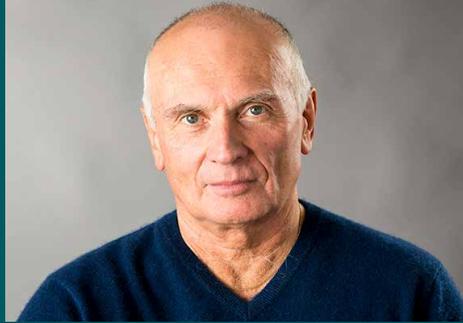


Maturation for the Mascot

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



The youngest child in a family often occupies the role of Mascot. If the stress in the family is not excessively severe, the child in this role knows how to play, have fun, and bring lightness to family life. This child's gift of love is an offering of endless comedy with the price being arrested development. However, if family stress builds, the mascot hides fear and confusion behind a permanently painted smile. Family members get to release pent-up tension as they laugh and hoot at the antics of the family jokester. In fact, the jocularity stimulated by the Mascot may be the only authentic emotions expressed in the family.

Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse suggests, "You don't have to be with a family more than a few minutes to know which child is playing this part. He may act cute and helpless, or interrupt and do "crazy" things. He may beguile you or bedevil you, but he's very hard to ignore." (p. 140, *Another Chance: Hope and Health for the Alcoholic Family*.) If the Mascot locks into his or her role without repair, then the repertoire of slapstick trails them into adulthood. Such a primitive way to cope will have varied injurious implications.

Challenges Facing the Mascot

- **Faces significant levels of denial.** As Mascots view their role as the essence of their identity, it becomes very easy to deny that there is any kind of a problem. Their role exempted them from living life on life's terms, having to face the tension and ambiguity of real-life situations. Why give up simply having a good time?
- **Often misdiagnosed.** Mascots often go misdiagnosed initially with ADD and later with manic episodes.
- **Learning impediment.** Remaining a clown, striving to engage and distract classmates with a variety of antics will not lend itself to classroom learning. If Mascots are lucky, they might see a formal education offering a ticket to professional advancement, and likely lack the depth to see their education as possibly opening a door to a vocation.
- **Risks being locked into the puer personality.** The puer or eternal boy can become a life-long persona. Mascots have repressed their ability for introspection so as not to allow anything that might interrupt their parade.
- **Loses friends.** As their friends grow and mature, Mascots remain gridlocked in an infantile pattern. Friends who have moved on from juvenile mannerisms and responses no longer find the Mascot all that entertaining.
- **Loss of intimacy.** As Mascots experience a measure of arrested development, their capacity for in-depth relationships can be severely restricted.

They likely will lack an ability to offer genuine empathy, address conflict and know how to offer an understanding of themselves to the relationship.

- **Immature spirituality.** Convinced that there are no real complex questions, Mascots either ignore their spiritual lives or reduce it to periodic church attendance accompanied by a perfunctory adherence to dogma.

Healing for the Mascot

- **Psychological education.** Mascots can gain a great deal by understanding their role in a stressed system. Of course, such understanding will not come easily since it is the antithesis of the Mascot's way to cope. The hope is that they can value their propensity for lightness without the illusion that lightness can address all that life has to offer. An essential learning is that they were over-protected as children and offered a deluded sense of reassurance that all was well.
 - **Grieving.** The more Mascots learn about their role and the status of their family of origin, they begin to identify losses. These losses include honest disclosure about family challenges, encouragement to access inner strengths and resources, and the modeling of effective coping mechanisms. Although losses are not easy to address, it very well might mean the beginning of Mascots daring to get honest about what dwells within.
 - **Acceptance of intuition.** As Mascots work their Recovery, they may access memories of vague intuitions they experienced as a child. These old intuitions likely were informing the child about the stress facing the family. They can begin to trust the pulse of their current intuitions.
 - **Scared and confused.** As their compulsion for humor subsides, the emotions of fear and confusion likely surface. They can learn to shamelessly feel these feelings. A key is to understand that as a child they did not possess
- enough inner resource to navigate these feelings. Confusion likely resulted because their intuitions conflicted with the parental reassurance they were receiving. Fear would also get ignited due to the incongruence of their experience.
- **Practicing silence with breath.** A helpful interpersonal practice is to simply explore being silent and breathing when interacting with others. A first step is to relinquish jocularity and learn to hold the ensuing tension by focusing on the breath. It will be a sizable leap for Mascots to let go of comic engagement and focus on their interior world in the presence of others.
 - **Releasing tension.** Mascots are so familiar with working with tension by slipping into a comedy routine. New methods for releasing tension will be critical in the support of emotional maturity. Deep breathing, exercise, yoga, tracking internal sensations, meditation, therapeutic massage, and acupuncture are helpful ways to address the release of tension.
 - **Easing into ambiguity.** The comic relief exercised by Mascots derails them from leaning how to relate to the ambiguous nature of what gives meaning and depth to life. Hence, benchmarks for maturation such as wrestling with an ability to be authentic, courageous, and compassionate are not entertained by Mascots, or are endeavors receiving minimal attention. Mascots can gradually learn to entertain what both gives meaning and is ambiguous by eliminating hilarity and moving gradually toward holding more curiosity. Ultimately, their relationship with ambiguity can unfold a mature spirituality - one galvanized by curiosity, devotion, personal values, and a longing for unity consciousness.

