

HUMOR AS AN EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM

or

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED TO ME ON THE WAY TO THE  
ATHENAEUM SOCIETY

Robert B. Sivley, Ph.D.

Prepared for the Athenaeum Society, October 6, 1988.

EXCEPT AT THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY, most after dinner speeches begin with the speaker telling one or two funny stories, which are meant to relax the listeners and to put them in an amiable frame of mind. It is for such purposes that most jokes are told: to create a pleasant climate, to break monotony, and to give pleasure not only to the listeners but to the storyteller as well, because there are few things more satisfying than to make other people laugh, when one means to do so. (By the same token, few things make one feel worse than to tell a joke that falls flat.) There is no question that some people have a knack for telling funny stories, while others find it very difficult, if not impossible.

IF INVITED TO SPEAK TO a group on the topic of suicide, one might begin as follows: You may have heard about the fellow who decided to commit suicide and wanted to make certain that his attempt did not end in failure. Taking a loaded pistol, a bottle of barbiturates, and a rope tied so as to make a hangman's knot he walked to a high bridge overlooking a river. He first put the rope round his neck, swallowed the pills, pointed the gun at his head and fired, jumping off the bridge rail as he did so. As luck would have it, the bullet missed his head and severed the rope. As he hit the river he swallowed so much water he regurgitated, losing all the pills. And he said later that if he hadn't been a good swimmer he might have drowned!

OF COURSE, TELLING STORIES IS not the only way to make people laugh. It can be done with pictures, facial grimaces, or physical feats such as falling over furniture, walking or standing certain ways, or, if the timing is right, doing absolutely nothing. Books and lectures on humor tend to be boring, perhaps because it is disappointing to hear humor discussed without hearing anything funny - the way talk of food or sex may get our attention but prove quite unsatisfying.

THOUGH MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN on the subject, humor remains an obscure topic, something one experiences but cannot analyze. Like the person who says " I know nothing about art, but I know what I like," most of us recognize funny stories when we hear them but would be hard pressed to explain logically why one story is funny, while another one is not.

IN THIS PAPER I CERTAINLY DO NOT expect to explain humor fully, merely to deal with several questions about humor such as: what makes a story or act funny? Are there different styles of humor? Is there a purpose to humor? Why can some people make us laugh while others cannot?

TO BEGIN, LET US EXAMINE several stories that contain some of the classic elements of American humor:

A LAWYER, A CLERGYMAN, AND A DOCTOR went fishing off the Florida coast, but their boat struck a small reef in shark infested waters and the three men were stranded, with the tide coming in. After debating a long time as to who should swim to shore for help, the lawyer suddenly stated that he would do it and dove into the water. There was an immediate splashing of water, as the sharks moved toward the man, and the two friends closed their eyes with dread. Suddenly, however, they saw that the sharks had not attacked him, but had formed two straight lines on either side and escorted him to the shore in safety. "My God said the clergyman we've seen a miracle."

"Miracle hell," said the doctor, "that's just professional courtesy."

A YOUNG BOY LIVING IN the mountains of Eastern Kentucky decided he wanted to marry his sweetheart, Bessie Lou, and told his father so. The old man explained to him that in his younger days he had been quite handy with the ladies, and that the boy could not marry Bessie Lou, because she was, in fact, his half-sister. The disappointed boy found another sweetheart, but thought he had better consult his father first. The same thing happened, the second sweetheart also happened to be the offspring of a union between the old man and another woman in the community.

After he had found a third prospect and been told the same thing, he became quite depressed. Noticing his downcast look, his mother asked him what was wrong. Reluctantly, he told her the story. His mother, however, began to laugh and said "don't worry about what he says son, marry any of those young gals you want to. He ain't even your paw."

AND DO YOU KNOW HOW many psychologists it takes to change a lightbulb? It only takes one, but the light bulb has to want to change.

THESE STORIES ARE FAIRLY TYPICAL of those that make the rounds. The subjects of these stories are not inherently funny. It appears, therefore, that there must be some kind of relationship between humor and themes that make us anxious, insecure, or angry. Think of how many stories you have heard on such topics as death, taxes, mothers-in-law, growing old (Martin Standard's favorite theme), insanity and mental retardation, crime, sexual violence, severe physical and speech handicaps, sexual impotence, bankruptcy, and racial and ethnic inferiority. Indeed, there are not too many jokes that don't contain one or more of these themes.

YOU WILL NOTE THAT CERTAIN occupations are the subjects of more jokes than others. Among the more frequent are doctors, (especially psychiatrists) lawyers, clergymen, traveling

salesmen, and undertakers. One rarely hears a joke about a pharmacist, a tailor, a miller, or a CPA.

