



Let's Get Something Straight

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What Is Funny and What Is Not?

Understanding humor (not a useful undertaking)

The American humorist Mark Twain said, "Yours was not, in the beginning, a criminal nature, but circumstances changed it. At the age of nine you stole sugar. At the age of 15 you stole money. At twenty you stole horses. At 25 you committed arson. At 30, hardened in crime, you became an editor" (1).

A joke (2) goes something like this: An editor and a writer go to the Middle East and become lost in the desert sands. Winds howling, sun beating down, mirages appear. They sink to their knees, by now quite close to death, when suddenly – an oasis, no mirage! Editor and writer crawl toward the water, hand over hand, and finally immerse their faces in the cool desert pond. The writer looks up, appalled, to see that the editor is standing over him and urinating into the water. "What are you

DOING?", cries the writer. "It's okay," the editor says. "I'm improving it."

There probably has never been an author, reader, publisher, or owner of a periodical or publishing house who did not, at one time or another, disapprove, disparage, complain about, or criticize an editor. If you publish enough, you have your own stories to tell. Meanwhile, the editor, having professional but no personal investment in the writing, has to listen to complaints from people who have taken offense, rather than just repairing the damage they created. Writers, meanwhile, look ridiculous, trying to defend the indefensible.

E.B. White: "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." That's the way I feel also. The Talmud says that "A man will have to give account on the Judgment Day for every good thing which he might have en-

joyed and did not." I sense that this is correct. According to a dictionary, a joke is something said or done to provoke laughter or to cause amusement, as a witticism, a short and amusing anecdote, a prankish act, or something that is ridiculous, particularly because it is inadequate (I will get to administrators later on). Anyway, what is the value of analyzing jokes? Probably not much, unless you are or intend to be a comedian. Nonetheless, jokes are common in our lives and many of us wonder how we could live without them; I cannot imagine being serious all the time. It has been said that "Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth, or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humor?" The dullest, most serious, most boring people I know think they have a sense of humor; perhaps they do. They laugh at jokes (a good sign) but they do not make jokes. Some say they do not have time for hu-

mor but, as Oscar Wilde said: "Seriousness is the only refuge of the shallow.", and, as Bertrand Russell said: "One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is terribly important."

What is funny, what is not

Many years ago, in another job, I was attending a monthly staff meeting, which always was intended to review individual progress. Each staff member was to present an introduction to his or her work, then a summary of what s/he had done, and then an outline of the work planned to be done. One staff member, an intelligent person who had not done much work, got about half way through his presentation when I realized that he had presented all this at the previous staff meeting, and at a few before that. I began to laugh, quietly at first, so that only those nearby heard me, then so loud that everyone stopped listening to the speaker and stared at me. I told them they should stare at the speaker. Our supervisor asked me to leave the meeting, of course. He told me I had been very rude, impolite, disrespectful, and undiplomatic and he was correct. He later said that, were he not our supervisor, he also would have laughed. That was no consolation at all; the poor man thought he had

to withhold how he felt; perhaps, because of his position, he did. I never have withheld how I feel about things, which, in addition to incompetence, probably is one of the many reasons I have not been elected President of something, or Chairman of a Board, or Pope. This characteristic is annoying to many people but I would rather laugh at something humorous than not. Then, again, I find humor in things that others see as not at all humorous. This certainly is another peculiarity of mine and definitely a personality flaw.

What is a joke?

If someone laughs at a joke, then the words themselves constituted the joke, a thought was transmitted. If someone else did not laugh at the same words, then those words did not constitute a joke, at least not to them. How then could the same words be funny to one person and not be funny to another? It is impossible that the words themselves are funny, so it must be the listener who receives the words who finds humor in them, as the proverbial tree falling in the forest makes a sound only if the waves produced are "heard" (received).

