

# Behind the Red Nose

Judy Schaap ~ *Bo-Ho-Ho the Clown*

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**I**t should be said that I was tricked into going to clown school. I was in a decidedly un-clown like time of life, dark-hearted from a painful divorce, unable to find beauty even in a Montana sunset. Even my clown name reflects the duress I was under when I found out I had been secretly enrolled in this school. *Bo-Ho-Ho* was my little sister's toddler-aged word for a really serious "NO!" and was the only thing I could come up with when a lady repeatedly demanded to know my clown name, refusing to take herself and her clip board away until a name had been inserted into the blank.

Inside I was kicking and screaming, cussing and fussing, feeling duped and tricked and ganged up on. That is... until my teachers were introduced. There they were, look-

ing exactly as they had when I saw them in circus magazines and the Red Skelton show when I was a kid. My tantrum-filled adult immediately shrunk to an awe-filled child and I was healed. I was willing to learn everything I could from these gentle men, in hopes of someday helping a child feel the comfortable glee which I'd felt early in life. Nearly as great was my hope that I could help an adult feel the way I felt right at that moment.

That was the first time I understood the healing power of a clown. Later that night, I pondered the role of clown, jester, trickster, contrary in myriad cultures throughout time. Each of those societies had powerful healers, teams of people who studied and practiced the healing of body, soul, mind, spirit and community. With awe, I realized that my inner gifts, paired with what I

could learn from these master clowns, could illuminate the healer in me.

My teachers made sure each student understood not just how to dress up and tie balloon animals, but that we truly knew the responsibility of the profession. We were schooled in everything from how to "pick your nose" (clown-ease for finding the right shape and size nose for your character) to working with abused children and others who hurt in seen and unseen ways.

Each time I prepare to clown, I am aware of the honor and responsibility of stepping into the lineage of those who have made people laugh, cry, question or release their tight control.

It takes about two hours to get properly made up, dressed and prepared. I admit the process is tedious. It will be done to the high specifications of my teachers. Paint, powder, glue - and check details thrice before leaving the mirror. The detailed drudgery dissipates quickly the moment I see the first person's response when I step out onto the street. Then "it" kicks in and I am filled with glee and passion for what I do.

There's an incredibly euphoric feeling when all my senses are so fully and presently engaged in clowning. My goal is quite simply to make every single person's day different, if only for a few seconds.

I am flamboyant for the group at large yet for each individual, I am theirs alone. I do my best to sense what each person needs most, whether it's a high-five, a hug, a bit of silly flirting, or a posed photograph. I adore seeing everyone, from cherished baby to the elder who was wheeled to the parade by a nursing home attendant. They each light up when they become aware that they are truly seen and adored by a clown.

One of my most important personal rules is never to cause fear. Each time I perform, I do my best to sense those who genuinely feel fear of being near a clown. Most often they are older teens or adults. I assure them, from a great distance, that I will not be coming close to them. There often are people who become brave enough to tell me of their fear, from yards away. When they do that, I know they are open to conquering their fears and their courage touches me deeply. Patience, compassion and time is my gift to these people as they allow their fears to melt away. They answer my questions to help me understand their fears. I help them to understand the difference between someone dressing up as a clown, acting in unpredictable or frightening ways, and a person with the warm and gentle heart of a true clown. I remain still as the person chooses to come closer while we talk. Finally, I offer the opportunity to touch my nose, my eyelashes, or my gloved hand. The transformation and healing that occurs as they dare to touch, is a moment of beauty beyond compare.

One of the world's most beloved clowns, Red Skelton, has been my inspiration for the 14 years I have been performing as *Bo-Ho-Ho*. He healed and entertained people with the genuine warmth, kindness and compassion that he is so cherished for. When I look into the wonder-filled eyes of a child, and see the reflection of my own made up face, I realize that in some small way I am giving them what Red Skelton gave me. A tear of gratitude slides unnoticed from the painted eyes of this clown. It is the healer who has been healed. ■

*"If someday you're not feeling well, and you should remember some silly little thing I've said or done, and if it brings a smile to your face or a chuckle to your heart, then my purpose as a clown has been fulfilled."*

—Red Skelton

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## DIARY: ENNIS 4th of JULY PARADE

The world is a different place from behind the red nose of a clown. I yearn to show my family, my friends, even strangers—just what it looks like from this vantage point.

For instance, there's Ennis. It's one of my favorite places to clown. Just today, this Fourth of July, the beauty of this place and these people nearly filled me to overflowing.

Although the town's population swells considerably for the parade and rodeo, Ennis retains an air of simpler times. The town is draped in red, white and blue bunting and vibrant anticipation. Shops display their best wares while cafes open their doors to allow sumptuous smells to waft out, and hungry people to drift in. Flags flutter from front porches in quiet neighborhoods where sleepy dogs lie in the July sun. The bank's large lawn is freshly mown in anticipation of the picnic blankets which will hold sun-kissed families, their paper plates buckling under the weight of burgers and watermelon.

The air at the parade staging area is simply ripe with anticipation. Restless horses, rodeo queens, and copiously badged Boy Scouts take their parade positions an hour early. Miles City's Scottish dancers share a little giggle with me as I ineptly attempt to match their high practice steps. Veterans greet each other with eyes that remember, even now. They will ride in the position of honor, on a bright red flatbed truck at the front of the parade.

The bag pipe corp from Helena, wrapped in the tentacles of their pipes, tune up in a non-sonorous squall of blats and hums, which will soon give way to stirring melodies echoing through the small town's streets. The uniformed servicemen take their place, flags held respectfully in white gloved hands. I believe they are aware that we will see the faces of our loved ones in their own as they walk solemnly by folks who still stand as the flag passes, hearts covered with hands or cowboy hats. This parade starts on time—always. The soldiers' polished boots taking their first steps at the stroke of 10 am.

It always touches my heart to see the street lined with a red, white and blue festooned crowd. Some don their best jeans and well starched shirts, others wear their colors in hair ribbons and silly hats. I watch their anticipation as I come closer. The parade detours through the nursing home parking area, and the residents smile and hold my hand as I take extra time with each of them. Children beam their neon-ice-drink colored smiles at me. They'll want high fives, hugs and to tell me their secrets. Adults applaud or quickly snap photographs. Last year's favorite memories... a beautiful little girl named Sophia displayed a radiant smile, minus one recently lost front tooth... A parade goer offered me a heavenly bottle of water from an ice filled cooler... A small boy, after finding out I had no candy to give him, dug into his candy filled cowboy hat and offers me a brightly wrapped, sticky piece of his own.

By the parade's end, I'm drenched in sweat, clown make up a little worn where my eyes crinkle when I smile. The people of Ennis, and those who've traveled there for the parade are responsible for the real smile behind the painted one on this clown's face.

