

LAUGHING AT OURSELVES: THE HOLY FOOL
Rev. Kit Ketcham, June 10, 2007

Say, didja hear this one? A Unitarian Universalist family moved into a new neighborhood. Their little girl finds a new playmate living next door and they are happily getting to know each other. One day, the playmate says, "We're Episcopalians, what are you?" The Unitarian Universalist child thinks hard for a moment, puzzling over this question, and finally says, "I'm not sure, but I think we're League of Women Voters."

Or how about these one-liners?

You may be a UU if:

you are unsure about the gender of God.

you think the trinity is "reduce, reuse, and recycle"

you consider them the "ten suggestions" instead of the ten commandments.

Or since the word Unitarian means "one" and Universalist means "everything", Unitarian Universalist means "one of everything".

And the famous scene from that hotbed of theological inquiry, The Simpsons show, where two neighbor boys are showing Bart Simpson, the modern Dennis the Menace, their new video game. Now, Rod and Todd, the neighbor boys, go to a fundamentalist megachurch and their video game is entitled “Billy Graham’s Bible Verse Blaster”. In it, you shoot heathens with Bibles to turn them into Christians. So Bart finally has to ask, “what happens if you don’t hit them straight on?” and Todd answers, “well, when you only wing-em, they turn into Unitarians.”

We UUs have given the world a lot to laugh about over the centuries since we began to be a serious religious path. And that’s a good thing. To be the Holy Fool is a noble task.

What is humor? What makes something funny? And what does it have to do with religious faith? It’s been said that the relationship between humor and faith springs from the fact that both deal with incongruity and paradox. We laugh when something surprises us by its oddness or its juxtaposition with its opposite.

Remember the dumb junior high jokes from the 70’s? What’s red and goes putt-putt? An outboard apple. How does the elephant hide in the strawberry patch? She wears red tennis shoes.

Comedy often is anchored in tragedy. We laugh to keep from crying. And sometimes we cry to keep from laughing. Laughter and tears are closely connected. You may have noticed that at John Adams' memorial service last fall, for example, that we did as much laughing as crying, and that was because John's life was so memorable. Even his sudden tragic death became an opportunity for sharing both joy and sorrow. Which, I'm guessing, is how he would have wanted it to be.

And what is the value of laughter?

Remember Norman Cousins, the fellow who healed himself of a terminal illness by watching Three Stooges and I love Lucy videos? Cousins called laughter "inner jogging" and credited his daily laughter workout as a lifesaving therapy.

Dr. Madan Kataria in India invented "Laughter Yoga". He writes: "We all know that laughter makes us feel good. A regular 20 minute laughter session can have a profound impact on our health and wellbeing. Laughter is gentle exercise. It fills your lungs and body with oxygen, deep-clears your breathing passages and exercises your lungs. This is really important for people who don't get regular aerobic exercise.

“When we laugh our bodies release a cocktail of hormones and chemicals that have startling positive effects on our system. Stress is reduced, blood pressure drops, depression is lifted, your immune system is boosted...Western science is just starting to discover the great effects of laughter.”

We laugh at the absurdities of life. We laugh to help ourselves accept the inevitable. We laugh with others and feel ourselves connected to them. We laugh to put our human bumbling into perspective. We laugh to let go of unwanted memories. We laugh to release emotion. We laugh to fight anger, fear, and depression. We laugh to ease an unhappy heart.

And we laugh to poke holes in egotism, both our own egotism and that of others. We laugh at our politicians’ antics and foolery; we laugh at the ridiculous things public figures do. And we gingerly and sometimes painfully laugh at ourselves, at our own egos, at our own ridiculous behavior.

Laughing at ourselves is probably one of the most important and yet painful things we can do. As Unitarian Universalists, we endure a lot of laughter at our expense.

