

HUMOR AND SPIRITUALITY: PARTNERS IN GRACE

By Jim Brown, February 25, 2018

George Burns observed that the secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.

The Place of Laughter, from the book "The Seventh Enemy," by Ronald Higgins:

"A re-awakening to the religious must include a special recognition of laughter. Laughter is a great redeemer, a kind of resolution in itself of the rival forces that tear at us. In healthy laughing at ourselves we abandon false dignity, false pride, and simply accept and enjoy whatever we are.

Laughter is realistic and unaggressive, and enables us to laugh lovingly at ourselves and others, just as we are. **It is a sign of grace**; not the decoration on the cake of spirituality but a fundamental ingredient, vital to its wholeness. Someone said we should judge a philosopher by the quality of her laughter.

We need to joke, to laugh and to play. Man is homo ludens as well as homo faber --- the playing as well as working creature. Play makes its own rules and frames of time outside the "serious" world of daily life. Play can therefore be seen as a participation in eternity."

Many of us grew up in religious denominations where liturgies didn't incorporate much humor. Laughter, if any, was a response to something inserted in a sermon or homily by intention or otherwise. And attempts to incorporate humor can have unintended consequences. Here's an example.

A preacher, who shall we say was "humor impaired," attended a conference to help encourage and better equip pastors for their ministry. Among the speakers were many well known and dynamic orators.

One such motivational speaker boldly approached the podium and, gathering the entire crowd's attention, announced "The best years of my life were spent in the arms of a man that wasn't my husband!" The crowd was shocked! She followed up by saying, "And that man was my father!" The crowd burst into laughter and the rest of her talk went over quite well.

The next week, the pastor decided she'd give this humor thing a try, and use that joke in her sermon. As she confidently approached the pulpit, she tried to rehearse the joke in her head, but it suddenly seemed a bit foggy to her.

Getting to the microphone she said loudly, "The greatest years of my life were spent in the arms of another man that was not my husband!" The congregation inhaled half the air in the room. After standing there for almost 10 seconds in the stunned silence, trying to recall the second half of the joke, the pastor finally blurted out, "...and I can't remember who he was!"

Numerous studies have demonstrated that people are most susceptible to humor when they are relaxed. So please join me in an exercise.

Let's all get into a comfortable position. It may help if you close your eyes.

Take a few deep breaths: in, out. in, out. in, out.

Picture yourself near a stream. Birds are softly chirping in the crisp cool mountain air. Nothing can bother you here. No one knows this secret place. You are in total seclusion from that place called "the world" and all its stress. The soothing sound of a gentle waterfall fills the air with a cascade of serenity.

The water is clear. You can easily make out the face of the person whose head you're holding under the water. Look. It's the person who caused you all this stress in the first place!

What a pleasant surprise. You let him up....just for a quick breath....then **ploop!**...back under.

There now, feeling better?

Some of the inspiration for today's talk came from an article in the British Unitarian Newsletter entitled "Is Your Sermon Really Necessary?" The author observes that "much preparation time for services is spent composing a twenty-minute address for a congregation with an attention span of less than ten minutes." He ends with the admonition that "if you don't strike oil in ten minutes, stop boring."

Most of the inspiration came from a service I attended in 2001 at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Chautauqua, western New York state. The fellowship is unique in two respects: it ONLY meets in the summer, and it ONLY meets outdoors, howbeit in a roofed Grecian style temple open on all four sides to the grounds of the prestigious Chautauqua Institute. The speaker was the Rev. David Weissbard, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford, Illinois. He pointed out that UU humor is unique in that it is often self deprecating and makes fun of UU process and beliefs. Other denominations profess to have humor, but it has little to do with beliefs or innermost yearnings. I guess I'd take issue with the last point, based on a quote I found on a Baptist website:

Humor is very valuable in evangelism and Christian communication because humor breaks down barriers and can smuggle ideas and challenges into people's hearts.

