

The Power of Humor

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I wrote this last night and I timed it: 15 minutes! Here we go:

There is so much power and healing energy in having a good laugh. Nearly every morning, my email is full of funny stuff that friends and acquaintances have sent to me...it seems the whole world is trying to share a good belly laugh...

The electronic shout goes out: Hey my friend, LOL! Laugh Out Loud indeed.

Why do we need to share humor? What takes place in our minds when we hear a phrase, or a story, or see an image that spontaneously has us opening our mouths and making that odd sound; the very human noise of laughter! We can often identify each other by the different sounds of our individual laughs...I have a friend who brays like a donkey...it's hilarious and I love to make her laugh!

I think my sense of humor has sustained me through many tough times when I was growing up and then when my husband and I were raising our daughter. I was originally attracted to Stephen because of his wicked sense of humor. The fact that we amuse each other has always been the glue that holds our family together. Stephen makes me laugh and I make him laugh...who could ask for anything more. I see this in my daughter's relationship with her husband. They don't just cheer each other *on*; they cheer each other *up*. (I think we could all use some continual cheering up.)

By the way, Stephen thinks that "The Three Stooges" are hilarious. He does that thing where he laughs so hard that no sound is coming out of him...just a slight hissing noise in between great gulps of air and there's lots of rocking and shaking...it's a one man riot. *I* do not think "The Three Stooges" are all that funny. But I very much enjoy watching the show with him anyway. Stephen watches "The Three Stooges" and I watch Stephen! That's the real show! I secretly love "The Three Stooges".

Mark Twain said, "The secret source of humor itself is not joy, but sorrow." It does seem that for all of us, the funniest moments seem to rise from the ashes of some minor catastrophe. (Like Larry, Moe and Curley, most of us are secretly just bungling our way through life.) Our ability to laugh at ourselves, the insanity of our own existence and the social *disorder* that we create is often the only healing balm that we can get our hands on.

The comedian Rowan Atkinson says that we laugh at whatever is out of place, unusual, or wrong. The word humor itself comes from the Latin description of “the four humors”. The word humor meant “liquid”...these “humors” were the fluids in the physical body that were said to cause illness if they weren’t balanced properly. If you were unbalanced you were said to be “humorous”. Soon the word humor was simply applied to anything or anybody that was “odd”...not well, eccentric, out of place, out of step, different, funny. When my daughter was little she would announce that something funny had happened and I would ask, “do you mean funny, ha-ha, funny...or funny, weird, funny?” But really it was often both kinds of funny.

As human beings, we take great joy in beauty, love, kindness, brave deeds, valor, and all good things. But all that joy and happiness doesn’t necessarily make us laugh. Humor is different than being happy. As a friend of mine recently said, “Beautiful flowers don’t make me laugh...but I did crack up when my dog actually *ate* our flower garden!”

There is another important component of humor: Will Rogers said, “I have always noticed that people will *never* laugh at anything that is not based on truth.” Yes, we laugh when something is revealed to us...some facet that we hadn’t thought of in just that certain way. That’s the stuff that cracks me up...I love clever comedians that point out all the things that we don’t ordinarily notice about the way our world works.

But the thing I love the most about all this funny-business is how it bonds us together. I enjoy the art of “quipping”...and I do believe it is an art. I can always tell that someone I’ve just met is going to be a good friend because there will be some bit of humor shared in our very first conversation and there will be the recognition that we both “get it”...I get your jokes and you get mine...we “get” each other.

I’ve written down a few UU jokes to tell this morning. They are different than the jokes that Jim and I told at our First Parish Canvas Dinner. But first, one last serious quote:

The great philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche said, “And we should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once. And we should call every truth false, which was not accompanied by at least one laugh.”

So here’s some truth for you...I hope you all “get it”:

The copy machine broke down at a Unitarian Universalist church... a disaster of biblical proportions! Because it was Sunday, no repairperson could be called until the next day, and Lil Ralston desperately needed more copies of the order of service. After fluttering around the machine in distress for some time, a member more mechanically inclined than the rest found the problem.

"It's just out of paper. The flashing box said right there 'Replace Paper in Tray 2.' Sheesh, can't anyone here follow directions?"

Another member retorted, "If we were the kind of people who followed directions we wouldn't be Unitarian Universalists!"