Garrison Keillor, of the NPR show *Prairie Home Companion*, has raised Unitarian jokes to an art form. It has become almost a cottage industry for him and others. He even encourages listeners to send him Unitarian jokes. Sometimes this bothers me, because I think his humor at our expense is occasionally a little unkind. But I think he has done us a great service as well, probably without realizing it, by elevating us to the position of America's Holy Fool.

Remember the little boy who cried out, at the parade, "the emperor has no clothes!" and was ridiculed and shushed by those who were afraid to tell the truth? That little kid was a UU at heart.

Remember the Unitarian educator who said "children need accurate sex education" and was ridiculed and scorned by the public? That was Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott, whose radical ideas in 19th century Massachusetts drew laughter and financial ruin. Today, our UU curriculum "Our Whole Lives" has been called the premiere sex education program of our time.

Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists have been benevolent radicals, on the far edge of religious thought, for centuries. We have carried the flag for progressive causes for a long time: for religious freedom, for reproductive freedom, for abolition of slavery, for humane treatment of the insane, of prisoners, of children, for public education for all, for abolishment of torture, for withdrawal from inhumane wars, for civil rights, for marriage equality, for the environment, to name a few. We have been ahead of the social action curve for a long long time.

And virtually every cause we have supported has been ridiculed, fought, and finally accepted. I'm reminded of the t-shirt I used for last June's T-shirt theology service. It portrayed a Gandhi quote: "first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

The Fool is a real historical character, both in secular and sacred life. The court jester was the one person who was allowed to say anything he wanted to the King. He was safe and his character figures in many a folk tale and even in Shakespearean drama, in addition to real life history.

Jesus was not the first Holy Fool---Hebrew prophets and other sages beat him to it---but he certainly did speak new truth to power. And that's what the Holy Fool does, speaks truth to power.

What does our Unitarian Universalist humor say about us? Behind the quick punchlines, behind the ridiculous scenarios, what is the real message?

Try this one: All the people had heard on the news that a great flood was coming, so the Catholics said their rosaries, the Buddhists used their beads, the Protestants joined in prayer, and the Unitarian Universalists formed a class to learn how to live underwater.

And then there's this one: Garrison Keillor did a skit in which the Rapture had come. For those of us who don't speak conservative Christian, the Rapture is the moment in time when Jesus is supposed to return to earth and take the faithful up to heaven. It's a big deal in many evangelical churches.

In the PHC skit, Keillor is helping a child find her parents, who seem to have disappeared. He suspects that the Rapture has come and her Baptist parents are gone to heaven, leaving her behind. But just to make sure, he calls around. Hmm, George W. Bush is still at his desk, the Pope is conducting mass, even Billy Graham is home.

Then he dials another number and gets a recording. "Thank you for calling the Unitarian Universalist Association. Nobody is here to take your call, so please leave a message and we will return your call as soon as possible. Oh my gosh, all my clothes just fell off and I'm going up into the air-----mmmm (dial tone)."

When Keillor turns on the radio, he hears "Meanwhile, in Boston, hundreds of men and women who were protesting the war in Iraq suddenly disappeared, according to eyewitnesses, leaving their clothing lying in the street, all of which was made from natural materials by native people and had political slogans written on it, as well as Native American jewelry...."

On another station, Rush Limbaugh is speaking in tongues and Keillor moans, " why would the Unitarians be raptured? They don't want salvation, they want closure." Interesting that Keillor is still earthbound in the skit and that the Baptist parents eventually turned up.

Funny as this is, there may be sweet truth underlying it. The Holy Fool, the ridiculous character, the one everyone makes fun of, is rewarded at last.

You can't have a fragile ego if you are a Unitarian Universalist. It's a bruising world of humor out there. Some say that Garrison Keillor is a closet UU-----I don't think so. That ego of his might get in the way!

Some humor is definitely unkind. Some humor is limited by its content and language to expression only by insiders. We think of the furor kicked up when Euro-Americans use the "n" word or racial stereotypes to describe an African American. You can't use certain forms of humor unless you're a member of the group.

