

# ***From Executive to Contact Clown: creative collaboration through dancing between the conscious and unconscious***

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## **Key words**

Creative collaboration, unconscious, metaphors, psychodynamics, contact clown, quest, calling

## **Introduction**

“Begin with a room...Within this room two people will dance...They will make up the dance as they go along, their steps guided by currents of unconscious thought that ebb and flow between them, moving with faith through the ballroom of the unknown.”

(Knafo 2016, p. 275)

Let me tell you my story about how I transformed from an Executive into a Contact Clown. I would like to share two key learnings based upon my own personal experience. Firstly, the significant role the unconsciousness can play in creative collaboration. Secondly, that I discovered that a Contact Clown belongs to the world of creative collaboration and facilitation. Therefore, my narrative consists of two parts.

Part 1, ‘Finding my Calling’, is about my quest, after a life-changing experience, to find fulfilment in my life again. I open myself up to learn more about creative collaboration, with the aim to make a difference as a facilitator in the corporate world. I am curious to explore the connection between the unconscious and creative processes. Quite unexpected paths appear. Many times, I am lost and several metaphors come up during this *“Dance between the Conscious and Unconscious”* (Ringer 2002, p.82). At first, I have no clue what to do with those images and reject them. Then I remember what Jung proposed (1967, p.75), that *“Image is Psyche”*, and what Ringer describes about ‘learning in the experience’. Ringer explains that we learn through a range of different memory systems, sitting in the unconscious, that are built up since early childhood.

These memory systems work far faster than the consciousness, and produce images that we can only understand in hindsight. Understanding this, I start to embrace unexpected images as part of my learning process. The images from my unconscious, I propose, guided me to find my calling; to become a Contact Clown. I would never have expected this outcome by the start of my quest.

Part 2, 'Being a Contact Clown', tells of my experience once I discovered this new calling. Now, the outcome makes sense to me, as I discover that the work of a Contact Clown it is actually about facilitating creative collaboration. In this part, you will read that a Contact Clown is very different from a Show Clown, and how a Contact Clown brings about creative collaboration in 1-to-1 situations when working with vulnerable people with dementia, (multiple) handicaps and (terminally) ill children. My mission is to bring about a twinkle in their eyes whilst 'dancing with them between the conscious and unconscious' to make connections with their deeper unconscious layers built up since early childhood. This work as a Contact Clown draws upon the world of improvisation and play, of not knowing, of being, and of having an open mind.

I hope to inspire you for your own practice, as I am myself really thrilled that I have learned to be open to the unconscious, in myself, individuals and group processes.



Now I feel free 'to go with the flow' and hope you enjoy flying with me on this journey of discovery!

## Part 1: Finding my Calling

Let's deep dive into my quest and explore how I found my calling. It's a narrative that draws upon a psychodynamic perspective. This involves a dynamic interplay of conscious and unconscious factors.

It's about rejecting or embracing the images from my unconscious, I propose, that this process guided me to find my calling - to become a Contact Clown.

### My quest

It's the end of November 2013. I am shocked and angry. I have just lost my job as an Executive working in a leading role at the Corporate University of a world-wide international company, due to budget constraints. Then my mother, as well as a very close friend, dies. I am lost.

It's the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2014. I had enrolled on the Artgym '[Lead like a River](#)' program. I am in the Atlas Mountains, Morocco to explore what could bring fulfilment back into my life and how I could contribute differently to the world. That's the quest that brings me here. I am in our last Council - a meeting held every day to exchange insights between fellow participants - looking back at my inner journey of the past week. Here is what I conclude in my journal:

"I was a colorful, passionate dancer, my dance stopped. I danced alone with no connection to the ground. My river was stuck, dead, I lost my self-confidence, trust and hope."



Dancing Carmen, painted by Corry Kooy



Flowering plant on my roof terrace

I know now how it is and feels to be vulnerable, to ask for help. I learnt to let go, to trust others, myself. Feeling vulnerable myself I can now help other vulnerable people. I gained my self-confidence and my river streams again to water others! The plant stands for being grounded, growing, giving beautiful flowers. The flowers are the fruits of my work and will continue to grow even when I am no longer here."

