

I've never been in a place like this before. The air smells like urine and rancid cabbage. The halls are daunting and resemble what I would imagine the interior of a prison to look like with sterile architecture discreetly alluding to years and years of abuse. The linoleum floor of the institution reflects the harsh fluorescent lights coming from the decrepit ceiling. In the long hallowed hallway I see an open door. The others are still in the main room with the kids, which the institution, orphanage number four, has presented. I choose to venture into the neglected hallways of this desolate place hoping to find kids, whom the institution has hidden and chosen not to introduce. I walk in to see a room filled with cribs. There must have been close to fifty cribs in this small cramped room. I walk over to one of them to find a child with severe deformities. His body is crunched together like a can trampled underfoot. I quickly realize that he can't speak and that all he can muster are tender guttural exclamations. I begin to hold his hand and move his arm around. His face brightens immediately and I realize that somebody caring and touching him is a rare event that he has grown unaccustomed to. His smile spreads across his face and his eyelids flutter with bliss. I begin to tickle him, which makes him squirm and screech with the new sensation - laughter. He is more relaxed now and my gaze drifts up to the nametag on the head of the metal crib showing his birth date. A shock goes throughout my entire body. He is three years older than I am.

This was an experience I had on my first humanitarian clown trip in the beginning of eighth grade. I went to Russia with Patch Adams and his organization Gesundheit. The trips began in 1985 when Patch Adams led a group of 40 untrained clowns into the Soviet Union. Patch entered the world of medicine to use it as a platform for social change, but quickly realized that the world he was entering was corrupt and the opposite of what he thought it was and should be. He began to realize that one of the main problems he saw with the medical system is that "medicine itself is critically ill because it makes an emotional void between patients and doctors."<sup>1</sup> Patch Adams came up with a solution to this ubiquitous gap that he saw by going to medical school and promptly dropping out because he found something that he viewed to be more powerful than medical treatment. He found humor to be a panacea, an all-powerful healing method. Patch realized that "humor is an antidote to all ills"<sup>2</sup> and, further, that humor is a universal platform for connection and inclusion. For Patch humor not only holds an incredible restorative power, it can act as a medicine on a personal and societal level.

The trip to Russia consists of one week in Moscow then taking an overnight train to St. Petersburg, spending a week in each. In both Moscow and St. Petersburg I visited orphanages, mental health hospitals, homeless shelters, hospice homes, and retirement

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<sup>1</sup> Stout, David. "Doctor Is Clown Suit Battles Ills of His Profession." New York Times, n.d. Web.  
<[http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured\\_articles/19981215tuesday.html](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/19981215tuesday.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> Stout, David. "Doctor Is Clown Suit Battles Ills of His Profession." New York Times, n.d. Web.  
<[http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured\\_articles/19981215tuesday.html](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/19981215tuesday.html)>.

homes most of which so separated from populated areas that it takes hours in a bus to get to them. Traveling to these remote parts of society made me confront hidden parts of society which are not only ignored in the urban landscape of the country but also seem to be pushed out of societal recognition. The people in the institutions are in a reality that has been plastered over. This lack of acceptance has taught the people in these institutions that they are not worth remembering and should be treated as if they themselves do not exist, which is fundamentally wrong.

Going to these institutions within Russia showed me many things, which I had never been exposed to before, having come from a private school in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in New York City, being raised in an environment of privilege alongside children of celebrities and scholars. I got to see a harsh reality not many will ever choose to see, which caused me to recognize the healing nature of laughter and how humor can be a release and salve. Simply laughing and tickling this one boy showed me that this impact was not theoretical but incredibly real because for those twenty minutes (before a nurse noticed I was in a restricted room and pushed me out) I had the privilege of connecting with someone whom the world has shut out and refused to appreciate. My red nose and the inherent levity found within it became a bridge to a world many have been told not to venture into.

