

UU HUUMOR: WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT US?

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The Rev. Louis V. Schwebius

Reading 1:

Alf It's Funny, You Laugh, But Why?@ by Emily Eakin

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Plato wanted it tightly regulated in his Republic. Socrates thought it should be used sparingly like salt. Pythagoras swore off it entirely and forbid his followers to indulge.

For the ancient Greeks, laughter was serious stuff. Some, like Plato, thought it could incite violence and disrupt the social order. Others, like Aristotle, thought it was what distinguished men from beasts. Such notions may sound, well, laughable to modern ears. But the Greeks' guiding assumption there is nothing funny about laughter turns out to be thoroughly up to date.

History is littered with the sober efforts of learned men to make sense of giggles and guffaws. The question of whether Jesus had ever laughed so consumed medieval Christian scholars that the University of Paris devoted an entire conference to it in the 13th century. (The evidence was apparently inconclusive. On the advice of his religious consultants, Louis IX, who was later canonized, hedged his bets by never chuckling on Fridays.)

The Renaissance brought Hobbes's superiority theory (laughter marks the sudden attainment of power over someone else), which gave way first to Kant's incongruity theory (laughter occurs when perceptions don't conform to logical expectations), and, finally, to Freud's relief theory (laughter releases pent-up nervous energy.)

But the theorizing did not stop there. Today, laughter is a thriving, if not notably jolly, field of study whose members are scattered across the academic spectrum, from literature and history to linguistics and neuroscience.

"Humor is hard to study because it's extremely complicated and has so many different manifestations," explained Lawrence Mintz, a professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland at College Park. "We are not in the business of being funny."

Humor contributors may not be playing for laughs, but most want to understand why certain jokes or situations tend to elicit them. Other laughter scholars, however, aren't really interested in laughter at all. Instead, they look at expressions of humor as a way of understanding broad, high-minded issues like politics, economics and individual identity.

"The key insights into laughter cannot come simply from thinking about it," says Robert Provine, a neuroscientist at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. "Some of the

most brilliant people in the history of our species from Plato on have tried to explain it. But laughter is not accessible to reason alone."

On that point, Mr. Provine concurs with Jonathan Swift, the Irish satirist who, 300 years ago, remarked:

ΔWhat Humor is, not all the Tribe
Of Logick-mongers can describe.@"

Reading 2:

Compiled by Rev. Rolfe Gerhardt,
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ΔAs we welcome our newest members, it is only fair to let them know what we Unitarian Universalists are like and what we expect.

We are friendly. If you are not friendly, out you go!

We are genuine people. Even our phonies are real phonies.

We are always sincere even if we have to fake it.

We aren=t sure how ambivalent we should be.

We believe in tolerance and cannot stand intolerant people.

We are optimists. Anyone who doesn't look on the bright side depresses us.

We are more non-competitive than other groups.

We believe in equality; everyone is as good as the next person and a whole lot better.

Every Unitarian is a feminist, so he has to watch his language.

The organization is run democratically, because the minister insists on it.

We have our critics, but they are paranoid.

We are prompt about being late to meetings.

Dogmatism is absolutely forbidden.

Freedom of belief is rigidly enforced.

And to this wonderful place, we joyfully welcome you!@"

Sermon

(Sung)

*“Something familiar,
Something peculiar,
Something for everyone,
A comedy tonight!*

*Something appealing,
Something appalling,
Something for everyone,
A comedy tonight!*

*Nothing with kings,
Nothing with crowns,
Bring on the lovers, liars and clowns!*

*Old situations,
New complications,
Nothing portentous or polite;
Tragedy tomorrow,
Comedy tonight!*

Humor is very important to me. I believe that it can not only extend life, but it also can keep a life worth living. This idea did not originate with me. In the Hebrew Bible, Proverbs 17:22 says that *AA merry heart doeth good like a medicine; but a broken spirit drieth the bones.*@

Some time ago I came upon a study of 50-year marriages. Despite tremendous diversity in the types, races, religions, and backgrounds of the individuals in these long relationships, researchers identified two characteristics that appeared in nearly every marriage studied: First, the couple shared some commitment; there was some mutually cherished cause, political party, religion, or other institution to which they were both deeply committed. Second, these mates had markedly well-developed sense of humor. They frequently made each other laugh, and often one partner would say that their spouse was the funniest person they knew. The study concluded that a sense of humor and a shared commitment may keep marriages alive and well through all the changes in people=s lives. Since folks in 50-year marriages tend to be of advanced age, perhaps one might just as easily decide that those two things help keep individuals alive and healthy, too! We might also conclude that a strong ethic of commitment and a good sense of humor could keep a society alive as well!

