

# Strange times for court jesters

**Michael Leunig talks turkey on career,  
childhood, and coming holidays**

With Meredith Fuller

*Michael Leunig's quirky cartoons first appeared in 1965 and have since become an established part of Australia's cultural landscape. A recent cartoon, 'Thoughts of a baby lying in a childcare centre', sparked a torrent of letters, calls to talkback radio, and even a book.*

*Meredith Fuller had several conversations with Michael Leunig in the aftermath of the controversy. To give us some insight into Leunig's vocation as cultural mirror, she presents a distilled version of one of their conversations.*

*Meredith believes that in Michael Leunig she can see a fellow INFP. And when Leunig says 'I struggle toward mysterious things and sometimes don't quite get there', it seems that she might be on the right track.*

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## **'I must say out loud what people are whispering'**

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*Newspaper cartoonists could be described as translators who name unconscious societal concerns. How do you see it?*

My role has evolved as I have been doing it. It has been quite an evolution in understanding over thirty years. I think what I do probably belongs to a tradition that I have heard about—there's a bit of Court Jester there, that intuitive, bardic voice. There's some archetypal function there. Something fundamental, like being a carpenter.

But it's a compulsion or impulse, not a learned thing I set out to do. It is compulsive in origin: you just have the impulse and you do it. It's an artistic voice, what the lyric poets or some writers do—reflecting on existential matters such as love, death, tragedy and absurdity—eternal themes. In contemporary society you can overlook old roles and think it is new and cutting edge, when it's really very traditional.

There is invention too. Artists take liberties that must be taken! I love what engages my mind in delight, absurdity, anger and concern. I must say out loud what people are whispering.

*You seem to notice patterns in chaos that fuel public debate and reflection by conveying primitive feelings visually, postulating 'maybe this or that'; which enables a 'playing in the mind' space for people.*

It is an ancient childhood feeling, my intuitive core, that I have every right to belong to my society and make comment. I was brought up to sit around the family table and talk about what delights, upsets and fascinates. It isn't the sense that I have the right to do it. It's a sense that we all have the duty to comment: to follow that impulse and speak without any particular authority seems entirely natural.

People can, and do, tell me to shut up! I'm always a bit conscious that mine is the voice of a Lone Individual, maybe as lost as anyone. I don't claim to have any special insight or power to do this, but I have just as much right and duty as anyone. I might have a kind of privileged position working for a newspaper, but I don't have any special power to do this. Somehow I don't think I have a particular authority to act upon. I might have an authority outside my own understanding! I suspect I have the authority of an active individual in this world, and very much alone ...

My speaking is ordinary and obvious, not grandiose or arrogant, I hope. Sometimes it is cheeky or blunt or mysterious, but it's not from on high—unless I am intoxicated in some sense. I can get carried away at times, but that is just stupidity.

*What did you want to be when you grew up?*

My childhood fantasy was 'Always Speaking to the World—to Have a Voice.' I expected that I would tell stories in a general sense, and I felt that this would be a good thing to do. I assumed it was a natural desire that everyone had—to want to grow up to speak, to hold forth, to amuse and to touch people by telling stories.

I loved telling and listening to stories as a child. I come from a verbal culture; we were always talking and listening, and I took it for granted that I would be listened to. One's natural birthright. I wasn't sure how this would be manifested, but I had a general sense that I would be doing what I'm doing now. Anything I've done in my life hasn't surprised me; it seems natural.

*There's a sense that our society is dispirited. Our post-industrial age of information and global connectedness appears to foster an autistic attitude.*

It seems that there are problems with relationship. Our natural world is under threat, so it follows that the natural parts of the human condition seem to be in trouble (our inner ecology). We seem to be losing our ability to want to relate, like birds that have lost the art of navigating north for winter ...

We seem to be retreating from relationship. We can see it expressed in our gender war. We seem to shun relationship, be afraid of it. I feel that relationship is a necessity. Relationship to the Other is important for our vitality. Many of our relationships seem to be disintegrating.

What has caused this retreat from relationship? We appear to be losing our capacity of knowing what is true, right and real. That is why our first relationship seems important to me—our first love, being carried within the Other. I'm talking about the mother-child relationship here. Us and our mums.

*And being held in mind.*

Yes, held in mind, and being known. It seems that this sets something up in terms of relationship—the capacity for relationship. To recognise and be recognised.

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**'The mob that can love you today  
might string you up tomorrow'**

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*When the public personalises your material, what are your thoughts on the process that provokes an attack at you—the person, not the cartoonist?*

I think any society can change in its capacity to hear varying or dissenting or different voices, and it seems to me that we are currently watching a diminishing of psychological space. The place where ideas live and feelings are exchanged is shrinking. Our psychological, cultural and physical space is diminishing, and civic space is concurrently shrinking also.

