

“Co(s)mic Transformations”

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I wish I was funnier.

I love making people laugh.

I love *to* laugh.

And yet, how often do we make *laughing* a deliberate part of our day? How often do we frame laughter as a spiritual practice?

Did you know that studies suggest children laugh 100-200 times a day! That’s a lot of laughter. While adults laugh less, humor is still a part of our lives, our culture. So, why then is something that is so much a part of our lives, often a *good* part of our lives, seem to receive so little attention from religious folk looking for sources of meaning?

Comedy and laughter are all around us in our society. From knock-knock jokes to sophisticated late-night satire, comedy permeates our culture. So, what *is* comedy? Why do we laugh?

In his introduction to his book, *Ha!: The Science of When We Laugh and Why*, author Scott Weems explains:

Ha! is about an idea. The idea is that humor and its most common symptom—laughter—are by-products of possessing brains which rely on conflict. Because they constantly deal with confusion or ambiguity, our minds jump the gun, make mistakes, and generally get muddled in their own complexity. But this isn’t bad. On the contrary, it provides us adaptability and a constant reason to laugh. (xiv)

Laughing is a byproduct of our muddled thinking!

Our brains absorb tremendous amounts of information. And, to help us organize all that inform, our brains develop patterns and expectations of what *should* come next. But sometimes, what comes next can be unexpected or confusing. Take this joke as an example:

David is so modest that he pulls down the shade to change his mind. (114)

When you hear the words modesty, shades, and changing, your mind likely jumps to the word *clothes*. But the joke works because instead of what you expect to hear, you’re *surprised*... it’s

not only a different word, but a different kind of word ... an intangible concept rather than something material like clothing.

Having just analyzed a joke, perhaps now is the time to share what E.B. White once said on this subject:

Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.

So maybe analyzing jokes is not funny, but perhaps it is interesting, even enlightening to consider why we laugh and what role comedy plays in our lives.

What then is humor *for*? Humor brings us pleasure. It doses our brains with pleasant floods of dopamine—the same chemical that both cocaine and chocolate stimulate. Humor, in this sense, is a medicine that can soothe and renew us, can help smooth over tensions between people, and simply improve our mood. Humor is one of those good parts of life.

Humor is also social. Try telling a joke in an empty room and see what kind of response that you get! The social nature of humor explains some of why humor can be culture bound. If humor lives in the muddled thinking of our minds, then we need shared reference points to appreciate unexpected jumps and connections. A well-timed reference to a certain movie, lyric, or event may be hilarious or simply confound someone who doesn't get it. Finding a friend who shares a sense of humor is a delightful gift.

Humor can also teach and critique.

Globally cultures are full of “trickster” stories that poke fun in ways that challenge our assumptions. Examples include Coyote in Native American stories, Brer Rabbit in African-American folklore, Loki the Norse God of mischief, and many more. [Storygrid.com](https://www.storygrid.com) explains that the trickster archetype is a character who represents disruption, mischief, and humor. They challenge the status quo, introduce disruption, and remind us that not everything can be controlled or goes according to plan.

Here's an example of a [Coyote story as told by Professor Bill Cohen](#) from the Okanagan Nation:

Coyote was watching Eagle one day. He saw Eagle soaring on up drafts near a high cliff at Ashnola. Eagle would swoop down, scream and ride the drafts back up, really enjoying himself. Coyote watched and watched.

Then he said to himself, “Those are my ways.” In this frame of mind, he climbed all the way up the cliff... all the while watching Eagle, and thinking to himself, “Those are my ways.” It was hard work, but he was determined to get to the top. Finally, after climbing all day, he got to the top of the cliff.

He walked to the edge and jumped off, intending to catch an updraft and soar. With his skinny arms and legs, however, he just plummeted down. He tried frantically to flap his arms and twirl his tail, but nothing helped him fly. He continued to plummet down the sheer cliff face. He became so afraid that he screamed and pooped all the way to the bottom, where he was splattered to pieces. A long white streak from the top to the bottom remains on that cliff to remind us of Coyote’s journey.