Perhaps UU humor does indeed smuggle ideas and challenges? But at the least, to quote the *Readers' Digest*, "*Laughter is the best medicine.*" Other luminaries have weighed in.

As soap is to the body, so laughter is to the soul. — A Jewish Proverb

From the Koran: *He deserves Paradise who makes his companions laugh.*

Victor Borge tells us that: "*Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.*"

According to John Cleese: *“Laughter connects you with people. It’s almost impossible to maintain any kind of distance or any sense of social hierarchy when you’re just howling with laughter. Laughter is a force for democracy.”*

Samuel Johnson weighed in with: *“Mirth is like a flash of lightning that breaks through a gloom of clouds and glitters for the moment. Cheerfulness keeps up daylight in the mind, filling it with steady and perpetual serenity.”*

Not to be outdone, Shirley MacClain quipped: *“A person who knows how to laugh at himself will never cease to be amused.”*

And according to an anonymous source: *Laughter is carbonated holiness.*

Laughter is a gift, and as such can be equal to “grace,” the biblical definition of which is a quality bestowed, a gift that is not necessarily earned. To paraphrase” *You need it. You can’t live without it, but you can’t purchase it and you can’t earn it. It only ever comes by means of a gift, and when you receive it, you immediately realize how much you needed it all along, and you wonder how you could’ve lived so long without it.*

The foregoing reminds me of my favorite passage from Garrison Keillor’s *Lake Wobegon*: “Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted, but having what you have, and being smart enough to know it’s what you would have wanted, had you known.”

According to Paul E. McGee, Ph.D., “Your sense of humor is one of the most powerful tools you have to make certain that your daily mood and emotional state support good health.” The ability to laugh at your own mistakes is associated with mental flexibility and the ability to shift perspective. This can be an invaluable tool to leading a more satisfying and fulfilling life. Let’s take a closer look at more health benefits of laughter...

And what a gift! Laughter relaxes the whole body. ...

Laughter boosts the immune system. ...

Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. ...

Laughter protects the heart. ...

Laughter burns calories. ...

Laughter lightens anger's heavy load. ...

Laughter may even help you to live longer.

Spirituality is the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. And what could be more wrapped up with the human spirit or soul than a sense of humor!

Most religious humor is pretty generic, often in the form of church bulletin bloopers:

Don't let worry kill you. Let the church help.

Tuesday at 4 PM there will be an ice cream social. All ladies giving milk will please come early.

At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be "What is hell?" Come early and listen to the choir practice.

This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the altar.

Eight new choir robes are currently needed, due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.

Unitarian Universalists have their own spin on humor. Lets look at **process**:

We UU's are so committed to process that if we had to form a firing squad we would arrange ourselves in a circle.

What is the UU definition of sin? A discussion group in which everyone agrees with each other.

And now for **beliefs**:

Q. What is a Unitarian Universalist?

A. Someone who believes in life before death.

A. Someone who faces all questions with an open mouth.

A Unitarian is just a Quaker with Attention Deficit Disorder.

How can you tell a Unitarian Universalist?

You can't; they already know it all.

How many UU's does it take to change a light bulb? None. They believe it must change itself.

Let me point out that the punch line you just heard DOES NOT, and I repeat, does not apply to "how many Casper UU's does it take to clean the church!"

Adlai Stevenson, a Unitarian, remarked that "Unitarians are accused of believing in one god, at most."

The author of *The Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce, an avowed agnostic, is often listed as one of our famous Unitarians. He defines "**Unitarian**" as "One who denies the divinity of a Trinitarian." He defines "**Universalist**" as "One who foregoes the advantage of Hell for persons of another faith."

Bierce doesn't spare other religious inclinations. He defines "**Christian**" as one who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor."

On **prayer**: To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner, confessedly unworthy.”

Lily Tomlin adds: "Why is it when we talk to God, we're said to be **praying**, but when God talks to us, we're schizophrenic?"

I'll counter that with a paraphrase from a Unitarian writer: Prayer is not about changing things, prayer is about changing people and people change things; prayer is not about hearing voices, prayer is about acquiring a voice.

