

It's kind of funny that no one seems to know exactly how April Fools' Day came about. One theory involves the switch to the Gregorian calendar. Because of the change, New Year celebrations were moved back three months from April 1 to January 1, and those who didn't get the news were mocked.

Other theories claim a lineage with ancient pagan or Roman celebrations of spring. I think – without any supporting evidence – that it's a remnant of the Feast of Fools, a popular festival during the Middle Ages, held on or about January 1, in which a mock bishop or pope was elected, ecclesiastical ritual was parodied, and low and high officials changed places. Pagan hijinks ensued, and things got pretty rowdy and risqué.

Or maybe it just spontaneously arose.

Just one of life's little mysteries.

Many people hate April Fools' Day. They feel it has become tiresome and meaningless, that the jokes and pranks are juvenile, predictable, and just plain dumb. Or that the jokes are mean and cruel deceptions that play on people's gullibility.

They have a point. Making fools of other people isn't very noble, or even very interesting.

On the other hand, playing the fool, or being a Fool - with a capitol F – has a rich lineage.

Being a big F Fool, a great fool, puts us into ancient archetypal territory, the land where the holy fools, the sacred clowns, and the tricksters walk the land, fast talking crazy wisdom, and delivering punch lines so fast you barely have to time laugh.

Those archetypes are all related, but somewhat distinct, so it's worth taking a few minutes to explore them.

Holy Fools seem to be quite specific to Christianity. To be holy was to be innocent in the eyes of God. Being a "fool for Christ" meant giving up one's worldly possessions, flouting social customs to challenge accepted norms and deliver prophecies, and mocking those with pretensions to being "holier than thou."

Many Orthodox Churches saw this form of asceticism as a vocation, a difficult and deliberate spiritual path, holding that holy fools voluntarily take up the guise of insanity in order to conceal their perfection from the world, and thus avoid praise.

St. Basil was such a figure. He went naked, covered only by his long beard, and wearing chains that jingled with each step. He lived among the market stalls of Moscow's Red Square, going nude in summer and the harsh Russian winters.

Any money he was given was immediately spent on food and clothing for other poor people, if he didn't just give it away to them at once.

In his wanderings through the city, he would sometimes pick up stones and throw them at the houses of the rich. Other times, he would approach the buildings, and reverently kiss the stones of the houses, and pray for the people who lived in them. Once asked about his behavior, he said, "Angels stand in sorrow at the house and are distressed by the sins of the people, but I entreat them with tears to pray to the Lord for the conversion of sinners."

It is said that Tsar Ivan the Terrible feared no one but Basil. The story goes that he went to Ivan's palace in the Kremlin and forced the tsar to eat raw meat during Lent saying, "Why abstain from eating meat when you murder men?"

The Tsar let him live.

Jim Forest, author and secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, writes:

*"Holy fools pose the question: Are we keeping heaven at a distance by clinging to the good regard of others, prudence, and what those around us regard as 'sanity'? The holy fools shout out with their mad words and deeds that to seek God is not necessarily the same thing as to seek sanity. We need to think long and hard about sanity, a word most of us cling to with a steel grip. Does fear of being regarded by others as insane confine me in a cage of 'responsible' behavior that limits my freedom and cripples my ability to love? And is it in fact such a wonderful thing to be regarded as sane? Adolph Eichmann, the chief administrator of the Holocaust, was declared 'quite sane' by the psychiatrists who examined him before his trial."*

The madness of the Holy Fools was ambiguous, and could be real or be a form of theatre. Some of them we would now consider insane, actually suffering from some form of mental illness. But he (or she) was believed to have been divinely inspired, and was therefore able to challenge people and their behavior, and speak truths which others could not.

Which brings us to sacred clowns. Sacred clowns are particular to Native America. Sacred clowns are different from jesters or fools, although they have quite a bit of the trickster in them.

There are the koshare, who follow behind the neat rows of katsina dancers, dancing out of step, singing one beat behind. These are the confusing individuals, men dressed as women; old men acting young, young acting old. They are lovers, teasing the young women, the tourist ladies taking pictures, the unmarried women or other men, whacking the crowd with giant mock genitalia.

There are the heyoka, the contraries, who do strange things. He says "yes" when he means "no." He rides his horse backward. He wears his moccasins or boots the wrong way. When he's coming, he's really going. When it's real hot, a heyoka will shiver with cold, put on all his clothes and blankets. He'll build a big fire and complain that he is freezing to death. In the wintertime, during a blizzard, the heyoka will be sweating. It's too hot for him. He's taking off all his clothes and going for stroll.

Those are only two examples among many. What is most obvious about these sacred clowns is that they are full of contradictions. They are a mix of innocence and wisdom. They act foolishly, without conscience, trampling the boundaries of proper behavior.

These are religious specialists who play an important social function. They turn the world inside-out and upside-down. They show the limits of the world by playing at the boundaries, acting in a non-ordinary way while doing so, and in this way they contrast their own behavior with the regular order of both the mundane and sacred worlds.