## Discovering 'how to dance'

By the end of 2014 I start my own company and chose to work, as a facilitator, only for companies that make a positive difference in the world. I guide Executives, who struggle with persistent change issues, how to tackle these with creative methods. This seems a logical next step; I did this kind of work for many years as a leader in several companies and sectors. Still, I am wandering around knowing that my quest has not yet ended. Inspired by artists and the book "Think Like an Artist" (Gompertz, 2015, p.150):

"It's the artist's job to pay attention to prompts, to trust their feelings and instincts".

I am curious to deep-dive, to 'know' more about unconscious processes as the source of our creativity. When I 'know', I can better manage creative processes and make a difference to the corporate world. However, in July 2016, after embarking on another ArtGym program, [Leading Creative Collaboration](#), I discover that my statement is actually ridiculous, a contradiction in terms, as 'knowing' is in the conscious world.

I rephrase my question, inspired by Ringer (2002, p 82), to 'How to move in a dance between the conscious & unconscious?' He states that exploring your own unconscious enables the facilitator to deeply understand group processes and individual drives and fears. As a consequence, they would be able to lead a group with intent to its purpose.

My dance begins. However, I don't have a clue what to do and am anxious and worried. Yes, I see myself dancing, though not the same way as in the dancing image that I brought to Morocco. What kind of dancer then and what is the dance about? Through sharing my feelings with my fellow students and with Alison Hodge, coach of our Action Learning sets, I recognize that I actually had landed into the darkness of 'Not Knowing' (D'Souza and Renner, 2014, p. 133-134):

"A common contemporary metaphor associates knowledge with light and Not Knowing with darkness. This is illustrated by the phrase "I am in the dark". Paradoxically, Not Knowing often leads to learning and new knowledge.....Admitting that we don't know allows us to learn. The darkness of Not Knowing creates the freedom and space for new sources of illumination".

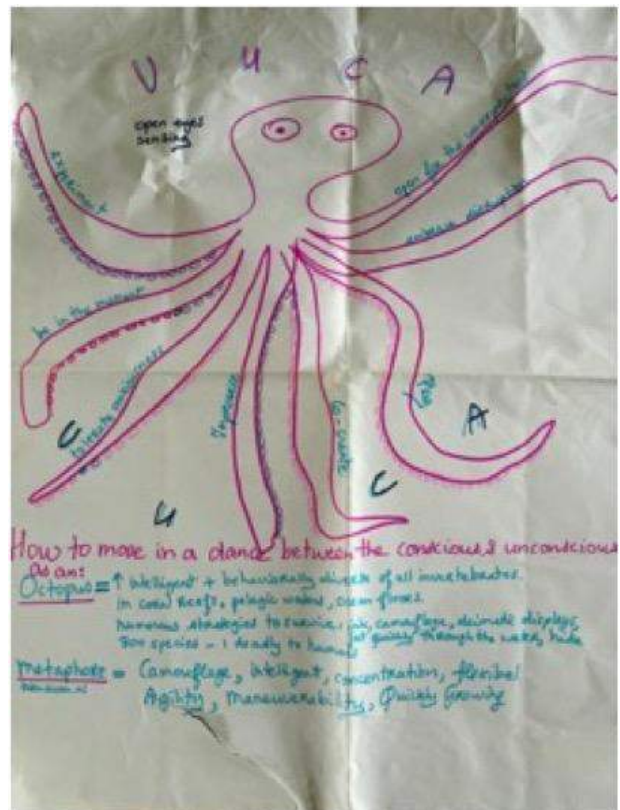
After an improvisation workshop, our Course Director asks us to come up with a metaphor to represent our experience. The image of an 'Octopus' appears to me. My first reaction? Rejection! What to do with an Octopus? Then, I remember what Jung and Ringer expressed about images, as described in my introduction, and I start to explore. An Octopus appears to be a metaphor for excellent camouflage, intelligence, concentration, flexibility, agility and maneuverability. The Octopus is behaviorally very different from other vertebrates; it's eight tentacles sense autonomously and separately from its brain. I realize that in 'sensing with its tentacles' it actually looks like it is dancing! I draw the Octopus and list eight possible characteristics of bringing about creative collaboration and plot them onto the Octopus's tentacles. I am thrilled that such a well fitted metaphor appears to me to strongly support me whilst facilitating creative collaboration.