As for“ **Infidel**,” Ambrose Bierce says this: “In New York, [an infidel is] one who does not believe in the Christian religion; in Constantinople, one who does.”

And “**Heathen**” is “a benighted creature who has the folly to worship something he can see and feel.”

Here’s an unattributed quote: Unitarians are not so much interested in getting into heaven as they are interested in getting heaven into people.

Reminds me of one of my favorite poems:

*Hope of Heaven when we die
Would seem to place self interest high.
Why not hope a way to find
To leave a bit of heaven behind.*

A sign seen outside a UU church proclaims: “We curb our dogma.”

Garrison Keillor has been including so many references to Unitarians in his broadcasts of the *Prairie Home Companion* that some suspect he may have some Unitarian tendencies himself. When asked about this, Keillor replied: *I know nothing about Unitarians other than what UU people tell me, and the ones I know have a sense of humor. I go to a dinner party, sit next to a Unitarian, and on my next show have six new Unitarian jokes.*

Yes, we do have a tendency to laugh at ourselves in a way that may bewilder, amuse or cause folks with more ridged beliefs to scorn us. And many Unitarians who do joke about their religion suspect that this may be the only life they have, so why not take it more seriously? We do take ourselves seriously, perhaps too much so, when we believe that we are carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders. In our efforts to effect constructive change in the institutions around us, be they political or social, we put our religion in the forefront. So we need to be able to take ourselves lightly. We need to laugh at our pretensions to make life bearable. And this makes our humility genuine, even when we’re arrogant. There’s some insecurity in knowing that we don’t have all the answers, so we try to make it better by joking about knowing, and sometimes joking about our end.

Garrison Keillor: "They say such nice things about people at their funerals that it makes me sad to realize that I'm going to miss mine by just a few days."

Perhaps the type of humor most often equated to Unitarian humor is Jewish humor, often self-deprecating, but tending to deal more with culture than religion. Here's a joke from a Jewish website about conversion:

David and Reuben were passing a Catholic church. The sign out front said "Convert today for \$50,000.

They continued walking when Reuben says: "I think I'll go back and check out that offer."

David says: "You don't want to do that, Reuben. It's probably a lie, anyway."

Two weeks later David runs into Reuben. He quickly asks: "So Reuben, did you convert? Did they give you the money?"

Reuben replies: "Is that all you people think about?"

And here's my favorite:

My mother once gave me two sweaters for Hanukkah. The next time we visited, I made sure to wear one. As we entered her home, instead of the expected smile, she said, "What's the matter? You didn't like the other one?"

Sigmund Freud, perhaps the first serious student of Jewish humor, correctly identified a self-critical component of many jokes, noting: "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character..." Notice that Freud used the word "character," not "religion" or "spirituality."

Unitarian Universalists are unique in that they sometimes cross the "spirituality" threshold in their jokes.

A young Unitarian was visiting a Christian church when the pastor asked if she were saved. She whispered: "In *my* church, we aren't allowed to get lost!"

The Rev. Dr. Everett Hale, a Unitarian, was once one of the most famous preachers in the United States. He was serving as the Chaplain of the U. S. Senate when he was asked: "Do you pray for the senators, Dr. Hale?" The great man replied, "No I look at senators and I pray for the country."

Famous Universalist minister Hosea Ballou argued with a Methodist colleague over the issue of eternal damnation.

The Methodist asserted, "if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven!"

Ballou answered, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you!"

A young mother and former Baptist spent many Sundays visiting different churches with her seven year old son. The two were not pleased with any of them. But when they visited a Unitarian Universalist Church, all the boy could say for a week afterward was "Can we go back to the church where people laugh?"

