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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Peter Gould's origin story is provably bullshit. Please tell me if my editor's interjection is too much.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Serious play

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Brattleboro's Peter Gould brings a clown's eye, a  
3 teacher's faith in young people, and a writer's political urgency to  
4 his eighth book

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 A CLOWN IS someone who pretends they have just been  
7 born, says Brattleboro's Peter Gould. And he should know. He's  
8 been a professional clown for decades.  
9 "A clown is a person who just finds everything interesting  
10 because their premise is that they don't know anything about  
11 anything," Gould explained. "This world is all new to them. And

12 we, the performers, have trained in ways to get the audience, if  
13 they want to, or even in spite of themselves, involved in our  
14 discovery of all the stuff that is so new.”

15 He demonstrated with a chair, which he turned upside  
16 down, and then he tried — and failed — in various ways to sit on  
17 it.

18 I had a sense of awe about his performance, which was  
19 funny, even in a crowded restaurant.

20 Gould, 80, is a polymath. He’s a performer, a director, a  
21 teacher, a Ph.D., a memoirist, and a novelist. He wasn’t in that  
22 restaurant just to describe being a clown. He has just published  
23 his eighth book, *Part for the Hole*, a novel about a creative high  
24 school teacher who saves the National Endowment for the Arts at  
25 gunpoint with the help of his lover, an old story from the  
26 *Brattleboro Reformer*, and students from his AP English class.

27 \* \* \*

28 GOULD CLAIMS, only partly tongue-in-cheek, that he  
29 became a clown because he once shook the hand of the great  
30 Charlie Chaplin. Some kind of inspiration may have passed  
31 between them.

32 It might be apocryphal, but it’s a great story that begins  
33 quite a while ago, on a ship, when Gould, just out of school, was  
34 traveling to Europe. On the voyage he happened to meet Sydney  
35 Chaplin, Charlie Chaplin’s son, an actor and a restaurateur.

36 The pair became friendly, and later, in Paris, Gould went  
37 to visit him at his restaurant.

38 “He recognized me,” Gould said. “He didn’t remember  
39 my name, but he said, ‘Oh, from the boat! Come on in. Have a  
40 meal.’

41 “We sat down and he was talking to me. He fed me roast  
42 beef and artichoke hearts and roasted potatoes and red wine.  
43 Really nice. And then, right behind him, the bell over the  
44 restaurant door went, ‘Tinkle! Tinkle!’ And he said, ‘Oh, pardon  
45 me. Here comes my dad.’”

46           Into the restaurant walked not only Charlie Chaplin and  
47 his wife, Oona O’Neill, but also Sophia Loren and her husband,  
48 Carlo Ponti.

49           “And I said, ‘Would you introduce me?’” Gould said. “So  
50 there I was, standing in the restaurant, and I shook Charlie  
51 Chaplin’s hand. He was in his late 80s then. Then I shook his  
52 wife’s hand. And I shook Sophia Loren’s hand. She was the most  
53 beautiful woman anybody could think of at that moment. And  
54 there she was!

55           “And then I shook Carlo Ponti’s hand, and then I went  
56 back to my booth and sat and watched them and finished my  
57 meal and floated back to my hotel.

58           “But little did I know that Charlie had a way when he  
59 shook my hand. It lay dormant in me for a while, and then I  
60 began learning physical expression, and it’s all Charlie Chaplin’s  
61 fault.”

62           *[Editor’s note: Charlie Chaplin had been dead for*  
63 *approximately 10 years before his son, Sydney, opened a*  
64 *restaurant in Los Vegas, not Paris. It’s still a great story.]*

65           \* \* \*

66           GOULD CAME TO Vermont in the 1970s as part of the  
67 back-to-the-land movement. He was a member of the original  
68 commune at Packer Corners in Guilford. His books about those  
69 days include *Burnt Toast* and *Horse-Drawn Yogurt: Stories from*  
70 *Total Loss Farm*.

71           Gould has a master’s degree and a doctorate in literary  
72 studies from Brandeis University, but he is best known as one half  
73 of Gould and Stearns, a successful clown comedy duo who wore  
74 red noses, performed physical comedy, and acted out original  
75 plays.

76           Gould met Stephen Stearns when they both signed up for  
77 a mime performance class in Maine in 1978. Gould offered to  
78 share rides and they became friends.

79           “We rehearsed a lot together,” Gould said. “And when  
80 we came back home, to Windham County, we started to rehearse

81 together here. So 1978 was the first year that he and I ever  
82 worked together.”

83 In 1980, Stearns asked Gould to join him, and Gould  
84 and Stearns, “and we did that for about 20 years,” Gould said.

85 After retiring from performing, Stearns went on to found  
86 Brattleboro’s successful New England Youth Theatre. Gould has  
87 directed approximately 30 plays there.

88 Gould continued performing, giving workshops, doing  
89 speaking engagements and writing books. In 1998 he founded a  
90 summer youth Shakespeare program, Get Thee to the Funnery, in  
91 the Northeast Kingdom and still directs plays there.

92 In 2016, he won the Ellen McCulloch-Lovell Award in  
93 Arts Education by the Vermont Arts Council for his work. Since  
94 1975, he has directed more than 100 youth theater productions  
95 in Brattleboro as well as around Vermont and in England, Costa  
96 Rica, and India.

97 \* \* \*

98 THIS NEWEST BOOK, Gould’s eighth, is based on that  
99 *Reformer* article: one about a kidnapped artist who was forced to  
100 paint at gunpoint.

101 Gould contemplated the image for years, and finally set  
102 the kidnap story in Latin America. He expanded on the original  
103 image, basing the painter on Victor Jara, his idol (and the subject  
104 of his dissertation).

105 Jara, a popular songwriter, theater director, and political  
106 activist, was assassinated in his native Chile by the dictator  
107 Augusto Pinochet.

108 In *Part of the Hole*, the artist was allowed to see his  
109 subject only at hours of her choosing, through a hole, while  
110 being monitored by thugs paid by an unknown hand. This image  
111 permeates the book.

112 The real hero of Gould’s book, however, is a high school  
113 English teacher who approaches life with deep thought tempered  
114 by whimsy and appears to be a fairly undisguised version of  
115 Gould himself.

116 For example, the teacher muses about taking bike rides  
117 on an old canal towpath: “I find ideas on that ride. Some have  
118 been around for generations; other people had them once.  
119 Started them. Lost them. They hang around like bats, upside  
120 down in trees. Don’t go looking for them; you can’t see them.  
121 They let go and enter your head when you pass under them.”

122 Gould, who also published a young adult book this year,  
123 *Red Nose Girl*, takes ideas very seriously. He also takes the  
124 current political temperature seriously. (Gould is married to  
125 painter and outgoing state Rep. Mollie Burke.)

126 “There is a real risk today that millions of people won’t  
127 know how it feels to be in a protected space,” he writes, “if, for  
128 no other reason than as soon as they’re in one, they willingly turn  
129 on the switch for the electric presence in their hand. [...] No one  
130 thinks, or reads, anymore. Ideas and visions come to people in  
131 protected spaces.

132 “Here we are on the far side of a new millennium, and  
133 suddenly we’re staring at years of geometrically expanding  
134 budget deficits, bound to cripple our material world, take away  
135 our vital programs. [...]

136 “What scares me more is the dream deficit,” Gould  
137 writes. “We multitask, we overwork, and, too tired to write or  
138 paint or create, we settle and watch those screens.”

139 The threatened vital program he’s talking about? Funding  
140 for the arts — more specifically, federal funding for the National  
141 Endowment for the Arts in the time of President Donald Trump.  
142 And so, the plot of *Part for the Hole* is set into motion.

143 \* \* \*

144 PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE informs Gould’s teaching; it also  
145 informs the way he describes the characters in his book, which is  
146 based in part on his work with high school students.

147 “Even in my Shakespeare work, I just said to the kids, ‘I  
148 want to see all these theater techniques: discovery, premise,  
149 breath, focus, escalation, do a payoff, deflection,’” he said. “All

150 these different, very specific physical theater techniques and  
151 concepts that regular acting teachers don't really teach?

152 "A clown is a person who just finds everything  
153 interesting because their premise is that they don't know anything  
154 about anything. This is all new to them. We have trained in ways  
155 to get the audience, if they want to, or even in spite of  
156 themselves, to get involved in our discovery of all the stuff that is  
157 so new."

158 Gould bases his clown's activities, even with the  
159 overturned chair, on the four noble truths of Buddhism.

160 "Number one, there's a problem," he said. "The second  
161 is that all problems have a solution. You can figure out the  
162 solution.

163 "And then you could do the solution where you figure  
164 out what's up, but often, if you're a clown who hasn't much  
165 experience in the world, the solution that you figure out is not  
166 exactly what a normal person would figure out. And it often  
167 yields another problem.

168 "But that's OK, because you're good at solving problems,  
169 and so you're right back at it again," Gould said.

170 He noted that most of his clown performances follow  
171 that structure: "Take the chair. The problem is, I don't know how  
172 to use a chair, and everything I figure out yields a new problem."

173 When he meets with a new class, he often starts out with  
174 the chair exercise.

175 "You start out by explaining that you don't know how to  
176 use a chair," Gould said. "The kids go, 'No, that's not how you do  
177 it.' But then they go, 'Oh, OK,' then they're all jumping up and  
178 down."

179 He tries to sit down, and "by the fifth or sixth minute, I  
180 finally get everybody clapping," he said.

181 That performance transcends language and culture.

182 "I could do that show anywhere in the world," Gould  
183 said. "I have performed in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica,

184 Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Honduras. The kids always act the  
185 exact same way.”

186 \* \* \*

187 *Peter Gould will launch his new book, Part of the Hole,*  
188 *with a reading at the Putney Public Library, 55 Main St., Putney,*  
189 *on Thursday, June 25 at 6:30 p.m. Copies of the book will be*  
190 *available for sale.*

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

191 **JOYCE MARCEL** is a reporter and columnist for *The*  
192 *Commons*, where she regularly covers politics, homelessness,  
193 economic development issues, and the arts.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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