

First Parish in Wayland
Sunday, June 1, 2003
Getting Serious About Humor
Rev. Maddie Sifantus

READINGS

Richard Carlson

Here these words written by Dr. Richard Carlson. You may know him from one of his many books about not sweating the small stuff:

“When Bobby McFerrin first sang his classic song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” I felt as if he were singing my thoughts to the world...I’ve always known that, despite resistance and objections from the more serious segment of society, people have an innate capacity for happiness. And when we are happy, we not only enjoy our lives more than when we are not, but we are far more competent, productive, and creative. Without the internal distractions of anger, depression, frustration, and especially worry, our relationships flourish, stress is diminished, new doors opened, and our lives run smoothly.¹

He also says these words in a piece entitled *Laugh at Your Mistakes (and You Won’t Repeat Them)*:

In terms of expending energy, it is far more powerful to be in favor of something positive than to be against something negative—for peace instead of against violence, for excellence instead of against mediocrity.

A decision to make light of your mistakes, to remain lighthearted, doesn’t mean that you don’t care or that you’re not concerned with making an error. It simply means that you refuse to compound a problem by making a bigger deal out of something than absolutely necessary. It means that you understand the value of keeping your perspective and sense of humor even in the face of adversity.

In every mistake there is the potential for growth. Inherent in every problem there is a solution. When you take the process too seriously however, you interfere with your ability to see answers. The next time you make a mistake, instead of dealing with it in your usual way, chuckle at yourself instead.²

¹ Carlson, Richard (1997). *Don’t Worry, Make Money*. NY: Hyperion, 1.

² *Ibid.*, 65-66.

HYMN

Old Time Religion

adapted by Pete Seeger³

Chorus: Give me that old time religion (3X)

And that's good enough for me.

(Repeat chorus after each verse)

We will pray to Aphrodite, even though she's rather flighty
And they say she wears no nightie **and that's good enough for me...**

We will pray with those Egyptians, build pyramids to put our crypts in
Cover subways with inscriptions **and that's good enough for me...**

O-old Odin we will follow and in fighting we will wallow
Til we wind up in Valhalla **and that's good enough for me...**

Let me follow dear old Buddha, for there is nobody cuter
He comes in plaster, wood, or pewter **and that's good enough for me...**

We will pray with Zarathustra, pray just like we useta
I'm Zarathustra booster **and that's good enough for me...**

We will pray with those old Druids, they drink fermented fluids
Waltzing naked thru the wo-ods **and that's good enough for me...**

Hare Krishna gets a laugh on when he sees me dressed in saffron
With my hair that's only half on **and that's good enough for me...**

I'll arise at early morning when the sun gives me the warning
That the solar age is dawning **and that's good enough for me...**

³ *Rise Up Singing*, 74.

Sermon: First Parish in Wayland

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Getting Serious About Humor

Rev. Maddie Sifantus

Personally, I don't know about you, I would wish that our Lady of *this* season's laughter might bring us some warm, sunny days sometime soon. But she *is* our *lady of the turning age*, so we *do* know that one of these days, and it won't be long, she *will* bring those days that we dream about all winter. Of course, when we are *dreaming* of them, as we still are right now, wondering if and when the summer might come, we conveniently leave out the mud season, the black flies, humidity, the mosquitoes, and all those beautiful leaves we need to rake in the fall. We clean up the dream. We look on the good side, the side of light, and minimize the down side. What a good plan! We look to have our fortunes improve and feel we are in favor with the universe again. We are renewed.

Most of you are probably aware of our Principles and Purposes document which was adopted as a Bylaw by the 1984 and 1985 General Assemblies of the Unitarian Universalist Association of which First Parish in Wayland is a member congregation. The whole second and longer part of this Bylaw is what is referred to as the sources section. If you don't remember what the sources are, you can find them in the front of our hymnal, among other places. But to remind you, it says that "The living tradition we share draws from many sources" and goes on to name a number of them, all which were chosen carefully at the time and amended later with MUCH discussion, as you may well imagine. I know some of you were at the General Assembly when the last "source" was amended. It reads the "spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature."

The first source named is the "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to the renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." What I love about this sentence is the movement towards renewal of the spirit, certainly one of the reasons we are gathered here in community this morning.

Part of what upholds life and is part of the sacred circle for me is a sense of humor—that ability to look on the lighter side of things in our world, our community, and most especially, ourselves. Even Unitarian Universalism. For these next moments this morning, I ask your indulgence to put aside your worries about our world, your finances, your health or that of your

loved ones, how messy the kitchen you left at home is, or whether the Red Sox will collapse in July this year. I maintain that, just as Ecclesiastes says that there is a “time to be born and a time to die” as well as “time to weep and a time to laugh” (Eccl 3.2, 4), we also have time for both in our lives—that both are necessary. I am not saying that we should not cry when we are in pain or that we should not grieve our losses. Of course not. I am saying that we are created for both weeping and laughing, and we need to make a place for that lighter side and the place of joy. These are places of renewal and coming in contact with that elusive spirit of life and new creation.

