

Play, Healing, and Wellness as seen by a Physician Who Clowns

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An Interview with Bowen White, MD

Bowen White is a physician. He founded the Department of Preventive and Stress Medicine at the Baptist Medical Center in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1983 and later established the center's Department of Wellness and Health Promotion. White is also a clown who goes by the name of Dr. Jerko. For years he mixed these dual interests, skills, and egos while practicing medicine, and more recently he combines them as a writer, speaker, and consultant to a wide range of institutions and corporations. He is the author of *Why Normal Isn't Healthy: How to Find Heart, Meaning, Passion, and Humor on the Road Most Traveled* and has lectured and clowned across the globe, in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, homes for the aged, hospices, schools, refugee camps, prisons, and more. Play and playfulness lie at the center of how he views the world, and here he discusses how, in his opinion, clowning, play, and playfulness intersect with healing and good health.

American Journal of Play: Dr. White, you practiced medicine many years before taking up clowning. How did you, a doctor, get into clowning? What led you to this unusual combination?

Bowen White: Another physician who clowns led me to it. In April 1991, I cochaired a conference on the exploration of consciousness sponsored by the Voluntary Controls Research Group at the Menninger Foundation. The cochairs got to choose the theme and speakers, and after picking "Humor and Spirit: The Divine Comedy" as the focus, we invited our good friend Patch Adams to be one of the speakers. You might remember that about ten years ago Hollywood made a movie about him, and actor Robin Williams played the lead role. This was well before the movie, though.

We'd known Patch for years and correctly assumed he'd be a perfect fit. During the conference, Patch asked me to go with him and a group of clowns to Russia in November. I said I would like to go but not do the clown thing. I was goofy enough already and had no interest in dressing up. Patch allowed as how clown experience wasn't necessary, but clowning was a requirement for going. He and those traveling with him intended to clown in hospitals, orphanages, homes for the aged, schools for the handicapped, and other places to bring a little joy into people's lives that didn't have much. Everyone had to go in clown getup. The group would even fly to Moscow in clown. I got some healthy encouragement, paid my money, and went as Dr. Jerko, a clown I created over the summer. I hadn't gone to clown college; I'd gone to medical school. But while I was there, I learned to juggle balls and pins, and things like that. I even took up tap dancing for a few years after finishing medical school with my buddy who is a lawyer. I was even once in a recital at the Music Hall in Kansas City with my three oldest daughters. I also knew how to walk a slack rope. So I did come to clowning with some experiences that proved useful.

AJP: Having overcome your initial reluctance to dress as a clown, how do you feel about it now? How do you react when people call you a clown?

White: That depends. Dr. Jerko would say, "I'm dressing for success. I'm on my way to the top! The Big Top!" You see, my clown is obvious. He has a big butt, and he's a proctologist. He's playful. He gets up each day, puts on his silly clothes, and goes off to play. What's better than that? As you may have noticed, most clowns don't dress up, at least in obvious garb. They get up and start each day with a knot around their necks, dressing for success. *Vestis virum facit*, clothes make the man. Because they're dressed like each other, they're not obvious. It's normal. If you want to get to the top, you need to dress the part. You only have one chance to make a first impression. So, context is important. When I'm inside that character, I'm not dressing like a clown. I am a clown. So being called what I am is no problem. And there is an

interesting thing I've discovered. It's that there's a residual effect that remains in the psyche when I'm Bowen White. And that process has been ongoing since 1991 when Dr. Jerko was born.

AJP: Tell us more about how Dr. Jerko has affected Bowen White. Has he made you more playful?

White: There is no doubt that I'm more playful since I began clowning. As I said earlier, I was playful before, but as a clown you have license for lunacy. Dr. Jerko is always pushing past the limits of some normal *modus operandi*, but he does so in a light, playful, sensitive way. His playfulness has infected me so much that I now have a chronic condition, a kind of bias. Whether I'm inside or outside of that character, I'm always aware that it's playtime. I don't wait for after work or sometime later. I'm aware that now is really all we have. Just as many folks dress with some end in mind, Dr. Jerko dresses with some beginning in mind. He's dressed for play, and he's obvious about his intention. When I'm not in character, I maintain some connection to that quality of energy that he so obviously carries. He resides in the play state, and having visited it so frequently, I can enter it as soon as I remember. When that happens, I reconnect. I see the world playfully and others as potential playmates. When I'm not in character and people ask what I do, I often say just for fun, "I'm a clown." "Really?" they'll say. "Yeah. I also do dishes, parenting, cooking, laundry, and stuff." "I thought you were a medical doctor." "I am and so is my clown. But I'm the only one who plays golf. Of course, I play like a clown!"

