

## Humor: the Door to Understanding

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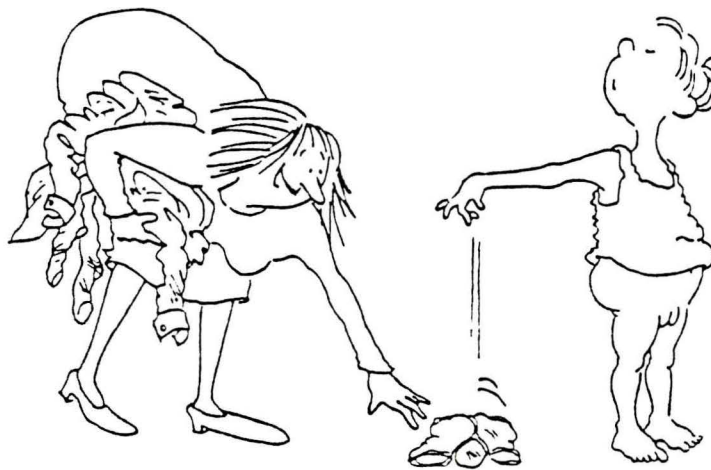
Sometimes the humorous presentation of an idea visits people with such clarity that they immediately recognize its underlying validity or truth. Even taken out of context, a witty expression can sometimes teach us things about ourselves we might not otherwise have realized. Thus Muriel Spark's phrase (out of context) "too cautious to live a life of normal danger" (30) is worthy of contemplation. It might apply at some point in our lives to most of us. What is a "life of normal danger," and are we willing to engage it? Is our caution intelligent or is it timidity? "Too cautious to live a life of normal danger" has a wealth of meanings, both profound and superficial. The next time you're asked advice from a friend who is unduly hesitating, try asking, "Are you too cautious to live a life of normal danger?" But don't try that question on your teenage son who has just died his punk hairdo fuschia and green.

My complex thesis at its most extreme contends that people sometimes learn things through wit and humor that they would otherwise not learn at all. I think Spark's phrase has that potential. It might surprise people constipated by indecision with valuable insight into themselves that they had previously been unable to achieve.

How can we tell someone excessively virtuous that their good actions have become an annoyance? No one, after all, wants to be blamed for doing the right thing. After Israel was established as a state, Israelis overwhelmed visitors with protracted explanations of everything they saw--and of things unseen as well. Muriel Spark provides a benignly amusing account of Israeli pride in The Mandelbaum Gate: "Through the length and breadth of the country the Israelis treated facts like antibiotic shots, injecting them into the visitor like diligent medical officers" (15). That salutary observation, recognizing the value of information, should strike even the most zealous Israeli as charmingly true.

Humor has other kinds of cognitive value. It conveys various types of understanding. Sometimes it helpfully reinforces perceptions we already have. Sometimes it presents wholly new ideas we have consciously resisted. Sometimes it crystallizes thoughts we had not previously identified. Sometimes it clarifies complex concepts we had earlier been unable to comprehend. Women, for example, have perhaps never understood why men throw their dirty clothes on the floor. Specimen A, a cartoon by Riana Duncan, clarifies the source of that persistent and universal habit. Men throw their clothes on the floor because in their childhood, adoring mothers applaud them for so doing.

• Specimen A



"CLEVER Boy!"

• Specimen B



"Hop in, I brought you some clean water."

Specimen B, Carol Simpson's 1990 comment on George Bush's environmental obtuseness, reinforces a common perception of his ecological insensitivities. In addition to its revealing Bush's radical inadequacy in environmental matters, the cartoon also exposes Bush's casual readiness to say patently stupid things in public, supposing people like the whale will believe anything he says. He foolishly has no inkling that the whale is more intelligent than he. Were Bush to see the Simpson cartoon, it might help him to realize how inadequate, how hypocritical, and how ridiculous he appears to an environmentally aware world population.

Humor and wit are good devices for addressing the morally obtuse. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fail to recognize their treachery toward their fellow student, Hamlet wittily compares himself to a musical instrument, the recorder:

"Why, look you now, how unworthy a  
thing you make of me! You would play  
upon me; you would seem to know my  
stops.... 'Sblood, do you think I am  
easier to be played on than a pipe?  
Call me what instrument you will,  
though you can fret me, you cannot  
play upon me."

(III.ii.371-380.)

Confronting the willful insensitivity of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, Hamlet's witty analogy forces them to see both their treachery and Hamlet's awareness of it.

Humor also has the potential for introducing us to unpleasant but enriching ideas. Suppose, for example, that we are fundamentalists who believe the

Bible's Old Testament is the word of God. In Muriel Spark's The Mandelbaum Gate, listening to an old man's admiring description of Jacob's cheating Esau of their father's blessing, "Barbara Vaughn reflected that God had not been to Eton" (17). Her wry observation amusingly shows that our overly-respected sacred document sometimes applauds morally reprehensible acts. In laughter, we might admit an insight that in our sobriety we had previously denied.