Years ago I saw a movie which I thought was extremely funny, even if quite sad in parts (real life issues, such as cancer and suicide). I watched it

with my (grown) children. One thought it was very funny and the other thought we were cruel, that it was not funny at all, that we were laughing at the character who was being made fun of. Of course we were. It was a movie. The person portraying the character was an actress. As it turned out, the movie, "Muriel's Wedding," starring Toni Collette, an Australian movie (I love Australian movies), won many awards, so others must also have thought it to be entertaining. If you cannot laugh at sad situations, what alternatives do you have? How could Jews have gotten through all these centuries without humor?

There is a very wide variety of "types" of jokes, or at least types of humor. Seeing a drunk climb onto a bar and try to dance may be funny to some. Watching Charlie Chaplin hit someone with his cane may be funny to others. Sometimes jokes and situations are funny one day and not funny the next. Let us look at various kinds of jokes and see what is funny about them (I will get to administrators later on).

Does Divine revelation outrank reason? This has been argued since at least the Middle Ages. Here is a humorous explanatory example: A man falls into and near the bottom of a deep well, but grabs a tree root, which stops his fall. He cannot hold on much longer and cries out, "Is there anyone up there?"

A beam of light shines down on him and a deep voice says, "I, the Lord, am here. Let go of the root and I will help you." The man then shouts, "Is there anyone else up there?". Reason has won out over faith.

The permutations and possible combinations of language (any language) can be used to twist meanings from serious to humorous (or vice versa), as in – "My wife said that for her birthday she wanted to go someplace she had never been. I suggested she try the kitchen." – or – (Garrison Keillor): "They say such nice things about people at their funerals that it makes me sad to realize that I'm going to miss mine by just a few days."

Most jokes are contrived but that doesn't matter, so long as they are funny: A grandmother is watching her grandson playing on a beach. A huge wave comes and washes him out to sea. The grandmother says, "Dear God, bring him back to me." Nothing happens. The grandmother says: "I am faithful to my husband, donate to charity, and have never done anything to intentionally offend You. Please bring my grandson back to me." Another huge wave comes and deposits the boy on the beach." The grandmother looks up and says, "He had a hat!"

The American comedian Will Rogers was asked how he conceived his jokes. He answered: "I don't make jokes. I just watch the government

and report the facts." See what I mean? Sometimes the truth is funnier than "comedy." And self-deprecation almost always works, because we all can commiserate.

One-liners

What are called "one-liners" are just that, very short jokes, to which one must pay attention or be left wondering what was so funny. Examples –

(Woody Allen) "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve it through not dying."

(Woody Allen) "I can't listen to that much Wagner. I start getting the urge to conquer Poland."

(Woody Allen) "I was thrown out of college for cheating on a metaphysics exam; I looked into the soul of the student sitting to me."

(Abe Lemons) "I don't exercise. When I die I want to be sick."

(Groucho Marx) "Outside of a dog a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog it is too dark to read."

(Groucho Marx) "Go, and never darken my towels again."

(Groucho Marx) "If I had my life to live over, I'd live over a delicatessen."

(Groucho Marx) "Either that horse is dead or my watch has stopped."

(Irving Berlin) "The world would not be in such a snarl,

had Marx been Groucho instead of Karl."

(S.J. Perelman) "I have Bright's disease and he has mine."

(Erma Bombeck) "The only concession we had made to automation was a smoke alarm, so we could know when dinner was ready."

(Erma Bombeck) "Never lend your car to anyone to whom you have given birth."

(Lewis Grizzard) "I'm not going to get married again. I'm just going to find a woman I hate and buy her a house."

(Arnold Schwarzenegger) "Waiting for me to win an Academy Award is like leaving the porch light on for Amelia Erhart."

(Ronnie Shakes) "My doctor gave me two weeks to live. I hope they are in August."

(Jackie Mason) "I have enough money to last me the rest of my life, unless I buy something."

(Bernard Malamud) "We didn't starve, but we didn't eat chicken unless we were sick, or the chicken was."

(Frank Layden) "My father always wanted to be a garbage man. He thought they only worked on Tuesdays."

