

HUMOR, NOT JUST A LAUGHING MATTER

A paper by: C. Larry Briggance

Holland Professional Club

January 11, 2008

When I picked humor as the topic for this evening's talk, I felt it would be interesting, different, a lot of fun to present and not too tough to prepare. It is interesting, it is different, it should be fun, but I had no clue how difficult the preparation would be. The amount of information and materials pertaining to humor is truly overwhelming. I narrowed my focus and tried to identify a few aspects of this broad topic that I would be able to present and discuss within the format of our meeting. The aspects of humor I will discuss are: Humor and Education, Humor and Advertising, Humor and Positive Relationships, Philosophy, Politics and Health. Each of these areas will include some loosely related "stories." I hope my talk tonight triggers your memory of a topic, joke, anecdote or funny story that will remind you of a good laugh. Tonight's talk may help us relax, smile a bit and get our "humors" flowing. But before I get to specifics, let's look at some definitions of humor.

What is humor? As defined in Webster's dictionary....."The Latin word umor or humor, from which the English humor is derived, meant "a liquid, fluid moisture." The word first appeared in English during the Middle Ages with that meaning. Humor came to denote mental qualities and disposition through its use in medieval physiology. A humor was one of the four principle fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, choler and black bile) that were mixed in different proportions in each person. The preponderance of one or another humor gave everyone a characteristic temperament or disposition, which was also called a humor. Humor also came to indicate temporary and changing moods and states of mind, particularly whimsical and capricious fancies which, when revealed in actions as humorous traits or eccentricities, afford amusement to others. Humor at last came to denote the ability to both amuse and to perceive what is amusing."

The last sentence from Webster's definition, I believe defines humor in a way with which most of us can easily agree. "The ability to both amuse and to perceive what is amusing." Humor never takes time off. It is always present and if we make ourselves open to that presence, it can have a profound affect on our lives and how we choose to live. John Erskine's modern definition seems to echo much of Webster's. Erskine wrote, "Humor is the art of adapting oneself to another temperament. Every temperament, men used to think, is conditioned by the quality of moisture or "humor" in the individual's body. If you were melancholy, it was because you had a melancholy "humor".....To humor a person was to accommodate yourself to his characteristic tendencies. To have a sense of humor was to have such imaginative flexibility that you could adapt yourself to anybody." Others have written that Erskine, in referring back to the old definition in regard to fluids, was merely metaphorically stating that liquid can, and will in fact, eliminate friction and "humors" can and will in fact, eliminate friction in relationships.

So let us talk a bit about this "lubrication" of relationships which we will call a "sense of humor." Most of us would probably define the word humor by itself, without any sense, as in "sense of humor," as what we find funny. When you bring sense to humor, a metamorphosis occurs. Our individual sense of humor emerges as inseparable from our whole being. It is intrinsically woven into our emotional and social psyche and reflects our individual belief systems. The ability to adapt to change with a positive acceptance and/or enjoyment defines the essence of having a sense of humor.

An example of changing with positive acceptance can be seen in this story about Abraham

Lincoln. When Lincoln was a young lawyer he told a story to the clerk of the court during a trial. The story was so funny, the clerk laughed out loud and disturbing the court. "Order in the court, order in the court," shouted the judge. "Mr. Lincoln, this must be stopped. You cannot continue disturbing this court with your stories." Then the judge told the clerk he had to fine himself five dollars for contempt of court. The clerk apologized to the court and said the story was well worth five bucks. A few moments later, the judge asked the clerk to approach the bench and asked, "What was that story that Lincoln told you?" When he was told the story, he burst out laughing and told the clerk, "Remit your fine."

Now here is a more modern example of a judge who I hope had a sense of humor. A man waits all day in traffic court for his case to be heard. At long last it's his turn to stand before the judge, but the judge only tells him that he will have to come back tomorrow, as the court is being adjourned for today. In exasperation, the man snaps, "This is bullshit!" The judge snaps back, "Twenty dollars for contempt of court." The man pulls out his wallet, and the judge says, "You don't have to pay today." The man says, "I'm just checking to see if I have enough for two more words."

Douglas Malloch is credited with the following:

"The funniest thing beyond all doubt, is someone with the fun left out.

A man without a sense of humor, seems like a myth, at most a rumor.

I can't believe there can exist, a person like a pessimist

Not here, not certainly, hereafter, a man without a soul for laughter.

It must be wrong, a myth, a rumor, this talk about no sense of humor."

Essential questions revolve around the relationships between one's environment and one's development of a sense of humor. There are significant factors that seem to support this process. While it is understood that children are born with an inherent pre-disposition for temperament, environment significantly impacts our "funny bone."