Unlike the other family roles, Mascots are encouraged not to grow up. The other roles certainly carry some impediment to maturation, but no one is viewing those roles as appropriately infantile. At least one parent is benefiting or distracted from the Mascot's shenanigans as well as attempting to protect

the Mascot from the turmoil in the family. If Mascots experience enough loss or pain, they may seek the help and support that can point them in the direction of their own maturation.

This was the case with Stephen a fifty-year-old manager of a retail chain, married for twenty years with three children. He entered my office with a large grin on his face and moved toward a seat with a swagger suggesting he was extremely comfortable.

“So Stephen, tell me a bit about what brings you here, and I must say, most people don’t come here looking quite as cheery as you do,” I remarked, wondering how genuine that grin was.

“Well, I’m always pretty cheerful. I mean who benefits if we get all down and dreary?” he suggested, with his grin stretching further than I thought his face could accommodate.

“Okay, cherry or not, tell me more about what brings you here,” I invited, becoming mascot-alert.

“I don’t think my marriage is in any real trouble, but my wife thinks there’s something I should look at. Specifically, how I respond to people,” Stephen described, not relinquishing his grip on that grin.

“Does your wife not appreciate how you respond to her or people in general?” I inquired, wondering how much he had understood his wife’s feedback.

“Oh no, she’s talking about how I respond to our children as well as to her,” he explained, his grin losing some of its extension and luster.

“Can you say more about these responses and why they obviously annoy your wife?” I encouraged, noticing the tapping of his foot becoming more rapid.

“She says I’m never serious, that I make jokes or react lightly when family members are expressing something serious. I mean the folks at work think I’m an easy-going guy,” he claimed, seeming to hope that his work persona would get my attention.

I went on to ask questions about his family origin and his siblings. He spoke a high-achieving older brother and an older sister who was prone to acting-out in some way. He concluded by describing himself as the youngest and with palpable pride and enthusiasm recounted how his parents insisted that he perform as song and dance for family and guests at holidays. He stressed how much he saw their request for the show as a loving act on behalf of his parents. It was feeling

more and more apparent I was hearing a mascot offer an account of his childhood.

Before introducing him to the role of the mascot, we explored what responses people need when they feel challenged or distraught. I affirmed how much he was attempting to care and support people by introducing levity into the conversation about their concerns.

“I don’t get what I would do. I mean I don’t want to awfulize the situation or make it worse”, Stephen puzzled, leaning forward with what appeared to be curiosity regarding the alternatives.

“I’m with you. This is not about awfulizing or bringing more drama to the situation. It’s mostly about empathy, feeling into the struggle of the speaker. And simply acknowledging what you hear the person addressing”, I offered, wondering how ready he was to interrupt a compulsive use of jocularity.

“I guess AI tell myself that if I’m really caring I should have a solution for them and SI don’t. It makes me feel badly”, he admitted, the grin disappearing, with more of an opening happening.

“What a great thing to say to someone you love, ‘ I really want to give you a solution to your problem and I don’t have one’”, I suggested.

“Is that enough”? he worried, curious if it would be enough of an offering.

“It’s the truth and if it’s offered with compassion, it’s a valued offering. You can listen with your heart, letting the speaker know you are with them as you acknowledge their struggle and allow them to come forward with their feelings. However, let’s have you practicing with yourself. You have a great smile. Slowly, allow that smile to express what is true for you in your heart. If you feel glad, thankful, or celebratory, let your smile deliver the truth of those feeling. Let the smile gently release when you feel sad, scared, or angry. Your family will likely feel more comfortable as you allow your external expression to tell the story of what is happening inside you”, I explained, concerned that I might be offering too much new material, and I allowed for the silence that ensued.

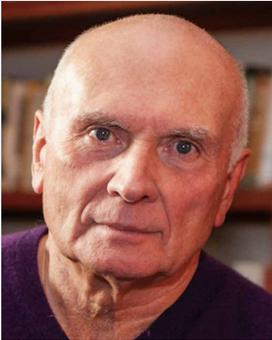
“Wow, I feel like I’ve been living half of a life. I’m bright enough to figure out that life is more than smiles and happy times. What have I been doing”? Stephen asked, with a note of self-admonishment.

MATURATION FOR THE MASCOT

“You’ve been loving the best you know how. None of us get love just right. Love is always calling us to understand it in some new way, it remains just out of reach”, I suggested, hoping he could gently hold what he was discovering.

I went on to tell him that I saw his large heart and we

were mostly talking about learning how to carry such a heart so that those whom he loved could truly be fully touched by it. He worked only a short time with me and after some months past, I received an email, “I’m keeping that grin where it belongs”.



PAUL DUNION, Mobius Transformational Faculty, Senior Expert, and track leader at the Next Practice Institute, earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at the University of Connecticut and Three Rivers Community College.

He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men’s movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life’s mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner’s Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



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