AJP: You're clearly a cutup. Do you view work as play? Is that something you tell managers when you talk to corporations?

White: I don't see them as separate. It's too darn easy to have fun. This is a minority view, however. We've all been acculturated to devalue play and fun or to relegate it to some later, after work time frame. We have a bivalent, all-or-nothing, this-or-that

perspective. Energy follows attention. What we pay attention to, we have energy for. We value work and say, “Hard work is the secret to success.” Our energy is invested in that which we value—work. For most of us, fun starts after work. No wonder in our culture we never hear “TGIM” upon greeting someone in the elevator on Monday morning.

AJP: So you tell corporations that their employees should be playing at work? White: You might put it that way. Workers who have fun working together do better work than those who don’t. Some of the world’s most creative problem solvers—I mean people who are Nobel Prize winners—see their work as play. They play with the problems that engage them, and time flies because they’re having fun. “Whoops, missed lunch, again!” This applies to our daily lives, too. Is work over when we get home? No way. It’s not just our children who have homework. We have plenty of work to do there, too. What is the quality of energy we emit doing that work? If it’s playful and fun, we enjoy it more and do it better. Speaking of children, don’t you think parents who are playful do better parenting than those whose focus is keeping their kids’ noses to the grindstone? That’s hard on the nose.

AJP: Give us an example of how you use Dr. Jerko to get that message across.

White: Here’s one that occurred on my way home from that first trip abroad, the one to Russia with Patch Adams in 1991. I was scheduled to do grand rounds and give a talk for the adolescent medicine department at Beth Israel Hospital in New York City when we returned. When I was getting dressed to go to the hospital, I thought why not give my talk in clown? After all, I reasoned, it is adolescent medicine, and before the talk, I could play with a few patients at bedside. So that’s what I did.

AJP: What sort of reaction did you get?

White: After my clown rounds with patients, my hosts gave me a serious, formal, doctorlike introduction followed by, “Let’s have a warm welcome for Dr. Bowen White.” Then, instead of me walking up to the podium, Dr. Jerko came stumbling in from the back of the room. He said, “Is this where Dr. White’s supposed to speak? Is this the right place? He had an emergency and sent me to fill in. Is he on now?” Dr. Jerko walked down to the front of the room with his clown bag, stopping here and there. And everywhere he paused, he placed his bag on the floor next to some unsuspecting doctor’s chair, bent over and put his prominent posterior in some fellow’s face. People begin to laugh and have fun. It wasn’t your typical grand rounds scenario because the mood in the room was different; it was playful.

AJP: How did Dr. Jerko get from all the laughter to the content of Bowen White’s message?

White: Well, without knowing beforehand what to expect, I had some angst about that. But my concern was relieved shortly after I entered the room and began to play with my peers. I am a doctor you know! When people laugh and have fun, they drop their defenses. And when they drop their defenses, you can stick in content. I had been speaking to groups for a long time, knew that to be true, and I was already pretty good at creating a fun learning environment. But this clown-speaking experience was an “Ah ha!” moment. Dr. Jerko made me a standard deviation better as a speaker-teacher, and the enjoyment felt matched that of the audience. I still had access to all that left-brain, logical, linear, analytic medical acumen, such as it is, and I had a creative vehicle to deliver material in a way that sticks.

AJP: And so that has served you well ever since?

White: Right. Dr. Jerko and I are still a team.

AJP: Aren't doctors the archetypal deliverers of bad news? How does levity fit in amid so much gravity?

White: I was playful before Dr. Jerko was born. I had been taught well the value of playfulness by a patient. And what he taught me made me ripe for another level of playful risk taking and adventure. It's a long story, but I'll tell it if you want me to. No, I'm going to tell it even if you don't want me to.

AJP: OK. What did that patient teach you?

