

Humor as a Spiritual Practice

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December 27, 2009

On December 16th, Garrison Keillor, humorist, writer and radio personality, published a syndicated column in which he berated Unitarians – he always refers to Unitarians, never Unitarian Universalists – for changing the words to the Christmas hymn, “Silent Night.” His essay was titled “Don’t Mess with Christmas: It’s a Christian holiday, dammit, and it’s plain wrong to rewrite “Silent Night.” Unitarians, I’m talking to you!”

His holiday rant goes on to malign many of the more modern “embellishments” to the celebrations of December 25th. He takes a few more cracks at UUs, including our theology, the insights of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and our supposed acts of spiritual and cultural piracy. Lest you think that UU’s are the only source of his displeasure, you’ll be happy to know that he includes Jews, pagans, and those fond of figgy pudding, as well. Pretty much covers the waterfront, don’t you think?

This morning’s reflection is on humor, so I won’t take the time to address Mr. Keillor’s concerns or his inaccuracies about the Christmas holiday. Nor will we explore the history of Unitarians and Universalists to highlight the contributions made to the traditions of the season by those of our own faith heritage. Suffice it to say – our ancestors in faith have contributed enough music, story, and festivity to let us feel very comfortable about participating in making the season bright.

If you’re like me, and apparently like many Unitarian Universalists, you’ve listened to Garrison Keillor’s show on NPR – A Prairie Home Companion. Over the years, I’ve found it to be a comfort and joy to listen to – I enjoy the usually gentle and easy-going humor. So, I’m not ready to join some of our UU colleagues who are blogging about boycotting all things Lake Wobegon. But, I do think that Mr. Keillor has unfortunately lost his sense of humor in this case. Perhaps he didn’t get enough ketchup this month or something.

All of us look for barometers in life, little signs and signals that we’re doing okay, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually. We try to find ways to live in balance – following a middle path, perhaps, that allows us to be our best selves. And, one of the best ways I know to tell if you’re living life in balance is whether you’re able to laugh, and specifically, to laugh at yourself.

Unitarian Universalists are usually pretty good at taking a joke, and there are certainly a lot of them out there about us. Here’s one I heard recently from a minister colleague:

So these two Unitarian Universalists die, and next thing they know they find themselves standing in line in front of these large pearlescent gates. Somewhat to their surprise, they’re actually waiting in line to talk with St. Peter. When their turn finally comes, St. Pete asks them what religion they used to be, and they say, “Unitarian Universalists.”

“Hmm, Unitarian Universalists,” replies St. Pete. “Well, even though you’re heretics, because you did so much social justice work on earth, you can go into heaven.”

The two Unitarian Universalists look at each other, and one of them says, “You mean you actually send people to hell?” “Oh yes,” says St. Peter.

So they step out of line, and start picketing the gates of heaven, carrying signs that read, “St. Peter Unfair to the Damned!” and “Give the Damned a Second Chance!”

I like what David Pyle says about UU humor: “UU humor is an invitation to a faith that takes itself seriously, but not too seriously. It is a symbol of the humility necessary in a faith that cherishes doubt. It is a chance to find the places where our faith has problems, and learn from them. And, as we laugh together, we grow together.”

Laughter encourages questions and questions encourage learning, one of the most basic truths of our UU faith tradition. Overly serious spirituality can lead to blind faith – “don’t ask questions, just do as you’re told.” It seems to me that if we ever get so involved in our faith that we can’t laugh at it, then we certainly can’t grow from it, either. And why would we follow a spiritual path that didn’t encourage us to learn and grow?

And, in talking about Unitarian Universalists, author Ken Rogers once said: “We do laugh a lot. I think some humor aimed at ourselves would actually be an invitation to investigate the beauty and fulfillment available within UU. It would remove the self-supporting pedestal others feel we stand upon. UU scares people. It doesn’t present a perfect image of spiritual enrichment – other religions offer fantasies of desperately needed illusion. We are willing to die forever, we are willing to live our lives as relevant elements of now.”

Many of you know that Carl and I have spent a lot of time on planes in the last few months. On our last flight the attendant gave us instructions on what to do if the plane developed engine trouble. We were told how to use the oxygen masks that would fall and also instructed on how to use our headsets.

"If the plane is about to crash you can dial up an appropriate message on the selector to your right. Catholics will hear a recording of the Hail Mary, Protestants will hear the 23rd Psalm, Jews can hear the Kaddish, and the Unitarians will be treated to a roundtable discussion on flight safety."

Fortunately, we’re not the only faith tradition that is a source of humor in the world, and neither are we the only people of faith who enjoy a good laugh.

There’s a school of Buddhist teaching called “Laughter Yoga” where adherents engage in a variety of spiritual exercises that encourage them to laugh fully, heartily, and robustly. The yoga teacher doesn’t stand around telling jokes to get people going, they just start laughing and go from there. Soon, the room is engulfed in the sound of people chuckling, chortling, and guffawing to their heart’s content and presumably, achieving enlightenment along the way.