(Frank Layden) "I was driving down the freeway and this cop pulls me over. I pull out my driver's license and ask what the matter is. The cop says he thought I ought to know my wife fell out of the car three

miles back down the road. I tell him thanks because I was getting worried that I was going deaf." [I told this at a party for my mother-in-law's 75th birthday. She was the only one who laughed, so it was a good joke.]

Ethnic jokes, political jokes

I remember the "good old days," when members of one group could tell good-natured jokes about members of another group and no one got agitated or insulted. Nowadays in the US, we are expected to be politically correct, to not say anything that might hurt someone's feelings. I liked it better the way things used to be in what we here call "the melting pot." As I see it, either you are an American or you are not, as opposed to German-American, Irish-American, or Mexican-American. [Kermit the Frog: "Calling us Amphibian-Americans is going a little too far. I could see how, if you were a salamander, Amphibian-American would be a step up, but it seems to me you should call a toad a toad."]

Here is sort of an ethnic joke: A man goes into a confession booth and tells the priest, "Father, I'm seventy-five years old and last night I made love to two twenty-year old girls – at the same time." The priest gasps and says, "When did you last go to confession?" The man says, "I have never been to confession, Father. I'm Jewish." The priest

says, "Then why are you telling me?" The man says, "I'm telling everybody."

There! Whether you are Catholic or Jewish, that didn't hurt, did it? There is no reason for people to insult each other but there is no reason for people to be overly sensitive either, is there? Good humor breaks down walls between people, so long as it does not get overdone and lead to destructive relationships. The same could be said for nations.

On the other hand, politically-charged jokes, about Hitler, Stalin, Bush, and hundreds of others, are humorous efforts to help us bear the misery imposed by these people and others who would be like them. During the Communist reigns in many countries, jokes about the situation might have been the only way for people to release the pressures that had built and to let others know that they were not alone in their thoughts, ie, (Milan Kundera): Right in the middle of Prague, Wenceslaus Square, there's this guy throwing up. And this other guy comes along, takes a look at him, shakes his head, and says, "I know just what you mean." Here's one for today, a combination of the consequences of outsourcing ("to purchase goods or subcontract services from an outside supplier or source," very popular and very controversial in the US) and international difficulties: "I was depressed last night, so I called

Lifeline. A man at the call center in Pakistan answered. I told him I was suicidal. He got all excited and asked whether I knew how to drive a truck."

Dave Broadfoot: "Adam was a Canadian. Nobody but a Canadian would stand beside a naked woman and worry about an apple." This appears to make fun of Canadians but actually says some very nice things about them, as well we all should. Whereas: (Arnold Toynbee) "America is a large friendly dog in a small room. Every time it wags its tail it knocks over a chair", seems to say something nice about Americans but is quite critical, even if correctly so. One needs to read between the lines sometimes, ie, "For a fat person you do not sweat much." is not a compliment, although it might at first seem to be so.

Administrators

I promised to say something about administrators, so here it is. There is not much funny about them. First, I must confess to having a bias against these people as a group, even though many of them are otherwise good people and having a few around to help can be a huge benefit. I am generalizing here, so I hope no one (or not too many) takes this personally. Let me begin with a statement attributed to Gaius Petronius Arbitrator, Pro-Consul at Bithynia in the time of Nero, A.D. 65: "We

trained hard, but it seemed every time we were beginning to form teams we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet every situation by reorganizing, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.” Sound familiar?

I am not much of a Ronald Reagan fan but I must admit he did have a sense of humor and had some good ideas. One of Reagan’s proposals was to get rid of “middle level managers.” Commercial interests in the US had already begun to do that. To the surprise of no one except the middle level managers, there was little or no consequent effect of their being fired and therefore absent from decision-making. Those poor people had to go find jobs doing something productive. After all, why should anyone pay you if you do not do anything or, more accurately, do not do anything useful?

Here’s the scenario and problem. Note the lack of humor.