It seems that now we are *in* each other's face; the talkback radio confrontation syndrome! Voice to voice, face to face confrontation more often. There seems to be less space between us for discussion of ideas and exchange. It is a civilized idea that we be allowed to speak ...

I think we are in particular trouble if the Court Jester isn't allowed to speak 'weirdly', to be offensive, in bad taste occasionally. Sometimes those 'off with the pixies' ideas can be quite prophetic in some way we don't understand as yet. Those eccentric voices, they are special and valuable.

I have been quite surprised by the quickness and savagery of the attack with the childcare issue. As though a mob of people are saying, 'you shut up, and don't say something that discomferts us.' Mob hostility creates a deep loneliness. Despite an enormous amount of support by mail and messages, it is awful to be so attacked.

History is full of precedent of the mob suddenly turning dark and nasty. I remember once being in a mob in Paris—a good-humoured mob that turned dark and nasty very quickly. The switch from good hearted gaiety and celebration—the socialists had come to power that very day—and then it went suddenly dark on the basis of a car trying to push through the crowd and getting frightened because the crowd were thumping on the roof, and then suddenly the air was full of flying bottles. I have always had a chill about this aspect of humanity that can turn quickly. The mob that can love you today might string you up tomorrow. I am cautious.

The great problem is the mob, the corporate conforming impulse, like a regiment marching together agreeing on something. Of course they do have a value in civic life, this is democracy; a collective voice and consciousness, but allowing the eccentric voice to give the artistic balance must offset this. Saying what it is like to be alone and human on this earth. Not echoing the collective. This is part of the great poetic and artistic tradition. This is civic vitality, too.

When people want me to shut up, humiliate and annihilate me, it is, in effect, like denying the democratic duty to speak as an individual ... I'm certainly not claiming some privilege. I simply value the range of voices, and I appreciate any lone voices. We don't want to crush that voice because it just might be the bearer of something difficult and clumsy to hear. The culture needs to both expect and respect it in some way. I'm noticing a diminishing of willingness to bear with it, or letting it go and allowing it space even if it awakens something unpleasant ...

The traditional bards, the poets, the genuine lone voices, have an uncertain place in our culture at present. Currently, it is fashionable to be the 'individual eccentric voice'—but not a genuine one; instead a slick one. I notice in the contemporary style now there are lots and lots of people being wacky and jokey. Everybody's playing at it. Everyone making jokes. The enormous development of the humour industry attests to this.

Let me put it like this. In the old days, when I started with the newspaper, it was a rare position—there were only a few. There weren't many columnists who were given that role of being that individual eccentric voice. That's probably why it worked so well in those days.

Now nearly everyone is at it (look at the number of satirists, humour panels and political takeoffs), I feel that I want to leave it. I feel I don't want to do that anymore, because everybody seems to be doing it. I want to go serious and plain, and not be humorous any more! I don't want to rock the boat, I want to steady it. There seem to be far too many court jesters wanting to rock the boat. They can be quite wanton and reckless in many cases, and perhaps not inspired by a profound deeply felt insight or faith. It seems more like a vaudevillian impulse. That bothers me.

I get cast in with these people as just another columnist, and yet I sincerely felt an ancient duty to speak the profound eccentric voice. That is almost redundant because now there are too many court jesters, world is full of them, and there are no kings any more. The jesters are strutting and being feted, they're famous and wealthy, while the kings are in retreat and trembling. It is a cultural problem; we are entering strange times for court jesters and poets.

#### *How do you hold the projections?*

They bother me a bit. I think they tire me. As if I am carrying something. It feels dismal. Even despite enormous support from people. As I get older I appreciate the gravity of being able to touch people. I now expect the darkness of it too, it isn't all sweetness and light when you dig things up—and go about disturbing things and moving people!

The human condition is a swamp in a way: the ducks pleasantly swimming on top of the pond and it is pleasant. I was with the ducks. Now, I am also going into the murky underwater where there is a lot of darkness and things are primitive and obscured. It's radically wild down there. Slickness and awards mean nothing down there. It's not nice.

#### *What was your first taste of public displeasure?*

My taste of this came way back. I remember as a young man protesting conscription, when I got called up. I was spat on, and they also spat at my feet. I suddenly realised, 'oh, this is serious.' I have been in court for obscenity and sent much hate mail. I felt the weight of society's disapproval. An angry mob. Bishops signing a letter saying I was a blasphemer. It was awful. I invited it. I went through it.