The Proverbs tell us that “The one whose throne is in heaven sits laughing,” and the Bible is chockfull of references to laughter, joy, and celebration. While our usual visual images of Jesus are ones of a very serious fellow, there’s beautiful art out there of a laughing Jesus. And, despite the very serious situations he was often in, Jesus was also a spiritually enlightened guy who liked a party and to have a good time.

In the Talmud, the sacred writings of the Jewish tradition, there’s a story that tells of God laughing. And all of us have enjoyed the humor of Jewish comedians for many years – from Milton Berle to Jerry Seinfeld.

Laughter is a part of the world’s great spiritual traditions, and people who are spiritually enlightened know how to laugh. They know how to look at a world filled with pain and suffering, and also see the humor, the beauty, and the grace of life. The Dalai Lama faces people every day who need food and freedom, healing and wholeness. Yet, he has not lost his sense of humor. His smile is infectious and his laugh is charming. We know this because he allows them to shine out from his inner self and he shares them with those around him on a regular basis. He’s modeling something we should all be doing.

Author Jennifer Louden says she is “wary of people in any walk of life who take themselves too seriously, especially if they profess to know anything about spirituality. Seriousness is almost always the sound of one ego clapping – for itself. Laughter is the music of the human heart. It offers, perhaps, the single best way for us to open up and get out of our heads.”

A Hindu, a Jew, and a Unitarian were traveling one night in the midst of nowhere, and the weather turned bad. They started looking for shelter, and found a farmhouse. They knocked on the door and were greeted by a gentleman who understood their plight. "You're welcome here, fellas. In fact, I have a guest room upstairs. But there's only room for two to sleep up there. One of you will have to sleep in the barn. That's not a problem, though, because the barn is warm and I just put a fresh bed of hay out there."

So the Hindu, the Jew, and the Unitarian decided to draw straws to see who would sleep in the barn. The Hindu came up short, and he picked up the pillow and blanket the farmer had provided and went out to the barn. The Jew and the Unitarian were getting ready for bed when a knock came on the bedroom door. It was the Hindu, and he said, "Fellas, I'm upset. There's a cow in the barn, and I know he's being bred for slaughter. That just doesn't sit well with my faith."

Since the Jew had drawn the next shorter straw, he volunteered to sleep in the barn instead, and he picked up the blanket and pillow and went out. The Hindu and Unitarian were about to climb into bed when another knock came at the door. It was the Jew. "Fellas, I'm sorry, but there's a pig out there, and knowing my dietary restrictions and the fact that that pig is obviously being bred for market, I just can't stay out there."

So the Unitarian said, "That's okay. I'll go out. I should have volunteered in the first place, knowing your concerns." So he picked up the blanket and pillow and headed to the barn. The Hindu and the Jew were just about to turn out the light when another knock came at the door. It was the cow and the pig.

The more we are able to laugh and let go, the freer we feel. Have you ever tried to have an original, creative thought while really concentrating? Intensely trying, focusing with laser-like precision, struggling to get it right – none of these are conducive to spontaneity, creativity, or inspiration. You remember the old saying, "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly." We, too, are lighter when we allow ourselves to be playful, open, and filled with laughter. In those moments, we are more open to the spontaneous, more able to take advantage of the whimsical and unstructured places in our mind. In that space, we are open to creative solutions, new ideas, and innovative approaches, even for problems that seemed intractable.

And, laughing at ourselves helps us get in touch with our humanity and our humility. Laughter opens us up to the possibility of learning difficult truths about ourselves by letting us take a lighter-hearted look at our shortcomings. We're not perfect – well, so what? We're not alone! And, it's so much easier to face that reality and cope with the outcome if we do it with a smile.

In that vein, I certainly hope that Garrison Keillor finds his sense of humor again soon; that he rediscovers the humility and joy that humor and laughter offer us as a gift of life. I hope that each of us keeps the promise of humor as a bright light of hope in front of us, giving us the opportunity to relax and enjoy ourselves, even in the midst of fear, or grief, or uncertainty. I hope we all learn to take ourselves just a little less seriously, allowing our frown muscles to rest and our smile muscles many more chances to get a work out every day.

And I'll close today's discourse on the spiritual practice of humor with this:

A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted. After the sermon a UU asked the visitor, "So how did you like it?"

"I can't believe half the things that minister said!" sputtered the visitor in outrage.

"Oh, good -- then you'll fit right in!"

Blessed be.

Okay, one last joke! In this one, UUs do okay – finally!

On her way to church one Sunday morning, the UU minister noticed a young child in the parking lot of the nearby Catholic church, with a box and a sign: "Free kittens, from a good Catholic family!" She smiled to herself, mentally wished the child good luck, and went on her way.

About the middle of the week, she saw the same child, with the same box, outside the Methodist church, this time with a sign that said, "Good Methodist kittens! Absolutely free!" Impressed with the child's tenacity, she went on into her board meeting.

Finally, the next Sunday, the child was in her Church's parking lot, with a new sign reading: "Unitarian Universalist kittens! Free to a good home!" This time she stopped to chat.

"Weren't you outside the Catholic church last Sunday?"

"Yes."

"And on Wednesday, weren't these Methodist kittens?"

"They sure were."

"Well, how come they're Unitarian Universalist kittens now?"

"Cause today their eyes are open!"