Babies start to laugh when they are ten weeks old. Six months later they are laughing about once every hour. Four year olds laugh once every four minutes. The average American adult is said to laugh only about fifteen times a day. It seems our culture inhibits humor. We learn to associate growing up with "getting serious." And being "serious" is somehow equated with being solemn and humorless. We are ordered to "wipe that smile off your face" and told that things are "no laughing matter." Sometimes we repress our good humor because we're afraid others will think we are frivolous and not take us seriously. Our "funny bones" get broken and unfortunately, do not always heal.

Speaking of kids and laughter remind me of this cute story. Two little kids in the hospital were lying next to one another. The first kid leans over and asks, "What are you in here for?" The second kid said, "I'm in here to have my tonsils out and I'm a little nervous." The first kid said, "You've got nothing to worry about. I had that done to me once. They put you to sleep and when you wake up they give you all the Jell-O and ice cream you can eat. It's a piece of cake." The second kid then asked, "What are you in here for?" "Well, I'm in here for a circumcision." The first kid said, "Whoa, I had that done when I was born and I couldn't walk for a year."

“In a nutshell, humor is a fundamental and integral core of our cognitive emotional growth. The fertile ground of trust and the elements of nurturing relationships are required for the sense of humor to take root. Today’s mighty oak is just yesterday’s nut that held its ground.”

And now, let’s look at HUMOR AND EDUCATION: Research clearly indicates that play is the fundamental skill that fosters learning and growth yet it decreases almost to the point of extinction as children progress through school. Play supports the development of a sense of humor by providing the brain compatible elements of free choice, movement and engaged discovery. It is our responsibility as parents, grandparents, educators and supporters of strong educational institutions, to encourage schools not to abandon play, fun and games, and laughter as our children and grandchildren grow through the years. The research is overwhelmingly clear: humor parallels and nurtures cognitive and social development. Without its presence in the educational process, children and young adults will be at a disadvantage. I have been reminded by colleagues who are teaching, that the current “No Child Left Behind” philosophy, known to today’s teachers as “Drill and Kill,” kill meaning the killing of creativity and the art of teaching. The requirements of “No Child Left Behind,” allow little time for the joy, delight and “aha” moments in today’s classrooms. It seems we now only value the “science” of teaching and have forgotten the “art” of the profession. Let’s not ignore the research. Kids who have fun learning, discover more, learn more and retain more. Joyful and exciting learning experiences produce lifelong learners.

The teacher planned a special spelling exercise where each student would be asked to say and

spell the name of a parent's job or profession. The teacher began with Susie. "My mother is a doctor...DOCTOR" Thank you Susie. "Mary, would you go next?" My daddy is a fireman...FIREMAN...Then the teacher turns to Jimmy and asks him to be next. "My dad is a sheet metal fabricator...SHI...SHE...SH..SHI..."It's alright Jimmy. You think about it for a little bit and we'll come back to you later." The next student to spell was Mikey. "My dad is a bookie...BOOKIE...teacher, I'll give you ten to one odds that Jimmy spells SHIT before sheet metal."

John locked himself in the bathroom and refused to come out. "Come out of there John. You have to go to school and you are going to be late." "I don't want to go to school; no one likes me. The kids don't like me, the teachers don't like me." "John, I'm sure the teachers like you and you have lots of friends." "Well, I'm not going. The lunch ladies won't talk to me, even the janitor ignores me." "You don't have a choice, John, you have to go." "Well, I'm never going to school again." "John, you have to go, you are the principal!"

HUMOR and ADVERTISING

The gurus of marketing and advertising clearly understand the importance of humor. Like many of you, I will watch the Super Bowl next week. I must confess that my main reason to tune in is to chuckle at the ads. The commercials will likely be slick, creative and contain a lot of humor. The money spent on these advertising moments is mind boggling. Advertisers have less than two minutes, some as little as thirty seconds, to get our attention and put their product into or long-term memory. Billions of dollars will be spent to capture the attention of the large viewing

audience. Animated discussions of favorite Super Bowl commercials follow the next morning in offices and coffee shops all across the country. There is good reason for the use of humor. Advertisers know how to grab our attention and lock information into our long-term memories.

Speaking of grabbing attention, let me tell you how a shopper grabbed the owner's attention at a local hardware store.....