During a recent ecumenical gathering at a Unitarian Universalist church, a secretary rushed in shouting, "The building is on fire!"

The BAPTISTS cried, "Where is the holy water?"

The LUTHERANS posted a notice on the door declaring the fire was evil.

The FUNDAMENTALISTS proclaimed, "It's the vengeance of God!"

The PAGANS respectfully banished the fire spirits and then spiraled danced out the back door.

The METHODISTS gathered in the corner and prayed.

The QUAKERS quietly praised God for the blessings that fire brings.

The JEWS posted symbols on the sanctuary doors hoping the fire would pass.

The CHRISTIAN SCIENTISTS concluded that there was no fire.

The CONGREGATIONALISTS shouted, "Every man for himself!"

The ROMAN CATHOLICS passed the plate to cover the damage.

The PRESBYTERIANS appointed a chairperson who was to appoint a committee to look into the matter and submit a written report.

The EPISCOPALIANS formed an orderly procession and marched out.

The secretary grabbed the fire extinguisher and put the fire out.

The UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS:

- chided the Christian Scientists for not heeding the dictates of science and reason,*
- objected to the Baptist's failure to consider alternative solutions,*
- accused the Fundamentalists of feeding the flames of guilt,*
- protested the Lutheran's reliance on fear and hatred,*
- couldn't understand why the Pagans had to spiral dance all of the time,*
- criticized the Methodists for marginalizing atheists,*
- noted the inherent patriarchy in the Quaker's approach,*
- pointed to the avarice inherent in the Catholics' approach,*
- excoriated the Congregationalists for their blind disregard of the interconnected web of all existence,*
- boycotted the Episcopalian procession because it was led by a white male,*
- overlooked the Jews' outmoded mystical practices,*
- demanded that the Presbyterians committee conform to strict guidelines for ethnic and cultural diversity, and*
- moved that the secretary be fired for failure to work out a consensus before taking action.*

What does this joke and other jokes about Unitarian Universalism imply about us? That's our question for this morning - and my thanks go to all the folks near and far who have passed on AUU jokes@ at my request for me to examine.

A crowd of the deceased is following St. Peter through the clouds to their final destination. They come to two signs pointing in different directions. One reads: "To Heaven," the other "To Discussion of Heaven." Almost everybody follows the arrow to heaven. But once in a while somebody goes the other way.

"What's with them?" somebody asks.

"Oh," signs St. Peter. "We lose more Unitarian Universalists that way."

Now, would we really choose a discussion of heaven over heaven itself? Some people would tell the last joke to imply that Unitarian Universalists prefer talking to doing or experiencing the real thing - especially in spiritual matters. Really now - such commentators are not our friends and obviously don't know us! For example, we are discussing jokes this morning. But that doesn't mean we'd forego a chance to laugh! Likewise, we'd love a chance to experience heaven. Plenty of time for discussion there!

The truth behind this joke is that we know that it is those who follow authoritarian directives and promises without examining them who are likely to be misled and duped and lose out on the real or best experiences of humanity. Better to hear what's being offered. Maybe it's a fraud. Maybe we won't like what is said in the fine prints. Better to discuss first.

I=ve heard it said on more than one occasion that a Unitarian Universalist approaches every question with an open mouth.

You know what that implies. It pokes at our treasured ideal of having an open mind. Well, sometimes it's true. Like any group we have big domineering talkers. And their open mouths may mean a closed mind. But much more often the open mouth for us signifies that we welcome the views of everyone and want each experience sung out. Also, about the great questions of life and meaning and responsibility, our open mouths bespeak awe at the grand mystery and possibility and bespeak that courageous deep gulp before once again plunging with our lighted chalice into the heart of darkness.

When the question of Heaven is raised, Unitarian Universalism, rather than deny Heaven to its members, more than any other gathering I know draws on that part of our heritage that says the kingdom of Heaven is within you, as an individual and as a community. Only the heightened consciousness that reflection and discussion promote can make this Kingdom possible and prevents people from being led by power-seekers toward meaningless goals.

Along this "Discussion" line.

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb? At least two: one to change the bulb and one or more to share the experience.

Some people argue it takes at least ten: Three to make coffee, six for the electrical committee, and one to change the bulb.