I realized that without my red nose and the whole clown costume which both held such playfulness within them, I would feel uncomfortable entering these forgotten institutions. My red nose acted a shield for me because I knew that with this relic of humor and amusement there was an assumption of buffoonery which most of these kids are so restricted to in their daily routine. I became an excuse for them to finally embrace the childhood that they were deprived of. The kids were all forced to grow up so fast because of a forced confrontation with aspects of life which most adults can't even face after experiencing all of the painful intricates of living. When I had this realization I began to further ask myself why I found it so much easier to face these people in such dire situations when I had my clown nose on. What does humor and tomfoolery provide? How can humor be a medicine on a personal and a societal level? In Russia, the playfulness that my clown nose brought was an immediate bridge for connection because it made a saddening reality suddenly full of mirth and giddiness. I began to realize that when I wasn't in Russia and I wasn't costumed in my clown costume I still used humor as a vehicle to make myself more comfortable in social interactions. Humor became much more than just a flippant joke or sarcastic comment, it became coping mechanism, a weapon, a way for me to protect myself, and a necessity for me to lead a sane existence.

Through my experience in Russia I came to the understanding that humor is an advanced intellectual means of developing new perspectives and coping with extreme circumstances. Throughout history humor has proved to be a mechanism with which one can face things, which are difficult to confront.

For example during the holocaust humor came to be seen as a coping mechanism because it became one form of escape. In Elie Wiesel's memoir Night about his time at Auschwitz he shows the macabre forms of comedy that took place- "in Treblinka where a days food was some stale bread and a cup rotting soup one prisoner cautions a fellow

inmate of gluttony ‘hey Moshe, don’t overeat think of us who will have to carry you.’”<sup>3</sup> For Wiesel the fact that humor persisted in Nazi concentration camps shows the vital role it plays in human resilience and survival. Humor created a space for confrontation and reconciliation with reality. The jokes made in the concentration camps reflected the vividness of the tragedy they were living; instead of facing it in a way that would cause further depression and loss of hope, it produced an opportunity for a small pleasure and spark of resilience. Humor is vital as a coping mechanism and a tool to counteract unpleasant reality because it is an almost unconscious way of confronting something hard to approach.

The coping mechanism that humor provides creates a cathartic release and calm space for reevaluation. Theorist Martin Armstrong who wrote about the function of humor in society says. “For a few moments under the spell of laughter, the whole man is completely and gloriously alive: body, mind and soul vibrate in unison...the mind flings its doors and windows open... its foul and secret places are ventilated and sweetened.”<sup>4</sup> Armstrong shows the beauty that humor can give in an ugly place, which not many other things have the capacity to do. Humor can create something, which I found my clown nose created for me when I went to Russia. It gave me the strength and space to deal with topics that I would have either ignored or shied away from. Humor has the ability to make things that are unapproachable suddenly and gloriously approachable, which is so necessary because those things that we fail to approach can be some of the things that need to be confronted the most. The world is an incredibly brutal place. It is hard to not feel the onus that it puts on one’s shoulders of not being enough or if we do feel content, that we don’t deserve it. We are born into a race with no finish line. It’s so easy to let this reality bog one down and if we didn’t have the coping mechanism of humor to deal with this reality we as people would not be as balanced or human. The philosopher Francis Bacon states that “Imagination was given to man to compensate for what he is not; a sense of humor to console him for what he is.”<sup>5</sup> In this quote Bacon shows that the human condition is incredibly difficult and confusing, but humor supplies one with both a weapon to protect one’s sense of self and a bandage to heal with when knocked down.

We have been taught to build walls and suppress so many important things, which instead, we should face and digest. I think that this mentality has stuck with me because when I went clowning in Russia I truly realized how sheltered I had been living until that

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<sup>3</sup> Force, Nichole. "Humor As Weapon, Shield and Psychological Salve." *Psych Central.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Nov. 2014. <<http://psychcentral.com/lib/humor-as-weapon-shield-and-psychological-salve/0005629>>.

<sup>4</sup> Force, Nichole. "Humor As Weapon, Shield and Psychological Salve." *Psych Central.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Nov. 2014. <<http://psychcentral.com/lib/humor-as-weapon-shield-and-psychological-salve/0005629>>.

<sup>5</sup> Force, Nichole. "The Hidden Power of Humor." *Psych Central.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Nov. 2014. <<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2010/03/02/the-hidden-power-of-humor/>>.

point, and how blind I was to the world outside of my incredibly privileged community. In Russia I began to try and break down these walls, which I feel limit me; humor gave me a bridge to change my perception of the world. As people we are forced to build walls. We build walls to protect ourselves because when we are born we are born into a system/society that is bigger than all of us. Society has ingrown ideas of what is right and wrong so unconsciously when we are born we are already biased against certain things because of the system that we are born into and walls are constructed which dictate how we should lead our lives. Because society has created a mindset of closed off oppression and has woven a thick carpet---making it so easy to hide things beneath the surface--- comedy becomes something to break this up and the walls that have been built. In the words of comedian Chris Bliss “comedy deals with things where the walls are the highest, race, religion, sexuality, and the alchemy of laughter turns walls into windows revealing a fresh and unexpected point of view.”<sup>6</sup> Bliss shows that comedy presents things often distressing and uncomfortable in a way, which makes them affably approachable. He also presents the idea that humor and comedy deliver heavy things with levity providing a new perspective on the burdensome situation, helping create if not a solution, a way to cope.

