

What's So Funny? by Carol Smaldino, CSW

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“With some relation” is a good way of starting, precisely because it hints at the subtle and nuanced connections humor has to everything else, and perhaps more specifically to sadness and to anger in this case. It also hints at the loose formation of the presentation despite a deep encounter with the material at both a visceral and intellectual level.

Although it was more organized than my last year presentation on the shadow where I wound up writing on my hands to remember new thoughts, there was something in common with that experience since I relied on up to the second insights to make for inclusion. I allowed myself to seep in the mixed feelings I had during the conference, which went from impatience to sadness, to intense involvement and even belonging.

Humor has been emerging for me as a radical interruption of what is—the ways we think and feel and operate. It can bring about an opening of the pores of our awareness, while in that experience it can provide discomfort in having our assumptions questioned at times in dramatic ways. It's obviously potentially uncomfortable for the audience who is reading or listening but also very much so for the “humorist” of the moment who is also a recipient, even of the sudden awareness not always so very welcome.

There are all kinds of analyses of humor as hostile and defensive, and this is not one of those to be sure. However I've come to think of humor as aggressive and bold, a kind of revolutionary beginning of feeling, thought, and observation which struggle for their right to be. To be specific and self-referential on purpose, my own beginnings included my capacity to laugh at other people's humor and to be silly. However I didn't like jokes much because I wasn't any good at telling them and I was often frightened I wouldn't get a joke. The New Yorker magazine, for example, was a favorite for many bright people who especially loved their

cartoons whose meaning I often didn't fathom, leaving me feeling inadequate. I especially love humor when a joke can be shared by both parties and at times say to clients that a joke actually means both people find it funny. This is mostly to offer doubt as to the "it was only a joke" phenomenon of passive aggressiveness.

So back to me and my notions and experience. As a kid, or sort of since I didn't really fully feel like a **child**, I alternated between trying to understand the adults around me, fix their problems, and being cranky and moody. I was the prototype of the "spoiled" child who can only be so when someone calls you that since what kid would invent a word that sounds like something stale or broken or ruined? I was overindulged by parents who couldn't say no and then blamed for that. Classically, I wasn't grateful since I was insulted, and the being given felt random, part of adult impulses having nothing to do with me. As such I had a chronic feeling of bad girl precisely because of the sacrifices, particularly by my mother, allegedly for me.

Okay so then, having wanted to be an interpreter because of my love of and facility with languages, I was discouraged at 16 by my eldest brother telling me I might suck==basically more or less==and then hearing myself be nasal the first time round discouraging me forever. So what to be if not the/a savior of the poor, the downtrodden, the ones who had a right to feel as bad as I felt but couldn't say out loud because look how lucky I was...(One example right here of humor being a tad of fresh air playing into the darkness of mood described)

So a social worker (the psychology teacher I had a crush on told us that if we wanted to help the world we should be social workers so say no more), a therapist, what else? And even though bit by bit I wasn't only engaged with poor people, the impoverishment within of the people I met, was great. But before I decided to stay in the field I had to weather the storm of feeling once again like a very bad person. The children and adolescents I worked with in residential treatment made me cry on paper in terms of their histories, but outwitted me in every way when I tried what I now see as my sappy over serious approach to forced empathy. My "You must be angry" was met with "Fuck you, you overly sweet idiot" or the like, and that kind of insulting attitude was rather relentless. A failure as a child, and a failure as a savior...

A therapist of mine at the time helped me feel anger was normal and then I invented my own style of confessing my inability to match the expertise of my patients. And here began the willingness to feel the frustration (had I felt a choice?) of the people so damaged and wounded by life, that then seemed to lead to a different sense of equality: they could make me feel something akin to their own feelings that was real so perhaps I deserved skeptical consideration for their private club. I became more comfortable with my own aggressiveness and so the relationships had more the flavor of mutuality, admission of imperfection. There wasn't much humor in my work, since most of the kids were so on edge and paranoid that a laugh would have ruined everything.