I conclude in my journal:

“It was like exploring as an Octopus in an intriguing sea having arms everywhere. Experimenting, be in the moment, tolerate anxiousness, improvise, co-create, play, embrace disruption and be open for the unexpected”.

I feel that I actually had moved in a ‘dance between the conscious and unconscious’; a real AHA experience! I agree with Louise Austin, our Course Director, who concludes by the end of this session:

“Working with metaphors, creating stuff allows your conscious mind to catch up with your unconscious. Often, our conscious mind can only understand the message of the unconscious, via images and metaphors, in hindsight.”



### Dancing with my octopus

Let me go back in time now, so that you can understand how the dancing Octopus brought me further in my quest. Since my youth, I used a ‘Clown’ as a very powerful defense mechanism in anxious and stressful situations. Not that I was consciously aware of doing this. For example, when something ‘bad’ happened in my family, I intuitively started to show funny faces and to make jokes. Then everybody had to laugh and the tension was broken.

After I left home, I repeated that behavior whenever needed, as everybody loved my clown characteristics, and this helped me survive in anxious situations.

An example of how I used my Clown as a defense mechanism was when, in the Atlas Mountains, I found myself in a dangerous situation sitting on a mule that almost fell off a cliff.

My reaction? I shout out loud: “It looks like I am in a Rodeo!” Everybody is astonished and laughs; the tension is broken again and nobody, including me, is worried anymore.



My mule and me are facing steep rocks

Now we land in the middle of the Advanced Diploma Study in Creative Collaboration again and we are exploring Family Dynamics, led by Eugene Hughes, using a Jungian methodology called [Sandplay](#) (Kalff 1981). During this play, my dancing Octopus discovers the Clown metaphor and its meaning; to take care of others and to walk away from deep emotional feelings myself. Preventing me to “be authentic; to be intimate with myself, others and the world” to quote Eugene. My Clown, as a defense mechanism, has become an obstacle in my development. Ringer (2002, p.105) writes:

”Defenses become a problem in individual functioning when they restrict the range of responses that a person may have...”

At the same time, I am in a dilemma: “Do I really need to get rid of my Clown, as it also has good characteristics like positive energy and brings joy, relativism and a different view angle on situations?”

Working remotely with Trebbe Johnson in the last part of our program, I realize that my Clown has the potential to become ‘My Beloved’ (2005, p.65):

“The Beloved personifies the object of the soul’s longing for union with its highest expression. Elusive and alluring, the Beloved seduces us into our own becoming, compelling us to keep moving through tangled paths, wild deserts, mockery, misunderstanding, and, more often than not, a Vulcan’s forge of yearning love that we discover we cannot bear to live without”.

### **The birth of clown Papilio**

It’s October 2017 and I am a certified facilitator of creative collaboration and quite successful, according to the feedback. Looking back to my quest in Morocco, I wonder “Does this really bring more fulfilment in my life? Is this really my calling? Do I want to stay in the corporate world? How about vulnerable people? How to bring more meaning to the world in a different way?”

It’s January 2018. I am sitting down to create an out-of-the box list of ‘pathways to the future’, sitting next to my Octopus. Suddenly ‘My Beloved’ appears on Stage. Why not utilize the positive qualities of my ‘Beloved Clown’ to become a Contact Clown? I am anxious about going on this Contact Clown journey. It’s an intense profession, because it requires you to deeply connect with others, as I illustrate in Part 2. It’s about authenticity, deep emotional connections to vulnerable people and their grief, coping with being close to mortality, professional distance whilst I am still mourning about my mother, who died with dementia.

But I feel this is my calling, as written in my notebook in Morocco 6 years ago. It really feels like what Trebbe Johnson expresses:

“Our calling is where our gladness and the deep hunger of the world meet.”

In May 2019, I dare to go for my calling. I participate in the action learning training at ‘[Clownschool](#)’ Esterella under the name Clown ‘Goofy’, choosing a very relaxed cartoon character as a way to cope with my anxiety. A couple of months into my training, I discover that a Contact Clown is actually a facilitator of creative collaboration in 1-to-1 situations, and I decide to find a new name to represent my authentic Clown.

