



## *The Crying Need for Laughter*

*Is the world running out of humour the way it is said to be running out of oil? It sometimes looks that way as we watch those so-called "comedies" on television. But not really — the best jokes are the ones that spring from our daily existence. Here we look at humour as a great gift to the human race . . .*

□ Humour, the moan goes up, doesn't seem to get around much any more. If it's not downright sick, then it's definitely green around the gills.

Nevertheless, in print, films and broadcasting, vast amounts of money and energy are being expended to make adults do what comes naturally to an infant who chuckles at the sight of his teddy bear. The airwaves are leaden with mercifully short-lived situation comedies; stand-up comedians proliferate on nightly talk shows; variety series sprout and wither within a matter of months.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation recently instituted a television quiz show entitled *Trivia*. On it, two teams matched wits to produce totally useless information. The purpose was to amuse.

To relieve the tedium, the quizmaster would occasionally toss out a question to the studio audience. One such went: "What is the most appropriate gift for a couple's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary?" Almost instantly, someone in the back of the hall called out, "Separate vacations."

With a sickly grin, the quizmaster quickly explained the significance of the sterling silver jubilee. Another laugh — live, on television — had been throttled at birth.

It was a striking instance of the difference between spontaneous and manufactured laughter — the funny versus the merely facetious. The laugh machines of television spew out thousands of jokes daily, but somehow there are more jokes and fewer laughs. What seems to be lacking is a sense of the

ridiculous, the instinct that helps man to live peaceably with himself and gets a frazzled store clerk through the Christmas sales rush. A sense of the ridiculous is difficult to fabricate because it usually dwells among real people in real situations.

Hence the masters of written humour are usually the ones with the talent to give wild and grand dimensions to essential truths about the human condition. It takes courage to be funny, because people are loath to be told just how ridiculous they are. One master humorist, P. G. Wodehouse, wrote in the introduction to a book ten years ago: "People are very serious today, and the writer who refuses to take them seriously is viewed with concern and suspicion." There can be no such problem with the gag writers of the mass media a decade later: it is all too obvious that they look upon amusing the public as a very serious business. Perhaps that is why their assembly line jokes so often seem limp.

The true humorist, said Wodehouse, "is certainly the man least likely to succeed. He is like the dove sent out from the Ark which could find no parking place . . . Humorists as a class are gloomy men, and it is this sense of being apart from the herd, of being, as one might say, the poison ivy rash on the body politic, that makes them so . . ."

Another splendidly funny writer, E. B. White, carried this theme further in his introduction to *A Subtreasury of American Humor*. He wrote that there is a deep vein of melancholy running through everyone's life. "Practically everyone is a manic

depressive of sorts," White mused, "with his up moments and his down moments, and you certainly don't have to be a humorist to taste the sadness of situation and mood. But, as everyone knows, there is often a rather fine line between laughing and crying, and if a humorous piece of writing brings a person to the point where his emotional responses are untrustworthy and seem likely to break over into the opposite realm, it is because humorous writing, like poetical writing, has an extra content. It plays, like an active child, close to the big hot fire which is Truth. And sometimes the reader feels the heat."

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### *It can launch a sneak attack on the funny-bone at any time*

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We all feel that heat in our personal lives from time to time, and given the choice between laughing and crying, we mostly choose laughing. Our sense of humour is our first line of defence against life's vexations and woes. A sense of humour can be defined broadly as the quality of appreciating the ludicrous and incongruous elements in events or idea. To put it more simply, it is that sensitive and vulnerable thing, our funny-bone.

Humour has a kind of life of its own, and it can launch a sneak attack on the funny-bone at the most unexpected times and places. For example, a retired beauty queen attempted in a magazine article not long ago to describe *A Day in Her Life*. She set off with grim purposefulness, then ran into a spot of trouble early in her morning. "I'll either have my answering service call to wake me up or I use a dumb little alarm clock that ticks, ticks, ticks," she wrote. "Then I get ready in a hurry . . . I sweep all the last minute things that I've lined up on the bureau into a bag. As I'm leaving, I check my body to make sure I've got all my clothes on."

