

"TIME FLIES LIKE AN EAGLE, FRUIT FLIES LIKE A BANANA:
DOES YOUR SOUL EVER LAUGH?"

Rev. Don Rollins
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*INVITE RESPONSES: "WHAT WAS/IS
YOUR FAVORITE TV COMEDY?"*

Fatty Arbuckle; "Roseanne Barr; "Friends"; Lewis and Martin; "Animal House"; Robin Williams; "Car 54"; Margaret Cho; "30 Rock"; "My Girl Friday"; Eddie Murphy

He smoked unfiltered Camels, my (adoptive) dad, thus it was through a blue haze that I watched with him his favorite TV shows. There were the westerns: "Big Valley"; "Gunsmoke"; and "Bonanza". There were the cop shows: "Dragnet"; "Hawaii Five-Oh"; "Cannon"; and "Ironside". There were the spy shows: "Mission Impossible"; "I Spy"; and "Man From U.N.C.L.E." There were the science fiction shows: "The Outer Limits"; "The Twilight Zone"; "Alfred Hitchcock Presents"; and "Star Trek". And there were a handful of variety shows that my father generally tolerated as a passing nod to my (adoptive) mother's tastes: "The Dean Martin Show"; "The Red Skelton Show"; "The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour"; and "Hee Haw".

But the shows from the mid-sixties through the early-seventies that I remember best – the ones whose characters remain distinct and whose storylines I still recall – were the comedies: "McHale's Navy"; "Hogan's Heroes"; "Get Smart"; "Barney Miller"; and "F Troop".

My dad was generally loyal to these shows save for his weekly bowling night. But if down-home sitcoms had an attendance system, my old man would surely have gotten a gold star when the people who talked more like us came on our television screen: "The Beverly Hillbillies"; "The Andy Griffith Show"; "Petticoat Junction"; and "Green Acres".

So, I grew up with TV comedies. And, as if that weren't enough couch time for an American adolescent, over the course of my teens I was drawn to my own, wackier, genres: "The Addams Family"; "The Munsters"; "Gilligan's Island"; "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In"; and "The Gong Show". The zanier, the better.

I'll regale you shortly with yet another trip down Baby-Boomer Memory Lane, but let me pause here to say that all that humor, TV or otherwise, can be therapeutic. For real, if I were to make a list of the things that got me through my personal version of a seriously troubled adolescence, it would look something like this:

1. Humor
2. Nature
3. Sports
4. Church

Folks, humor can be therapeutic. It can save lives.

Now, nobody in our little town seemed to understand laughter as an authentic expression of the soul, but that didn't stop my buds and me from cultivating it to the point of an art form, doing our best to be a nuisance to every local authority figure we could find: parents, teachers, principals, pastors, coaches, lifeguards, librarians, store owners, law enforcement officials and, on occasion, juvenile court judges.

Looking back, each of us had some big-time dysfunction in our home lives, so I suppose we put all that negative energy into making each other laugh. Anywhere. Anytime. On the one hand, we were tremendously irritating; on the other, we were surviving.

Minnie Pearl; The Bowery Boys; "Wayne's World"; Sarah Silverman; "The Mary Tyler Moore Show"; Lenny Bruce; "All in the Family"; Chris Rock; Mae West; "The African Queen"

The experts tell us that comedy existed before the Greeks and Romans, but it was they who made it into a staple of what they considered to be "the good life". Greek comedy was often profane, insulting and sexual. Roaming around the rural villages, bands of locals out for a good time were called *comus*, and their songs were called *comoedia*.

Every culture the anthropologists can find has its history of humor. Even the relatively stolid periods of history, say, the Middle Ages or the Reformation, still produced court jesters and the beginnings of what we now call the cartoon. Comedy has been around for a long time.