Meeting with my colleague Clown Carola Jehae, the name ‘Butterfly’ comes up, when she sees my butterfly fabric to make new clown trousers. I am in rejection mode, because in my country, somebody is also called ‘a butterfly’ when flirting. But I catch up in hindsight again, and find out that a butterfly is a beautiful symbol for human life. It’s metamorphosis, vulnerability, mortality and beauty. That really expresses how I feel now. Clown ‘Papillio’ is born.

## Part 2: Being a Contact Clown

Part 1 was about my quest and how I found my calling to become a Contact Clown. In Part 2, I describe what a Contact Clown is and what the difference is compared to a Show Clown. I illustrate through a real-life example how a Contact Clown works and applies creative collaboration. Finally, you can see me and my fellow Clowns working through the five phases of the contact process, as I’ve inserted a slide show at the end of this article.



### What is a Contact Clown?

Probably you have different associations with the term Clown, like a Circus Clown with an ‘act’, who is sad and comic at the same time, a fool at a children’s party or a Clown consulted in ancient times by Kings for their wisdom and witticism. Some people are even afraid of Clowns. In Table 1 I list the differences:

**Table 1: Show Clown and Contact Clown compared**

<b>Show Clown</b>	<b>Contact Clown</b>
Performance	Being there
Role	Authentic Self
Audience	1-to-1 Contact
Script	Improvisation
Has a Text	Doesn’t speak much
Repeats Act	Plays in the moment
Tricks	Sense & Play
Standardized	Reacts to emotions
Laughter	Connection
Applause	Happy moment in a life

## Five key principles that guide Contact Clowns

During my training as a Contact Clown we learn to work with five key principles, which I've summarized below:

### 1. Improvisation:

Contact Clowns are 'just present in the here and now' without a script to play. We improvise on the spot depending on the situation, the possibilities and emotional state of the other. We touch to get a connection, especially when the other is in a baby phase or seems absent. Sing songs and play music (Scherder 2017), as this results in a direct connection to the brain, where the memories and feelings from childhood sit (remember Jung 1967, Ringer 2002).

### 2. 1-to-1 contact:

We connect as best possible to one person. Have a blank mind and open heart. We are curious; say 'YES' to the unexpected. Come in still, just look around. Sense the atmosphere and emotions. We don't speak a lot, make no judgements. Go with the flow.

### 3. Quiet:

We work mostly from still environments. The normal routine goes on in collaboration with the caretakers and/or present family; we don't disturb usual practices. From still environments we slowly build up the contact. We slow down actions; adjust to the pace of the other and improvise on what we see. The interaction can emerge in very joyful and intense connections, because a Contact Clown can be very expressive, but also very modest and quiet.

### 4. Hold the other centrally:

We always work with the reactions and possibilities of the other and make sure to check that he or she is feeling safe. We don't ask questions, as the other could be embarrassed by not knowing the answers. Whenever we come too close or are asked to leave, we'll always respect that.

### 5. Heart contact:

We know we are not dealing with roars of laughter; as first and foremost we know we will deal with a smile or a twinkle in somebody's eyes. There can be a joyful contact when the other is glad, but as well when somebody is sad, afraid or angry. The essence is making connections, in whatever way or emotion.

## A precious experience

It's January 2019. We are visiting a home for people with dementia. I am sitting on a dinner table and walk away heading to the living room. A woman on the other side of the table is calling me: *"Do you go away? Don't you want to sit with me?"* I feel disrupted, but turn around.



I thought she was not aware of me, as she did not look at me having breakfast, but apparently, she was. I walk to her. She says *“You look so beautiful and colorful, so very different from others. Let me look at your nails, they are so well polished”*. She takes my hands and caresses them. *“When people tell you to remove that nail polish, because it is different from what is accepted [purple], tell them to come to me. I will protect you from them!”* She asks me to show myself even more. I move around and dance a bit. She looks at my outfit and caresses my clothes and my face admiring and loving me. She says *“My nails will be polished too, when I go home again”*. I have a shiver, because I know she will never return home. We play. She is the wise lady and I am a playful child. She expresses her love in a variety of ways and her longing for protecting me.