If only for an instant, this girl had turned the serious and dull routine of preparing to face the world into a comic turn on her own doorstep, presenting a ludicrous image to the reader's imagination. Often such a picture will be produced

within a person's own mind. The story is told of a couple fleeing in their night clothes to a bomb shelter while their block was being flattened during the Blitz in London. They had scarcely reached the street when the woman turned to go back into the imperilled house.

"What are you doing?" shouted the Cockney husband.

"Have to go back. Forgot my false teeth."

"For God's sake," the husband cried above the din of the falling bombs, "They're not dropping sandwiches, you know!"

Not everyone would find a story like this amusing, because a sense of humour is such an individual matter. Some people appear to others to have no sense of humour at all. This does not seem possible in light of the fact that to accuse a person of not having one is an unforgiveable insult. In the words of essayist Frank Moore Colby: "Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humour? The courage that could draw this confession from a man would atone for everything."

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### *A rational explanation may end a quarrel, but it kills a joke*

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To dissect humour, to take it apart to see what makes it tickle, is futile and destructive. Nothing can alter the mood of a story-teller so radically as the whined complaint from a listener, "I don't get it." A rational explanation may end a family quarrel, but it positively exterminates a good joke.

To define humour, however, is not such a pointless exercise, for it has an ancestry which is — like the English aristocracy — both distinguished and peculiar. The word comes directly from the Latin word for moisture, *humor*. It was originally applied in ancient medical usage to the four principal fluids of the human body: blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile), and melancholy (black bile). The perfect person had a mixture of the four fluids in perfect proportion, it was said.

An imbalance produced a "melancholy" man, or, at the other end of the scale, one who was "sanguine", from the Latin word for blood. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, each of the four complexions had specific characteristics, and therefore the words carried more meaning than now. For

example, a choleric man was lean, hairy, proud, ambitious, revengeful, shrewd — and yellow-faced.

By the 16th century, "humour" came to mean a mood or unbalanced mental condition; something to be laughed at. So by the time the Renaissance was in full swing, "humour" was a subject for comedy writers whose main function was to expose to ridicule irrational behaviour or improper conduct. "Humour" had a whole new meaning, and manufactured laughter was here to stay.

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### *Laughing at oneself is one of man's noblest and most difficult acts*

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Comedy, of course, was no instant hit. Man had been laughing at himself for centuries. The Greek comedies of Aristophanes (450 B.C.) still play to appreciative audiences, and in England there exists a book of jokes that was published in 1526 — almost ten years before Miles Coverdale translated the first complete Bible to be printed in English. Levity beat piety to the punch.

But comedy and humour are not necessarily synonymous. A sense of humour is much more than the ability to laugh on cue. Nor is laughter inextricably linked to a sense of humour.

For instance, men at war laugh, harshly, when a wave of terror has swept over them and left them unharmed. Laughter is no less pleasurable when it springs from fear than when it springs from joy. And in fact people will laugh for no other reason than because they are happy. They will laugh — albeit a trifle guardedly — at their own mistakes, and laugh with considerably more gusto at the foolishness and misfortunes of others.

Laughing at oneself is one of the noblest and most difficult things a person can do, for it takes courage and intelligence to recognize your own foolishness and deflate your own pretensions and pomposities. The great men of humour have always laughed at themselves before anyone else. Stephen Leacock was proud of his Doctorate of Philosophy, but he knew how to keep it in perspective. "The meaning of this degree," he once said in a lecture, "is that the recipient has been examined for the last time in his life and pronounced full. After this, no new ideas can be imparted to him."

Humour comes in all kinds of packages from the practical joke to the studied epigram, but the laughs people remember most fondly are usually those that crop up unexpectedly in the course of everyday life. The following incident occurred on a London subway train crowded with homeward-bound workers on a miserable winter's evening. In the leading car, a well-dressed man bearing an umbrella and bowler suddenly stood up, opened the door leading to the driver's compartment and disappeared inside. After a moment of mystification while the train clattered on, a work-begrimed and weary-looking man said to no one in particular, "Well, that's that, then. We're off to Cuba." Everyone in the coach felt warmed.

It's this sense of communal camaraderie that heightens one's appreciation of the value and need for humour as an aid to living. A problem shared, goes the old saying, is a problem halved; but pleasure shared is pleasure magnified.