White: When you choose to go into medicine, you are choosing to be with suffering people. And I thought I knew how to be with them. In 1984, I went to ninety-minute sessions with every patient. You might ask here why I spent so much time with each patient. It's because I'm slow. Slow but trainable; that's my motto! But no one complained about me spending too much time with them. I thought I needed that amount of time to become a full participant with my patients on their healing journeys. And if I was with them at some worst possible moment in the office or in the hospital and felt tears well up, I didn't try to hide my feelings. I wanted to feel a connection with them that was authentic, and sometimes tears were the result of that. Then a young boy with a brain tumor came to see me. His name was Graham. He was in third grade, and I called him Graham Cracker. He taught me there was another way of being with people who are suffering. Graham had a tumor that extended to his brain stem. When they operated, they didn't want to mess around too much with that part because the brain stem passes through a small hole in the base of the skull, the foramen magnum, and becomes the spinal cord. You don't want the brain stem to swell because of that rigid, bony opening. If the stem swells, the patient stops breathing. And breathing is a positive health habit. If you stop, make sure you start right up again! So Graham went back home with the certain knowledge that there was still cancer left in his brain, and he prepared for adjuvant therapy. He recovered a while at home then returned to school. He was still weak

from surgery, though, and at recess he was the last one chosen to play kickball. Why pick him when he's a sure out? We already know in third grade what kind of play is important. Competitive play, that's the ticket! Our kids need to know how to compete, don't they? It's a dog-eat-dog world, isn't it? Let me ask you this, have you personally ever seen a dog eat another dog? I haven't, and I think we've been oversold on competitive play. And we've been undersold on original play, on collaborative play. So we grow up being much better at competing against each other rather than collaborating well together. So, when we play we need to beat someone else to feel good and be successful.

AJP: What did Graham teach you?

White: Back to brain cancer. Let's face it. If you want stress, brain cancer would be right up near the top. And Graham knew he still had it. His adjuvant therapy included serious post-op treatment with both chemotherapy and radiation. He'd go see the high-powered specialists for his treatments then come see me. He used biofeedback to learn to relax, and he used guided imagery and visualization to augment the effectiveness of his therapy. This allowed him to participate actively in his own care. It was a way of taking back power and control rather than being passive. And it was a way to play as in a game worth playing. Anyway, here comes the lesson I learned from him. He finished his last radiation treatment then went to see the radiation oncologist. Following that, he came to his appointment with me. When he walked in, he handed me a bag saying, "Doc, I have a present for you." I said, "Thanks," and looked to find a bag full of animal noses. There was a pig nose, an elephant nose, a shark nose, and a bunch of other fun animal noses. Graham said, "I just came from the x-ray doc's office and sometimes when you go to see the doc you have to wait. I was getting kinda bored waiting, and I got this idea. I got that pig nose out of the bag, put it on, and when I heard the door begin to open, I stood up and put my back to the door. Then, when the doctor walked in and said, 'Hey

Graham, how's it going?' I turned around, pointed to the pig nose and said, 'Well doc, there were certain side effects from the radiation you forgot to tell me about!'" I laughed big time! I also recognized that Graham was giving me a life lesson. Here he was suffering with this heavy, serious, life-threatening problem, and what had he found to balance that heaviness? He found a light, buoyant, and playful quality of energy that allowed him to stay emotionally balanced at a very stressful time in his life. That, to me, is a criterion for emotional maturity. He wasn't in denial. He was going through all his treatments head on, pardon the pun. So, all grown-ups looking for balance in their lives, take note. Learn what I learned, what Graham taught me. There's another way to be with people who are suffering. Be light, buoyant, and playful. Play is a way of connecting with people where they are. It's a way to be both spontaneous and vulnerable at the same time. Without knowing what's the perfect thing to say or do is, one enters into a psychological space with another person or group of people where the reality of their situation is confronted.

AJP: What can a clown accomplish with playfulness that a doctor can't?

White: I'll answer that with another example. After the United States sent troops to Afghanistan following the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York, clowns went there, too. In the film *Clowning in Kabul*, there is a scene that breaks your heart. It documents some of the horrors of war. A young Afghan girl is in a very old, poorly equipped hospital. She has been burned as a result of the fighting, and naturally, she's crying. The doctors have no anesthetic to help her deal with the terrible pain of removing the burned skin and tissue prior to putting antibiotic salve on her wounds. However, they know in order to save her from certain death by infection they must. So they begin their work. The little girl screams in anguish as they peel away dead flesh. A clown is close by, and you watch as she, the clown, plays with the young girl as a way to distract her from her pain. The clown also plays a violin, sings, and does everything she can to be present with the child in the

middle of this horrific experience. The clown didn't turn away to find a more comfortable patient to play with. She chose to stay there and fully feel all the unbearable pain there, some of which you may feel now. As you watch this terrible yet necessary first step in this child's healing, you see another use of play and clowning. After the cooling salve has been placed where it's needed and the child is able to finally feel some relief, you see the other side of this clown's experience. She is off by herself, sobbing. Watching it, I was crying, too. So when you ask to what uses I put play, the above represents one end of the spectrum. I have had my heart broken often while playing with others. And when you get your heart broken open, you see what's inside. I think having that experience helps us better connect with people because we can then empathize with them wherever they are in their lives.