While shopping at Graafschap Hardware a few days before Christmas, I noticed a lady admiring a teapot that was displayed on a shelf at the end of the housewares aisle. A bit later at the check out, the same lady was paying for a couple of hinges she had purchased for her husband. She asked Harlan, the owner of the store, "How much is that teapot on the shelf back there?" Harlan told her, "That teapot is \$59." "Well, I guess I'll just take the hinges today." As Harlan put the hinges in a bag, he asked the lady, "How about a couple of screws for those hinges?" She replied, "No, but I will for that teapot!"

HUMOR and POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

In all aspects of life, human relationships are key. Humor builds relationships. Humor nurtures trust. When people feel comfortable and relaxed, spontaneous laughter often emerge, followed by a feeling of human bonding. Group laughter is contagious. People are more likely to laugh in social settings than when they are alone. Sharing humor with others, helps us all see and better understand how we are more alike than different. Using humor to build and maintain relationships is invaluable. Humor generates increased trust accompanied by a reduction in

tension and anger. The ability to assist others in seeing the “humor” in difficult situations will ease tension and help nurture positive regard for one another.

HUMOR and PHILOSOPHY

I recently came across a new book titled: Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar, Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes. The book was written by Tom Cathcart and Dan Klein who were classmates and philosophy majors at Harvard. It became clear to Cathcart and Klein that philosophical ideas could be more easily understood when explained using jokes. I’m going to share a few stories from the section of the book that discusses scientific method and empirical thinking, as they contrast with innate ideas.

A scientist and his wife are out for a drive in the country. The wife says, “Oh, look! Those sheep have been shorn.” “Yes,” says the scientist. “On this side.”

The Holland police captain is interviewing three recruits who are training to become detectives. To test their skills in recognizing a suspect, he shows the first recruit a picture for five seconds and then hides it. “This is your suspect, how would you recognize him?” The recruit answered, “That would be easy. We’ll catch him fast because he only has one eye.” The captain says, “That’s because the picture I showed you is his profile.” Then the captain flashes the picture for five seconds for the second recruit and asks him, “This is your suspect, how would you recognize him?” The second recruit smiles and says, “Ha, that’s easy. He’d be too easy to catch because

he only has one ear.” The captain angrily responds, “What is the matter with you two? Of course only one eye and one ear are showing, because it is a picture of his profile! Is that the best answer you can come up with?” Extremely frustrated at this point, he shows the picture to the third recruit and in a very testy voice asks, “This is your suspect. How would you recognize him?” The recruit looks at the picture intently for a moment and says, “The suspect wears contact lenses.” The captain is caught off guard because he doesn’t really know whether the suspect wears contact lenses. “Well, that’s an interesting answer,” he says. “Wait here for a few minutes while I check his file and I’ll get back to you on that.” He leaves the room, goes to his office, checks the suspect’s file in his computer, and comes back smiling. “Wow, I can’t believe it’s true. The suspect does in fact wear contact lenses. Good work. How were you able to make such an astute observation?” “That’s easy,” the recruit replied. “He can’t wear regular glasses because he only has one eye and one ear.”

“Empiricism is the method of verification used by most people today.”

Three women are in a locker room dressing to play tennis when a man runs through wearing nothing but a bag over his head. The first woman looks at his “exposed parts” and says, “Well, it’s not my husband.” The second woman says, “No, it isn’t.” The third says, “He’s not even a member of this club.”

HUMOR and POLITICS

Our lives today are inundated with political news. Throughout history, politics and humor have

been inseparable. A sense of humor is not only an acceptable attribute of political leaders, it is often decried as a necessity. Political campaigns hire professional joke writers and humorists because the joke, in today's media-driven campaigns, furnishes the perfect "sound bite" for the evening news. Every president since Franklin Roosevelt has had his collection of humorous anecdotes and clever sayings published as an illustration of his genial sense of humor. Even Richard Nixon, the president least likely to be identified as possessing a sense of humor, saw its importance. He made it a point to appear on television's "Laugh In" as if to prove that he could laugh at himself.

Ronald Reagan's reputation as "the great communicator" was supported by his use of self-deprecating humor, particularly in regard to his age. In today's environment, it is the political leader who refuses laughter and humor that runs the risk of damaging his/her credibility. No politician wants to be accused of lacking a sense of humor.

