On finding your feral self

Actor, director, and professional clown Christopher Bayes discusses the importance of audacity, how despair gives you more access to joy, and trying until you win.

February 26, 2026 -

As told to Jun Chou, 3084 words.

Tags: Performance, First attempts, Failure, Inspiration, Mentorship, Mental health, Process.

What is your teaching philosophy?

My teaching philosophy continues to be about trying to encourage the wildness in people, the playfulness in people, the innocence we've left behind in order just to fit in and get socialized. Somebody told me this word recently, what they do in Brooklyn backyards is called "rewilding."

Let nature do what nature wants to do and don't try to manicure everything. Part of what I'm trying to do with these young actors is to encourage their wildness, but also help them to rewild, so that they have a kind of audacity and playfulness and courage. The audacity to be beautiful in the work takes some time.

What is your process for finding the true self?

It's quite labyrinthian. You got to get people to let go of some stuff that's familiar. You got to help them discover what they're capable of once they get past that. And it depends on the person. That's a gradual process of not breaking down, but trying to get people to be "more." I want more of you. I don't want you to feel like you need to be less and I don't want to take anything from anybody. But if I can get them to be more of that, more complicated, more messy, more unpleasant, more full of joy, more ferocious… All those things have equal value to me.

The work is a kind of diagnostic where I go, "I see where they are stopping themselves. Are they stopping themselves because it doesn't feel safe? Are they stopping themselves because they were taught to stop themselves there by the world?" One of the things somebody said recently to me was, "Imagine what you were like before the world got its hands on you." I think that is a beautiful way to think about it. We're trying to find our way back to something authentic and unique. It's not a formula and it's not a solution, but, "How do I help you find your way back to your authentic and unique self?"

You betrayed your enthusiasm in order to not get bullied because that's what the bullies go for.

Shame is a powerful teacher. Shame of failure, of embarrassment. Those are things that are instilled in you as a child. I love that you already said a few things of joy and rewilding. There's a feralness to this sort of joy I really love and it gets subdued a lot.

It's not cocktail party joy. It's pagan joy.

How do you access that?

I have a lesson plan but I can throw it out the window at any moment if something more interesting is happening. One of the things we spend a lot of time doing is getting into our voices and our laughter and the laughter in our bodies. The biggest block between you and your big true belly laugh and your big true belly joy is your fear of having a little cry about it, but the muscle that makes a laugh is the same muscle that makes a cry.

If you're trying to hold one part of it down, you're not going to get to the other. So if we can release into your despair, into your frustration, then that gives you more access to your joy. The students begin to notice when they start to get really wild in the room and I step out that it's up to them to have a little pagan yay party or a freak out or whatever it is they need to do. I've seen these things go on for 45 minutes. Forty-five minutes of pagan freakout.

What's really cool is I taught all over the world. And the thing that happens to people, the behavior that they drop into when they begin to find their authentic pagan self is the room does exactly the same thing in New Haven as it does in Brooklyn, Beijing, Bali, Hong Kong, as it does in Amsterdam. The behavior's the same. There's cultural differences in different blockages but when they get that pagan, it always looks the same.

I find that so gorgeous. We don't care what anybody thinks anymore. We're not concerned with them judging it because we're all in it. We're all in the mix. Every time I see it, it blows my mind. Often the things we have in common are the things we keep secret. Things that we hide are the things that make us mostly the same.

I know it must be impossible to describe, but can you try to describe what universal pagan joy looks like?

I hate to pin these things down because it feels like I'm pinning a butterfly to a corkboard and I'm not that kind of a scientist. I'm much more experiential in my observation of it.

But it often begins with somebody having a big laugh. Then they think it's over. There's polite time, now we move on to a different activity. But this one can't put it away, and this one can't put it away, because it's out of the box now. Once you begin to laugh that way, the body doesn't want to be done. The brain thinks that's enough, but the body's like, "No, I need more of this. I'm getting so many happy chemicals in my body right now." All of that stuff that's moving, your dopamine, your serotonin, endorphins, all kinds of stuff is just firing.

So I'll take that one that won't put it away and that one that won't put it away, and I put them together. Then someone else may join and [another] someone else may join. It could be that they're weeping, and I do the same thing. I'll have a cry-baby neighborhood. Anybody who needs to have a good cry, you go with your people. And then sometimes they find a rhythm, they find a beat, they find a song that they want to sing about. Sometimes I'll give them a theme for a song, and we make a spontaneous song together. And then it wants to build, it doesn't want to stop, they don't want to be done. Somewhere deep in their core, they want to go further.