How it begins

An effective and necessary personnel administrator (Director of Personnel; DP) finds that s/he simply cannot keep up with all the rules being produced by administrators at a higher position. Therefore, she hires an assistant, gives that person a title,

such as Acting Deputy Director of Personnel (ADDP); sounds good, so far. The person gets her name on the door, a parking space, and access to the executive cafeteria, plus a pencil sharpener, a computer, and a coffee maker. The ADDP begins to make some headway in responding to all the paperwork, sees some small problems and solves them, for which everyone is grateful, and then finds herself with a little time to breathe, perhaps more than a little time. In fact, enough time to write memoranda explaining to the staff why all these rules they have been ignoring have been necessary and why “from now on, henceforth and forthwith” said rules will be enforced, in the name of togetherness, community, and institutional viability. So far, so good and the ADDP becomes the Deputy Director (DDP).

Creeping bureaucracy

Some of the staff, however, simply ignore these new rules, which infuriates the DDP, so she makes clearer, stronger rules and hires someone to help her enforce them, an Acting Under-Assistant Deputy Director (AU-ADDP), who becomes invaluable and, after a time, “Acting” is removed from her title as well (now U-ADDP). Now there are three of them and they form a unit whose name is changed to “Human Resources” (after which they become

members of the International Society for Human Resource Management, for which they must be gone four days a year, so that they can attend the annual meeting of that organization, plus two more days to attend a Human Resources Workshop). They generate abbreviations at a rapid pace, abbreviations no one recognizes; it becomes practically a new language. Because the organization of which they are a part has specialized experts, they are given specific responsibility for recruitment, payroll matters, employee evaluations, employee satisfaction surveys, building keys, retirement paperwork, travel approval, and control over the photocopier, fax machine, and office supplies. Naturally, it is impossible for them to oversee all this and to produce new rules for their use, so the U-ADDP becomes the ADDHR. Now that there is a critical mass of people in this subunit, too large a group of people to be “sub” anything, it is separated from the original unit and established as the Office for Human Resources (OHR), and additional serious and self-important people are hired to make and enforce more rules, and so on. It never ends. Indeed, now there are more people in OHR than there are working for them. Did I say working for them? Must be some mistake here. These people were hired to help the workers get their jobs done, provide them with

information about sick leave, annual leave, retirement benefits, how to fill out forms, etc. If the workers are scientists, then someone surely must keep an eye on them. They are liable to build a pandemic virus (just for fun), or see what happens when they insert a gene from a tomato into the genome of a hedgehog (might make for tastier hedgehogs) or a gene from a hedgehog into the genome of a tomato (might make for a more self-defensive tomato), or want to use the space assigned to the guy in the basement who has not been to work for three months, or want a piece of new and expensive equipment, or want to inoculate a virus into a rabbit. We can't have any of that, can we?

The outcome

Last week I received a message from someone at my university asking what we (the faculty) would think about changing our e-mail domain name from "colostate" to "coloradostate." I replied as to what I thought of it and inquired as to whose stupid idea this was. Seems the university has hired a "consultant."

[A consultant was at a pier in a small coastal Mexican village when a fisherman docked his small boat. Inside the boat were several large yellow-fin tuna. The consultant complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The Mexi-

can replied "Only a little while." The consultant then asked why he hadn't stayed out longer and caught more fish. The fisherman said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs. The consultant then asked the Mexican how he spent the rest of his time. The fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siesta with my wife, Maria, and stroll into the village each evening where I drink beer and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, *senor*." The consultant scoffed, "I am a business consultant and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and, with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the fish caught using the bigger boat, you could buy several boats; eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then to Los Angeles and eventually to New York City where you will run your expanding enterprise."

The fisherman asked, "But *senor*, how long will this all take?" To which the consultant replied, "15-20 years." "But what then, *senor*?" asked the fisherman. The consultant laughed,

and said, "That's the best part! When the time is right, you would sell your company stock to the public. You'll become very rich, you would make millions!" "Millions, *senor*?" replied the fisherman. "Then what?"

The consultant said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could drink beer wine and play your guitar with your amigos."]

Anyway, our university's consultant is paid to devise ideas, so s/he did. Keeping in mind that not all ideas are good ideas and not all actions are sensible ones, it is not necessarily a good idea to have an idea, unless it is a useful one.