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### *Finding sources of laughter in a cruel and trying world*

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Shared laughter is often the product of shared hardship or adversity; of people being up against the same vicissitudes. A few years ago Canadian author and broadcaster Tony Aspler wrote an endearing and eloquent tribute to the humour of the Jewish race. Jewish humour, he noted, has a bittersweet quality of world-weariness and self-denigration. The history of the Jewish people has shown them that a sense of humour is a strong shield against suffering.

It is no accident that many of the greatest American comedians have been Jewish. Their cultural tradition abounds in didactic tales emphasizing the virtues of justice and piety; wit and humour are employed to get their meaning across. But more than anything, Jews are able to laugh at themselves; they are even able to find laughter in the discrimination they suffer. Aspler told the story of a Mr. Moses Greenbaum, who had worked hard all his life to build up a fortune and decided the time had come to enjoy his wealth.

A golfing addict, Mr. Greenbaum had a consuming ambition to play on a superb course which unfortunately belonged to a club whose membership was restricted to Gentiles. So he decided to

build up a whole new non-Jewish identity in order to join the club. He moved to a new neighbourhood; he cut off all contact with his family and friends; he changed his name by deed poll to Charles Montmorency Ffoulkesmythe. His application to the club was accepted. He was so delighted that he decided to use the facilities the very day his membership card arrived.

Among the delights of the club was an inviting-looking outdoor swimming pool with a large number of people sitting around it. The ex-Mr. Greenbaum immediately changed into swimming trunks, scampered out to the pool, and surveyed his fellow members before plunging in. The water was icy. The shock made him gasp: "Oy vey!" Looking sheepishly around as he trod water, he added in a loud voice: "Whatever that means . . ."

If the vein of Jewish humour runs more richly through present society than those of other so-called minorities, it is only because the Jews have had more experience in replenishing and refining the supply. Oppression and persecution, rather than dulling the human spirit, has honed their sense of humour.

Many people regard as abhorrent the poking of fun at another people's social customs or national traits. But the Jews — and the Scots, the Irish and the Newfoundlanders — have been telling stories on themselves for generations.

The vogue for "Newfie" jokes in Canada appears to have waned, and not before time, but that sometimes harsh and bleak island has produced a warm and generous breed of people who appreciate life's absurdities to the hilt.

For example, a small fishing village in Newfoundland had acquired a new fire engine after years of scrimping and saving by the town council. The old one was decrepit beyond repair, but its disposal had caused a crisis within the community. The council finally called a public meeting, and the entire adult population turned out. The air in the hall filled with tobacco smoke and suggestions for the fire truck's future. Someone suggested selling it for scrap, and others argued it would cost more to transport it to the junk yard than its sale would realize. Another advised mounting it on blocks and

using it as a centre-piece for the children's playground. Various mothers objected strenuously on the grounds it would be too dangerous.

Tempers were flaring, husbands were snarling at wives, and the meeting was getting completely out of hand. Then came one of those inexplicable pauses that can cut a hubbub dead, and an ancient fisherman rose to his feet. Said he, "Why don't we just keep the thing and use it for false alarms?" Everybody went home laughing.

A sense of humour is the ultimate safety-valve on temper's head of steam. The situation, as the Irish put it, may be disastrous but it's never serious.

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### *Do we appreciate our everyday jesters as much as we should?*

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Literature is filled with characters whose sole role was to cheer up melancholics, to make tragedy seem ridiculous. Shakespeare's kings had their clowns; Dickens' Cockneys had Sam Weller. ("It's over and can't be helped . . . and that's one consolation, as they always say in Turkey, ven they cuts the wrong man's head off.")

They still thrive in everyday life. Any large corporation has at least two indomitable office boys. (Like policemen in the grimmest reaches of a community, they always seem to come in pairs.) Waiters or barmen, given half a chance, like to play a mild joke on a favourite customer. Workers on assembly lines, social club members, teammates in amateur or professional sports — all have a resident jester. Are they appreciated? Probably not enough.

To return to P. G. Wodehouse: "People are always writing articles or delivering lectures about humour, generally starting off with the words, 'Why do we laugh?' One of these days someone is going to say, 'Why shouldn't we?' and they won't know which way to look."

Humour is out there, tottering around trying to cope with life's set-backs. It just needs care and exercise in our own daily lives, and everything will be fine.