Comedy and humor provide a space to feel/see things in a casual but extremely impactful way. Comedy has such a huge impact, which many don't notice. In her article “The Dark Psychology of Being a Comedian” Olga Khazan shows comedy can have an impact on our decision making process. She says that, “evolutionary psychologists have suggested that humor is a way to subtly outshine our competitors for mates. Nothing says ‘pick me’ like having an entire office/bar/dorm double over at your imitation of Shosh from *Girls*.”<sup>7</sup> Khazan shows that humor holds great power and that one snide remark could rule out another suitor, making humor a huge role in the decision making process—not only in how we pick and choose our mates, but also how we choose our political candidates. Comedy held great power in Nazi Germany as well because telling a joke became illegal. If one were to tell a joke in earshot of a Gestapo officer then one would be labeled ‘a-social’, which was a segment of society often sent to concentration camps. So something which had the intention for silliness suddenly became quite, quite serious.

Humor is a vital player in our perceptions of people because it can twist and warp someone into the butt of the joke, rendering them not only insincere but also powerless. There is an Italian phrase “una risata vi seppelira. (Translation: it will be a laugh that buries you.)”<sup>8</sup> Meaning that comedy and humor can be the end of you, proving that

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<sup>6</sup> "Comedy Is Translation." *Chris Bliss*: N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2014.  
<[http://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_bliss\\_comedy\\_is\\_translation](http://www.ted.com/talks/chris_bliss_comedy_is_translation)>.

<sup>7</sup> Khazan, Olga. "The Dark Psychology of Being a Good Comedian." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 27 Feb. 2014. Web. 10 Nov. 2014.  
<<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/02/the-dark-psychology-of-being-a-good-comedian/284104/>>.

<sup>8</sup> "Comedy Is Translation." *Chris Bliss*: N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2014.  
<[http://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_bliss\\_comedy\\_is\\_translation](http://www.ted.com/talks/chris_bliss_comedy_is_translation)>.

humor and comedy are dangerous weapons. In his TED Talk “Comedy is Translation” Chris Bliss explores the power that comedy still obtains in decision-making and how it can potentially change perceptions

In 2008 when Tina Fey impersonated the vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin she not only made a hilarious and accurate impersonation, but also changed the way that Sarah Palin was viewed by a majority of the public forever. In this instance, Tina Fey had power over Sarah Palin and, with that power, was able to change the perception of the American people. Fey turned a very serious political candidate into a joke. Bliss believes that this specific impersonation was incredibly impactful because all of Fey’s scripts were not written by Fey or the Saturday Night Live writers, but lifted from Palin’s actual remarks. If words are what we present of ourselves to the exterior world then by using Palin’s real words the American public was literally laughing at Sarah Palin as a person. Jon Stewart also holds a similar perception changing power over the American public by being a more trustworthy news source than major network news shows and having better informed viewers. Watching the news in general can be a very depressing activity; for Jon Stewart to then turn something depressing into an opportunity for comedy and laughter is not only smart but also then allows people to confront dark topics with lightheartedness. Because people have started viewing the daily show as a legitimate news source Jon Stewart now has the power to change people’s perception of what is right and wrong based on his own personal opinions. Jon Stewart and The Daily Show has become the source that governs the general public’s political/societal perspective and shifts their opinion.