There have been many issues I comment on where I am dealing in dangerous territory! People thought, 'he's on my side, because he holds all my views,' and now they think that I have betrayed them because of how they have interpreted the meaning in my work. It goes with the territory—the Archetypal Invoice—the threat of being chased out of your own culture and exiled because you are too close to the bone, or your transgressions and truths and errors are intolerable.

#### *What has surprised you the most about the responses to your controversial childcare cartoons?*

I remember being concerned about some columns in the press that were a denigration of the choice to be a mother. I have been upset for quite a while at the tide against motherhood. It appears that there has been resurgence in the idea that motherhood is futile; it's being a failure, it's a kind of a folly. A cartoonist's voice is supposed to make comment on what we are.

I am interested in the critical importance of infancy in the formation of who we are. I carry some memory of infancy. I guess we all do somewhere. Perhaps because I'm an artist—I tend to hold on to this and value it in a special way.

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### **'Our first relationship is so important: the one with our mother'**

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#### *Your childhood?*

I can't quite fathom it. It is somehow connected to art. Perhaps artists carry a lyrical sense of continuity back to childhood. Most painters adore the painting of children, for instance, quite sincerely. There is a deep reverence, some sense of it there within, strongly. There is a sense of all the feelings associated with it, and artists seem to keep that vital force within them. It is a sense that childhood still lives, and not just childhood, but a sense of before that, an awakening of some consciousness.

The creative act resembles that coming into consciousness, that being born thing, that great moments of creativity seem to echo something that has already happened—that birth. It is an essential subtle theme.

I am fascinated at how much the bourgeoisie pride themselves on the subtle differences of food, art, wine, decoration, fashion, and so forth—where they are highly alert and attuned—when they can be so crass and coarse to the subtle parts of the child's emergence into the world! That contradiction fascinates me.

#### *This preoccupation with narcissistic discrimination doesn't seem to translate to a preoccupation with complex needs of the other.*

Good point. The finer tuning into the self. The pleasuring of the self at all costs! It's all about the pleasuring, not that there's anything wrong in that! But what is the problem with the other? It appears there is a lost capacity with the relationship to the other and the world. What is causing this problem? Our first relationship is so important: the one with our mother.

*What are your memories?*

You mean specifics? We had a deep sense of being an organic family. A swarm, a tribe.

I was the second of five children. We were called a working class family back then, so in some respects ours was a simple setting. Lots of nourishment and food. We swarmed over and highly used our house, yard, and surroundings. My mother saw her role as important, and our family was very connected.

Lots of freedom, and mud pies and dogs. We were often barefoot roaming, wandering, living organically and creatively. My parents weren't afraid of silence and space. Few toys to entertain us, we made our own from sticks and stones, or watched ants crawling around. I wandered around the local tip, where there was much to be discovered ...

I was allowed to find things, create, invent, and remain unstructured. I was never over-managed. The world was safer then, you could play in the streets and go exploring. There was a lot of time too. We had lots and lots of time.

Children have more toys and novelties now, but it seems they don't have much time.

*No time to just be.*

The world is so fast. If you move slowly you have more time. I think I take in things rather more slowly now, and I feel somewhat out of step with society as a result. I think there is something else to be found, and you need to slow down to notice what is lost. I mustn't be absorbed in the same time culture, because my knees would start jerking in time with everyone else's.

I am able to say no to many things. I have to say no. I'm not a post-modern as in 'let it all happen, refuse nothing.' One of the conditions of contemporary culture is to accept everything possible—accept ugliness, get on the side of the winner, be perverse: the world is perverse.

The new meaning of tolerance is indifference, and kind of loss of resistance. It is fascinating the way medical science parallels this—they talk about our immune systems breaking down, our bodies tolerating invasion and damage—we can't fight well enough. We treat ourselves now the way we used to treat rivers and lakes—pumping in effluent, and poisoning with refuse.

We are like children playing with dangerous things we just don't understand. We just think we'll live forever. We're stuck in our childhood omnipotence—poisoning things, poisoning our souls with imagery and noise and fear. It all adds up.

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**'I feel engaged in my  
existential mystery'**

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*Hurling along without pondering the consequences: is the cartoon character a composite of humanity, and where does that character live inside you?*

The character has no gender, it's not quite human—it's kind of a subhuman spirit. It sort of represents a kind of prehistoric embryo that might awaken in us what is pre-language. I feel it emerging onto the page, as a very old, ancient, primitive little thing ... so much feeling in the dumbest little drawings! So much hope!