However some of the kids got better and got to show the healthy aspect of laughter. And little by little, longer than I would like to be saying, I began to feel less of an outlaw or perhaps still an outlaw who had more of the right to be so. Perhaps even if I gave candy to a kid while the supervisor said that was enabling, that was okay because the work thrived. Perhaps, as I began to see over years, my inventiveness, honesty and thinking outside the box were worthy even though they didn't have the fancy aspects of proven research. I was not a researcher and my being diagnosed with ADD in 2006 helped me strengthen the sense of being different, being me and perhaps not any worse than anyone else. Of course, being sensitive to begin with there is no easy answer or ending to this quest and it is ongoing.

But the child in me is having a second coming....not a religious set of proclamations...sorry about that. I am playing with my rebellion, with my capacity to see what some "grownups" don't see, and my trusting some of my crankiness. Lo and behold often when I am cranky I am responding to something within or without that is awry. It isn't only my flaw, but it's the nerve ending which alerts me to something off. And when someone really funny in a deep and irreverent way comes to town or to my attention, there is a "Thank God" that rises up in me. It means I'm not alone, and hell yeah, there is that one thing or another wrong. Maybe it's something I didn't think of before, like the absurdity of "God Bless America"...as George Carlin put it, "Look there is no God, and besides why in hell would he pick this out of all the....countries on earth to bless?" Let's be clear, it is this mischievous intrusion that I love and perhaps even crave.

Crankiness trusted, validated, even from within, can bring up the urge to rebel, to have autonomy, a voice, to be “fresh” instead of stale...So being Jewish can't hurt here because I've even read about so much of the history and variety of Jewish humor. Besides, the one liners that are fresh and form a relief at times, come to me naturally. Perhaps “naturally” is a silly word here, because they weren't there at my beginning. But they are the opposite of the silent oppression of depression or loneliness or the sense of being an outsider with no belonging. The humor is actually an invitation, and I can only do it if I can risk rejection which in a big crowd is easier at times==after all I can go home alone. But it's tricky because it's like a shout out to the world and again the miracle often enough happens: there is a hand or a desire or a voice in someone else craving the refreshing nature of what feels like the truth.

We are conditioned to talk about things seriously, and feel that is the way to be taken seriously. It may be that humor is part of the courage we need to challenge a system that oppresses us all. I can't stand just being on the sidelines thinking of myself as good and the world that will kill all of us as bad. I need the world, I need to communicate, and besides I am of the world. Deep down I probably do feel the shadow as organic, that I too would be capable of homicide and more, that I am just as bad as anyone else. Humor, for me, equalizes the playing field..

There is no one formula to this though I consider myself potentially helpful in facilitating the humor urges and competence of others, but the basis is that there is humor in all of us. Where it isn't the worst thing is to force it, which leads to fakery or something which isn't freeing and is just another way of lying. The trick here, one of the tricks in this way of thinking about being funny as healing is that it plays with the beginnings of anger which make revolt possible. Even the two girls I saw this morning whose father emotionally abuses them, came to their beginnings of inner glory when I enunciated what they might be feeling towards their father. One who is eight years old, “You know, our father is really meshugge”. Now you could argue that it isn't nice or helpful to call one's parent crazy, but in fact for me and for them it's freeing, because it's true and hiding from it just gives him more power.

This kind of humor is about opening the pores of awareness, true, but it also opens or increases the opening of the pores of a comfort with mischief, making trouble. For the abusive father of whom I just spoke, of course I will walk on purpose on some egg shells as I meet him in person. But behind his back, I will feed the dignity of his kids in feeling whatever they need to, including fear, regret, perhaps even love. If we can't feel like the bad kid, it's hard to be the trouble maker we need to be in order to stand up to authority.

Perhaps I'll thank my background for making me too much at home with feeling yucky==sorry to be so technical. In any case, just feeling bad is without joy, but feeling the power to question that and to even rise up against it by crying, talking, laughing out loud, is the beginning of a different kind of freedom.