

A Clown at Midnight

You are enjoying yourself at the circus, the clowns regaling you with their antics, the wild colors of their clothes, and the absurdity of their makeup. Having driven home way past your normal bedtime, a smile on your face for your childlike experience, you find the porch light won't go on and you have a difficulty opening the door. After the noise of the circus, the silence outside seems bizarre. Once inside, you are again secure but find that the hallway lamp won't light, so while walking toward the closet, you make do with the dim illumination of an adjacent room. Halfway off with your overcoat, you open the closet door. There stands the clown.

Robert Bloch defined his idea of horror as “a clown at midnight”. That which delights us or excites us in one context will give us a heart attack in another.

At first, when we train in *budo*, we are a little excited and sometimes afraid. We have never been punched before let alone kicked, and the idea of having to block or avoid such violent attacks freezes rather than motivates us. Later, we become used to controlled blows, knowing that our partners do not really want to hit us anymore than they want to be hit. Then Sensei ups the ante. The attacks are to be more aggressive, faster, and from a closer distance. We are as unsure about our ability to respond as we are about our partner's ability to control his blows.

Having achieved black belt, we feel comfortable in most martial arts engagements. We know just about everything that can happen to us in the dojo and which students have extra long arms, extra short attention spans, or extraordinary lack of control. That which used to challenge us is comfortable for us. We have successfully expanded our comfort zone. Then we attend a seminar in which both the techniques and the partners are unfamiliar. We feel uneasy again, but draw on our pride-in-rank to bolster us.

It is even more difficult for instructors to keep widening their comfort zones until they can handle most self-defense situations. After all, their sensei is not around to up the ante so they can continue their development. That is why the honest and dedicated instructor challenges himself by working with various students during training (rather than watching from the sidelines), and why he will ask strangers to be his demonstration partner when giving seminars. If what he teaches requires a trained *uke*, he teaches an artsy art that looks martial, not a martial practice that looks like art.

In brief, good training gradually but continually, ups the ante by changing the context. At some point, the student reaches a level at which no one is around to up the ante, so he ups it himself. At a later point, after he has reached his apex, his very age will challenge him. The ante is upped in proportion to his gradually declining physical abilities.

The main way to “up the ante” is to change the context, to provide, in a way, a clown at midnight. I am not suggesting that the instructor hire the Insane Clown Posse to jump out of a VW beetle and attack his students in the parking lot, nor do I think the sudden opening of a closet door in a dark house is a wise idea; nevertheless, comfort zones do not expand by themselves. If you have had a training career of having your art

or sensei challenge you and then in time challenge yourself, you will have developed the ability to be rational when others are panicked, to feel a call to action when others feel immobilized, and to stay calmer longer in stressful situations. When you run into a clown at midnight, you are shocked for a moment, but cognizant that you have many out-of-context training experiences to draw upon, you use your stress response to throw your coat over his head, thrust him out on the curb, cast him into his little VW, and slam the door shut with a sidekick. Just another night at the circus.