There seems to be a loss of understanding of how we are interfering with a delicate ecology. What are we doing to ourselves? I get upset about traffic jams, or townscape planning that takes away spaces for children's play. Why are so many children getting sick? We are spoiling things. We are hurting ourselves but not feeling it. Speed numbs. Then twenty years later you find out how dangerous it is.

There is such a loss of understanding about our cities, our roads, the way we entertain ourselves. We don't seem to sense what is good for us and what hurts us. We wander away from relationship and that's the real place where you learn about limitations and discrimination and so on ...

This collective calamity worries me more than current political or budget issues. I'm not a popular political cartoonist any more because I don't believe we should be projecting all our woes onto the politicians or sending up a few individuals that we can target as being responsible. I am concerned about our part in it. Everyone. I feel that it is perilous to project it onto a few, and sanction the media to create villains as repositories for our misery and anger.

Conscience to me is not only about moral choices, but also knowing, at our core, what is right for our psychological ecosystem. Somehow retaining our conviction about our knowing, and daring to know. And knowing how to act and make and change.

Certain human functions are not possible at speed: there are important things we can't do if we are moving too fast. Technology rushes us and we desperately try to prove we can keep up to it. Love and attentiveness become difficult at speed. So does forgiveness. Reverence, which is a special and essential insight, becomes pretty well impossible. You can't fix things at speed. And at speed we can lose our capacity for slowness—our ability to be fallow and regenerative, and to appreciate the human seasons.

And what happens to the quality of patience in all this quick and highly stimulated culture? Patience is not just a virtue, it's an absolute necessity in the raising of children and in the understanding of the human condition. Patience is a vital survival skill. Yet patience might be diminishing. Moving at speed probably makes you very expectant and needy – almost insatiable, restlessly demanding – wanting it to get better and better. This is madness.

Our expectation of excellence is a kind of vanity where we tell ourselves we deserve the best, expect the best all the time. But on the other hand, isn't it an achievement to know you don't need it, and can get through the night with nothing but yourself, and you can relax into that nothingness by yourself? This seems to be an ancient virtue lost to us.

Keats talked about negative capability; the ability of not knowing, not having, and still being able to get through. Getting through the Long Dark Night of the Soul. This was a working class virtue. This could be a good thing; to wait, to go without, and at other times you may have everything. There'll be lots of times when you'll have lots. Other times maybe not. There is a rhythm to it.

So, you see, this contemporary issue of childcare which I've been caught up in is really a very small aspect of the issue of 'care for us all' and 'how do we care for ourselves; how do we live'? This is the stuff that cartoons are made of – and poems and jokes and songs. This is the natural habitat of the jester: all these emerging human tendencies; these cultural drifts and shifting borders. There's great enchantment and drama in all this. It's much more than academic: it's operatic!

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**'My starting point is being intellectual, cranky with pissed-off thoughts'**

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*Whose voices soothe and challenge you?*

There are no central sources. It's an ecological taking of bits and pieces. I enjoy mindless time, digging holes and playing in the paddocks. Watching nature. I feel engaged in my existential mystery. I expect it will be lonely a lot of the time, and I'll have to go hungry, although the hunger seems to bring something out too.

I do suffer from a lack of supportive ethos around me. I'm probably seen as a bit too serious, and feel lonely within the newspaper world that further isolates me. I'm not interested in award-winning political cartoons. I tend to feel like a lone voice in newspapers and journalism, and sense I am becoming further isolated with issues I tend to speak about.

***What internal process do you go through to create your cartoons?***

It is magical, delightful, earnest and filled with anguish. My starting point is being intellectual, cranky with pissed-off thoughts that I want to say. I feel kind of cranky, and I struggle with words. Getting them in order. I begin in a structured way, like visual algebra. But I have only ordered things, and it isn't enough. But the thinking is missing that transcendent *new* quality!

Then I move to the process of drawing – physical grappling and wrestling. A state of primitivism, where blobs of ink mess up the drawing, and leak on my hands, and I get annoyed. Physicality inhabits this area; I go into a bit of a trance, a reverie, even a slight derangement. It's a mess, and I trust it is going somewhere! So the neurotic thing diminishes and the physicality takes over. An 'inefficiency', a mess starts to take over.

Then a dream emerges. 'Oh, what just happened there?' I got swept up in an undercurrent, rolled along by it, out of control as I went beneath intellect, and a mystery happened! I have lost my sense of civilised decorum and freed myself from that clever witty thinking. That 'yes, yes, very respectable' thinking! You need to free yourself from all that. Freeing yourself in a way that is not barbaric but actually starts to make something new, you know. Physicality does that.