Then a rhythm will drop in and then people will find a circle, and people will go in the middle of the circle. This is the thing that happens everywhere. Some people will go in the circle and show off a little bit and show off their pagan theory or their disaster, or their hope, or their joy. Everybody gets infected by that. And then there's always some people on the outside who are sheepdogging. There's always somebody trying to keep everybody together, and there's always the one who doesn't want to do it at all and will lie on the floor in a fetal position in the corner. I've done a whole afternoon of exercises with one person just lying in the middle of the floor crying, and we just kept working. There was no stigma about it. There was no shame about it.

If you can endure the discomfort of it, if you can endure that and let it stay in your body, then you become illuminated in a way. You become really beautiful to work on because your face is relaxed, your face is open, your eyes are open, and you're not presenting any longer. You're not presenting that socialized self you carry onto the subway with you, where it needs to be a certain way in order to get by.

Would you say it's like an exorcism in a way?

Yeah, but exorcism is getting rid of the demons. The demons are not forbidden. The demons are as welcome as

anything else because they're in there too. You can't be selective. You have to be willing to let yourself get messy.

You said once that "crying is just laughing larger."

Crying is just laughing but all wet.

What can we learn from the things that are regarded as negative?

Well, those are the things that we hide, right?

Those are the things that are attached to shame and weakness. Joy is not. People would like for you to diminish yourself because it's easier for them. If you want to work in a Walgreens or in a bank, that's fine. If you want to be an artist in this world, you need to be more. You need to let yourself be more, and relearn how to do that without shame and without attaching it to weakness.

One of the things we talk about too, particularly when people are having a little cry or a full-on rage out, just let your face be wet for a minute and don't wipe until you're done.

We have a rule in my class: no pre-wiping. Why would you wipe in the middle? It doesn't make any sense why you would wipe in the middle until you're done. We learn our freedom there, we learn our humanity there, we learn our empathy there, which is something that's terrifyingly lacking at the moment for many people, that lack of empathy, because they've been so blocked. They have to be a certain way and they have to act a certain way, and they have to get things done. Usually, it's attached to some kind of financial commitment of some sort or obligation. But if I can get some people loose into their empathy and lead from their hope, I've lived a good life. I did what I was supposed to do.

Especially in today's current world, state, political climate, there is such a lack of empathy and there is such an overemphasis on the fury. It's very detached from joy, and it's leaning very deep into despair.

Or just straight up fear.

How do you diagnose the world right now and what is the medicine?

Are you asking me?

Your best answer.

I am not touching that. ICE is everywhere. I'm not touching it. They come for the clowns first, man.

I think the medicine is following your bliss.

Over the last couple of years, I've started to do more work in Beijing with CEOs from around Asia. The Yale School of Management has this program where they bring folks from mostly Asia to come to New Haven. They do a week or two of conferences and things, talk about AI and the generation of this and that, and global financial, blah, blah, blah, the age of tariffs. And then they have me.

The last room I was in, I had 50 CEOs and founding presidents of corporations from all over in Asia. I'm used to working with actors so I'm trying to get these folks to come out of their corporate bodies and they're very reluctant to do so. But when they start to, all kinds of stuff gets loose.

One of the ways that I do that is by saying, "Today, I'm the leader. You do what I say. And if you don't want to do it, you can go sit down. That's fine. There's no shame. I don't want to hurt you. Let's get loose."

Another thing I do is like, “I want you to imagine that I’m your worst employee. I talk trash about you, I’ve stolen from you, and come at me.” A lot of them will say, “Well, I’ll just let HR do that.” I was like, “Yeah, but I’m in the room. Imagine. Or, imagine I’m responsible for the tariffs now that are harming your business.”

Then they come at me. This guy tried to choke me once. He tried to T-bone my throat, and I’m like, “No, man, you can’t choke me.” Another guy chased me around for a while.

I had one woman come to me and say, “I really hated this. I’m terrified of actually being seen in my vulnerability. But I’ll tell you what, this year when I’m in my corner office and I’m having a rough day, I’m going to remember this day because I got looser this day than I’ve gotten since I was a baby.” So if that CEO’s kinder to one person, I’ve done my work.

These CEOs, coming from a culture that doesn’t allow this kind of behavior, particularly as head of their corporations. If I can get them just to move a little bit into kindness and empathy, that’s the medicine.

