

Sermon: Why the Devil Hates the Sound of Laughter May 6th, 2018

When I decided to dedicate a sermon to humor, it felt like a treat, an indulgence.

And, I like to think I know why.

It's because I like to think I know what's funny?

I may not know why something is funny, FYI the sneaky excuse for the sermon, but like the Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said about pornography, "I may not know exactly how to define it, but I know it when he sees it."

I like to think I know what's funny.

Jean Tordella, at one point called my collection jokes, "corny" (pause)

And, I have never forgiven her. (Smile)

This was my chance to prove her wrong.

I didn't want this to feel like an effort at a comedy routine.

I wanted to look at humor from the perspective of a social scientist and use jokes as examples of what humor is and reveals.

Essentially, I wanted to continue my consistent pattern of over analyzing spiritual matters to the point that they lose their magic.

In my effort to overanalyze the wonder of humor, comedy, and laughter two questions emerged.

First, how does humor work? What makes something funny?

And, secondly, why is there such a thing in the first place. What function does it have? What does it do for us.

What does it do:

It almost feels pointless to say that laughing is correlated with our joy and happiness

We already instinctively know that.

Connecting laughter to happiness is nearly the equivalent of saying that food tastes good, or that beauty is appealing.

We all know that!

I want to know is how and why the simple question

"If love is blind, why is lingerie so popular?"

Bring me that little cheeky joy.

What is funny really?

Perhaps Spiritual stuff from original sermon.

And, the funny thing about humor, not "Ha Ha" funny "but "odd" or "weird" funny, is that we don't know what's funny about something before we find ourselves chuckling about it? Do we?

The experience of what's funny not only generally comes before we have an awareness of why it's humorous, ... it must!

Once we know what is funny about something,

It isn't funny anymore. I think that's cool.

It is a bit like “mystery” or “wonder” that way.

I hadn’t quite known, that when “funny” is put under the microscope, it isn’t funny anymore.

Rev. Ilona Forgens suggests in her sermon on laughter that analyzing humor is a little like studying how a frog works. It can be done, but the subject tends to die in the process.

Humor must first surprise us. A twist of expectations seems part of it.

Comedy is hardly physics but discerning exactly what makes something funny is a little like the difficulty scientists have pin-pointing the actions of an atom. Our analysis seems to be always a second late, and, comedy and physics are similar in the way that we know that the observer changes the joke. I hadn’t quite known that so directly.

But even if comedy always approaches us peripherally we do know some things.

In John Morreall’s book “Taking Laughter Seriously.” he claims that humor is based on novelty and incongruity.

Essentially suggesting that a big part of “What’s so funny” is the liberating spirit elevating pleasure we get having one’s expectations violated.

I have recently been asked to give my friend Eric’s cat a bath.

(My notes here instruct me to pause for a minute.)

You might be beginning to feel some comical images coming to mind.

Lots of unexpected, embarrassing things can happen in the effort to bath a cat. Especially one that’s not your own.

You might be quietly imagining me chasing a cat around an apartment, imagine water spilling everywhere, or getting scratched while stretching an arm blindly under a couch.

As it turned out, none of that happened.

There was no drama at all. In fact, the cat liked it a lot more than I had expected.

Good news for me certainly, but disappointingly not funny.

Until I add that most people don’t have any idea how hard it was to get all those little hairs off your tongue. Ughh!

Funny, right.

If you followed your personal journey, with the joke, it is in the twist of our expectations, that we find the humor and the joy.

I think, humor is connected to the experience we have when our brains, that work so hard to predict and see things from established patterns, get its own expectations challenged.

That makes the humor an internal experience in the observer, which I think humor is.

My Father frequently talks about the day his Mother, my grandmother died in her sleep. She just turned 98 years old he says, quietly, she was surrounded by three of her kids.

When people respond, as they frequently do with a comforting statement like
“well that’s a nice way to go, or the like, he pauses and adds,
“Well I can tell you my sisters and I riding in her car didn’t think so.

You can’t help but chuckle at the refreshing surprise. It’s liberating.
And with perfect timing and never breaking his face, when the chuckle of his audience has fully
subsided, he returns us to the poignancy by saying. “I wasn’t kidding.”
And after the embarrassing pause most witnesses experience, he drop’s
“However, even with that tragic accident, there really was something very blessed about that
day,
“they were able to save the baby”
Twisted, but Funny right. But not for the sensitive.

Sometimes what’s funny is rooted not in a twist in content as much as connected to pace.
Sometimes part of the comedy is dependent on our own experience of the pause of time it for us
to get a joke.

“He’s so stupid, he couldn’t get water out of a boot, if the directions were written on the sole.”