When this kind of thing happens, some deride the need for "political correctness police", but political correctness emerged from an effort to be kinder. It's not okay to laugh at others' expense. We teach our children that unkind teasing is wrong. And usually we remember to be kind too.

It used to be a sin to laugh. In the year 390, the theologian John of Chrysostom preached a sermon against laughter and playfulness. He wrote: "this world is not a theatre in which we can laugh...and we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins...it is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil."

Our Puritan ancestors shared these sentiments as do some of their modern descendants. And the attitude is not confined to Christian traditions but can be found in early Buddhist writings which used the kinds of laughter voiced by humans to separate them into classes according to their enlightenment. Those of us who laugh boisterously at times would be considered vulgar and uncouth.

The American humorist James Thurber once wrote: "If a thing can't endure laughter, it is not a good thing. Laughter is never out of date or out of place. Too often the intense person loses the ability to laugh and accuses those who see humor in pompous circumstances of being sacrilegious. Far from it! Parody, satire, and wit represent strong emotions, for we usually parody and satirize only those things which mean something to us and when we use these forms with love and affection, we are paying homage."

And the Greek philosopher Aristotle said "the gods too are fond of a joke". The Bible tells us that "a merry heart doeth good like medicine, but a broken spirit drieth up the bones." St. Teresa, the Christian mystic, said, "there is no spirituality without the laughter which the sense of humor brings." And, here in western America's native cultures, we are familiar

with Coyote and Raven, the tricksters of native folk tales.

What is our responsibility as the Holy Fool of American religion?

What does this role free us to do? It frees us to laugh at the follies of the powerful. It frees us to stick our necks out for others, to risk being uncool, to look ridiculous in our intensity and earnestness. It frees us to laugh at all the UU jokes, make up a few of our own, and relish the laughter of others, because we know we are inviting people to open their minds and hearts and join us in this holy foolishness of leading others.

How would our prayer, as UUs go, assuming we decided to pray?

How about this?

To Whom It May Concern, God, Ground of all Being, Source of all Light, Divine Daddy, Whatever,

Help us to relax about insignificant details, beginning tomorrow at 7:41:23 a.m., PDT.

Help us to consider people's feelings, even if most of them are hypersensitive.

Help us to take responsibility for our own actions, even though they're usually NOT our fault.

Help us to not try to run everything. But, if You need some help, please feel free to ask us.

Help us to be more laid back, and help us to do it exactly right.

Give us patience, and I mean right now!

Help us to do only what we can and trust you for the rest. And would you mind putting that in writing?

Keep us open to others' ideas, wrong though they may be.

In the name of everything, Amen!

The Holy Fool reminds the world that there are limitations to creation and evolution. It points out the ostrich and the platypus and the quirky system devised by nature to make sure that the human species reproduces itself. The Holy Fool tears down the walls we erect to protect us from the real world and pokes holes in our egos. The Holy Fool points out our irony deficiency and subverts the established norms.

It's great to be a Unitarian Universalist, able to laugh at ourselves, giggle about our faith, guffaw about the world, and chuckle even about death. Our good humor allows us to be good in the face of all that tries to divert us from goodness, giving us humility as well as wisdom.

My colleague the Rev. Michael McGee has written, "For life is absurd as well as profound. Life is filled with love as well as hate, wisdom as well as stupidity, courage as well as fear. And our religious path at times looks as orderly as a labyrinth and at other times like a drunk staggering to the outhouse.

"To be a fool is not foolish but refreshing, to chuckle through lectures and sermons is not a sin but the epitome of sanity, and to laugh until we cry is not shameful but sanctifying."

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN #123 "Spirit of Life"

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place.

Let us go in peace, with a joke on our lips and joy in our hearts,

remembering that humility and wisdom are the byproducts of laughter. May

we live our role as America's Holy Fool with courage and conviction and

use humor to heal and not to hurt. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed

Be.