I always like to ground my thinking in our sacred texts—those referred to in that sources section. For us, these texts can be from any of the world’s religions. I just referred to Ecclesiastes, one of my favorite books from the Hebrew Bible which is part of what is called the Wisdom Literature. Another is the book of Psalms, sometimes called the Psalms of David. When thinking about laughter this week I came across this in Psalm 126:

When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion,
We were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
And our tongue with shouts of joy...

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy
Those who go out weeping,
Bearing the seed for sowing,
Shall come home with shouts of joy,
Carrying their sheaves.

Sometimes I think we forget that part of being human, part of being a spiritual person, if you will, really includes having our mouths filled with laughter and our tongues loosed with shouts of joy. We are often more comfortable with the “sowing in tears” part. So indulge me this morning as I consider how we might value those shouts of joy, having our mouths *filled* with laughter.

So, what do you think? Is it okay to laugh in church? Actually, I learned in this place that the answer is, of course! There is a little book now in its fourth edition written by Gwen Foss which tells some of those UU jokes. You know the kind—“you might be UU if...you organize a

crew to person the coffee machine...or you might be UU if you are uncertain about the gender of God...or you might be UU if you get so fired up about an issue that you finally go out and write an essay about it.”⁴

And then there’s the light bulb variety: “How many skeptical UUs does it take to change a light bulb? None. They aren’t sure if we are really in the dark.”⁵ Or “How many members of a UUA committee does it take to change a light bulb? Ten, of whom at least five must be women, two people of color, three ministers, one Canadian, one youth, two gay or lesbian, one Christian, one disabled, one UUA board member, and no more than three from any one district.”⁶

There is a story in this same book which is titled “Miraculous Conversion #32,838.” It reads, “A young mother and former Baptist, Sherry Wells, spent many Sundays visiting different churches with her son Brett. The two were not pleased with any other them. But when they visited the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit, all the boy could say for a week afterward was: ‘Can we go back to the church where people laugh?’” Gwen has this story in her little book, and it inspired the book’s title, *The Church Where People Laugh*. I think that Brett was lucky to have found a UU church where the people *do* laugh. And I think many of our churches are like that from time to time, and what a gift that can be. But we do have our pontificating and sanctimonious UUs as well.

I remember a number of years ago I attended religious education week at Star Island. I was your youth advisor at the time, hungering for the company of others doing that work. During my week there I became friendly with a woman who was leading a youth group at one of our churches. She had a bigger than life personality, wore colorful clothes and had one of those long tails at the back of her short hairdo. She was fun to be around. Towards the end of the week, a psychologist who was also attending the conference came up to her, urging her to begin therapy because in his eyes she was not acting her age—translation, in his eyes she was having way too much fun! This was an example to me at the time of how many of us adults lose our joy in living and sense of play. My friend was suspect because she was having too much fun! At a UU conference center!

Later when I founded the elder chorus, the Golden Tones, which, as you may know, is the main focus of my community ministry, I had many more experiences of people “not acting their

⁴ Foss, Gwen. *The Church Where People Laugh*, 77-78.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

age.” I could tell you stories of folks “not acting their age” right up until they have entered the hospital for their last days. These stories would definitely include how humor helped these folks get through difficult losses and ill health. I could tell stories about how my chorus brings fun wherever they go—including a kazoo chorus which I call the Golden Tones Symphony Orchestra. I can’t tell you the pleasure and satisfaction it gives to bring a smile to folks in a nursing home who may have been slumped over in a wheel chair moments before. In fact, I considered bringing my kazoo collection with me this morning but decided on singing about those Ole Time Religions instead. Just think, you could have been in the First Parish Symphony Orchestra! Watch out bell choir!

There is a conference I used to attend before I got so busy with all this ministry stuff. It is called *The Positive Power of Humor and Creativity* and it is held each April in Saratoga Springs, New York. It brings together social workers, nurses, business people, comedians, and anyone who uses humor in their work or would like to—even ministers! A man I heard speak several times there is Michael Pritchard. He lives in the San Francisco area and is a close friend of the comedian Robin Williams. Michael has worked for many years with groups which society identifies as being “at risk,” thirteen years as a probation officer. He also works with children living with cancer, people living with aids, mentally disabled folks, and he’s a youth advocate of national prominence. Perhaps some of you have seen his award winning series which aired some years back on PBS: *The Power of Choice*, *You Can Choose*, and *Big Changes, Big Choices*. If you ever get a chance to hear him, I would highly recommend it. His skill as a humorist and his life-affirming stories will move you to laughter and to tears. As the French say, “*les gens qui rit et les gens qui pleure.*” And the lessons to be learned are as powerful as any preached on a Sunday morning in any one of our congregations. Michael is not a minister-- but he certainly does minister to everyone he comes in contact with, for him coming from a place of his strong Roman Catholic faith.