Some of our jokes display a gentle arrogance:

On her way to church a UU minister sees a child out in front of a house holding a sign that says "Adorable kittens -- FREE." The next day, the minister notices the child in front of a church with a sign saying: "Adorable Methodist Kittens -- FREE." A couple of days later, the kid is posted in front of the synagogue with a sign: "Adorable Jewish Kittens -- Free." So the Minister isn't surprised when, the next Sunday the child is in front of her church with a sign promising "Adorable Unitarian Universalist kittens." "Now really," she tells the child, "they are adorable kittens, but I have a problem with your advertising. I've seen your kittens change their religion every day for a week. Why do you think I'll believe that these are UU kittens all of a sudden?" "Well," said the child, "Now they have their eyes open."

One route to understanding a particular religion or religious practice is to listen to the practitioner's' pickup lines.

Here's two from an **Islamic** dating site:

Our parents engaged us when we were little... they must have forgotten to tell you.

Hey I just met you, and this is crazy, but here's my dad's number, so call him maybe?

And of course the **Amish** have there own pickup lines:

I'd totally get shunned for you.

I own several acres of fertile land in Pennsylvania

My mother spoke to your mother and now I'm supposed to speak to you.

Would you like to see my well?

Christian pickup lines are well known for their creativity, pun intended.

Nice bible

Your congregation or mine?

I didn't believe in predestination until tonight.

I put the "stud" in bible study.

Of course the classic **Pagan** come-on is:

I worship the ground you stand on.

Atheists have some of the best pickup lines:

"You're like religion - unbelievable!"

Naturally, I'd select you over anyone else.

"Don't worry. It's okay... Nobody's watching."

The **mystic** might say:

If you believe in telekinesis, please raise my hand.

What about **Unitarian** pickup lines? To my despair, I only found two:

"Your committee or mine?"

Your inner light shines so brightly I don't even need to turn on those low energy light bulbs.

Such a weak come-on deserves a rebuttal: *the only thing you and I have in common is that we're both vowels.*

Theists and deists can regard humor and the ability to laugh as special gifts from God. In other words, "grace." Humanists can see the evolution of a sense of humor as a uniquely human phenomenon. Agnostics can enjoy religious jokes as a sort of gallows humor. Whistling in the dark or laughing can make fears of the unknown much more bearable. Atheists, who see the amazing curative power of laughter, can have something most miraculous or magical to believe in. And of course humor definitely belongs in our own Unitarian Universalism for all the above reasons and because we're comprised of all groups.

At the conclusion of his Chautauqua presentation, David Weissbard said this, and I quote: *There are times when our not knowing makes us feel so insecure that we act as if we know --- and that's when the pin of humor needs to pop our balloons. We repeat the ancient Unitarian Universalist jokes, as we should, but in doing so we need to remember the difference between those caricatures and the reality of our commitment to the best and the depth of human living.*

The last paragraph of William Schultz' Unitarian Universalist elevator speech, printed on the back of your Sunday Bulletin, answers the question:

What do Unitarian Universalists believe we must do to be saved?

He answers: *Live life with as much passion, integrity, and care as we can muster and remember that every single one of us is on a short and perilous pilgrimage. If we can **gladden the hearts** of those who travel with us, if we can be swift to love, "salvation," whatever it be, will take care of itself.*

To me, humor is the grace that gladdens our hearts.

There are many different types of humor. These include: puns, wordplays, riddles, jokes, satires, lampoons, sarcasm, irony, wit, black humor, comedy, slapstick, farce, burlesques, caricatures, parody, and travesty. The differences among these different humor types is not always great. In particular, burlesque, caricature, parody, and travesty are very much alike and refer to literary or dramatic works that mimic serious works in order to achieve a humorous or satiric effect. Likewise, the difference between satire and lampoon is not that great. *The bottom line is that humor has the ability to make people laugh, smile, or chuckle, at least inwardly. **Perhaps it does the same for a divine being.***

As I am a Unitarian Universalist, your laughter this morning confirms my belief that there's a spark of divinity in all of **you**.

And remember:

If you put your nose to the grindstone rough

And leave it down there long enough

In time you'll find there's no such thing.

As brooks that babble and birds that sing.

Then these three things will your life compose.

You, the stone, and your worn-out nose.

Amen