

Can We Make Merry In A Suffering Season?:
How Laughter Helps Us Endure
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Beacon UU Congregation
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Do you consider yourself an ethical and compassionate person with a mature sense of humor? Would you laugh if I showed you a photograph of an emaciated Auschwitz inmate or a distraught immigrant child at a detention camp? Would a harrowing account of the end stages of COVID induce a chuckle? How about witnessing the callous schoolyard (or Twitter) bullying of an unpopular kid? And lastly, can you imagine laughing about the events of September 11th or Hurricane Katrina? I'd venture to say, the answer to all of the above questions is a resounding, No!" Yet, what if I showed you a clever meme or gif related to one these hot topics? Would that tickle your funny bone?

Just now, America is understandably not in the mood for hilarity...you know the litany of realities we're facing, and now, in early December, many are also anticipating a bluer holiday season than usual. A newspaper headline recently went so far as to proclaimed that "the age of irony may be dead this time." Local comedy clubs are temporarily closed. None other than Jerry Seinfeld has lamented that its nearly impossible to "think funny" these days.

So, this morning, I offer up a rhetorical question: Can we laugh again? Can we make merry in a suffering season? Well, I certainly hope so! Yes, of course we *can* and we *should* laugh again. -- not while "forgetting those in agony or Nature in torment." But, rather, in the words from our reading earlier, laughing "soft and sad, surging with emotion, remembering pain, fear, death."

Woody Allen has said that "Comedy is tragedy plus time." We're nine months into the pandemic. Is that enough time? There is still nothing comedic about the shattering of normalcy, the financial cataclysm or the loss of loved ones (not to mention the racial violence and social turmoil of the past year). But the beat of life goes on and laughter can provide us with grace notes along the way. For instance, a New Yorker cartoon showed two people on Zoom. She says to him: "I thought I'd never laugh again. But then I saw your jacket." Oh, yes...let's laugh again! Absolutely. But let's also pause to think about comedy and humor, irony and satire; why we laugh, when we shouldn't, and how laughter can numb us and how it can heal and support us.

"Laugh if you can," writes philosopher Henri Bergson. But should we? "Certainly one can laugh at everything, and even a prohibition of laughter would be ridiculous. Yet, there are ethical limits to laughter, voluntary self-limitations of which one should be aware -- precisely because of all the tempting possibilities which laughter offers." To be moral, one cannot place laughter beyond good and evil. So, how then might we understand and embrace our moral imperative to *refuse* to laugh, particularly at savage pop culture and entertainment or crass jokes at the expense of the weak or the victimized? Let's explore this together.

As a relatively youthful optimistic nation, America loves to laugh. In the 1930's, for instance, laughter became a trait that distinguished democracies from dictatorships. "How long is it since a laugh has been heard on a public platform in Germany or Soviet Russia?" asked a New York Times editorial in 1939, while the comedian Bob Hope championed humor as a potent weapon for American G.I.s: "Where Hitlerism and fascism and Tojoism have set in, they take with them . . . their sense of humor, and its ready infection is being spread through countries and people they visit."

America loves to laugh, and our laughter wears many moods and faces. It expresses every shade of emotion and feeling. Just as there are experiences so foolish, so terrible, so tragic that we can only laugh in helpless frustration, so there are experiences so wonderful that laughter brings tears of joy. And so our moods can be measured by the quality of our laughter. In fact, you can weigh the condition of an entire people by observing what makes them laugh. In our case, everything from Don Rickles to Chris Rock, from South Park to the Simpsons. And in this respect humor is no laughing matter. It is one of the most important tools we have in coping with the serious problems and events of life. Case in point – one of my colleagues recently posted on the Facebook that he, "won't agree to 2021 until he reads the terms and conditions."

In his sermon on "Sacred Humor," the Rev. Charles Henderson remarks on how our humor touches upon the most important topics under the sun; it touches upon politics and science, sex and religion, life and death, good and evil. Comedians, like ministers, must wrestle with the most elementary questions. Commenting upon the importance of humor, one writer put it this way, "Life is serious all the time but living cannot be. You may have all the solemnity you wish in your neckties, but in everything important you must have mirth or you will have madness." Or, as the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche observed, "the most suffering animal on earth invented for itself --laughter "-- a tonic of relief against the inevitable pain of living."

