

I Feel So Much Better...After You're Gone
A Treatise on Humor
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Introduction: Humor. What is it? How is it supposed to work? Rick Walton defines humor as "surprise without threat or promise." His premise, simply stated, is that all humor has in it an element of surprise. To be surprised you must have an expectation of how the world works. When something happens contrary to that expectation, you are surprised.

So, what surprises you depends on your experience and knowledge. Everyone has a different expectation of how the world works. What surprises you might not surprise someone else.

Involved in Walton's complex, and not so funny position, is the idea that every person's expectation of how the world works includes fields of ignorance. For instance, most people will not be surprised when a nuclear physicist makes a scientific error because they don't know enough about nuclear physics to know that it is an error.

Most babies are blissfully ignorant of the "surprises" going on around them because their expectation of the working of the world includes that event, or the event might be in the person's field of ignorance.

Once Mr. Walton determines what all humor has in common, he begins looking for exceptions, situations where there is surprise, but no humor. One thing that many non-humorous surprises had in common is a sense of threat.

If you are surprised by a mugger jumping you and robbing you, it certainly wouldn't be funny. Along with the surprise there must be a lack of threat.

Some humorists theorize that the surprise, to be funny, must be in the context of "play." However, when Bill Clinton, in his inaugural address, used the word "liberal", when he meant to say "literal", there was no sense of play, yet it was surprising, and falling down funny.

Ethnic jokes can be terribly threatening and insulting, unless you are Eddie Murphy telling African American jokes. Also, the risk of threat is diminished when the person telling a joke about another ethnic group, puts that ethnic group in a positive light. What we might call "low brow" humor might threaten our sense of maturity, or dignity.

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Practical jokes are funny only if the listener doesn't feel offended or hurt, or the practical joker can "take it on the chin," as well as giving a "knock out punch" to another. In this category would be my good friend, William Turner.

Remember the earlier definition of humor as surprise without threat or promise? Here again, there are exceptions. For example, when the surprise shows promise, fulfills hopes, resolves problems, we are satisfied, delighted, and overjoyed, but we do not consider it funny. When an archaeologist discovers the unopened tomb, there is surprise, but no humor.

Chip Walter, in his book, Thumbs, Toes, and Tears, has a chapter on laughter. He believes laughter is related to play and feeling good, although it isn't simply about fun.

Walter quotes Darwin as saying, "It, laughter, can show up when we are feeling anger, shame, or nervousness, acting to mask, rather than display emotion."

Freud makes this observation. "A laugh physically reveals the relief felt when something disturbing was, is, expressed. This is similar to what we do in our dreaming, unconsciously concerning what we are not entirely comfortable with consciously."

One thing is sure. We can find humor almost anywhere. Many times it finds us! But, in simple terms, what is humor?

Webster defines humor as, "The capacity to perceive, appreciate, or express what is funny."

David Redding, a Presbyterian Minister has written a book entitled Jesus Makes Me Laugh. The author says, "...even Dante called creation the divine comedy." He goes on to say, "I also believe I can detect at times an air of mischief about God. At our best, do we not then have his sense of humor?"

I agree with Redding when he wonders "how could a somber God have made skunks, parrots, penguins, asses, men."

I love the biblical story of creation for many reasons, the least of which is not "the fall." A fall isn't funny when there is personal injury, as in the fall of Father Adam and Mother Eve.

However, Bill Cosby gets a lot of mileage out of the fall of man when he

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has God saying, as he blows the whistle on them, "Okay, everybody out of the pool."

I have to laugh when I hear Adam telling God that eating the forbidden fruit wasn't his idea. My wife, Helen, says, "That's a man for you."

Isn't it falling down funny to read the story of Noah and the ark? Not for one second would I put myself in the same category as Noah, but I can only imagine my response to the person on the other end of the line saying, "Howard, this is God. I want you to build a boat."