AJP: Can you give us an example, maybe with Dr. Jerko?

White: On one of our trips to Russia, we were at a hospital for children with facial deformities. When we arrived, we met a nurse with a medical team from Wales doing facial reconstructions on some of the kids. She was holding a young boy with a double cleft palate. He was too malnourished to operate on then, and they hoped they could do it on their next visit. He had on a little coat and was fussing with the nurse about something. When I asked what he was upset about she told me a remarkable story. When the team from Wales first came to the hospital, this child lay naked in the fetal position, frightened by everything. It seems that just after he was born his parents brought him to the hospital and left him, never to return. His entire life had been spent inside that building. He had barely survived, and when the Welsh team got there, he was too frightened even to look out the window. With love and attention from these visitors, he had begun to come out of his shell. So much so that he not only liked to look out the window, he wanted to go outside. There was just one problem, though. The Russian staff didn't want him to go out. In fact, they were adamant that the front door was a boundary he was not to cross. He was

wearing that coat and fussing because he wanted the Welsh nurse to take him outside, but she didn't feel she could go against the orders she had been given by the Russians. The Russians didn't deter Dr. Jerko, though. He saw only one thing to do in this situation. A millisecond after hearing what the boy wanted, Dr. Jerko took him into his arms, put his clown hat on the boy's head, and started down the hall. A Russian nurse began yelling at him, but Dr. Jerko kept walking. He carried the youngster down the stairs, past a security guard, and toward the front door with the guard in hot pursuit. When Dr. Jerko got outside in the cold but sunny November daylight, with the snow crunching under his feet, the boy leaned his head back, opened his arms, and just beamed. And my heart melted. When I set the young lad on the ground, he went over to feel that white stuff he'd seen out the window. He was grinning from ear to ear, and tears were streaming down my face. That was a good, playful day, one of Dr. Jerko's best.

AJP: Clowns seem to break rules a lot, but don't doctors spend their lives following rules? Aren't physicians the ultimate grown-ups?

White: I don't know about all clowns, but many of them have a problem with authority. Dr. Jerko doesn't need someone else's permission to do the right thing. His heart gives him direction, and sometimes that means breaking the rules. As a physician, I like that about him.

AJP: Being playful, then, figures large in your definition of the right thing, doesn't it?

White: You bet. Let me tell you about another time Dr. Jerko broke rules, playfully, to do the right thing to help others. This is a story about my mom's service after she passed. She died in the month of March at the age of eighty-six. March was always a big month for her because there were national basketball tournaments on the tube. She was a sports nut in general and a basketball fanatic in particular. Everyone who knew her knew this about her. If you came over to our house during March Madness

[the time of the annual NCAA men's national tournament] you would find two TVs next to each other with Mom at the remote watching two games at once. This was a given. Snacks would be plentiful, not conversation. When Mom died, the usual visitation preceded the service at the funeral home. She was laid out beautifully so folks could pay their last respects. But in contrast to what is usual, at the end of the casket was a big TV set with live action from the NCAA tournament. People could say goodbye to her and catch the score of the game at the same time. It might not have been proper in ordinary funeral parlance, but it seemed appropriate to us. When the visitation was over and mourners started filing into the chapel, we had "On Wisconsin" playing because Mom had graduated from the University of Wisconsin. Then, when all were seated, the music changed to "When the Saints Go Marching In." A few bars into it, the officiate marched in step with it from the back of the chapel. As those present turned to look, most didn't know the gentleman entering with the red nose, large butt, and clown clothes. But you guessed it. Dr. Jerko had been asked by family members to do the honors of opening the service. I was glad to serve, although I'd been surprised that my siblings wanted Dr. Jerko to do this. He greeted and goofed around with a few folks on his way to the front and then welcomed everyone. His job was to read emails that had come from friends and family not able to be there. Being inside that character made it possible for me to get through those messages without becoming a blithering idiot. And, it broke the ice for others to get up and share their memories of Mom. This was certainly a first for the funeral home, but when all was said and done, both the attendees and the professionals said it was one of the best funerals they had experienced. We broke the rules, but we had a truly playful, loving, and very personal celebration of my mother's life. Earlier I said play is often about being with people where they are in their lives; I should amend that to where they are or were.