Humor can be a vehicle for the nastiest human impulses, crude racism, prejudice or simple ignorance, too. But in the best of humor we learn to laugh at ourselves. For while its perfectly human to deride one's enemies, it's divine to see the humor in oneself. One of the very first steps on the road to spiritual maturity is learning to laugh at one's own mistakes. Only when we are in touch with our own flaws can we truly open ourselves to the wonders and the absurdities around us.

We can even detect this link between laughter and life's ironies in the Old Testament story that tells of laughter's birth. God promised Abraham that a son would be born to his wife Sarah, but Abraham, being 100 years old at the time, fell on his face and laughed. "What! Shall a child be born to man who is 100 years old?" Good one, God! When three mysterious strangers repeated the promise to Sarah, she laughed too. There was a laughter born of irony. But when the baby was actually delivered, Sarah said: "God has made laughter for me. Everyone who hears my story will laugh with delight. Who would have said that Abraham and Sarah could have children, yet I have born him a son in his old age." And they named the child Isaac, the Hebrew word for laughter. That was how laughter was born. Born of surprise and irony.

To be aware and fully alive in life's surprises requires a deep sense of humor, the kind of humor which has a close affinity with faith. We, too, must keep our faith and our mirth even in the face of this world's tragedies and disasters.

In his book, The Culture of Pain, David Morris argues that we actually *need* some element of *pain* in order to create comedy. Morris readily acknowledges that "pain certainly offers an odd, even perverse, entry into the comic world. But, "comedy," suggests Morris, "depends on the presence of pain in part to keep the comic universe from spinning totally out of control;" a comedy *without* pain, he writes, is one of "pure wish fulfillment." Morris provides fascinating insights into the "pain of comedy," with references to a variety of philosophical, theological, and psycho-social traditions.

For instance, from Aristotle, we derive the dominant tradition that associates comedy with pure pleasure. He also defines comedy as evoking in the audience a sense of *fearlessness* and *power* over pain. The example that comes to mind is the comic mask, which is ugly and distorted but causes no pain."On the other hand, Plato gives us the normally unacknowledged tradition that understands comedy as pleasure shot through with inevitable traces of pain. He identified the aggressive element in laughter; the odd mixture of anxiety and mirth embodied in the boundless laughter of what is called a "*Schadenfreude*," a 'comic pleasure' with a slightly menacing edge. To keep this menace under control, Plato argues that "laughter and ethics (as well as laughter and reason) belong together. The boundless dynamic of laughter must be ethically tamed or it remains inferior and repulsive; beyond all human reason and human ethic, a dangerous laughter 'beyond good and evil.'

Scholarship is littered with other sober efforts of researchers to make sense of giggles and guffaws. My favorite is the question of whether Jesus had ever laughed, which so consumed medieval Christian scholars that the University of Paris devoted an entire conference to it in the 13th century. I wonder if he'd chuckle at this classic Jewish joke: "How do you know for sure that Jesus is Jewish? Answer: He lived at home until he was 33, he went into his father's business, and his mother thought he was God!"

Perhaps, late-night king Johnny Carson hits the mark squarely when he asserts, "Comedy is a cruel business." Nonetheless, it's hard to imagine (especially in the wake of recent events) how suffering and pain, under any circumstances (even under the guise of "surreal satire") , could serve as an appropriate catalyst for our laughter.