If you are not first put off by the derogatory tone, I think the comedy comes mostly from the joy
we experience in the pause it takes our minds to grasp that to look at the sole of a boot means to
employ gravity in removing the water.

The audience might also add to their own mental image of someone looking at the sole of their
boot, water pouring out all over the daft persons shoes, but that case, the humor is found in the
pace.

However, it is always more complicated than that. Humor is inherently subjective.

If we happen to be, or get sensitive about being stupid, or sensitive to the accusation of others
being, or feeling dumb, then mostly the joy evaporates. If that happens and our emotions shift
towards a sensitivity and sympathy to our dumb and likely wet victim and perhaps even, then
quickly again to the heartless jokester willing to point out other limitations.

Maybe both. Maybe both.

What’s hard about humor is that whether something is funny, or sad, or hurtful is complex,
simply because what we find funny is silently and unconsciously fluid, contextual, relational, and
personal.

So, we know what makes something funny involves an unexpected twist in our mental perspective and expectations, but the recipe involves too many moving parts to be predictable.

Even Saturday Night Live's skits, which include top of their craft professionals with no other agenda than being funny, and a week to vet the stories, only get it right about a third of the time. I love that too.

(Pick hairs from my tongue)

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, humor is in our conscious and unconscious attitudes towards the characters too.

Because of this, if we are inclined to want to see a character brought down to earth, things as familiar and as humbling as watching someone try to steer a supermarket shopping cart with a broken wheel, can be hilarious.

However, the same visual can be sympathy provoking if the person pushing the faulty wheel turns into a haggard mother pushing a full kart with three kids in tow. The variables are too many to predict.

But if we can't exactly know what makes the magic of humor and laughter work, we do know a little more clearly about what it does to and for us. It's a lot!

We use humor as a social lubricant.

It does not take a scientist to tell us that we enjoy the people we laugh with, but more than simply responsive to a situation laughter is a bridge.

In more ways than I initially even thought, laughter mediates social our social relations. We of course and most famously laugh when we react to something we think is comical, but upon closer look, laughter is a far more proactive than we presume.

Laughter and humor meters and is metered by our relationships.

We use laughter to dissolve uncomfortable situations. We laugh when we lie, when we uncomfortably have to say no, and at the jokes of those we want to impress, and fear.

Laughter breaks the ice. It eases hostility and aggression.

The underlying evolutionary theory is that laughter, like a smile, is a profoundly disarming action to those who witness it. It is the result of and a bridge to warmth, closeness, and goodwill. It is a cue that we are supposed to be friends.

But laughter not only reduces social tension, laughter literally heals us. As one source described it, when we laugh our whole system dances.

Did you know that studies have shown that when you laugh, whether contrived or not, you decrease your blood pressure by as much as 25%, and that those who laugh on average for more than 4 minutes a day extend their life by more than 7 years?

Ok, I made those statistics up, but

I bet you probably felt healthy when you laughed at my cat joke. My sermon notes here read that more than 65 percent of you loved it. (smirk)

If you did, you can thank me for strengthening your immune system and relaxing your muscles. In fact, this sermon would have probably improved your health for the rest of the day.

I would say your welcome, if we also didn't know that prolonged sitting is bad for you. I would be content to call us even.

In researching this sermon have read reports of reports, that suggested that half a minute of full, hearty laughter is the same as three minutes of rowing.

That stat I didn't make up, I did read that, what I couldn't seem to find was the joke that lives somewhere in there about how much easier laughing is than rowing, or how few of us own a boat.

As Henry Ward Beecher said, so well "Mirth is God's medicine, for a long life, and Everybody ought to bathe in it." He died at 43, ...but I still think he's right.

*(Note Henry Ward Beecher did not die young, and I added the ("for a long life, and" part to make it a joke)

But, laughter not only heals, and "funny" not only acts a social lubricant, Humor also might just be the most concise fun way to pass on information about culture and identity.

I challenge you to more concisely express UU values than I will with these three jokes.

What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a Unitarian-Universalist. Someone who comes knocking at your door, but isn't sure why?

How can you assess whether you might be a UU, you might be one if you think the Holy Trinity is "reduce, reuse, and recycle?"

And, did you hear about the outraged, UU's, yeah, they are out burning question marks on people's lawns.

If you did not understand Unitarian-Universalism, ask yourself if you could pass on who we are in a more concise way.

So even if we don't exactly know what it is, it heals us, tells us culturally who we are, and acts as a social lubricant. Humor takes the sting out of tragedy and the challenges to our fate.

There is a Yiddish Proverb that says, "What soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul." I think we have all felt its cleansing renewing quality of laughter haven't we.
humor is to life's challenges
what the pleasure of tasting food is to our need to eat, and
What the pleasure of sex is to our need to procreate.