***What happens in your body?***

A great physicality where even my mind itself feels physical. Not a thinking mind. I am sort of a moving mind whose thoughts are muscular. A strong feeling, when it is operating well!

I was watching some violinists recently, and I noticed how physical it was. Same with artists at the canvas. Physicality seems to create mystery (and sometimes mistakes). Serendipitous discoveries are made in physicality! Bold and subtle physicality. (It fits my miner/meat worker background. I worked in a lot of factories when I got chucked out of uni. I was free to physically think there.)

But I must have intellectual food to consume first and lyrical food too. I digest that food to get to the other messy magical stuff. I'm practical – if I want to be moved, I realise I must go through something!

But, oh, if only I could do it with clean hands! I can't. I must endure a tiring cathartic wrestle to make something of value. I sometimes dread it, but well I have to chew bits up and spit stuff out trusting that it is leading somewhere. At other times nothing seems to make sense. Life is horrible and I wonder why I put myself through it! Not really a depression.

*Exquisite melancholy?*

The exquisite part is that beautiful time when you are descending into that flat place, or when just coming out of it and there is a coming of light. Mysterious changes.

A flat period of nothingness, but all I have to do is to be patient. You have to expect that and you know that it passes. There is a twinkle of a promise. Some emptying out is going on, preparing me for growth. Something is being prepared, a new phase to come in. Things wither so new ground can be prepared. I have to clear away the wreckage lying around. You have processed the accumulated junk, and need to clear it away so you can thrill to something new. Love it ... love your emptiness! Then suddenly, new life! I feel thrilled, and people seem marvellous again. It's all wonderful again. So radiant and promising as the light comes. It is a very slow process—it's not manic—it's seasons changing!

*Does this process vary?*

Usually it is very gradual and gentle—a moving through the seasons of nature, almost. Sometimes I am still struggling with something and I cannot get to the end and resolve it. I am fighting against intellectual algebra; it is oppressive if one and one always makes two.

Nonsense, whimsy, poetry and simplicity do funny things deep inside us. You are bringing a gift back to the world.

*Many people argue about what your cartoons are saying. Is this something going on for the recipient, or do you sometimes do that: like a Melbourne Nostradamus, making things more obscure?*

Some people feel threatened and disturbed by what they don't understand. I do not want to perplex people in a troubling sense, or try to be elusive. I don't set out to be elusive or perplexing. But on the other hand I am not afraid of people feeling bewildered. As long as there is some sense of engagement.

The great things have mysterious parts of them that sit there unresolved. Like fairy tales. You can't contrive it. I never set out to be freaky and just want to grab attention. I struggle toward mysterious things and sometimes don't quite get there. I am doing something that mystifies me, but I like it. I go deeper and deeper and take all sorts of risks. If I am engaged, the work will be engaging, I believe.

Later, people may ponder and evolve a meaning. Music doesn't speak, but it awakens what needs to be explored. I compose little tunes that come to life in the person. Pixie things that transcend normality.

A little sprite playing a tune, that takes you away from all the confines and restrictions of normality. One must be kind of simple. Being too clever can be a terrible disease! I love that little trace element of happy stupidity and singing a nonsense song, like 'doodily dum dum dum.' Like a haiku.

I think our imagination is our great ecology at risk. It could be wilting and becoming replaced with a kind of false imagination. Like a self-help book death. 'Be spontaneous!' 'Think laterally!' 'Read the steps to intuition!' To open ourselves up to mystery and wonder, I believe that you don't put in something; you call forth and awaken what lies within us. Like psychotherapy. People ask what my cartoons mean, and I ask 'What does it mean to you?'

My cartoons can be interpreted in many ways. I am merely trying to awaken mysteries and encourage reflection. A good cartoon often evokes in a way that a melody does. Taking liberties with the cartooning tradition and turning it into this other thing that may involve some kind of therapeutic contemplation. It saddens me when they are met with a sort of instant hostility and almost a thuggish response.

*Where would your character go for holidays in Melbourne?*

Not the Big Hotel! More like ... I don't really know all the little places now, I have lost touch. Maybe down a back lane: dogs are barking, it's a cosy spot. There is so much magic in Melbourne, but you have to look long and hard in unlikely places. I would wander around my childhood haunts—what's left of them—and then I might stay in some small hotel right in the centre of Melbourne: down an alleyway, or in one of the 'Little' streets.

I would just roam about and admire all those astonishing and marvellous people getting about their ordinary business. I would pause for cups of tea or coffee—some pasta, a salad, wine; and I'd end up having all sorts of unlikely conversations.

People of the street are usually very warm and friendly to me, and I enjoy these brief moments of fellowship immensely. ❖



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