These jokes applaud our appreciation of the basic human desire for camaraderie and democratic participation. They also point out the need for one person to make sure the job gets done. Also, when the individual is changing the bulb, the other nine are there to make sure the power doesn't go to her or his head. Theologically, politically and practically, we know an individual must remain supported and properly grounded to assure general well-being and true enlightenment. Hence, the need for communal dialogue.

A couple was on the first night of their honeymoon. The Unitarian Universalist groom was in bed, anxiously awaiting his bride to join him. She comes out of the bathroom, swathed head to toe in yards and yards of gauzy cloth.

"Sweetheart, you're so beautiful," he says. "Why cover yourself in all of that gauze?"

"Darling," she responds, "I thought Unitarian Universalists would rather seek than find."

No, no, no. This punchline has it wrong. Yes, for a short time, the vogue in some Unitarian Universalist circles was to say "The question is the answer" or "To question is the answer." But we have always been intent on finding answers and reaching the goals we have for ourselves and humankind. Yes, we are aware that old answers should be questioned and that new answers often lead to new questions. But we are also committed to act on our best understanding. Good fruit has in it the seed of better fruit. But we also enjoy the good fruit. The better punchline, I think, is "Darling, I thought Unitarian Universalists enjoyed searching as much as finding." This ending would emphasize our understanding that every moment of life has great value and is best experienced to the fullest. In our relationships with others, or ourselves or God or Nature, the joy of unwrapping and exploring becomes inseparable from the joy of finding. To become love is to make love. To be peace is to bring peace.

I know you've heard how the Ku Klux Klan tried to harass a Unitarian Universalist family. They built a question mark of wood and burned it on the family's lawn.

Some people tell this joke to imply confusion either in others about us, or in us about life. But to me it implies that we know exactly what we think about each person's right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. And the Klan knows our view. In fact, I'd say, the Klan got the question mark from its own front lawn where we put it to question its understanding.

You probably haven't heard how this story actually turned out.

When the Unitarian Universalist family members saw the question mark flaming on their lawn, they came charging out. Then they threw the Klansmen into complete confusion by getting into a big argument among themselves. It seems the husband had brought

out a bucket of water and was arguing that they should douse the question and give the Klan the answer one and for all. The wife was carrying logs and kerosene. She argued in favor of keeping the question burning, for years if necessary. Finally the kids solved the whole thing by getting the Klansmen to join in toasting marshmallows and singing Unitarian Universalist camp songs, starting with "Shalom Havayreem" and "We Shall Overcome."

Did you hear about the Unitarian Universalist church in the city? It has a little plot of grass out front with a sign saying "Curb your dogma!"

I understand that this sign has actually attracted a number of people who have found, during this hectic era of religion-switching, that their dogma has been run over by their Karma.

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb? Well, first, you have to find out if it wants to be changed.

A little boy came from Sunday School class with a picture he'd drawn. It showed four people sitting in an airplane.

"What's this?" his mother asked.

"It's Jesus, Mary and Joseph on their flight to Egypt," the boy answered, pointing to three of the people.

"I see," said the sympathetic Mom. "And who's this up front?"

"Oh, that Pontius, the Pilot."

Presuming this was not an extraordinarily precocious and witty child (which I wouldn't generally presume), we have here a story of what we aim to avoid in Unitarian Universalist Sunday Schools. There are many great religious stories in our culture and in others. Presented one way, they are meaningless to our children. Presented another way, they inspire the imagination and help our children understand the realities, the potentials, and the meanings of life as discovered by humanity throughout its existence and as discoverable by the children themselves. And, hopefully, we also help them find the saving humor even in the tough and bad moments of life.

An elderly New Englander was complaining about her Florida Unitarian Universalist church that she attends in the winter. "My dear," she said to her friend up north, "The only time I've ever heard the name of Jesus Christ there was when the minister tripped and fell down the stairs."

I have heard this story told; sometimes with concern, sometimes with pride. Over the past several decades, as little Unitarian Universalist fellowships sprang up around the country, some of them reacted to Protestant and Catholic abuse of the story of Jesus by avoiding it. But one of the special gifts of Unitarianism and Universalism to Western religious life, for lo these many years, has been to present the gospel story as a great model and example of the human spiritual endeavor along with other great stories and models and teachings of the world religious community. And now, as newer congregations mature, we continue providing that gift. We no longer need to rely on injury to our ministers to fulfill this special role.