Out of the blue I'm ordered to build a boat, smack in the middle of a dry spell, miles from any water. Coz gets a lot of milage out of this crazy scene. Goes something like this. Neighbor: "What are you doing with all that lumber in your drive way?" Noah: "I'm building a boat" Neighbor: "Why?" Noah: "God said to." Neighbor: "Oh, Okay. I hope you soon get to feeling better."

About that time someone from city hall shows up and hands Noah an order to cease construction...or go to jail. "Besides", Noah is told, "think of your neighbors in this up scale neighborhood. Think of the odor from all those animals." Tell me God doesn't have a sense of humor!!

Remember Abraham and Sarah? Parents of the Jewish race. Wife Sarah was ninety years of age. No son to carry on the family name. Then an angel came with the message to Abraham that his wife was pregnant. This is the first time in the Bible the word "laugh" appears. Genesis 17:17 says, "Abraham fell on his face and laughed."

Jesus, a descendant of Abraham, chose to be introduced to the world at a rowdy wedding reception, where he performed his first miracle. He knew how to laugh.

This is the guy who, when he described the legal eagles of his day, said of them, "They strain at gnats and swallow camels." Now, that's funny. In the same context he spoke of the same group who went about "removing the speck from the eye of another, while ignoring the saw log in their eye."

Elton Trueblood, clergyman and author, in his book, The Humor of Christ, says, "The writer who has done most, in the 20th Century, to overcome the misapprehension that Christianity is a religion of sorrow and only sorrow, is

G. K. Chesterton.”

Wylie Sypher, in his Appendix to Comedy, says, “We do not really know what laughter is, or what causes it.” Trueblood agrees, and adds this statement. “It has been said many times that man is the only animal who laughs, and this is true, for the laughter of other creatures is only apparent, but not one claims to understand fully what laughter means. It is connected, of course, with our gift of self-consciousness.”

There is a danger about which we must always be concerned. Laughter “at” another person can be terribly hurtful. Laughter can also be a healing balm. One needs to be objective enough to laugh at oneself.

Thomas Hobbs thought laughter is almost wholly vicious. It is, he thought, “the sudden glory which arises from our feeling of superiority whenever we see ourselves triumphantly secure while others stumble.” (Trueblood) Thus, laughter can be only a cruel vice.

Ernst Cassirer has contributed to our understanding of humor. “We live”, he says “in this restricted world, but we are no longer imprisoned by it...Scorn is dissolved into laughter and laughter is liberation.”

Kierkegaard thought of humor as a reflection of the childlike. He furthermore thought humor is not inconsistent with true maturity, thus, providing us lightness and sadness at once.

Trueblood holds that Kierkegaard believed in the connection which exists between religious experience and humor. This is true, so Kierkegaard held, because in religion, we are conscious of sharp inconsistencies, and every inconsistency is potentially humorous.

Wylie Sypher, whom I’ve quoted tonight, gives good advice to any of us who are concerned with the improvement of morals in our society. “No society is in good health without laughing at itself quietly and privately; no character is sound ...without turning inward to see where it may have over rated itself.”

Soon after assuming the Chair of English Literature at Cambridge Sypher made this statement while giving his famous lectures. “I suppose that if any ordinary man of my age were asked which has better helped him to bear the burs of life—religion or a sense of humor, he would, were he quiet honest, be

grovelled for an answer.”

After a careful study of humor, exposure to real contemporary people and heart disease, I finally wised up and did what Jesus and Will Rogers admonished me to do: Jesus, when he said “consider the lilies of the field,” and Will Rogers, when he said, “Sit loose in the saddle of life.”

Which brings me to the consideration humor has played in my ministerial life of almost forty-nine years. I was ordained at age three. Been a great trip! Wish I could do it all over again. But since that is not possible, I am content in making life miserable for you, telling my favorite war stories.

My most valuable education has come from the most unexpected places, and the most unlikely persons. Names will forever be protected to protect the guilty.

Following is a sampling of true stories which have helped keep me in ministry for almost half a century. A pastor’s life revolves around places, functions and all kinds of “holy” experiences.

