

Preparation for Humor

Humor is found in all cultures. Babies begin to laugh in response to human actions at about four months of age, and laughter sounds the same regardless of geography. While humor is universal, different cultures have different norms that dictate when expressions of humor are proper, and the appropriate topics for humor. We usually think of humor as positive, as it can enhance an individual's ability to deal with life's challenges, enrich interpersonal communication, and promote bonding. Humor, however, has a dark side, rearing its ugly head in the form of mockery, sarcasm, or aggressive teasing. Jokes built on race, gender, religion, and other stereotypes can even be used to pressure others to conform to dominant beliefs and customs.

Theorists have noted that for humor to occur there needs to be a cognitive appraisal involving the perception of *nonserious incongruity*. The incongruity comes into play when humor surprises us in some way. Psychology professor Richard Wiseman, explaining incongruity at his Laugh Lab site, reports this joke: Two fish are in a tank. One turns to the other and asks, "Do you know how to drive this?" The joke is funny because the set-up has us expecting the aquarium meaning of "tank." It's also funny because it is surprising for a fish to be talking, not to mention driving an armored vehicle. This incongruity is the foundation for all kinds of humor ranging from puns and witticism to teasing, ridicule, jokes, and slips of the tongue. Some believe that laughter and smiling have evolved among humans as one way to communicate to peers that an initially perceived threat proved to be a false alarm.

Sigmund Freud observed that people make jokes about things that are important to them to lessen the tension caused by that importance. Here is Laugh Lab's joke about marital tension: A woman told her friend: "For eighteen years my husband and I were the happiest people in the world! Then we met." Expressions of humor in a community may reflect the group's values, specifically the stress among community members as they strive to live up to those ideals and values. Is it any wonder that preschoolers joke about bodily functions, and teenagers joke about sex?

Perceptions of humor have changed over the years. Aristotle and Plato considered it to be a type of hostility or antagonism. In the 17th century, Hobbes noted that most humor relies on disparagement. Religious traditions and communities have often been uneasy with humor, sometimes resulting in its almost complete rejection. When humor is permitted (e.g., in specific rituals or stories), pains are often taken to restrict the presence of humor in other aspects of a religious community. Even when there appears to be complete freedom in humorous expression in a religious group, there are usually guidelines as to who can joke about what and whom, and under what circumstances.

Today, most people enjoy expressions of humor, and the lightness and merriment it brings to our lives, but these positive and prosocial aspects of humor have only been accentuated in the last century or so. Some people now exclude negative humor as true humor, and a good sense of humor is typically welcomed as an advantageous and even essential personality trait. As Erma Bombeck put it, "When humor goes, there goes civilization."

Laughter is man's most distinctive emotional expression. Man shares his capacity for love and hate, anger and fear, loyalty and grief with other living creatures. But humor, which has an intellectual as well as emotional element, belongs to man. *Margaret Mead*.

As soap is to the body, so laughter is to the soul. *Jewish Proverb*

If you wish to glimpse inside a human soul and get to know a man, don't bother analyzing his ways of being silent, of talking, of weeping, of seeing how much he is moved by noble ideas; you will get better results if you just watch him laugh. If he laughs well, he's a good man. *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*

You have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy. *Ken Kesey*

Scholars of the highest class, when they hear about the Tao, take it and practice it earnestly.

Scholars of the middle class, when they hear of it, take it half earnestly.

Scholars of the lowest class, when they hear of it, laugh at it.

Without the laughter, there would be no Tao.

Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching

Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humor? *Frank Moore Colby*

One can't express aggression and sexual drive directly, as it is prohibited in the society, so these desires get sublimated in telling "jokes." If you look at jokes, they are either about somebody getting hurt, or they have sexual connotations. *Sigmund Freud*

Humor, more than anything else in the human makeup, affords an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. *Victor Frankl*

Not living in fear is a great gift, because certainly these days we do it so much. And do you know what I like about comedy? You can't laugh and be afraid at the same time – of anything. If you're laughing, I defy you to be afraid. *Stephen Colbert*

Laughter connects you with people. It's almost impossible to maintain any kind of distance or any sense of social hierarchy when you're just howling with laughter. Laughter is a force for democracy. *John Cleese*

Questions to Ponder

1. What role does humor have in your life? Do you think you have a good sense of humor?
2. Think about a childhood memory of humor. How did your parents view humor?
3. Describe a time in your life when humor enabled you to cope with a difficult situation.
4. Has humor ever been a destructive force in your life?
5. Does humor play a part in your conception of religion and/or in your religious beliefs?
6. What is your favorite joke or your favorite kind of humor – knock-knock, puns, slapstick ... ?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe your thoughts about humor in your life. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "Humor has (or had) the biggest impact on my life when I ..."