At a Unitarian Universalist coffee hour once, a visitor asked two members what Unitarian Universalists believe.

"We believe in one God," said one.

"At most," said the other.

You know, this joke hasn't been true since Ralph Waldo Emerson and his Unitarian Transcendentalists. For generations now, our ranks have included not only the wealth of theists, agnostics and atheists, but pantheists and polytheists who see the divine in everything and who can weave ancient spiritual mythologies with modern psychological archetypologies into a vibrant humanism of healing, creativity and meaning. Unitarianism - one great mysterious wonderful truth. Universalism - a world full of varied expressions of that truth.

Perhaps, as I've been told, many Unitarians do pray: Ato whom it may concern!@

We know it is appropriate to raise the questions. That is what prayer is. We know it is wise to pay attention for the answers. That is what meditation is. But in our multi-theisms and non-theisms, we do not presume where our answer will come from. And when we pray for peace, liberty, justice, compassion and opportunity for happiness, again, "to whom it may concern" is appropriate on the principle "If the shoe fits, wear it!"

A man had a brand new Masserati, which was sacred to him, and he wanted to get it blessed. So he went to the priest and said, "Father, will you give a blessing to my Masserati?" "Sure," said the priest. "But what's a Masserati?"

Well, it wouldn't do to have a blessing said by someone who didn't appreciate what he was blessing. So the man went to a Protestant minister and said, "Pastor, will you give a blessing to my Masserati?" "Sure," said the minister. "But what's a Masserati?"

No luck there. Somewhat despairing, the man stopped at the synagogue. "Rabbi," he said. "Will you give a blessing to my Masserati?" "Sure," says the rabbi. "But what's a Masserati?"

The man drove off. There seemed to be no hope. But by luck, when he stopped his car to think, he parked right in front of the Unitarian Universalist Church. No sooner had he turned off the motor than the church doors banged open and the minister, fully robed, came flying down the steps. "Wow!" he yelled. "A Masserati. What beauty! What precision! What style!" And he began asking all sorts of informed, detailed questions. The Masserati owner was jubilant. Here was the man for him. "Say, Reverend, would you be willing to do a blessing for my Masserati?" "Of course," said the minister. "But what's a blessing?"

What's a blessing?! In Webster=s Dictionary, I found five basic definitions of blessing: to consecrate or make holy ("God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it"), to invoke divine care ("Lord, bless your people"), to praise or glorify ("Blessed art thou"), to make happy now and in the future ("A child blessed their union"), and to protect or guard ("God bless me.").

Do we Unitarian Universalists understand what it is to do these things and do we do them? Let=s consider for a moment our Ceremony of Dedication for our children. Our Dedication Ceremony is an expression of what the parents want it to be. In preparing for it, the minister and the parents consult, reach agreement on what the parents want for their child in the ceremony, and then mutually prepare the ceremony. But the general purpose of the Dedication is always the same: to bless.

First, we bless, not by making sacred, but by expressing as parents and community our recognition of and devotion to the innate sacredness of the child. Second, we bless, not so much by invoking the divine to care, but by invoking the divine within the child to care for itself and all of life, which capacity we commit to nurture. Third, we bless life at the Dedication by praising and glorifying and giving thanks to life, which gives us this sacred trust of a child. And fourth and fifth, we bless at the Dedication by committing ourselves to protect this child from harm and to love and attend this child toward a life of goodness and happiness.

Each of the activities of blessing Unitarian Universalists do, or at least aim to do, in our daily lives as well as the highly ceremonial moments of life. We try to make them part of our Sunday Services, part of our coming-of-age ceremonies, part of our wedding ceremonies, part of our funerals and memorial services, and part of the principles that Unitarian Universalism has historically affirmed. Blessing could be seen as the basis of how we hope to interact with every individual with whom we come into contact.

Now, would we give a blessing to a Masserati? When somebody chooses to own something or relate to something, only they can bless it. And they can bless it only by dedicating the thing or relationship to a sacred purpose. And the only purposes that are sacred are those which promote recognition of the universal sacredness of life and which promote the well-being of all life. If a Masserati owner could explain to us how this vehicle would be used to that purpose, we would do the blessing and we would know what we were doing.

Which leads us to one last light bulb joke. . . .

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?

All of them: one to hold the bulb, the rest to turn the world around.

For me this captures the ultimate call of Unitarian Universalism - to actively care for our sister and brother creatures on this earth. May we each hold our light, and may we each turn our world!!