IF FUNNY STORIES USUALLY contain tragedy, ridicule, and anxiety, what elements make the stories funny? The humor of each seems to depend on surprise endings, which can evoke in the hearer (one who is safe as a non-participant) a picture of someone performing outrageous, unexpected acts with unpredictable results. It is as though both the listener and the joke teller have made a tacit agreement to this effect; one of us is going to tell the other a story which is not something that really happened. The story is going to involve elements that evoke a certain amount of anxiety or guilt in both of us (such as death, sexual promiscuity, or greed), and its going to show something that can happen to a person when he gives in to such impulses. It will be funny only if you look at it in a certain way.

GIVEN THESE PREMISES, EVEN so horrible an object as the French guillotine can become the subject of jokes. Charles Dickens cites two that made the rounds during the bloodiest part of the revolution. It seems that the effect of the guillotine was not all bad. It was guaranteed to cure a headache and was a sure way to prevent grey hair!

THE COMEDY SEEMS TO DEPEND entirely on this tacit, unspoken agreement. If the circumstances are made to seem real to the listener, the story will not be funny. By the same token, the listener who dwells on the tragic or technical elements of the story -- rather than setting those aside and looking at the unique result -- will be said to have no sense of humor. After all, what is funny about death or taxes? Nothing, unless one looks at them in a certain light.

SOME HUMOROUS STORIES DEPEND PRIMARILY on being sprinkled with obscene words. Otherwise sophisticated people will laugh when a big name entertainer in a Las Vegas nightclub uses in his act a four letter word that is too crude to be used among one's own friends but too commonly heard nowadays to have any shock value.

BUT THOUGH WE MAY HAVE difficulty in ascertaining precisely the elements of humor, there are certain facts about humor that we can substantiate. First, there must be a surprise element. In a one liner (for example: one surgeon says to another "Think you have problems? Tomorrow I'm operating on a malpractice attorney"), the punch line must be completely unexpected. But every rule has exceptions, and sometimes the non-surprise, i.e., the expected, repetitious response becomes funny. Recall the great popularity of Jack Benny who projected a character that became very familiar and very predictable. Every time he said or

did something that confirmed his notorious stinginess he got a laugh, even though the theme was repeated over-and-over. For example, when held up by a gunman who demanded menacingly, "Your money or your life!" Benny pauses for a long time, the audience snickers knowing how much he loves his money. The gunman becomes impatient and demands "Well what'll it be?" After another long pause Benny says "I'm thinking." And the audience laughs. He has confirmed their expectation that nothing is dearer to him than his money.

MANY JOKES PLAY ON PREJUDICE, and the point of each such story must restate the same basic assumptions, regardless of whether they are valid. Examples include the stupidity of blacks, the business avarice of Jews, the unpredictability of women, and the braggadocio of Texans. No one would start a joke with "there was this gentile who ran a pawn shop..."

SOME GROUPS (USUALLY ETHNIC GROUPS) become identified with certain types of jokes, which proliferate once they become popular, so that the mere mention of the group becomes the main part of the humor. "Pollocks" are still big in this context, and I understand that the "Aggies" are funny in Texas. Some years ago many stories were built around "the little moron", and most of you will remember those hapless Irishmen "Pat and Mike."



ONE OF MY FAVORITE FORMS of humor is the malapropism, because it is always unintentional. Baseball player Yogi Berra is famous for such utterances, such as his observation on one occasion that "people don't go there any more, because it's too crowded," or on another occasion "if I hadn't woke up I'd still be asleep." Hollywood producer Sam Goldwyn once stated: "An oral contract isn't worth the paper it's printed on." A former Chairman of the House Arms Service Committee contended that "the only way to ever get a volunteer army is to draft them."

POLITICIANS SEEM PARTICULARLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO malapropisms. Former Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo defended his city's honor by saying "the streets are safe in Philadelphia, it's only the people who make them unsafe." Former Alabama Governor Lester Maddux must have been thinking in the same vein when he argued that "Alabama will never be able to improve it's penal system until it starts getting a better class of prisoner."

IT IS TEMPTING TO PUT these down simply as dumb remarks, but note that each was made by a well known leader. Being intelligent does not rule out malapropisms, which, of course, are not funny to those who make them - only to those of us who hear them and can then breath a sigh of "there but for the grace of God go I," because we know that the malapropism, like lightening, can strike any of us at any time.

WHEN I WAS A BOY, during the hey day of network radio, the great funny men were Bob Hope, a master of the one liner; Fred Allen who wrote his own material and whose jokes were a poignant social and political commentary; Red Skelton, an old fashioned clown; and Jack Benny whose humor was based on his creation of an eccentric character at whose peculiarities he could get everyone to laugh by his subtle, self-deprecating comments.