AJP: You have written quite a lot about connecting with others at such times and about the importance of relationships in healthy lives. How significant are they?

White: I can't answer that fully in the space of this interview, but I can tell you that they are extremely significant. Much of our stress is about relationships.

Traditionally, concerns about wellness have focused on things like fitness, nutrition, weight reduction, not smoking, taking responsibility for one's lifestyle, and such. The fun factor—play—usually isn't included, and neither are relationships. When we confront our own mortality or that of a loved one, that's when relationships matter most. That's when the seriousness of the circumstances can weigh heaviest on everyone. It can deprive the living of that which is still possible. So what can lift that weight? What can transform that seriousness? It's playfulness. As I wrote a while back in a blog on my Web site, "Light, buoyant, playful energy creates a more relaxed atmosphere for authenticity. Lightness balances heaviness and emotional equilibrium results. What follows can be a level of connection amongst those present that is a present, a gift for everyone." I also said, "I believe that play, with love, may just be central to living fully, living well." Play not only creates psychological space for relationships, it frees up potential energy for problem solving and facilitates our creative impulses.

AJP: What is the science behind that point of view? White: Every white blood cell in the body has receptor sites for every neurotransmitter we produce. When we are playful and enjoying ourselves, we are producing cortical and limbic brain activity that reflects the play state. The neurotransmitters we produce would be markedly different from those of someone who was depressed and play deprived. We feel positive when we are playful, and those thoughts or feelings create neurotransmitters as the chemical messengers of our psychophysiological state. Those neurotransmitters then attach to receptor sites on white blood cells and deliver their messages. That interaction then can influence the function of those white blood cells. The field of psychoneuroimmunology is all about exploring these mind/brain/body connections. The research is still new, and much is anecdotal. But we do know that chronically depressed folks and those who are situationally

depressed over the loss of significant others have decreased white blood cell function. So we know something about the negative impact of the depressed psychological state. The other side of the coin, the play state, is only just beginning to be scientifically explored. My bias is clear; not playing enough is bad for your health. But you can extrapolate for yourself; be your own control group. What's your psychological and social life like when you are play deprived and dour? If you're not having much fun then you're probably not much fun to be around. Being playful is fun for me and helps create a safe psychological space for others to enter. It helps lubricate our social connections so we get stuck less frequently by working/playing through rough, relational, psychological, terrain. In writing *Why Normal Isn't Healthy*, I stole the definition of health from the anthropologist Ashley Montagu. In his book *Growing Young*, he defines health minimally as "the ability to work, to love, to play, and to think soundly." When we are playful, we do better thinking, better work, and better loving. It's suspiciously healthy. Of course, I wouldn't believe anything I say without testing it. Perhaps I'm wrong. After all, there's a big sign on my office door that says:

Caution. Beware of doc. Enter at your own risk. I make mistakes very day.

AJP: What are some other uses to which you put play and clowning?

White: I could go on and on about uses of clowning. What I began doing with Patch in 1991, I have continued to the present. I have clowned in refugee camps, prisons, hospices, all kinds of schools for kids with all sorts of problems, hospitals, homes for the aged, and rehab centers, and on the street, and in subways, public parks, airports, restaurants, and trains. You name it. I've gone all over the world on these clown missions that Patch organizes: Russia, China, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Israel, Algeria, Ecuador, Columbia, Peru, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Panama, El Salvador, Cuba, and Mexico. We have clowned with the firm and infirm alike. Wherever we go, it's time to play, and by that I mean play in the largest sense of the word. For

example, clowning and playing with a very poor community in the Amazon basin of Peru includes painting houses; in rural Cambodia, building a school; in El Salvador, building medical clinics; and in Russia, helping orphans build self-esteem through art. I see this as play in the largest sense.

AJP: Would it be fair to say that you get as much out of this playing and clowning as the folks you're helping?

White: Of course. You don't get paid in the normal way to do this. It costs money to go. You get paid in another sense. When playful energy moves through you to others it feels good for you! I'm selfish. I like to feel good. So I go for me. And when I feel the pain of another playmate, I feel that pain fully. It's real, it's painful, and that's part of the deal.

AJP: So has being a physician made you a better clown, or have playfulness and clowning made you a better physician?

White: Medicine has not taught me to be a better clown. Rather, the reverse is true. Clowning has taught me to be a better doctor. By playing around as a clown, I've made a systemic shift, and I think I'm a better person now, regardless of which role I'm in.

AJP: Any last words for our readers?

White: Play more; worry less; love more; and forgive more. Begin with yourself.

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