This play continues a long time, till she expresses that she is tired. That she wants me to come back again another day. We send each other hand-blown kisses, wave and slowly I dance away.

### Bringing about creative collaboration

What happened? My interpretation of the situation is as following. In the spirit of Knafo ‘we danced in the ballroom of the unknown’, as I quote in my introduction. I move away, but go back to this lady with an open heart and blank mind. Curious. I am there in the moment without any plan. We improvise, we play creatively together. A connection between the deeper layers of our unconscious unfolds in an unexpected direction for me. She addresses me as my mother protecting me. I really feel safe like a child, her daughter. Delighted to be loved, but also a bit anxious, because she reminds me of my mother and my grief of losing her whilst having dementia. Her eyes twinkle and shine. Mine too. We both have a very precious happy time. I’ll never forget and I am sure she will. That’s what I have to deal with as well.

When I share my experience with the group I am in tears. Later on, whilst writing a reflection report, I articulate that actually ‘transference’ and ‘countertransference’ occurred (Ringer, 2002). That could only happen through letting our unconscious speak with each other during our play.

“Transference is another interpersonal phenomenon where one person transfers expectations derived from his or her past onto a current situation that involves another person”

(p: 138)

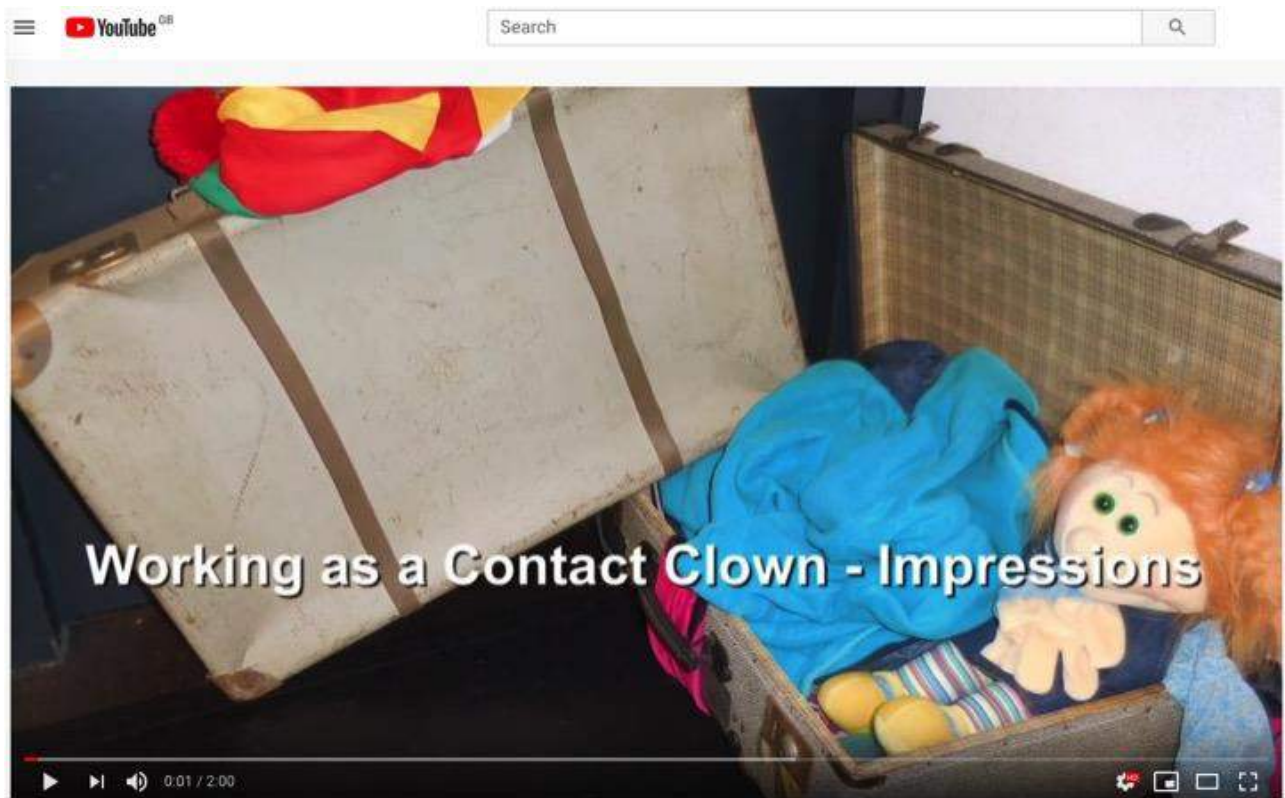
“Countertransference is the sum of the leader’s unconsciously evoked reaction to group experience”.

