

“Humor is a Saving Grace”

Some years ago, as I was reading through a batch of newsletters from neighboring churches, I came across this cryptic line in a Minister’s column: “I’d like to apologize for my accident in the pulpit last week, and to thank you for your understanding.” No explanation was given concerning the nature of his “accident in the pulpit,” and so, the reader’s imagination was left free to wander over the possibilities.

In his book *Still Here*, Baba Ram Dass sketched the story of an accident in a similar setting. He wrote:

“A few years back, I was invited to speak to an audience of several thousand people in Denver....I sat in the front row of the hall as the host sang my praises, and when it came time for me to take the stage, rather than climb the steps like most sixty-three-year-olds would, my Ego, inflated from too much praise, urged me to leap from the floor to the podium. The next thing I knew I was flat on my face in front of this crowd, my leg mangled and bleeding. Rather than attend to my needs, I lectured for the next hour with blood dripping down into my sock, too embarrassed to admit that I was ready to pass out.” [pp. 44-45]

For my part, I recall a morning when I was the guest preacher for the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Hopedale, Massachusetts. I was humming along with the service, somewhere about page three or so of the sermon, when I took a step back from the pulpit and discovered there was nothing underneath my foot but thin air. In a flash, and too late, I realized that the woman who was the regular minister there, who was quite a bit shorter than I am, had placed a block on the floor to raise herself up behind the pulpit, and I had stepped off the block. Thankfully, I didn’t wipe out, I just stepped down, pushed the block aside with my foot, and kept on talking. Anyone who was paying attention would have noticed that all at once I was six inches shorter. But I didn’t even pause mid-sentence. I didn’t have the wherewithal to acknowledge the obvious. While one part of me kept rattling on smoothly, the other part of me was laughing inside. I had had a first hand lesson in exactly how precarious the preaching profession can be.

That experience has become an enduring metaphor for me. I think I know what I’m doing, I’m following the script I have prepared and everything is under control. Then all at once, the bottom falls out, and I realize I’m not quite as big as I had imagined. Who hasn’t stepped confidently into midair, been taken down a peg, or performed a macho leap of body or intellect and fallen flat, or had some kind of “accident in the pulpit” or other public venue which robbed you of all semblance of control?

My beloved voice teacher used to say to me “Whatever happens, just keep smiling.” I once sang the tune “Christmas Time is Here” with four friends for a sizable audience at a holiday concert. We were singing a cappella - without instrumental accompaniment - one on a part. Someone, the bass, I think, hit a wrong note, and he kept on singing his part as written, but one note off. Then I hit a wrong interval, and

from there it was like dominoes. The result was that we were singing this song in five different keys. We looked at each other and we knew there was simply no way to rescue it. But we kept going, and we kept smiling. Our most difficult challenge, in fact, was to keep from bursting out into laughter. Afterwards, a friend came up to me and he said "You know Elaine, that was a very modern piece you all sang. I never heard harmonies like that before."

Whether the joke is shared by everyone, by those in the know, or is known by you alone, that still, small voice inside chuckling away so often helps us to endure the disharmonies, wipe outs, and take downs with equanimity.

"The generally accepted evolutionary explanation for the development of laughter," according to Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves in their book *Only Joking*, "argues that it evolved from a threat response or warning. To paraphrase slightly: Early man, the theory goes, thought he saw a woolly mammoth charging across the tundra. He bared his teeth, narrowed his eyes and prepared to scream the alarm to the rest of his tribe. Suddenly the woolly mammoth slipped and fell down, out cold. (This sort of accident was, sadly, all too common during the Ice Age.) Early man's grimace of fear softened into a wide smile and his scream of alarm became a hearty laugh as he ran to fetch his mammoth-disemboweling hook and his brothers.

In other words, laughter is a release of tension on discovering that a perceived threat is not, in fact, a threat at all." [p. 18]

Certainly there are threats in life that are difficult to laugh away. It all depends, I think, on whether we can separate ourselves from the part within us that is threatened. The ego is an easy target for fear, anger, or emotional pain. Humor can break into that tension with spontaneous power, providing new perspective, showing us we are not only our egos, we are something more, giving us opportunity to disengage from fear or anger.

Have you ever been so angry at another person you could turn red in the face, and something happens in the middle of your argument that makes you both laugh? I think of a furious exchange with my daughter, in her tempestuous early teen years, when she blurted out "Monitor your own existence!" She was so right on, her admonition stopped us both in our tracks, and we had to laugh - tension gone, breathing room opened up. We transformed into two people who could laugh at ourselves and love each other, so much more than the mother/daughter egos who had been threatening each other in heated battle moments before. "Monitor your own existence!" lives on as a family punch line, aptly employed on numerous occasions.

As many of you have probably witnessed, humor often breaks the tension even in the face of death. One exemplary story stays close to my heart. I had a dear friend named Todd Jacobs, whom I knew through our high school and college years, and into adulthood. In the late 1970's, along with so many others in those days before we knew the risks, Todd contracted the H.I.V. virus. During the years before AIDS took hold in

his body, he completed his studies to be a doctor, lived in London and Latin America, and finally took up his practice in adolescent medicine - a field he pioneered - at the University of California in San Francisco. As a physician, Todd had a very clear understanding of the progression of the disease, the timing of the breakthroughs in treatment, and his chances for survival. He was a pragmatic person. When it became clear that he had limited time left as a man with an active, productive life, rather than face the denouement of his vitality, Todd decided to commit suicide.

