gestures and antics were as if he'd been programmed by a manic toymaker. His tongue galloped amok in his mouth, as if there was a cassette tape-recorder in his throat, made in Japan of course, and out of control, and any minute he'd commit hairy curry, like they do in Japan, disembowel himself, he'd show 'em what he was made of. And this is what worried him. This is what I am trying to get at. Perhaps there was nothing inside him. Nothing there at all. No eyes, no skin even, behind the cosmic cosmetics. No bones, no blood even, inside his flitting limbs and his haphazard hands. No words, no word even, inside his tripping tongue.

This was his first problems, his first load of doubts. Maybe the more effort he made, the more he gibbered and gimmicked for effect, the more he lost his own inside. Maybe the more there was outside the less there was inside.

The second load of doubts was to do with his audience. It was bad enough to be losing himself, his inside. But what was also bad was that he was, perhaps, in his act, hurting other people, hurting his audience.

To catch and to hold people's attention is maybe to pluck from them a precious fruit. To jag, jig, jog, joke, jerk, jib, with words amongst people is maybe to tear their flesh.

Oh, I'm not talking about the Mrs Whitehouses and housemasters of this world. I'm not talking about embarrassing your host .. Well, causing offence and embarrassment is one of the things I'm talking about ... but mainly what I'm talking about, and what this clown was wondering about, was the assault on people which you are perpetrating if you get up and do an act – any kind of act.

This was the second set of worries. Maybe, in and through his act, he was not only systematically losing his own self, his own soul, but also systematically scattering, scuttling, the selves and souls of other people too.

That poem by e e cummings has a second verse:

when man determined to destroy  
himself he picked the was

of shall and finding only why  
smashed it into because

Here was the third set of doubts. To do an act, even a clown's act, means planning, planning ahead. It means picking the was of shall – changing your mind as you look ahead, trying to imagine exactly what it will be like. You try to get everything neat and tidy in your mind's eye. You work with because, not with why. There's lots of light and very little dark, lots of tongue and very little silence.

(Oh yes, you may seem to be impromptu, to be plucking words and ideas from the God-given air around you. But no, all your tricks come from up your own sleeve.)

And a fourth load. There are two groups of people in the world – the haves and the haven'ts, the insiders and outsiders, those who say thank you and those who say please. Oppressors and oppressed. And there's only one business, which is the creation of justice. How dare the clown waste, how dare the clown fritter, his scraps of time, his scrappy gimmicks and gambles? How dare he fritter these away on an act, a mere act? When there is real work to be done, the work of doing justice?

In particular how dare he fritter his time in certain particular arenas, amphitheatres, audiences, assemblies – those (these) certain particular places closely enmeshed with the world's elites? How dare he go there? How dare he condone by with presence, his frivolous, superficial, artificial presence, the structures of inequality and injustice?

These four loads of doubts. What could he do?

Well, the obvious thing he could do, flashing obvious, was nothing. He could just go home. Or rather, not come at all. Not do an act. Just shut up. Just be silent.

Just be, just, nothing.

And this is what the clown decided to do – to choose silence, in order to avoid losing himself, and to avoid hurting others, and avoid falsifying God, and to keep faith with the oppressed.

But then, thinking a bit about God, it occurred to him that to be yourself, to find yourself, you have to act.

And to be of use, even the slightest use, to other people, you have to act.

And even if all you want to say is that nothing should be said, still you have to act.

And the creation of justice, you have to act.

Whether, trembled the clown as he thought about this, you're old God inventing the odd universe, or whether you're dear Christ getting stuck into it, or whether, and the clown trembled most of all on this, particularly on this he trembled, but his tremble was a tremble of joy as well as of awe, you're just a poor clown, you have to act.

This is what the clown thought, about his problems. And he trembled, he trembled, with joy as well as with awe.

But he wasn't sure. And I'm not sure.

If you want to take the matter further, you can get in touch with him, care of yourself.

Yes. I think that's it. Care of yourself.

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