But, let's be honest enough to admit that neither the synagogue, church or mosque have retained all that much humor, let alone the earthy, silly stuff so evident in Pagan, Greek or Roman life. If they didn't know better, folks outside the organized religion thing might think that holiness and humor are sworn enemies, what with all the solemn, sullen rituals, sacraments and music. It's as though the somber God of scripture doesn't have time to laugh; help me on this one: if human beings were so hell-bent on making God in our own image, *couldn't we at least have thrown in a sense of humor?* No wonder young people are staying away in droves.

Lewis Black; "Cheers"; George Burns; Paula Poundstone; Milton Berle; Sarah Bernhardt; "The Pink Panther"; Dick Gregory; "The Dick Van Dyke Show"; Jerry Seinfeld; Richard Pryor; "Annie Hall"

Like every other function of human beings, laughter has to do with brain chemicals. Physical changes occur when we laugh. Depending on those chemicals, external circumstances and other day-to-day variables, you and I laugh an average of 17 times a day.

Many researchers who study laughter believe that, in its earliest form, laughter was a reaction to passing danger: "The sun rose again." "The pterodactyls didn't eat us." "The lightning didn't strike us." With the advantage of time, we moderns might look at this and say that laughter is nothing less than the body, mind and soul expressing a sense of relief. A return to safety. A return of well-being.

Whatever the origins of laughter, study of the brain tells us that while emotions occur in just one section – the frontal lobe – laughter involves *five different sections*. This tells us that laughing is different from emoting. But, according to more than a few online sources, it might also tell us why laughter is a proven means by which we survive stress and illness. Some studies indicate that laughter is effective in countering depression, chronic physical pain and weak immune systems. It may be that getting silly is a strategy for supporting the body, mind and soul. (This is the premise of laughter therapy, a treatment method that has a good deal of research to support it.)

Just to finish off this section, here are the three "prescriptions" recommended by an outfit called the International Society for Humor Studies:

- Figure out what makes you laugh and do it (read it, watch it, listen to it) more often
- Surround yourself with funny people – be with them every chance you get
- Develop your own sense of humor. Maybe even take a class [or read a book] about how to be a better comic – or at least a better storyteller...

Nora friends, there's enough science behind this stuff to consider laughter as a means of spiritual self-care. And laughter seen through the lens of theology, well, we might say *we're actually reshaping God* – infusing outmoded images of somber transcendence with the capacity to appreciate the absurd. So whether God laughs or not, we surely do. We surely *must*.

INVITE RESPONSES: WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE COMEDY FILM?

Don Rickles; "The Full Monty"; Tracy Morgan; Gilda Radner; "I Love Lucy"; Larry the Cable Guy; Mark Twain; "M.A.S.H."; David Letterman; "The Jetsons"; Rosie O'Donnell; "This is Spinal Tap"

Let's move from television to films. Back to my father, I'm pretty sure that he never saw a film in a theatre, and very few at what we entertainment dinosaurs called drive-ins. But political differences aside, he watched on television (or, later, VCR) every Western John Wayne made. And he watched war movies, too: "Twelve O' Clock High"; "Sink the Bismarck"; "The Longest Day"; and "Tora! Tora! Tora!" But my old man wasn't much on comedy films. Nope, that was left first to my mom and sister, then my less-than-wholesome peers.

By my sister's recollection, the Beatles' "Help" was my first comedy film. (I seem to recall her Herculean efforts to make me see "West Side Story", but even then I knew that musical films are a cancer on both movies *and* music!) And although my mother says she recalls taking me to see a handful of funny films thereafter, she also says that she stopped taking me to see movies altogether after I cajoled her into seeing "Bonnie and Clyde". (I think it was the bloody shootout that got her.) But by then it was too late, anyway. Puberty and peers had possessed me. I would watch the zany stuff with my buds!

But, back to that first comedy film experience – drive-ins notwithstanding – I had never seen anything in such a clear, big format. With big sound to match. What a powerful, almost intimidating medium, the "Silver Screen"! And who knew what a rush it could be to see a comedy with other people, joining them in providing a *live* laugh track? It was a communal event, the big-screen, indoor movie. And not only was it a diversion from real life, it was a *bond* – I was now among the elite of my peers, the ones who had seen "The Love Bug" and "The Ghost and Mr. Chicken" and "Cat Ballou". Now I could recall the funny scenes and lines. I could join in the humor. I was somehow more worldly. I was hip.

