

30 May 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I heard this little joke today. A joke begs to be retold the way an itch asks to be scratched, so I'll tell it to you now.

True story...(maybe).

Two little boys were taken to Church, one for the very first time. As they recited The Lord's Prayer, the new boy, doing his best to follow along, said, "Our Father, who art in heaven, Hello, what's your name?"

The other boy corrected him. "No, it's 'Hello *is* your name'."

I didn't say it was *good* joke. But there you go. Now you can tell it to someone.

Laughing Matters

Some humour feeds off other people's errors. If we're into 'practical jokes', we'll set up the error ahead of time, a little trap for someone to fall into.

At the long dining tables in Knox College, someone would loosen the tops of the saltshakers, surreptitiously, so they'd release an avalanche of salt onto the plates of their unsuspecting users. Eventually, no one used the salt without tightening the lid first. We had to move on to other pranks. Or rather, *they* did.

YouTube is awash in 'Fail Videos'. I hadn't realised forklifts could be so funny. In one, the forklift driver accidentally knocks over a single stack of pallets piled high with light bulbs. There's a massive crash. Then, one by one, the adjoining stacks fall like dominos. It takes about thirty seconds for a tangle of twisted rubble and broken bulbs to litter the whole warehouse. The forklift driver gets down and stands still with his hands on his hips, staring and speechless. Then he takes off his cap and throws it on the ground.

Weddings are a fertile fairground for 'fails' too. A chef and his assistant carry in the wedding cake. It takes four hands because the cake is four tiers tall. All eyes are upon them. There's a little wobble. One of them overcorrects, making it worse. The other leans his face into the cake in a desperate ploy to keep it vertical. But the top is sagging more and more to one side now. They're almost there...no, down it goes. The assistant slips on the icing and lands on the little plastic bride-and-groom that sat atop the cake, breaking the groom's head off.

Then there's the husband sent outside to shovel the driveway while his wife films him from the front door. But it's slipperier than a freshly flooded skating rink. His limbs spasm wildly. He brandishes the shovel like it's an umbrella in an Atlantic gale. He battles to stay upright as he slides down a mild slope, receding with gathering speed until he vanishes headfirst into a snowbank. This is when the picture jiggles and we hear his wife – I'm *sure* it's his wife – giggle loudly.

The subjects of these videos didn't laugh. But we do. Why? What makes these so funny?

I think it's because humour depends on mismatches and incongruities. "Not only is there no God," said Woody Allen, "just try getting a plumber on the weekend." There comes a point in every joke, soon after the 'set up', when the story it's telling turns a quick corner. It suddenly subverts our expectations, and our visceral response is to laugh out loud.

Felix Culpa

Many of the 'fails' we see on YouTube are also sudden 'falls' – falls from ladders, falls from skateboards, full-on face plants, and pratfalls – as in the Garden of Eden. "Is this fruit slimming?" asked Eve. "Uh...yes, yes it is," said the Serpent.

John Milton, in *Paradise Lost* (a comedy lacking laughs), said the 'fall' of Adam and Eve was also *felix culpa*, a fortunate fault, a 'happy accident'. Why? Because our 'original fail' in the Garden set the scene for a more glorious redemption.

That makes all the difference. "No one was harmed in the making of these videos." Nothing *truly* tragic has happened if something beautiful or good or funny can come from it. That's why, when someone falls down, they often spring to their feet and laugh, to show us they're neither maimed nor hurt.

This happened to me once as I descended from a high pulpit ("six feet above contradiction," as clergy tell each other). I had just intoned the Benediction quite well, I thought; I'd preached a decent sermon too, if you ask me (which you didn't). So, I was feeling rather good about myself.

As I made my royal descent from a high estate to the plebeian realms, I missed, not the last step, but the last *two* steps. A truly magnificent 'fail'.

It may surprise you to know that a solemn posture of dignified holiness is *always* a bit of a stretch for me. Yes, I hide it well. This time, though, it was a pure impossibility. I went down. Hard. Did I fall on my own? Or had the Lord given me a wee push? The jury is still out.

But it was a genuine 'fail', I tell you. And everyone had a good, long belly laugh at my expense. So did I. You know, *eventually*. Only my dignity had been bruised (also an elbow).

Humour works well when those of high status (or in my case, *pretend* status) are suddenly, comically, brought 'low'. "He hath put down the mighty from their seats," sings Mary in her *Magnificat*. "And they fell hard on their plump buttocks," it might have added, before the censors got to work on St Luke's Gospel. More than subverting our own expectations, the fall of the mighty subverts *theirs*, doubling the fun.

This is why Monty Python's skits were always mocking Judges of the High Court, Barristers at the Inns of Court, Chartered Accountants in the City, Bishops in their Palaces, Cabinet Ministers in Parliament, and Field Marshals on the Parade

Ground. Graham Chapman, playing a Colonel in dress uniform, might interrupt a sketch out of the blue, and say, "Stop that now, it's silly!", feigning a comic ignorance that, in doing so, he was supremely silly himself.