(p: 141)

In this case it was my unconscious evoked reaction as a Clown in a 1-to-1 contact.

The previous example illustrates how facilitating as a Contact Clown, in a 1-to-1 situation was a creative collaboration and applied the eight creative collaboration principles of my Octopus - experimenting, being in the moment, tolerating anxiousness, improvising, co-creating, playing, embracing disruption and remaining open to the unexpected.

Last, but not least, let me end this article by not writing about, but showing visually in a slide show, the five phases we go through whilst connecting: Let Go, Observe, Link, Align and Play.



### **Conclusion: creative collaboration brought me a gift for life**

I have learned that pathways can appear, in ways never imagined upfront, by allowing the unconscious to speak with myself and others in creative collaboration. I have experienced the power of metaphors, that arose in a 'dance between the conscious and unconscious'. That you can only understand them in hindsight. These metaphors have really made the difference in my quest to find my calling, revealing a pathway, to be a Contact Clown, that my conscious mind would never have come up.

I discovered that a Contact Clown is a facilitator of creative collaboration whose performance is inspired by my Octopus's eight principles. I am thrilled that, as a Contact Clown, I am in a never-ending dance into the unknown with the mission to bring happy moments to lives of other people. My life changing learning experience turned into a gift for life.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you, Louise Austin, Bob MacKenzie, Karen Grimmett and Karin Schillert for your critical friend reviews of this article, my creative collaboration guides during my quest as mentioned in this article, Esther Hak for challenging me to go even more out-of-the-box during my clown study, and my fellow students and clowns, for being in such close creative collaboration with me.

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## About the author

Marijke is a Dutch Contact Clown & Senior Facilitator, who works to bring about a twinkle in the eyes of people through Creative Collaboration. She writes:

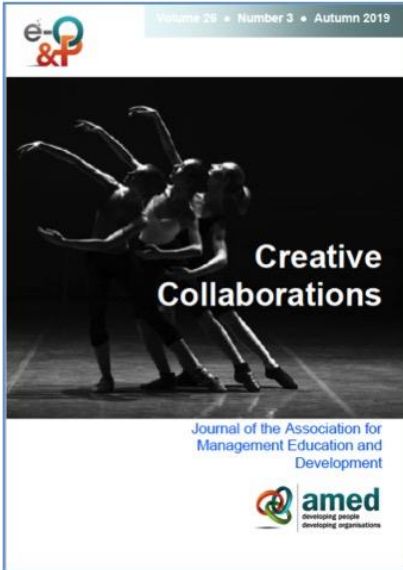
I draw my inspiration from Picasso, who said: "Every Child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once you grow up".

As a leader in business for more than 30 years, I've enjoyed working with teams ranging from 10 - 400 professionals in all HR disciplines, ITC, L&D, Consultancy and Change Management. I've always worked with CEOs and Work Councils, being responsible for budgets from 1 - 40 Million.

I am experienced in many sectors, such as healthcare, banking and insurances, oil and chemicals, energy, transportation, IT, Consultancy and Dutch governmental bodies like the Police, the Ministry of Defense, the city of Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

I really enjoyed as well to keep on developing myself; from a Drama Therapist to an Industrial Psychologist, certified Change Management Master, certified senior Facilitator & Contact Clown Creative Collaboration. My sources of inspiration are artists, theatre, art, nature, animals and the pureness of children and elderly people with dementia. I love to try out new recipes with daring friends, cycling, and sports. I enjoy keeping my child alive (Picasso again) through discovering and learning.

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