When life gets too intense, it is laughter that can help us get a new perspective and even a deeper understanding of what it means to be human.

There is a lot of connection between tragedy and comedy.
Fifteen years ago, comedian Chris Rock got in a heap of trouble for suggesting that the new World Trade Center' or "Freedom Tower" they have been building in New York City should have Target as its corporate sponsor, and be titled, "Isn't ever going in their tower."

Now I happen to think that is funny.
It's Funny because it names the hard to say fear that this new building will be something that terrorists would want to bring down. And funny because we on a very primitive almost superstitious level don't want to be there if that were to happen.

I do However acknowledge that I probably wouldn't think it was funny if I lost someone close to me on 9/11 or if were planning on working there.

Humor if we choose to see it, reveals our location and soft spots.

I would be remiss not to mention the power of comedy to stereotype and slur.

I want you to feel your bodies response to me standing in church delivering the following two jokes.

or if that one doesn't offend how about this one. What's better than a silver medal in the Special Olympics, not qualifying.

Oww! Right. And, how where you are on the spectrum of "oww!" And how much you felt "ha ha," is a near perfect litmus test to where your sensitivity to those with handicaps meets your cheeky appreciation of a twist in the story.

On a big growling truck on the one ten two weeks ago coming back from bathing the cat, I saw a little bumper-sticker that said, "Black Rifles Matter."

I could appreciate the pretty sharp play on a very serious situation and statement, harbored by the “Black Lives Matter” but too serious to be funny to me.

So, the question one is always faced with is, does the cutting and insightful quality of the joke worth the derogatory sentiment it can leave.

And to that there is no answer. There is no finite answer to where that line is because what allows any experience to be funny, or so hurtful that it is not- is an interior one.

So, for all its healing, incisive power, humor not only offers a balm to life’s challenges, but it can also be a knife, and power play.

Humor is dangerous. It has the power to be a balm, and likewise be the twist of a knife. Humor always lives on an edge.

And it is dangerous and at times not funny, precisely because of its potency to reveal.

I think the great distinction here is whether humor is used to laugh at, or with.

Jokes designed to laugh at are very close to ridicule, whereas humor designed to laugh with, generally feel like earnest expressions of the human condition.

So, there is a lot not funny, about what is or is thought to be funny. And, it is here much of the ethics of humor reside.

I would not have thought to break it down in these terms, but humor is generally both funnier and kinder when focused on behaviors and human circumstances than it is when it targets permanent situations or challenges. action rather than condition.

That is why it is funny to watch someone on America’s Funniest home video’s proudly bounce off their trampoline and fall, and immediately, instantaneously not when you discover they just broke their back.

Why slipping on a banana peel is funny, and cerebral palsy is not?

Humor unveils our social and existential position on things.

Our ability to as the Brit’s say, “take the piss out of ourselves,” (pardon the crude but accurate phrasing) is a visible sign to all that we don’t take ourselves more seriously.

As the Laughter “expert” John Morrell phrases it, people who laugh, and in particular laugh at themselves are trusted to be humbler in moments of success, less defeated in times of trouble, and in general, more accepting of things the way they are.”

Now I feel as a person of Irish heritage I feel like I can tell the following joke,

An Irishman walks past a bar, (pause) What! ...It happens!
In a way I really shouldn't tell this one

I can't really tell the joke,
Why do all Jewish football players play defense? Cause they are very good at getting the
quarter-back.

Now. I don't have a right to tell a Jewish joke, in the way I do an Irish one, because of a wealth
of very real not funny history of what people from Christian backgrounds, goy, or goyem, (which
I can say about myself) have done to Jewish people, I can't in return call "Kike's."
Right.

And even more, I can't tell the joke that goes what is Mexican matching luggage. "Two paper
bags from the same store."

That is even more hurtful, and it is more hurtful of a people with less cultural power

One safety net suggested was that Jokes should be about what people do--not what they are. I
instinctively like that. That is why one both should not, and it is very hard to find a broadly
appealing and appropriate joke at the expense of those who have permanent challenges.

When people who study racism say you can't be racist without any structural power, there is a
felt sense of that here.

In this case humor is underrated in its potency in both oppression and liberation.

Reinhold Niebuhr says that there is an intimate relationship between faith and humor because
both deal with the incongruous or illogical aspects of our lives.

Humor is a tool to remind us of our fragility, our weakness, our humanity.
For me, humor is a gift and a tool to deal frankly with the fact that tragedy is, a part of life.

I walk away believing that humor is only something that one can only see out of the corner of
one's eye. And, for that reason, I believe humor has an almost magical undefinable quality.
Not unlike love, or beauty.
I didn't quite expect that. Amen