Python always showed us happy incongruities and silly mismatches to make us laugh: a nude man playing an organ to segue between skits, a cross-dressing lumberjack serenaded by Mounties, an accountant who dreams of life as a lion tamer, a cheese shop that never has any kind of cheese you can name, and a dead parrot that the pet shop owner insists is very much alive and 'pining for the fjords' of Norway.

One of their skits from the 1970s, called "Upper Class Twit of the Year," made merciless fun of gormless gentry. We feel that gormless gentry, whoever they may be, can well afford a blow to their dignity. Perhaps they deserve it; maybe they need it; maybe they had it coming all along.

Either way, the joke's on them, and we laugh. It's comedy, after all not tragedy.

Bent not Broken

"You get tragedy where the tree, instead of bending, breaks," wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein, a rather unfunny philosopher, except in his spare time. It's a clever observation.

Tragedy and comedy are just one 'slapstick-gone-wrong' away from each other. Rigidity, whether it's 'physical' or 'moral', is prone to snapping in two. But a flexible soul can, living under the same circumstances as a rigid one, find humour in itself and in the world.

Woody Allen lifted this idea and put in the mouth of a bombastic character named Lester, played masterfully by Alan Alda, in his film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.

"What makes New York such a funny place is that there's so much tension and pain and misery and craziness here," says Lester. "The thing to remember about comedy is, if it *bends* it's funny. If it breaks, it's not funny."

What he says about New York we could say about the world, except the world has better parking.

Later, Lester says something more about the relationship we all have with the comic and the tragic in our own lives. "Comedy," he says, "is tragedy plus time."

I know what he means. Being a 'good sport', I laughed with everyone else when I fell at the foot of the pulpit. But I need more time than they did to find it funny. With time, though, we can all look back at our tragic pratfalls, and see ourselves as others saw us, and laugh.

No one seems ready to make jokes about 9/11, at least not yet. (Does anyone out there know one?) Lenny Bruce might have. Humour's *avant-garde* is always testing the limits, trespassing the border between 'funny' and 'too soon', thumbing its nose at the 'politically correct', touching on wounds that have only half-healed, and flirting with re-opening them.

Mel Brooks managed to make humour from Jesus' Last Supper, and, in *The Producers*, to sing satirically of "Springtime for Hitler and Germany." Yet the Second World War was barely twenty years in the past.

So yes, 'tragedy plus time' *can* sometimes make for comedy. "Think of Oedipus. Oedipus is funny!" screams Lester. "Oedipus – that's the structure of funny, right there. 'Who did this terrible thing to our city? Oh, my God, it was me!' That's funny."

Lamentations of the Father

Millennials won't understand this next bit, but I'm pretty sure none would read this anyway. You have to be familiar with the cadence of the Old Testament, and the Book of Leviticus in particular, to get its humour.

Poking fun doesn't always have to be about taking someone or something 'down a peg'. Sometimes, poking fun at something can be a sign of deep affection, and a backhanded way of honouring it.

I feel this way about a funny piece by an American humourist, Ian Frazier. It's called "Lamentations of the Father." He makes much fun here, not just by his pitch-perfect use of the Bible's tone and cadence, but by his spot-on descriptions of the messy business of raising children. You feel he must know both, intimately and affectionately.

The whole piece appeared in *The Atlantic* in February 1997. Here's just a bit of it:

"Laws Pertaining to Dessert

"For we judge between the plate that is unclean and the plate that is clean, saying first, if the plate is clean, then you shall have dessert.

"But of the unclean plate, the laws are these: If you have eaten most of your meat, and two bites of your peas with each bite consisting of not less than three peas each, or in total six peas, eaten where I can see, and you have also eaten enough of your potatoes to fill two forks, both forkfuls eaten where I can see, then you shall have dessert.

"But if you eat a lesser number of peas, and yet you eat the potatoes, still you shall not have dessert; and if you eat the peas, yet leave the potatoes uneaten, you shall not have dessert, no, not even a small portion thereof.

"And if you try to deceive by moving the potatoes or peas around with a fork, that it may appear you have eaten what you have not, you will fall into iniquity.

"And I will know, and you shall have no dessert.

"On Screaming

"Do not scream; for it is as if you scream all the time. If you are given a plate on which two foods you do not wish to touch each other are touching each other, your voice rises up even to the ceiling, while you point to the offense with the finger of your

right hand; but I say to you, scream not, only remonstrate gently with the server, that the server may correct the fault.

“Likewise, if you receive a portion of fish from which every piece of herbal seasoning has not been scraped off, and the herbal seasoning is loathsome to you, and steeped in vileness, again I say, refrain from screaming.

“Though the vileness overwhelm you, and cause you a faint unto death, make not that sound from within your throat, neither cover your face, nor press your fingers to your nose. For even now I have made the fish as it should be; behold, I eat of it myself, yet do not die.”

Live Long and Prosper

Nancy Abernethy is moving to Toronto next week. One of her daughters lives there. Her daughter and husband are expecting a child very soon. Nancy is excited to live nearer to them, and to be a grandmother at last.

We are all grateful that Nancy made Elmwood her spiritual home. She joined the choir, sang solos, and gave of herself to God and our little community.

We will miss her very much. But we rejoice with her as she enters a new and promising chapter of her life.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew