

Laughless
Can Humor Survive the Age of Political Correctness
By
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Earlier this week my friend, Rev. Rick Davis sent an email to myself and a couple of our colleagues containing a link to a comical podcast produced by *The Onion*, the American media company known for putting a satirical spin on the news. In this case the podcast lampooned the civil unrest in our country with a report teasing that, “A brutal clash with potentially hundreds dead after riots broke out between pro-something and anti-something groups this week. We’ll have more out of the volatile area that the conflict is probably taking place in.” The show’s host goes on to give a full report on the matter that is equally as nondescript about the conflict—never mentioning who it involves, what they are clashing over, or where it’s taking place.

It’s pretty funny, but I particularly appreciate one of the responses by another of our colleagues. He said, “It reminds me of a huge anti-war march in [San Francisco] back in the early '90's with some Starr King [School for the Ministry] friends. Lots of chanting various slogans (“No blood for oil!” etc.) In an Onion-esque spirit we got our 15 seconds of march-fame by starting up: *‘This! Not that!’*” Can you imagine watching the news that night and hearing protestors chanting, “This! Not that! This! Not that! This! Not that!” But it was his final remark that especially caught my attention: “You know, [that was] back in the day when UU's could be serious about something but also have a sense of humor about ourselves.”

This reminds me of an experience I had at the 2019 General Assembly, here in Spokane, before I got booted out for being Politically Incorrect. Those of who would be involved in leading a social justice event the next day gathered for a planning meeting in a foyer of the Convention Center. The lead organizer asked me to begin the meeting with an invocation. Being that I am always a little uncomfortable praying in public, and being that I was among other Unitarian Universalists, I began with a one-liner I often use in such circumstances. “It’s difficult for Unitarian Universalist ministers to pray in public,” I said. “The Unitarian part of us doesn’t know who to pray to, and the Universalist part doesn’t know who not to pray to.”

Admittedly, it’s not a line most people would get but it’s always been good for a couple of laughs among other Unitarian Universalists. Not so in this case. Not one person among the twenty or so gathered even cracked a smile. Instead, there was a momentary hush and general mood of uneasiness expressed by their affects and body language, as many of them appeared to pan the room waiting for someone else to point out whom I had just offended. It was like they instinctively felt that any joke at all must be offensive to someone. I’ll say more about this in a bit, but here I only want to point out that this group of Unitarian Universalists, which I think is indicative of Unitarian Universalism in general these days, had completely lost its sense of humor. They were afraid to laugh and suspicious of anyone who does, not unlike many others in today’s progressive organizations.

If the saying is true, that *laughter is the best medicine*, can we infer the opposite is also true, that those afraid to laugh, or are too serious to laugh, are not well? Is a broken funny bone the sign of

an injured soul, including the souls of groups and organizations that can't laugh at themselves? Is the reason there's so much conflict in our society today partly because too many take themselves and their ideas too seriously? Is the reason so many are prone to accepting impossible conspiracy theories because they have made totems of their own ideas and consider them too sacrosanct to be touched? Has it become taboo for anyone to make light of our beliefs, or to even question them, to the point that any joke, any chuckle, any smile is perceived as a trespass upon holy ground? If the answer to these questions is yes, then ours has become a sick society in desperate need of a good laugh.

Philosophers, psychologists, biologists, and other scientists have been discussing the purpose of laughter for centuries, resulting in a lengthy survey of humor that I will spare you from today. What I do glean from this field of study in general, however, is that laughter is more than the best medicine; it is also vital to our lives. It is more akin to the clean air we must breathe, the pure water we must drink, the nutritious food we must eat, and the exercise we must endure in order to maintain good health. Laughter is critical.

Laughter is also human. It may be that other animals laugh in their own ways, but humans do so with an excellence and sophistication unlike any other animal we know of. Not only is it vital to our lives, but some have made a living out of making us laugh and we are happy to pay for their comedic services. From the court jester to the class clown to the comedian on stage, or television, or the Big Screen, no human community is complete without its jokers. The very root of the word "human" is the same as in "humor." To be human is to be humorous. We are not called "serians," after the word "serious," meaning "heavy, weighty, grave." Humans are not meant to be serious animals. We are humorous animals that have evolved to laugh at ourselves and each other.

Yet *humor* and *human* are also related to *humus*, meaning "earth," as in soil or dirt. This is why dirty jokes are often the best kind, because they are the purest kind of jokes, the earthiest. Humor can help ground us by bringing us down to earth when we are confronted with problems or circumstances that seem too serious for us to take lightly. Yet poking fun of some difficulty with off-color jokes can puncture our inflated anxieties by poking fun at our problems. This does not mean we don't take our problems or the causes of human suffering and indignity seriously just because we also laugh at them. Laughter helps us manage our suffering so that it does not overwhelm us. They go hand in hand, which is why the Greeks displayed Tragedy and Comedy as twin masks.

Humor is also akin to *humility* for this same reason; because it helps us take ourselves less seriously by acknowledging our connectedness to the earth, from the dirtiness of our origins to the dustiness of our demise. An embarrassing joke at our expense can quickly humble our high and mighty opinions of ourselves and reconnect us to our common humanity and to our human community.

But *humus* doesn't just mean "earth." It refers more specifically to wet earth, to mud and moisture, which is why it is also the root of *humidity*. *Humor* was initially a medical word used to reference bodily fluids, which may be why so many jokes are sexual in nature. Little boys may be made of

snakes and snails and puppy dog tails, but all humans are made of snot, and phlegm, and bile, and blood, and all the other kinds of bodily fluids that ooze from us and flow within us that ought not be mentioned in polite company or during a Sunday sermon. Like the Earth itself, we are mostly composed of water, 60 percent altogether, but our hearts, brains, and lungs are more than 75 percent water. Perhaps this is why jokes about boogers, and farts, and other kinds of potty humor appeal so easily to children who come into this world with their sense of humor unadulterated by the cultural appropriateness that comes with adulthood.

This is precisely what Sigmund Freud believed: that tendentious jokes, in particular, allow us to release feelings and thoughts we have learned to suppress or repress. *Tendentious*, if you're not familiar with the word, refers to the mention of controversial topics, or what today we might call "politically incorrect" topics. "It is most instructive to observe," he said, "how the standards of joking sinks as spirits rise."¹ Isn't it so, at least when we are among those we can trust, that the cruder the joke the harder we laugh? In his book, *Humour*, professor Terry Eagleton summarizes Freud by explaining, "The energies we invest in some noble ideal or exalted ego are released as laughter when it is rudely punctured."² Or, as Freud's associate, the Hungarian psychoanalyst, Sandor Ferenczi put it, "remaining serious is a successful repression."³

So if it is to be helpful, inasmuch as it liberates us from repressed feelings and forbidden ideas, laughter must be at the expense of propriety. We must laugh at things that are no laughing matter for laughter to do its work. This is why humor expresses itself in dirty and off-color jokes and by poking fun of the things we are taught to take seriously. Humor is dirty, and wet, and grotesque, and dares to make light of the unmentionable topics most of us are embarrassed to bring up in polite society. This is why it has become difficult to laugh in our age of Political Correctness, because we are now being socially pressured and conditioned toward extreme repression. Anything we think, say, or do can result in near immediate condemnation and ostracization. Just as some feel the urgency to repress laughter in themselves, they feel compelled to suppress it in others with the same degree of urgency.

But, again, humor is by its very nature inappropriate, especially if it is going to do its healing work. Freud says, "tendentious jokes exhibit the main characteristic of the joke-work—that of liberating pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions."⁴ The crucial point here, not to be overlooked, is that we are being taught and pressured to only laugh at that which is appropriate to laugh at and are ready to condemn anyone who makes light of the serious matters of life, especially in light of suffering. Yet this is the entire point of humor, to help us lighten the gravity of Comedy's burdensome twin, Tragedy. Eagleton reminds us, "In *The Naked Ape*, the anthropologist Desmond Morris argues that laughter actually evolved from crying."⁵ Laughter is intricately bound with sorrow. We laugh because we grieve, and we laugh at the things that also make us cry, so our tears won't overwhelm us.

Who wants to hear a comedian who only tells appropriate jokes? Here are just a few I found online, described as "actually funny clean jokes for any situation." What is the best day to go to the beach? Sunday, of course! What bow can't be tied? A rainbow! How many tickles does it take to make an Octopus laugh? Ten-tickles. How does a dog stop a video? By hitting the paws button!

Shall I continue? There are fifty of them in all. Hearing no objections ... Now that's the funniest thing I've said so far, because I know, even without a live studio audience, that any more of these polite politically correct jokes and I'll boo myself off stage. Humor makes us laugh by violating our social taboos. The Greeks used to place statues of Priapus, a short, pot-bellied god with a constant erection, in their gardens to scare away the birds. In his book, *The Soul of Sex*, theologian Thomas Moore says this is also the point of dirty jokes, to scare away "all kinds of winged spirits—our lofty thoughts, our airy ideas, our flighty opinions, and our otherworldly aspirations."⁶ Good humor may be dirty, and inappropriate, and often makes its presence known "too soon," but it is what is necessary to help ground us in difficult times, by helping us realize our earthiness (our humus), and enables us to go with the flow (our humidity) when we otherwise feel overwhelmed.

Laughter is our rebellion against grief and oppression and depression, which may be why Robin Williams, who fought extreme depression most of his life, was one of the funniest men ever to have lived. His depression eventually overcame him, yet his comedy held it at bay for many years and gave all of us years of healing laughter in the process. Williams once quipped, "Reality is just a crutch for people who can't cope with drugs." Today he would likely be condemned for making light of drug addiction. But he'd probably just have laughed and made a joke about his critics. "The world is open for play," he said, "everyone and everything is mockable in some wonderful way." How I miss our nation's greatest jester. The court of public opinion has become far too serious without him.

One popular idea about what makes something funny is called the *benign violation theory*, as discussed in *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Something Funny*, by Peter McGraw and Joel Warner. After surveying the world, its authors have concluded that most jokes are based on a benign violation of some cultural taboo. In other words, the joke is socially inappropriate, but nobody gets hurt by it. *The Three Stooges* is funny even though its violent because, like all slapstick comedy, the stooges never really get hurt. There's never any sign of injury and they always get right back to their funny antics. The Chicken and the Road joke, on the other hand, annoys us because it doesn't violate any taboo. It causes us to groan rather than grin, like those appropriate for-all-occasions jokes I told a minute ago. According to *The Humor Code's* Peter McGraw, comedy happens by finding "this sweet spot between being too tame and boring people and being to risqué and offending people,"⁷ He also says. "A dirty joke trades on moral or social violations ... Puns can be seen as linguistic violations ... Sarcasm violates conversational rules by meaning the opposite of what is said ... [And] tickling involves violating someone's physical space in a benign way."⁸

Another way humor works is by temporarily breaking reality apart, then reconstituting it a bit differently in the process. This is why, after a good laugh, or a good cry for that matter, we don't feel quite as stressed about our weighty problems as we had before. Eagleton says, "Not only has laughter no inherent meaning, but at its most riotous and convulsive it involves the disintegration of sense, as the body tears one's speech to fragments and the id pitches the ego into temporary dismay."⁹ Sounding more like the noise of speechless animals, Eagleton says "[laughter] involves the breakdown of signification into pure sound, spasm, rhythm, and breath. It is hard to form well-shaped sentences when you are thrashing helplessly around on the floor."¹⁰ Perhaps this is why we

describe hysterical laughing as “cracking up,” just as crying is called “breaking down.” These primal, uncontrollable response to life’s miseries help us temporarily release our grip on painful reality even as we are reshaped to understand the world in a healthier light.

Friedrich Nietzsche called laughter humanity’s “desperate palliative for its afflictions.”¹¹ Today our society may be as desperate for this palliative as it ever has been. As human beings we must laugh to be healthy, and laughter means making light of our most serious problems. It means being inappropriate. It means not taking ourselves too seriously. It means not repressing laughter in ourselves and not suppressing it in others. It means understanding that an off-color joke doesn’t deny the seriousness of the matter but acknowledges just how serious it feels. It’s so serious a matter that we need to laugh at it. Laughter is how we cope with grave and weighty matters. Humor is human and those who profess to care about humanity must honor our need to laugh and understand the reasons why we laugh. As Robin Williams said, “You are given only one little spark of madness. You mustn’t lose it.”

¹ Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1960, 1963, p. 127.

² Eagleton, Terry, *Humour*, Yale University Press, New Have and London, 2019, p. 14.

³ Ibid., p. 15.

⁴ Freud, ibid., p. 134.

⁵ Eagleton, ibid., p. 6.

⁶ Moore, Thomas, *The Soul of Sex*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 1998, p. 120.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgiX7CjV910>

⁸ McGraw, Peter & Warner, Joel, *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 2014, p. 11.

⁹ Eagleton, ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 9.