The use of humor allows writers to approach and discuss political issues in ways that are a bit light hearted and serious at the same time. Consider political cartoons, late night talk show ^{MONO} ~~monologues~~ and we can't forget the "Daily Show" and the "Colbert Report." Calvin Trillin's book, A Heckava Job, gives some great examples. When the news media reported that Dick Cheney requested that the Televisions in any hotel room he occupied be preset to FOX news, Trillen wrote:

The networks give Bush knocks or mocks
They paint him stubborn as an ox
And clever as a box of rocks

So set the channel, please, to FOX

Some commentators on the box

Like making us the laughingstocks

Upon foul PBS a pox

Just set the channel, please, to FOX

That CNN will broadcast crocks

On Arabs managing our docks

And deaths in wars and other shocks

Now set the channel, please, to FOX

For me, the news that really rocks

Confirms beliefs held by our flocks

My mind remains quite closed, with locks

So set the channel, please, to FOX

Trillin wrote the following to explain President Bush's "Signing Statement" issued when he signed John McCain's anti-torture bill into law.

Since I'm the one in charge in war,

I'll do what I have done before

If it's consistent with my duties.
Is that an out? You bet your booties.
The boss is boss; he can't be bossed
I signed, but with my fingers crossed

We do not torture, never will
So why did we oppose John's bill?
Don't ask, or you'll be in a van
and rendered to Uzbekistan.
McCain won't win. We haven't lost.
I signed, but with my fingers crossed.

And finally, on politics:

George Bush and a news photographer were standing on a beach in south Florida when suddenly a huge rogue wave washed them both out to sea. The president is immediately struggling to survive. The photographer, a strong swimmer, finds himself in a moral dilemma. He can save the president's life or take historic photos of the president's death. What ~~do you do?~~ *would you do?* Color or Black and White?

HUMOR and HEALTH

At the beginning of this paper I used the archaic definition of "humors" which made direct connections to our bodies. Current research proves that a sense of humor directly impacts both

our physical and emotional health. Laughter changes how we feel physically, and dramatically affects our biochemistry. Laughter has been described as “inner jogging.” A robust laugh gives the muscles of your face, shoulders, diaphragm, and abdomen a good workout, and sometimes even your arms and legs. Heart rate and blood pressure temporarily rise, breathing becomes faster and deeper, and oxygen surges throughout your bloodstream. The physiological benefits of laughter, such as: an increase in certain antibodies and decreased levels of stress hormones, have been presented and verified in numerous research studies. Studies are now showing that laughing may be one of the healthiest things we can do. Recent studies show that laughter and a “positive” sense of humor can actually shrink skin welts of allergy patients as well as reduce pain and decrease one’s risk of heart disease.

Laughter is an invigorating tonic that heightens and brightens mood, gently releasing us from tensions and social constraints. Laughter is an affirmation of our humanness, a face-saving way to express our anxieties, fears, and other hidden emotions to others. It breaks the ice, builds trust, and draws us together into a state of well-being. Humor may be one of our best antidotes to stressful situations. When confronted with a threatening situation, animals have two choices: they can flee or they can fight. We humans have a third alternative: to laugh. By seeing humor in a stressful situation, we may be able to change our response to the threat thus relieving anxiety and stress. How about a few more laughs?

A man is shaving with a straight-edged razor when the razor drops out of his hands and lops off his penis. He gathers it up, stuffs it into his pocket, rushes outside and hails a cab, telling the

driver to get him to the emergency room fast. There he tells the surgeon what happened and the surgeon says, "We'll have to work quickly. Give it to me." The man reaches into his pocket and deposits its contents in the surgeon's hand, "But this is a cigar," says the surgeon, "not a penis!" And the man said, "Oh, my God, I must have smoked it in the cab."

John and David were both patients in a mental hospital. One day while they were walking past the hospital swimming pool, John suddenly dove into the deep end. He sunk to the bottom and stayed there. David promptly jumped in to save him. He swam to the bottom of the pool and pulled John out. The Medical Director came to know of David's heroic act. He immediately ordered that David be discharged from the mental hospital as he considered him to be okay. The doctor told David, "We have some good news and bad news for you David. The good news is that we are going to discharge you because you have regained your senses. Since you were able to jump in and save another patient you must be mentally stable. The bad news is that John, the patient whom you saved, hung himself in the bathroom and died." David replied, "Doctor, he didn't hang himself, I hung him there to dry."

Four doctors went on a duck hunting trip together: a family practitioner, a gynecologist, a surgeon, and a pathologist. As a bird flew overhead, the family practitioner started to shoot but decided not to because he wasn't sure it was a duck. The gynecologist also started to shoot, but lowered his gun when he realized he didn't know if it was a male or female duck. The surgeon, meanwhile, blew the bird away, calmly turned to the pathologist and said; "Go see if that was a duck."

In conclusion, I ask you to consider the wisdom of the following quotes.

“A cheerful heart is good medicine.”

King Solomon, Proverbs 17

“Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face.”

Victor Hugo

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”

Victor Borge

And remember please, “If you are too busy to laugh, you are too busy!”