Of course The Daily Show is a reputable source for the idea that Americans are getting their news and forming their opinions from a place that is comedic and poking fun is problematic. My problem with this idea is that: If comedy comes from a place of insincerity then is it okay to look at severely serious situations from a place of insincerity? Does that mentality lead to insincerity in everything? Are there some things that should never be playful? Comedy is helpful in so many ways where other things are not, but does comedy have its limits? Using comedy can be very productive to use as a coping mechanism and to deal with an unpleasant and unchanging reality but there needs to be a balance of mirth and sincerity. In my life I realized that I immediately jump to using humor when I’m in an uncomfortable/ unpleasant situation and that some times it fact more harmful because I have not digested the situation fully and using humor helps me remove myself. There are many thoughts on the negative aspects of comedy and why it can actually be harmful. Hobbes and Plato suggest that making fun helps us feel superior to others while Kant and later psychologists thought it was about a cognitive shift of moving a serious situation into playful territory.<sup>9</sup> If we move serious material into ‘playful territory’ then we lessen the reality of it and make something very heavy into something lighthearted and flippant, distancing ourselves from the trauma. In the humor research lab in Boulder, Colorado they found “Through clinical studies...that tragedies—think earthquakes, deaths, and the like—are funnier when they’re either physically or

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<sup>9</sup> Khazan, Olga. "The Dark Psychology of Being a Good Comedian." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 27 Feb. 2014. Web. 10 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/02/the-dark-psychology-of-being-a-good-comedian/284104/>>.

socially distant.”<sup>10</sup> The whole concept of distancing one’s self from trauma is something I find to be very difficult because in modern society it is becoming easier not to face your problems. Distance is an easy solution. Actor Will Rogers shone light on this predicament with comedy by stating that, “Everything is funny, as long as it's happening to somebody else.”<sup>11</sup> If comedy becomes not a coping mechanism but a way to distance ourselves from other people’s suffering then it becomes a device for malice, creating a society with no compassion for others, and instead with a solely self motivated mentality.

Comedy can be difficult and frustrating thing because often as a teenager I witness things that are said as jokes, but are actually incredibly painful and ignorant. I remember in fifth grade it suddenly became a trend to say “GGAAAAYY” or “that’s so gay” about random things, which were offensive. When “that’s so gay” becomes something that is just said around it lessens the meaning of being a LGBTQ individual, much less an LGBTQ teenager in an environment making a joke out of your identity. I found this to be troubling because kids around me began to not realize the impact that saying “that’s so gay” truly had. In Bliss’ TED talk he makes an argument on how comedy can be edgy and have impact without being fundamentally oppressive. Bliss states that, “when you get the viral appeal of a great joke with a powerful punch line that's crafted from honesty and integrity, it can have a real world impact at changing a conversation.” Bliss shows that the reason comedy and humor can both be so powerful are if it comes from a place of honesty and integrity. Both Tiny Fey’s impersonations of Sarah Palin in 2008 and the Daily Show with Jon Stewart, things that have changed the American public’s view on serious issues, are both full of honesty and integrity because Fey’s impersonations were lifted verbatim from Palin’s speeches it makes her stay honest to Palin and with Stewart’s brand of comedy he was to rely on factual evidence for it to be funny. Bliss says that they are “successful because of the common desire to hear the truth and face the world, but in tolerable terms.”<sup>12</sup> Bliss shows that although comedy may be difficult and frustrating it is essential in facing daunting areas/topics, although also entertaining honesty and integrity, allowing one to face things in a comfortable and low stress environment.

Comedy has provided me a tool to break down barriers, permitting me to explore areas I feel are important but difficult. Through my experiences clowning with Patch Adams in Russia I have seen how people’s barriers immediately break down when they begin to laugh and create an inviting environment. Walking down the street in full-fledged clown attire allows one to view interaction in an entirely different way. Usually when walking on the street I try to put on a persona of being in a rush, chin slightly cocked up and ear buds in, blocking out any avenue of an invitation for interaction.

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<sup>10</sup> Khazan, Olga. "The Dark Psychology of Being a Good Comedian." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 27 Feb. 2014. Web. 10 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/02/the-dark-psychology-of-being-a-good-comedian/284104/>>.

<sup>11</sup> "Monro's "Theories of Humor"" *Monro's "Theories of Humor"* N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2014. <<https://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/monro.html>>.

<sup>12</sup> "Comedy Is Translation." *Chris Bliss*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2014. <[http://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_bliss\\_comedy\\_is\\_translation](http://www.ted.com/talks/chris_bliss_comedy_is_translation)>.

Wearing the clown get-up made people on the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg laugh; it also made me realize how the humor found in my clothing was opening up a canal for inclusion and interaction. Humor is not just simply about a laugh, but it is a spark that helps demolish of the walls society presents and we presuppose to be the only reality.

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