Most of the cognitive functions of humor are brilliantly illustrated in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle. There humor shows the flexible possibilities of human compassion when protagonist Joan sees a collection of ants caught in thick syrup. She describes them as "trapped, like saber-toothed tigers in the tar pits." She tries to rescue them but laments, "...it was no use, they were hopeless glued. I was always bad with pets" (344). Joan's surprising reference to the trapped ants as pets causes us to muse about our arbitrary and careless attitudes toward tiny living creatures.

In another vein, many of us perhaps do not realize how we value defects of our spouse or living partners. We might learn from regarding Joan and Arthur in Lady Oracle. "Arthur," Joan ironically observes, "didn't like eating in restaurants. He seem to prefer my inedible food..." (233). Her description of her cooking leaves no doubt that "inedible" is an accurate term: "Swiss fondue... would turn to lymph and balls of chewing gum, poached eggs...disintegrated like mucous membranes,...roast chickens bled when cut,...bread refused to rise, lying like quicksand in the bowl..." (233-234). Having established her own deficiencies, Joan characterizes Arthur through his surprisingly tolerant attitude toward her cooking: "...though

[Arthur] criticized my cooking, he always ate it, and he resented its absence. ...It reassured him, too. His view of the world featured swift disasters set against a background of lurking doom, and my cooking did nothing to contradict it" (234). There is true comic genius in the illumination of a person's weltanschauung through discussion of the disaster of an inept cook. Joan continues, "It took me quite a while to realize that Arthur enjoyed my defeats. They cheered him up" (234). That is a significant perception about one's spouse. Atwood presents it with a deftly light touch and spares us the moralizing. We nevertheless absorb its comic truth.

One reason we learn things via humor that we would not otherwise have known is that it allows us to consider painful subjects we generally avoid. In Lady Oracle, Joan's relationship with her mother, fraught with pain and misunderstanding, is too hurtful for Joan directly to address. With masterful subtlety, Atwood uses humor to take us to the heart of Joan's painful and largely unrecognized love. In the past, the child Joan related to her mother by becoming defiantly and spectacularly fat. When adult and slender Joan receives word of her mother's death, she attempts to call her mother back to life by grossly overeating, as she had done in her childhood. Joan's limited self-awareness is a large element in the humor of her remarks:

"That night I went to the refrigerator,  
her refrigerator, and gorged myself on  
the contents, eating with frantic haste  
and no enjoyment half a chicken, a  
quarter pound of butter, a banana  
cream pie, store-bought, two loaves  
of bread and a jar of strawberry jam

from the cupboard. I expected her to materialize in the doorway with that disgusted, secretly pleased look I remembered so well--she liked to catch me in the act--but despite this ritual, which had often produced her, she failed to appear" (199).

Underlying the humor are the terror and the tumult of emotions that the death of a parent calls forth, as the complexity of a long relationship, deeply felt but only partially understood, assaults and confuses the feelings. In Joan's case, her eating binge was stimulated to a significant extent by guilt at her absence when her mother died. Atwood powerfully evokes the lack of focus people feel at such a time. Her comic view probably comes closer to the total experience than would a grimly realistic or a tragic account. Ultimately Joan does come to recognize her well hidden love for her mother, but that happens only because her repeated amusing forays have allowed her obliquely to think about her maternal parent. Humor is thus the vehicle of an understanding--an especially valuable insight-- that Joan was able to achieve in no other way.

It is one thing to recognize the value of humor as a primary tool for arriving at knowledge and understanding. It is quite another to suggest exactly how we can use humor in deliberate and successful ways. I am certain humor is an effective device in public schools, in colleges and in universities, as well as in our daily lives, and I would therefore like to end with a simple injunction to all of us to use more humor. At a conference such as this, full of effective humor practitioners, that is perhaps appropriate. In the world at large, however, to tell people to create and

use humor won't get very far. Most people don't know how. Comic genius is all too rare.

We can, however, point out that our societies at every level need consciously to value humor, to applaud it, to encourage and cultivate it, to study the humor we have, to celebrate and to reward it consistently and thoughtfully. Once we do this, humor will come more naturally to many more people. Eventually it will so color our ways of thinking and expressing ourselves, that people in general--not just humor specialists--will easily create humor. So my message to the world is: wake up to the treasure of humor. Don't trivialize our delight in amusement: cherish it.

The world at large (in spite of our good efforts) doesn't know that humor and intelligence have a high correlation in both humorist and audience. Humor is not only produced by our most talented and intelligent artists, but as we enjoy humor, it frees our minds and allows us to think more clearly and more creatively ourselves. As humor scholars we need to teach the world at large that humor is not a pleasant distraction but rather a vital, an essential way of cognition.

I look forward to the day when society encourages our minds to become increasingly playful and vigorous, when society frowns upon excessively serious teachers, and when society recognizes laughing students for the good learners they truly are.

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