

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist

“The Holiness of Humor”

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Long before anyone ever heard of psychosomatic medicine, **The Book of Proverbs** observed that “A merry heart doeth like a good medicine.” That fact, that a sense of humor is healthy, has become common knowledge. But, this morning I would suggest that, just as the words *healthy, whole, and holy* have the same etymological origin, humor has a **religious**, as well as physical and emotional significance.

**Defining humor as “the kindly contemplation of life’s incongruities,”** I contend that it requires not only a perception of the paradoxical aspects of life, but a tolerance of them. Though some define humor to include its use as a weapon of ridicule, I am in agreement with **Thomas Carlyle** who said, “**True humor is not contempt; its essence is charity.**”

At the **first level**, I suggest that genuine **humor is healthy because it relieves tension** and punctures pretension: enabling us to see our circumstance more clearly and deal with life’s absurdities more creatively.

There is a **story about a missionary** who spoke at a Church. Long before his arrival, there was antagonism toward the visit because people knew he would ask them for money. He came, spoke, and, just as the congregation feared, concluded saying, “Now, brothers and sisters, we’ll stand and sing a hymn while my hat is passed among you for contributions to my work.” Well, the hat passed up and down the rows of people but soon everyone realized that **no one was putting money in it!** And, when it was finally returned to the missionary—empty, the tension was thick as he bowed his head in prayer. But the man kept his sense of humor and rose to the occasion by praying, “**O, Lord, we give Thee thanks that these good people, in their dire poverty, have seen fit to gimme my hat back!**”

I submit that, if he would’ve passed the hat again, the missionary would probably have gotten some money. It is difficult to sustain hostility in the face of appropriate humor. At a risk of overdoing it I want to toss in another story, primarily for the parents present. It tells of a boy who came home with a terrible report card one day, and, when his father was about to launch into a verbal tirade, the youngster look up and said, “**What do you think my trouble is, Dad, heredity or environment?**”

**Humor is healthy because it relieves tension and restores perspective.** It will not solve our problems, but it does have a remarkable capacity for washing the sand out of the machinery of our minds enabling them to function more effectively. As **Henry Ward Beecher** put it, “A person without a sense of humor –is like a wagon without springs: jolted by **every pebble in the road.**”

A more significant facet of humor is that **it serves our sense of wholeness.** **If we can laugh at ourselves** in ludicrous circumstance, we reflect and reinforce our sense of transcendence: **our identity apart from the event.** We are saying, in effect, “What happens to me—is not ‘me’. I am greater than whatever I experience. I am the experience-er. And, **if** what happens to me is funny, I can laugh at it without threatening my sense of well being, without being swallowed up by the event.

**A sense of humor is thus an index of emotional stability.** To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the ironies and irrationalities with laughter is a high form of wisdom that does not try to deny the incongruity, but **integrates it** into a sense of wholeness which transcends the event. The perspective of humor is, therefore, **only possible** when we have a confidence in the basic goodness of life—which enables us to regard its incongruities with kindly, rather than anxious or angry contemplation.

Humor is a way of preserving our sense of selfhood apart from the vicissitudes of life. That is why certain cultural groups, notably Jews and Blacks, have tended to produce humor: **they had to** if they were to survive in a hostile world with their identity intact.

**When, however, we move toward the deepest incongruities** of life, humor changes as the **element of feeling enters**. Someone wrote, “For those who think, life is comic; for those who feel, life is tragic.” That may be why the philosopher **Henri Bergson** contended that “**Humor and feeling are incompatible.**” But I disagree. Laughter and feeling may be incompatible, but feeling produces the sublimest form of humorous conception: “*pathos.*”

It may contain an expression of protest, but, because it lacks bitterness, pathos retains its character as kindly contemplation while revealing human frailty and folly.

The cartoonist, **Herblock**, was particularly adept at this kind of humor. He once drew a scene depicting a group of obviously well-fed people, gathered around a dining table heavily laden with sumptuous food. In the background were the emaciated faces of starving children.

The caption below the cartoon has the plump hostess saying, to a portly preacher, “**Shall we say grace?**” No angry diatribe here, just **the artful revelation of incongruity**. There is an element of judgment implied, but it is neither harsh nor vindictive. When such perception ceases to be kindly, the humor is lost in angry indignation, as it degenerates into sarcasm, which literally means “scratching with a hoe.”