They think wildness is dangerous. They’re successful because they are so repressed. People need permission. What you provide in your rooms is the permission to let go and not have all the rules.

But it has to be encouraged. It’s not going to happen on its own. Just because I give them permission doesn’t mean anything’s going to happen. It’s so foreign somatically, kinesthetically. They don’t even know where it is anymore, where it lives, so I have to encourage it and insist. At least then they’ll have a somatic memory of what that felt like for a second.

So is it a fake cry that eventually becomes a real cry or a fake laugh that eventually becomes a real laugh?

Some people can start with a fake laugh and the body doesn’t really know the difference. It’s still making the sound, still purging toxins from the body.

The ugly cry is just for fun but that can lead to more truth. It’s like push-starting a car.

I started a thing during the pandemic called the Laughing Club. I was voted New Yorker of the Week one time during the pandemic because I was leading these laughing clubs. They’re sort of based on laughter yoga, but really based on the clown work and the form of that laughter yoga. You try on different laughs like a cocktail party laugh or a little polite laugh. That’s all well and good but I’m not interested in those so much. I’m trying to help you find your authentic belly laugh. A lot of people have a tendency to craft their laugh based on the community they want to be invited into. It’s a combination of subconscious but also desire to be accepted.

So the socially acceptable version of your true feral laugh.

And your office laugh versus your buddies-in-the-bar laugh. They’re different things. Your buddies-at-the-bar laugh is probably closer to the real than your corporate office laugh.

Tell me about living at the speed of fun.

The definition for the speed of fun is it’s faster than your worry and louder than your critic. As far as I know, I invented that.

The speed of fun is the speed of the comic world, the speed of farce, the speed of sitcom, the speed of standup, the speed of burlesque. It’s faster than normal because it gets a little out of control. It’s the speed with which you can no longer judge what you’re doing, you’re just doing and you don’t care if anybody’s watching.

One of the things that we talk about a lot in class is “the profound beauty of the fuck around.” For me, “the profound beauty of the fuck around” is watching someone play without fear or worry about whether they’re playing

correctly or just playing. Again, that goes back to the playground. When we were little, before we were told not to do that anymore, before we diminished; we're not that enough of this, we're too much of this, we're not enough of that. "No, no, no," and the social body starts to come in place. We have to remind ourselves what the actual speed of fun could be because the most fun games, you kick and run as fast as you can. You don't notice how you're running or kicking, you just do your best. That's super fun. Not thinking. Just playing.

Why is it important to play and fail?

There's people who talk about clown as being "the art of failure." I don't believe that at all. I believe in the world of clown, we always lead with our hope. Prepare for disaster because disaster will find you, but not always. The destination is not flop. The destination is not failure. The destination is success.

If you can't make it there and you have a disaster and you cry a little bit about it, then we love you. If you're really good, we can celebrate. If you're really bad and you pretend that you're really good, we hate you a little bit because you're a liar. But if you're bad and you admit you're bad and you have a little cry about it, we love you again because you're modeling behavior that we don't allow ourselves any longer. You become a beautiful lesson to us. So you got to be ready to fail but don't count on it. Why would you even start if you're prepared for failure? Don't even start.

How do you remain *not* in the despair? How do you hope? How do you fall in love, get your heart broken, choose to fall in love again?

Try again. If your hope is strong enough, you're going to try till you win. You're going to try till you succeed. Just because your heart's broken once doesn't mean you're never going to love again, unless you decide it's too much. And if you refuse to fall in love, you're never going to have your heart broken. You've already protected it. Nobody wants to live like that.

You have to know how far you can go into your flop. Then you leave and you have a little tragic moment. And 10 minutes later, you come out and try again, and maybe then you win. And everybody freaks out because of your audacity to lead with your hope.

Everybody loves a comeback story.

When you do fail, you admit you failed and then something may happen. If you pretend you didn't fail, when everyone saw that you failed, then we hate on you a little bit because you're a liar. Then it's shame on shame. You're lying. You're pretending everything's fine. Everything's not fine. Most of the time, everything's not fine.

Christopher Bayes recommends:

Always read Joseph Cambell with a pencil in your hand.

Pastrami sandwich from Langer's in LA.

Try to linger.

Be aggressively patient.

Marinate.

Name
Christopher Bayes

Vocation
actor, director, composer, designer, professional clown