And in the midst of the chaos they create, they speak truth to power. They say things others are too afraid to say about the social and spiritual life of the community. They ask difficult questions through jokes, nonsense, satire, and mockery.

Which brings us to the Buddhist traditions.

Zen happened when Buddhism met Taoism in 600 AD China. It later spread to Japan, where it flowered. Some Zen lineages trace their beginnings back to 500 BC India, to a meeting of the Buddha and more than a thousand of his disciples.

The Buddha held up a white flower. All the other disciples just looked on without knowing how to react, but the monk Kasyapa smiled faintly, and Buddha picked him as the one who truly understood him and was worthy to be his successor.

This direct pointing to reality was the beginning of Zen.

The crazy wisdom of the Zen master transforms ordinary experience back into ordinary experience. Most experience is extra-ordinary, overlaid with our preconceptions and

judgments, and filtered through our pragmatic desire to find a use for everything. Zen is to move beyond desire, ideas, or words and to experience each moment without qualification.

Zen fools have direct experience of the world from moment to moment, making them capable of continuous spontaneity and playfulness. Zen is perfectly crazy wisdom.

Master Shih-kung asked a disciple if he could take hold of empty space. The disciple made a grasping movement in the air with his hand but Shih-kung exclaimed. "You got nothing!" The disciple then asked. "What then, is your way?" Whereupon Shih-kung took hold of the disciple's nose, gave it a sharp twist and called out, "That is the way to take hold of empty space!"

When we give up trying to grasp reality with words, when we give up the hope of trying to understand reality through logic and language, then we just might start experiencing it directly, without our minds getting in the way.

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In Tibetan Buddhism, the term "crazy wisdom" translates the Tibetan term *drubnyon*, which "traditionally combines exceptional insight and impressive magical power with a flamboyant disregard for conventional behavior."

It is associated with Chögyam Trungpa, who described crazy wisdom as an infinitely recursive process of inquiry.

*"We don't fixate on an answer, we go further. "Why is that the case?" We look further and further. We ask: "Why is this so? Why is there spirituality? Why is there awakening? Why is there this moment of relief? Why is there such a thing as discovering the pleasure of spirituality? Why, why, why?" We go on deeper and deeper, until we reach the point where there is no answer. At that point we tend to give up hope of an answer, or of anything whatsoever, for that matter. This hopelessness is the essence of crazy wisdom. It is hopeless, utterly hopeless."*

My son at the age of two was a crazy wisdom master.

There is a power in hopelessness that the hopeful cannot know: existential freedom. Freedom from seriousness. Freedom from the pettiness of life. Freedom from the gravity of death. Freedom from the need for an answer. Freedom even from the need to be free. Such freedom gives us power over power: sacred humor and crazy wisdom.

Are we willing to follow the path of crazy wisdom down the rabbit hole to freedom?

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There seem to be two major currents swirling in this ocean of divine madness.

There is the current that carries the fools, the jesters, the tricksters, and the sacred clowns – who call out the Tsar in his palace, the righteous in their sanctimony, who remind us not to take ourselves too seriously. Who ask us to doubt the social truths we are so sure of, to re-examine them, and perhaps return to them with our certainty refreshed.

Or not. Perhaps really is something wrong with things in our city, our bioregion, our country, our world, and the jesters, clowns, and fools are right and we need to take a deeper look.

And they haven't disappeared. They've just moved to late night television, Youtube videos , rap and hip-hop, street theatre, standup shows, Twitter. They are everywhere. These times require them.

And there is the crazy wisdom current that does the same thing with our individual certainties, to get us to move past our mundane perceptions and see the Divine in everything, and then to realize that the mundane was the Divine all along. Or is it the other way round? The goal is to set us free from fear and anxiety and existential dread, to awaken our wonder at the majesty of it all, and awaken our laughter at the absurdity of it all.

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How do we invoke the power of the holy fools, sacred clowns, and crazy wisdom in a time when it feels like the inmates are running the asylum?

Back in the 4th century AD, St. Anthony the Great said: "A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying, 'You are mad; you are not like us.'"

That time is now, and yesterday, and tomorrow. Who are the inmates? Is this the asylum? Who is mad, and who is not? Do not be certain of your answers.

We point fingers at the mirror. Break it.

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And when the cracked pieces of the mirror lie on the floor, the spell broken, here we are.

The sun rises and sets. There is work to be done. The children fed, the dishes washed, the trash taken out. The world is the same but different. What to do?

This turns out to be a rather practical matter, so I'll end with these instructions from Tom Robbins:

“Crazy wisdom is the philosophical worldview that recommends swimming against the tide, cheerfully seizing the short end of the stick, embracing insecurity, honoring paradox, courting the unexpected, celebrating the unfamiliar, shunning orthodoxy, volunteering for tasks nobody else wants or dares to do, and breaking taboos in order to destroy their power. It's the wisdom of those who turn the tables on despair by lampooning it, and who neither seek authority nor submit to it. To enlarge the soul, light up the brain, and liberate the spirit.”

To paraphrase Hillel, let us go and learn it.