A wedding is not supposed to be humorous, or so I thought. However many of them have been “falling down funny.”

The place, the altar of the Middletown United Methodist Church. I had informed the bride of a potential problem with the chosen date for the wedding.

Middletown days would bring marching bands down Main Street. Floats of all kinds would be in endless procession past the “holy ground.” The Women’s Guild would be hocking sandwiches and drinks on the front lawn of the sanctuary. It’s hard to stay focused with so much noise. The bride would not listen to reason. The wedding was on.

At the appointed hour, the beautiful bride, and the handsome groom appeared before me at the sacred place of union. All is well! So I thought. Just as I began the liturgy of Holy Matrimony, a blue grass band, positioned across the street on the porch of the “old Country Store” struck up the tune of “Your Cheatin’ Heart.” I mused, “I wonder if God is trying to tell us something?” I think I saw God turn his head and laugh.

Wedding experiences have gone from the level of being downright crazy to being holy. The crazy ones are the ones I have remembered through the

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years. Tells you something about me. Right?

Two couples have shown up on their wedding day without a wedding license from the County Court Clerk's office. One bride actually called her groom by the wrong name in the liturgy. Now that's particularly strange when she called her old boyfriend's name...and he was present for the wedding.

Funerals have come in a close second of humorous experiences, which I will always cherish. One grieving spouse actually requested, "Take me out to the ball game," as the postlude. A five-hundred pound gentleman, in an oversized casket was almost turned over on the floor when his obese sister prostrated herself across the casket at the end of the service.

Nursing homes continue to lack decorum and are full of hilarity. I call in several of such places every week.

What I've learned is that most residents have reached that magical age when they no longer are trying impress others, even the clergy.

One of the dumb things I must break myself from doing, is asking nursing home patients, "How are you?" Just recently one little cultured lady smiled and replied, "Not worth a damn." Well, if you don't want to know, you shouldn't ask. Right ?

Just before Christmas, a few years back, I asked an elderly couple, "Got your Christmas shopping finished?" The man said, "No, we ain't going to do no shopping this year." Following was another one of my dumb questions, "Expecting Santa?" This time the lady did the talking. "No. Haven't you heard? Santa died."

Her name was Lydia, a member of my first congregation following graduation from seminary. A home-bound older lady, she said to her young minister, "I'm so glad to see you! I was sure I offended you when you called two weeks ago." Having not the slightest idea of what she was speaking, I said, "Miss Lydia, I have tough skin. Besides, you would never intentionally hurt anyone."

Smiling, following a short pause, she said, "I said something stupid, like, I'm always so glad to see you, and I feel so much better when you're gone." That, friends, is humor at it's best. I think I got the message.

Over a span of almost half a century, I have known some folk who used humor to cover up long standing hurts and disappointments. That is a sad commentary.

I have already referred to Dr. David Redding in this paper tonight. In closing, I return to Redding's book, Jesus Makes Me Laugh. About half-way through the book, Redding makes a bold assertion.

In the chapter, "A Time to Weep," he lays out his hypothesis. "Many people," he says, "have no capacity for, or understanding of genuine laughter because they have not wept.... If you cannot cry, you cannot laugh." Interesting! Having read this statement, I thought back to pastoral calls I've made at Western State Hospital.

I've seen very few people cry in mental hospitals. Ridden with despair, they sit and stare at the walls, without shedding a tear.

Several months after the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, I purchased a book, authored by men and women, pastors and politicians, entitled, And The Angels Wept.

While leaving the theology of angels to the theologians present tonight, it seems to me, that in order to live again, those touched most profoundly by the bombing, needed to hear the message that it's okay to cry.

Remember Monica? Monica was the mother of Augustine, who wept over her son until he became Saint Augustine. Tears of sorrow often become tears of joy.

You may recall that the Oklahoma City bombing happened just before Easter, the highest celebration for Christians. The following Sunday, one of the pastors entitled his sermon, "Easter Has Been Postponed," and that's enough, my friends, to make us cry...and laugh.