At one Sunday morning service, in one of the very big Unitarian churches in Boston, a man was making a ruckus in the back pew. After every sentence the minister spoke, the man would shout, "Amen! Halleluiah!"

One of the ushers approached the man and spoke to him discreetly. "Sir, uh, we just don't do things like that here."

"But I got religion in me!"

"Well, you certainly didn't get it here."

A UU family moves into a new neighborhood. Their little girl finds a new playmate, and they are happily getting to know each other. One day, the playmate says, "We're Episcopalians, what are you?"

The UU child thinks for a minute and says, "I'm not sure, but I think we're League of Women Voters."

I have heard it said that: If Unitarians had to form a firing squad they would arrange themselves in a circle.

Have you heard about the latest UU miracle?

Someone saw the face of Ralph Waldo Emerson on a tortilla.

A lifelong unchurched man suddenly develops a vague religious urge and decides to join a church...any church. So he sets out to find one.

His first stop is a Roman Catholic Church where he asks what he has to do to join. The priest mentions diligent study and the affirmation of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, then...just to see how much the man knows...he asks him where Jesus was born. "Pittsburgh," he answers. "Get out!" cries the shocked priest.

Next stop is the Southern Baptist church where the seeker is told he would have to learn Bible verses, get "born again", swear off booze, and be baptized ("By immersion, not just some sissy sprinklin"). The Baptist preacher then, to see how much this man knows, asks him where Jesus was born. "?Philadelphia?" he says tentatively. "Get out, you heathen!" yells the preacher.

Our perplexed protagonist finally walks into a Unitarian Universalist church where he is told all he has to do is sign the membership book. "You mean I don't have to renounce anything, swear to anything, or be dunked in anything?" "That's right. We have no special tests for membership, no dogma. We support total individual freedom of belief."

"Then I'll join! But please tell me...where was Jesus born?"

"Why, Bethlehem, of course," came the reply.

The man's face lights up. "I knew it was some place in Pennsylvania!"

A little Unitarian Universalist girl was sitting on the curb in front of her house with a sad look on her face. An older lady happened upon her and asked her why she looked so sad. The girl replied, "My kitty cat died."

The older woman, trying to be helpful, said to the little girl, "I know you're sad, but right now your kitty cat is with Jesus."

The girl crinkled her nose for a second and replied, "What would Jesus want with a dead cat?"

Okay, I know that there are zillions of these UU jokes that start with "How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb?" If you know one, please tell it to me at social hour. But I present my favorite one now...and boy does it ring true:

How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb? 300!

- * 12 to sit on the Board that appoints the Nominating Committee.

- * 5 to sit on the Nominating Committee that appoints the Building Committee.

- * 8 to sit on the Building Committee that appoints the Light Bulb changing committee.

- * 4 to sit on the Light Bulb Changing Committee which chooses who will screw in the Light Bulb.

Those four then give their own opinion of "screwing in methods" while the one actually does the installation.

After completion it takes 100 individuals to complain about the method of installation, another 177 to debate the ecological impact of using the light bulb at all, and at least one to *insist* that back in her day, the lit chalice was quite enough, thank-you-very-much!

It's good that we are here in a sunny room right now because according to that joke, we don't have enough members here at First Parish to change a light bulb.

And now for my final joke this morning, this is my favorite one, and I've saved it for last. For me personally, this joke is the truest of all.

I think that Mister Nietzsche might have liked it.

On her way to church one Sunday morning, the UU minister noticed a young child in the parking lot of the nearby Catholic church, with a box and a sign: "Free kittens, from a good Catholic family!" The minister smiled to herself, mentally wished the child good luck, and went on her way. About the middle of the week, she saw the same child, with the same box, outside the Methodist church, this time with a sign that said, "Good Methodist kittens! Absolutely free!" Impressed with the child's tenacity, she went on into her board meeting.

Finally, the next Sunday, the child was in UU Church's parking lot, with a new sign reading: "Unitarian Universalist kittens! Free to a good home!" This time the minister had to stop and chat.

"Weren't you outside the Catholic church last Sunday?"

"Yes."

"And on Wednesday, weren't these Methodist kittens?"

"They sure were."

"Well, how come they're Unitarian Universalist kittens now?"

"Because today they opened their eyes!"

Thank You!

***Benediction after the final hymn:

I leave you all with the words of wisdom that my father told me on the day I turned 18:

“Now gather up your belongings and GET OUT!”