The solution

I suggest we give all administrators 24 hours to get out of town. If they do not get that hint, we should line them up, alphabetically or by height or competence, and fire each fifth one. That would ease the burden on them as a group. Then each year we could do the same thing. We would never get rid of them all, as one can never get rid of anything, at least according to one of Zeno's paradoxes. Still, we would be left with a residuum of people who, realizing they have to do something

useful or have to join their unemployed brethren, would actually do something useful. Meanwhile, they would, perhaps, do more than smile, laugh at the jokes of others, and dress nicely (which they do now because they know they will not get dirty at work). Charm and contrived rules might be replaced by usefulness, support for those who are getting the important work done, and accomplishment. "Power comes from the barrel of a gun," said Chairman Mao. Some see true power as coming from administrative authority; this is not in the least true. True power comes from moral strength and concomitant persuasion. I may sound like an anarchist, but I am far from that. I believe in order; I simply do not believe in authoritarianism. That reeks of a sort of fascism.

The true problem at the crux of the matter

As a member of editorials boards of scientific journals and someone with more than 350 publications of my own, I know at least some of the problems editors face, problems arising from those who submit manuscripts, from the journal's readers, from the journal's editorial board members, from members of its advisory board, and sometimes from the very people who should be supporting them in their quests for truth, moral-

ity, and scientific integrity. As a reviewer for Croatian Medical Journal I know first-hand the tight and high standards required by this journal.

In the June 2007 issue of Croatian Medical Journal, the Editor in Chief published a retraction of an article that had appeared earlier in the Journal (3). The reason given for the retraction was that the authors of the article had broken one of the principal rules of scientific publishing; they previously had published a substantial amount of this work in another journal one (4). Difficult as that must have been for the Editor, retracting it was the right thing to do. It is up to the Editor of a journal to make such final decisions, based not on personal opinion but on scientific ethics.

Subsequent to the published notice of that retraction, a wholly different and clearly unrelated controversy arose. The editors of the Journal were charged with all sorts of unseemly, distasteful, and shameful acts (5,6). As noted above, people who crave power usually make use of rules, the more arcane the better. What has happened since then is a disgrace – a disgrace to Croatia, to Croatian science, to science in general, to journalism, to liberty, and to freedom of expression. Those who are unbiased and have taken the time to read any recent issue of this Journal recognizes it to be excellent

(Impact Factor 1.07), eclectic, very well produced, and to fill a niche. To say otherwise surely must be for cause other than alleged incompetence, a pathetically transparent attempt to acquire power and expression of a personal agenda.

There is no doubt that the transition from the former form of government of Croatia to the present form has been accompanied by difficulties in understanding and in accepting the reality that such changes have taken place, that things are different now, and that honesty and integrity have become more important than contacts and status. In a truly democratic country all statements are allowed, even cultivated. That is the purpose of a democracy – to cultivate a wide-range of concepts and views. Indeed, the word "university" (from the Latin "universus", meaning "totality") means a place where all ideas are fair game, not necessarily accepted as the truth, simply available to those who might be interested in them. Otherwise, one has a technical school, a place for narrow training. Changing my university's domain name is like leaving the porch light on for Amelia Earhart; it doesn't help at all. Wrongly accusing an editor does not help either.

The problems that lead to divorce are never one sided. That said, that three of the four Croatian medical schools with

oversight regarding the Journal have chosen to side with people who have little to say that is valid, either scientifically or judgmentally, says a great deal about attempted manipulation of an ethical process, and says a great deal about the progress of Croatia as it tries to move into the modern era. If such people are allowed to have their way, then the administrators will have won out, the tail will be wagging the dog, and those who are attempting to improve the status quo will be relegated

to being the dog, while intellectual corruption will continue unabated.

My dear friend, colleague, and heroine, Professor Jelka Vesenjak-Hirjan likely is spinning in her grave right now. She had a wonderful sense of humor but her honesty and decency was the key. There is nothing at all humorous or redeeming about intellectual corruption.

References

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