Sometime later, Coyote’s brother, Fox came along. Fox had heard that Coyote’s foolishness had caused his death again. Fox carefully gathered up all the bits and pieces of Coyote that he could find, a few hairs, a tooth, a piece of bone and so on. When Fox was satisfied that he had all the bits it was possible to find, he breathed into the assemblage, and then stepped over it four times. The pile then transformed itself into Coyote. Coyote sat up, rubbed his eyes, and chastised Fox for waking him up. Coyote said to Fox, “I must have dozed off for a few minutes, and then you’re waking me up!” Fox just shook his head, as Coyote carried on his way as if nothing had happened. (Edward, Eneas, Pierre in Cohen, 2010)

Oh my! In assuming he is something he is not, Coyote faces a rather dire consequence. And yet, even when helped by Fox, Coyote remains comically unperturbed by anything other than his “nap” being cut short. Coyote is both foolish and remarkable in his adaptability and resilience. Through our laughter at Coyote’s antics, the story teaches us respect for our limits, the possible source of a geographical anomaly in the local landscape, and the role of others in our resiliency. All while having some fun.

Literary analysis categorizes comedy as stories with “happy endings.” Without Coyote’s resurrection, the story would have a very different feel. As Professor Cohen explains, “Coyote has a gift from creation, the ability to transform or overcome people-eating monsters.” In a world where we face many dangers, Coyote stories inspire faith in the possibility of creative transformation, of cleverly finding new ways to adapt and thrive.

In my mind’s eye, I think of humor as a kind of mental and spiritual degreaser. I suspect many of us have experienced the wonder of the degreaser WD-40. Confronted with a dirty, rusty object like an old bike chain, a good dose of WD-40 loosens the grime, transforming the links from stuck to shiny and flexible. It’s very satisfying, right?! So also, humor can help us loosen the rigidity of our thinking. Through unexpected juxtapositions and surprising connections, we are reminded that the world is not always as we think it is. We are challenged to remain open to

other possibilities. Rather than remaining stuck in the same pathways of thought, humor teaches us a new way to perceive a situation or experience.

Humor can be a path towards new freedoms. Or, as the Sufi poet Rumi writes:

Your laughter turns the world to paradise.
It tears through me like fire.
It teaches me.

Like a cleansing fire, tricksters, humor, and laughter disrupt our understandings and our attachments to what we think we know. Yet, as Rumi shows humor not only destroys old patterns of thought, it also creates joy. He writes:

We're fodder for death so learn to laugh
from the angel of death.
He laughs at the jeweled belts and crowns of kings—
all that splendor's just on loan.

Treetop blossoms erupt in laughter.
Petals rain down.

Laugh like the bud of a flower,
hugging the ground.
Its hidden smile opens to a laugh that lasts a lifetime.

In Rumi's words, laughter even transforms death into a teacher—reframing the relative importance of wealth and power. As the adage says, “you can't take it with you.” So, laugh at the absurd attempts to hold fast to what does not last. Laugh instead *with* the treetop blossoms and flower buds who delight in their beauty, if only for a moment.

Our theme this month pairs stories of comedy and tragedy. And I would be remiss to not acknowledge the entangled presence of both in our lives. In preaching today about comedy, I do not mean to minimize or turn away from all the heartbreaking experiences and tragic injustices happening today. Rather, my hope is that by considering the transformative power of laughter to teach and to renew us, we might appreciate the role of comedy as a tool of resilience and creativity. Life *is* too often hard and very, very serious. Life is also wonderful and surprising. I believe there is a place—a need even—for us to remember to laugh and to find joy too.

[Liz James](#), founder of the UU Hysterical Society, agrees. She writes:

So, in my line of work—travelling and preaching about the UU Hysterical Society—I keep having the same conversation over and over.

Someone will sidle up to me in coffee hour, and say “It’s important to laugh”.

I will nod, because if there’s anyone who values laughter, it’s me.

“We need to keep laughing. Even with all the... stuff...” they will say.

“Especially with all the... stuff...” I will answer.

This whole conversation is had in the hushed tone that I imagine is usually reserved for the buying and selling of drugs.

UUs are earnest people. We care about the world. And when things get serious, our reflex is to get serious as well.

I don’t buy it. Serious times call for serious measures, but not only serious measures. Laughter and joy are not fancy china to be hauled out only for celebrations. They are for all of the times. In times like these, they are more important, not less.

In the words of Dan Savage: “During the darkest days of the AIDS crisis, we buried our friends in the morning, we protested in the afternoon, and we danced all night. The dance kept us in the fight, because it was the dance we were fighting for. It didn’t look like we were going to win, and then we did. It doesn’t feel like we’re going to win now, but we could. Keep fighting. Keep dancing.”

I would add, keep laughing.

May it be so. Ashe. Amen.