THERE WERE SEVERAL MAN AND WIFE comedy teams such as George Burns and Gracie Allen, in which Gracie's feather brained antics were the basis of most of the humor; and there was Fibber McGee and Mollie, on which team Fibber's bumbling ineptitude provided the funny stuff. (Who could forget his overstuffed closet which he opened once on each program, always proclaiming "I've got to clean that out someday.")

THE TEAM OF AMOS AND ANDY played on the foibles of black culture 50 years ago, while Lum and Abner were white but so unsophisticated and gauche that they made all their listeners seem superior to them.

THE GREAT COMEDY TEAM OF Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy depended much on visual humor in the late 1930s, but by the 1940s Bud Abbott and Lou Costello leaned more on verbal tricks (as illustrated by the famous "Who's on first?" dialogue) to tickle movie goers and radio listeners. Both used the old trick of one

member being unbelievably stupid, as did the later Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis whose hey day was the 1950s.

TEAMS WITH MORE THAN TWO members, included the Marx Brothers who used both sophisticated repartee, clever one liners, and visual humor to appeal to a wide range of fans including many intellectuals. The Three Stooges, on the other hand, used a type of low slapstick comedy that was so outrageous that it appealed mainly to children. With the advent of television their old movie shorts made their faces familiar to fans of three generations. While all of the vintage comedians were men, it is my opinion that the two most outstanding funny people of the television era have been women, notably Lucille Ball and Carol Burnette.

NONE OF THE OLD RADIO OR MOVIE comedians used obscenities or risqué material to get laughs - movies and radio just did not allow that in those days, though some did in their vaudeville and nightclub acts.

WHAT MADE THEM COMEDIANS? Why did we laugh at them? First, because we got to know them well and knew their little eccentricities and odd habits. Second, they all laughed at themselves. None developed a character or lifestyle that seemed superior to our own.

FRED ALLEN VISITED HIS FAMOUS Allen's Alley to question its inhabitants on some current topic of interest. Every answer given tended to show how foolish Allen's questions were. Jack Benny would have them rolling in the aisles trying to be taken seriously as a great violinist. Bob Hope was usually broke and could never get the sexy female guest stars to give him a tumble, while the clever Kingfish had difficulty outwitting his domineering wife. Stan Laurel could never do anything to please his friend Ollie, who would look at the audience or camera and say with disgust "This is another fine mess you've gotten me into." And boys of seven or eight howled uproariously on Saturday afternoons at the antics of Smiley Burnette and George "Gabby" Hayes, whose level of sophistication was even lower than that of their elementary school fans.

THE DAILY TROUBLES OF THESE funny men were the troubles of every man, but somehow they could make these serious problems seem amusing. All had the knack of good timing - a quality as necessary for humor as for athletic feats. One always felt comfortable with them, usually a little superior to them, and often a little sad that things seemed to go so badly for them.

THUS, I THINK HUMOR PLAYS an important role in good personal adjustment. We relieve tensions, we disguise murderous and lascivious desires, and we hide our deepest, darkest fears in

jokes. With satire, we speak the naked truth about subjects we dare not address with seriousness.

HOW BUT THROUGH JOKES CAN we express our secret desire to cheat the IRS? Our murderous impulses toward our own bosses? Our fear of sexual impotence or our desire to seduce someone else's wife? Our sneaking suspicion that all preachers are sinners? Our dread that we may actually go to hell after we die? Our concern that perhaps people who are black, Irish, Hispanic, Polish, or Jewish may actually be superior to us? Our fatalistic conviction that all politicians are crooks and our way of government really won't work in the long run? Or our unmentionable suspicion that perhaps lawyers really are manipulating all of us, doctors cannot cure us, psychologists are all crazy people with academic degrees, policemen are all corrupt, the rich have gained their wealth dishonestly, our wives may be cheating on us; any of us may be illegitimate children without knowing it, and life really has no meaning or purpose?

WHEN ADLAI STEVENSON SAID "A funny thing happened to me on the way to the White House," he broke the tension for his audience and he made both them and himself feel better. When Harry Truman began his political speeches by saying "I work for the government, and I'm trying to keep my job," he put himself on our level, and we liked him for it. When Fibber McGee's closet fell apart we knew how he felt, because we had procrastinated

too. When Joe E. Brown opened his wide, cavernous mouth, all of us knew that we were not the ugliest persons in the world. And when Lou Costello couldn't figure out who was on first, we knew that some people were dumber than we were, and knowing that felt good.

ONLY IN HUMOR OR SATIRE can we express these and countless other unconscious and semiconscious feelings, because through these media we signal others that we are only kidding, that we don't really feel any of these things. Thus, the joke is a healthy outlet for otherwise, unacceptable thoughts. And the comedian may be more important to our acceptance of ourselves and of life in general than any preacher or psychotherapist.

/lhj