All but the totally humorless amongst us acknowledge that laughter is full of *positive* possibilities. Medical research notes that a good chortle is like medicine – it can improve immunity, speed healing, ease depression and stress, improve our social skills, and can actually release natural pain relievers called endorphins from the brain. Even medieval physicians advised: "The patient should avoid all sadness and worry; bring joy and happiness to him by means of all those things he finds delightful." Not surprisingly, modern researchers (as well as the writer and cancer patient, Norman Cousins, used *Marx Brothers* classics, not films like *Fargo*, to assess the therapeutic value of "mirthful laughter. "

Laughing makes us feel alive. It helps us feel human. It heals and connects us, even virtually. In fact, one of my favorite go-tos for chuckles during the pandemic has been a Facebook site called The Unitarian Universalist Hysterical Society. The memes

and posts there are witty and capture some of our shared COVID experience. Here are a few: CoronaLisa with her grey roots showing; ventriloquist noting how his job has gotten easier, a man in a dog collar that keeps him from touching his face, a travel tour of one's house, a reconfigured bookstore, a promise of Emotional Support Canadians, and this duo on a moped with a stack of eggs – Its Friday, the 13th 2020 – what could go wrong? Clever without being cruel or cringeworthy.

Yes, jokes in a society can be liberating, but they can also be repressive, and subject the members of a group to pressure to conform. How often can you recall laughing as a result of group pressure and not wanting to be a spoilsport. Not joining in laughter, often criticized as a sign of being sanctimonious. Yet, at times this kind of "mob mentality" laughter can seem unbearable, the false, intoxicated freedom of a society of Philistines. *Genuine* comedy maintains its power even when stripped of every redeeming social value and reduced to its lowest level of intellectual life. *Twisted* comedy actually "kills off" the drive towards true solidarity, and can even lower the threshold of *shame* "which previously made some forms of perversion taboo." For example, the German people, systematically stripped of healthy "shame" under Nazism, literally "laughed themselves to death" through an anti-Semitic leisure-time propaganda operation called "Power through Joy." This malevolent mirth made the work of the executioners all the easier.

Once again, we are faced with the ethical question: can we endorse or even tolerate jokes about subjects like the Holocaust or the AIDS pandemic, Hurricane Katrina or the Twin Tower disaster? It's been widely reported how laughter helped concentration camp inmates survive the brutality of Auschwitz. The famed writer Victor Frankl calls humor "the soul's weapon in the fight for self-preservation," and others have suggested that if we can't laugh at life's darker side then we're doomed.

However, there is an acute and significant difference between the act of laughing *with* in benign camaraderie or from a standpoint of shared suffering, and the act of laughing *at* in a manner that is malignantly bereft of sensitivity to the profound suffering of the joke's object. Some ethnic jokes could be classified as "laughing with" provided the teller and the receiver are members of that tribe. Jewish mother jokes, for example, or the practice known as "the dozens" among African Americans. Or all of the UU jokes that float around the web.

Like this one: How many UUs does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: "We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. We're appointing a task force. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship with your light bulb, and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence." A glimmer of amusing truth there, hm?

The writer Helen Luke tells us: "Those with a sense of humor do not laugh AT a person; there is simply a feeling of delight in the ridiculous wherever it is manifest and such laughter does not condemn the other or oneself but simply enjoys the sudden recognition of the loss of proportion in all our human conflicts and contradictions.

It is a healing, not a destructive thing -- a delight in life, in its comedies and tragedies, its seriousness and absurdities -- the excellent absurdities." To be sure, "life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh." (George Bernard Shaw) In fact, it could be argued that the deeper the sorrow is carved in our beings, the more joy we can contain. Humor and laughter keep us hopeful and spiritually healthy, so, we *must* laugh again, ethically but wholeheartedly. Laughing will help to keep us humble, it will help us cope and connect, it may even release us from the bondage of time.

If we don't laugh again, even through our tears, then I fear the pandemic will have succeeded well beyond killing people by terrorizing our spirits, as well. Where might we find this laughter amidst our pain? The poet Galway Kinnell has one idea.

"Crying only a little bit is no use," he explains.

"You must cry until your pillow is wet.

Then you can get up and laugh.

Then you can jump in the shower and Splash, Splash, Splash.

Then you can throw open your window and "Ha Ha Ha Haaaaa!"

And if anyone says, "Hey, what's going on up there?"

"Ha, Ha' sing back.

"Happiness was hiding in my last tear. I wept it. Ha Haaa."

So may it be for us.

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen

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