You say that comedy films don't strike you as the stuff of bonding for those on the other side of braces and zits? Consider the cult-like "Rocky Horror Picture Show" fans that have watched that film dozens of times, participating in the dialogue and generally making blissful fools of themselves each and every time. They take their fun seriously.

Consider "Dr. Strangelove". "Harold and Maude". "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory". "Monty Python and the Holy Grail". "Dazed and Confused". "Pee Wee's Big Adventure". "Napoleon Dynamite". "Barber Shop". They've all fostered admittedly quirky connections amongst their devotees, but some of

these semi-cult films have spanned the age gap, the race gap and the gender gap. (I suggest that all-ages video games and comedy movies have replaced the 6:00 P.M. family dinner as an opportunity for bonding. We can lament that fact, or we can be glad that families still get together at all.) Either way, funny, smart, age-appropriate movies have a spiritual quality in that they create shared experiences and therefore have the potential for shared laughter and bonding.

"Little Miss Sunshine"; Johnny Carson; The Three Stooges; Phyllis Diller; "Saturday Night Live"; Jack Benny; Whoopie Goldberg; "The Smothers Brothers Show"; W.C. Fields; Bill Cosby; "The Flintstones"

Of course, there are a hundred different ways to goad the soul into laughter. (For example, we haven't even touched on music: Bobby Bare's "Drop Kick Me, Jesus, Through the Goal Posts of Life" and Kinky Friedman's "They Don't Make Jews Like Jesus Anymore" spring to mind.) Music works. Jokes work. Stories work. Poems work. The goal here is not to tell you what should make you laugh; the goal is to encourage you to *never miss a chance to laugh*.

Look here, life is hard. War rages, people sleep on the streets and Bible-thumpers want to hit us over the head with a book whose origins they don't even take the time to understand. Live long enough, and we'll lose everyone and everything we love. Why, in the name of sanity, would we deny ourselves the healing salve of raucous laughter? Why, indeed.

The Laughing Buddha graces the cover of today's order of service. I chose that image because religion need not take itself so doggone seriously. For me, the Laughing Buddha pierces the dense armor of time and musty tradition, signaling the possibility that humor and holiness are not the sworn enemies some of us were raised to believe. To the contrary, we might go so far as to say that *laughter is evidence of mature spirituality, that dimension of human experience that mystifies even as it sustains and refreshes*.

I say laugh with the Buddha. Enjoy good humor. Be goofy. Cultivate laughter. Celebrate the absurd. Let your soul laugh out loud. Spread it around.

Given that this is election season, let me close with a related story.

Seems a woman bought a new Lexus. Cost a bundle. Two days later, she returned to the dealer complaining that her fancy radio wasn't working.

"I think I know what's wrong," said the kindly saleswoman. "The audio system in this car is satellite-equipped and voice-activated. All you need to do is tell it what you want to listen to, and you'll hear exactly that."

Somewhat amazed that no one thought to explain that to her before she took delivery, she was nonetheless excited to know that her audio system was so simple. After a quick tutorial from the saleswoman, She got back in her car.

She glanced at her stereo system and said, "Nelson". To her surprise, a voice replied, "Willie or Ricky?" Soon she was gliding down the highway, listening to "On the Road Again". She was astounded! When she called for Beethoven, she was offered two dozen different compositions. Same with Nat King Cole.

Tapping her fingers in time to a Motown tune, she stopped at an intersection. The light turned green. Easing forward, she suddenly went into panic mode. Off to her right, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a large, tricked-out SUV running right through the red light. She braked just in time to avoid a collision. "Moron", she muttered. Just then, from the radio: "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States..."

Keep on laughing, friends.