As he told the story, one beautiful evening he loaded the vacuum cleaner extension hose and a clamp into his car, and headed over the Golden Gate bridge into Marin County. It was his intention to flood the interior of the car with exhaust, and so end the struggle. He found a secluded place to park overlooking the San Francisco Bay, got out of the car, and attempted to fit the vacuum hose onto the tailpipe of his car. Todd was a very gifted person, but mechanical skills were not among his many gifts. He couldn't figure out how to attach the hose onto the exhaust pipe. After about a half hour of trying to jigger the hose onto the pipe, he realized that solving this problem had become more important to him than offing himself. The threat of death had been so easily, if momentarily, displaced by the tension of the absurd problem before him. He began to laugh at his own ineptitude. He loaded the hose back into the trunk, drove home, and faced the music. Todd outlived his own expectations, as it turned out, and for almost two more years he experienced genuinely meaningful life, looking forward, never regretting the path laughter opened up for him in the deepest darkness.

"Angels can fly," wrote G. K. Chesterton, "because they take themselves lightly." I trust Todd got issued a pair of easy-to-operate wings to fly with when he passed on. In this life, he shared the powerful, uplifting, grace of mirth. The light in his spirit dispersed the tension of impending death. In order to honor him, I sometimes feel I can try to do no less. I imagine many of you may have memories of loved ones whose inspiration leads you to get rid of the heavy weight of the ego's fears and demands, and take yourself more lightly too. I trust your loved ones who have laughed even in the face of death have left you some stories to bring a smile when a little humor is sorely needed.

In Only Joking, Carr and Greeves cite the work of neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran. Ramachandran identified a "'laughter circuit' in the brain: a network deep in the limbic system, the seat of our emotions, which fires up when we find something funny." His research demonstrates "that the neural pathways for pain, fear and laughter are intimately connected." [p. 19] Ramachandran's theory is truly amazing: Pain, fear, and laughter are next door neighbors in the workings of our brains. Whenever pain or fear are present, laughter is only a breath away.

In Islam, the word "Dhikr" is a term for the remembrance of Allah. The practice of remembrance, or dhikr, is "the polish of hearts, the essence of the science of faith, the immunization against hypocrisy...." [<http://www.sunnah.org/ibadaat/dhikr.htm>] It seems to me that deliberate, practiced remembrance of humor may also immunize us against egotism, polish our hearts, and school us in the essentials of faith. Our innate ability to

breathe into a smile and find amusement in even the most serious of circumstances can be nurtured.

In his book *Jesus Laughed: The Redemptive Power of Humor*, Robert Darden quotes the following story from Herb Gardner's *A Thousand Clowns*:

"[The play] follows the misadventures of the gifted...writer named Murray, who is again unemployed as he rebels against society's artificial norms. He has become, quite by accident, the guardian of his twelve-year-old nephew, [Norman], and they are now fast friends. But Murray's bohemian lifestyle draws the attention of Child Protective Services, and a social worker comes to take the boy away. At first, Murray is worried that if they're separated, the kid will someday become a list-maker:

Murray: I didn't spend six years with him so he should turn into a list maker. He'll learn to know everything before it happens, he'll learn to plan, he'll learn how to be one of the nice dead people.

Murray is really warming up now, and...the social worker is mesmerized:

Murray: I just want him to stay with me till I can be sure he won't turn into Norman Nothing. I want to be sure he'll know when he's chickening out on himself. I want him to get to know exactly the special thing he is or else he won't notice when it starts to go.

By now, Murray is almost talking to himself, sadly, softly:

Murray: I will be very sorry to see him go. That kid was the best straight man I ever had. He is a laugher, and laughers are rare. I mean, you tell that kid something funny -- not just any piece of corn, but something funny, and he'll give you your money's worth. It's not just funny jokes he reads, or I tell him, that he laughs at. Not just set-up funny stuff. He sees street jokes, he has the good eye, he sees subway farce and crosstown-bus humor and all the cartoons that people make by being alive. He has a good eye. And I don't want him to leave until I'm certain he'll never be ashamed of it.

[pp. 111,112]

I think we're going to need unashamed, affirming folks with "a good eye" for humor in the times ahead. Like you, I surmise, I was exuberant last week with the inauguration of President Barack Obama. When twelve noon rolled around on 1/20/09, tangible relief and joy swept through us, and washed over our country. Joy is related to humor, but it is not quite the same. There was plenty of joy on that day, but, aside from Aretha Franklin's hat and Chief Justice Roberts's slapstick rendition of the Presidential oath, there was not too much humor. Only Reverend Lowery's closing words, "when

yellow will be mellow, when the red man can get ahead, man” opened up a blessed opportunity for laughter.

I have to say I was disappointed, because it seemed to me that Obama’s address could have been written by a list maker. Perhaps you have a different opinion. We all know about the vast “To Do” list confronting our nation, and our planet. We know it’s time to put away childish things and get down to work. Humor is not a distraction from the task - it is the lightness which relieves the tension, reminds us we are not all-knowing or all-important, defuses anger, and detaches us from outcomes while providing us with new perspectives. It keeps the fear of death and the growing pains at bay.

And so, as we continue this unpredictable, challenging journey together, I say, let us keep our good eyes open: Onward, Unitarian Punsters. AMEN