Even at the deeper levels, where feeling enters, humor must reflect a tolerance of life’s absurdities or surrender to cynicism. When, however, we are confronted with the deeply tragic aspects of human experience, tolerance becomes more difficult and laughter less healthy.

There are **many jokes which border on “poor taste”** and some which are aptly described as “sick humor” because they make light of tragic situations. An example is the “morbid joke” which a teenager once told me: Some children called on a neighbor boy and asked if he could come out and play baseball. When the mother replied, “Didn’t you know Johnnie had his arms and legs amputated?” The youngsters responded, “Yeah, we know, but we wanted him to be second base!”

Now, there’s incongruity there, but **it’s not funny!** To laugh at the tragic aspects of human experience is to scorn life and render it meaningless.

There is derision in that laughter and profound despair in that derision.

**That is why Ecclesiastes wrote that “Sorrow is better than laughter.”** At least it takes seriously the deeper, tragic dimensions of human existence, whereas laughter, at this level, makes a mockery of life. But Ecclesiastes, remember, was the cynic who also said, “All is vanity and striving after the wind.” He lacked a belief in the basic worthwhileness of life, which would have enabled him to retain a sense of humor even when confronted with the inherently tragic character of human existence: the fact that **we all must die**.

**For a sense of humor, at these deepest levels,** where laughter is driven out by feeling, **evolves into what is termed “faith.”** The same sense of wholeness that enables us to laugh at the superficial incongruities of life, expresses itself as a trust capable of integrating, if not resolving, the tragic vicissitudes of human existence.

From whence comes such faith? An elderly woman, told by an admirer, “I wish I had your faith,” replied, “**If you had something to put it in, I’d give you some.**” Well, that’s what we all need: a container that will hold our conviction that life is basically good, whatever its misfortunes: **a context** for our effort to make life meaningful and whole.

Down through the ages, people plagued with misfortune have been sustained by belief in a God of love whose purposes, however inscrutable, are good. But what of those of us for whom the idea of God’s love is too

abstract to be emotionally sustaining? Have we forfeited the basis for trust in the fundamental goodness of life? I think not.

**The substance of the traditional belief** in “the love of God” is available in **human** relationship. Indeed, I think that is its actual source for **all** human beings. To say that “God is love,” to someone who has never experienced human love, is like telling a blind person that “Grass is green.” The concept is empty of meaning. But to **give** the experience of love to another person— **is to put content into that concept** and give substance to what is otherwise a meaningless abstraction. And it is **that substance** which sustains us and enables us to believe in the goodness of life—whatever its misfortunes.

**The poet Archibald MacLeish** says this very well in his poetic-play, “**J.B.**” a modern rendering of **The Book of Job**. In the drama the hero, like his Biblical counterpart, is visited by great and inexplicable misfortune, and his wife, who has urged him to “curse God and die,” finally, in despair, leaves him. **In final last scene**, she returns, and Job meets her on the porch of their home. Sarah says, “**I loved you and I couldn’t help you**. You wanted justice and there was none. Only love.” Then J.B. contemplating the seeming neutrality of the universe, comments, “**He does not love**. He (simply) is.” “But **we do**,” Sarah responds, **that’s the wonder.**”

They cling to each other. Then peering at the darkness inside the door, J.B. says, “It’s too dark to see.” Sarah responds, “Then blow on the coal of the heart, my darling.” “The coal of the heart?” he asks. “It’s all the light – now,” she replies. They come forward into the dim room. Sarah lifts a fallen chair and continues, “**Blow on the coal of the heart**. The lights have gone out of the sky. Blow on the coal of the heart and we will see—by and by.” J.B. joins her in straightening chairs and adds, “We’ll see where we are. The wit won’t burn and the wet soul smolders—Blow on the coal of the heart.. and we’ll know, we’ll know.” The light increases and the curtain falls.

All of which is to say that, in the last analysis, **the context of our conviction** that life is worth living, or may be made so, whatever tragedies it holds, **is our awareness of caring relationship**. When our world comes crashing down and we sit among the shattered ruins of yesterday’s hopes and blithe assumptions, it is **love alone** can give us the strength to face another day. The fact is that **this fragile fabric of humanity is held together by the gossamer threads of human affection--- and the holiness of humor.**

**END**