Michael’s message is joy, laughter, caring and compassion-- and self-acceptance. He says things like, “If you can laugh at your troubles, you’ll always have something to laugh at!” And--- “Do you know how to make God laugh? Tell him your plans!” He believes that love, joy, and hope are always present-- even in the darkest moments, in the darkest places.

Michael loves young folks he calls special kids. He says, “Special kids are spies from God!” A group he works with took a group of special kids to San Quentin Prison to play

basketball. I was recently in California for a board meeting at the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley. After my meeting was over, I drove over to Marin County to visit some musician friends, driving right by San Quentin. Let me tell you, it is a forbidding place! So, Michael tells the story of coaching a basketball game there. On the convict team, there was this big, huge 6'8" center, and Michael sent in their little down syndrome guy, Jimmy. Michael describes him by saying: "He's got a look on his face like the ultimate peace of God"-- So, Jimmy goes out there to get ready... And he is like 5' and 230 pounds. So you have this enormous size differential. And the referee blows the whistle... gets ready to throw the ball up... And, just as he is getting ready to throw the ball up, Jimmy looks up at this great, big convict, and he goes: "You're all mine, big guy (bad-ass)!" They said it was the first time that convict laughed in ten years! Humor can break down moments of fear. It can break the ice and defuse loaded situations.

Michael's message is: we need to give ourselves permission to laugh. Joy can be a choice, just as Richard Carlson tells us in our readings this morning. We need to give ourselves courage to truly be ourselves, to accept ourselves. Sometimes that means that we need to open up to the light hearted moments of life. Sometimes we need to look at life around us as a cartoon show. We take ourselves too seriously and are too hard on ourselves. Michael says, "the great avatars of the world's religions all say: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself"-- And we do.-- We don't like our neighbors, and we don't like ourselves!" Self-acceptance. Joy comes by looking for it. You have to be able to laugh at yourself!

One more story about Michael. He tells the story of one the groups of mentally disabled folks he works which put on a play as part of their fundraising program. In this play, God was portrayed by a thirty-two year old woman named Ann Marie Casella. At one point in the play, Ann Marie plays the part of God. In this role she takes questions from the audience. Any question. A question came from a very wealthy, San Francisco socialite at the very back of the audience. She asked very seriously, "Why when I pray for things and ask for things, I don't get them?" Ann Marie thought and said, "I make the sky blue. I make the grass green. Some things you've got to do for yourself!"

It feels good to laugh! Did you know that laughter exercises your whole body? Ten seconds of laughter equals three minutes of rowing...and is a heck of a lot more fun, in my humble opinion. Laughing strengthens the heart muscle and helps lower blood pressure. It

produces endorphins which counteract the production of stress hormones. It appears to optimize the immune system. It relaxes muscles and helps fight the chronic pain associated with muscle tension. Your face relaxes. Did you know that it takes forty-three muscles to frown and only fifteen to smile? Some of the most underused muscles are in the face—at least in adults. Small children may have a facial range habit pattern of twelve to twenty faces they use during the day. How do we lose that ability as we grow older? If all those physical reasons are not enough for you, just contemplate how laughter forms community and bonds us together. It reduces self-consciousness and boosts self-confidence.⁷ Laughter can be an opening point to lead into greater relationship.

Humor is subjective but laughter is universal. A sense of humor is personal, like appreciating art or your choice in movies. Or perhaps in the varying theologies as expressed in our sources I talked about earlier. How *can* we *share* our senses of humor? How *can* we all laugh together? When is it okay to laugh? Laughing in church was okay with the boy I mentioned earlier. I myself remember being surprised by it in my early days of attending a Unitarian Universalist church after growing up Episcopalian. I don't believe I ever laughed once during a worship service there. Grown-ups and church was about serious business. There was no sense of play. But does it have to be that way? Is it like that in all traditions?

I have loved reading about the *Holy Fools and Mad Hatters*. This is a book by Edward Hays which turns serious theology on its head through the truth-telling of the “fool”. Hays points out that walking the religious path requires the “balance of a circus acrobat, the seeming vacation from reason of a Mad Hatter and the foolishness of God’s greatest saints.”⁸ “All spiritual traditions have holy fools, clowns or tricksters who try to tease people into a fuller appreciation of the paradox and mystery of life. The stories of Zen masters, Hasidic sages, Christian saints, and Muslim mystics keep us on our toes.”⁹ Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant reformation said in his *Table Talks*, “Our Loving God wills that we eat, drink and be merry.”¹⁰ Even our beloved Unitarian minister and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “It is a happy talent to know how to play.”¹¹

⁷ Most facts from *Parade*, 4-21-02, 22.

⁸ Email from Michael Leduc, 3-22-2000.

⁹ Brussat, Frederic and MaryAnn (1996). *Spiritual Literacy*, Simon and Schuster, 350.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 350.

So playing around is a good thing. Let's take a lesson or two from our children who still remember how to do it. Let's be careful when we say "act your age". Let us use laughter to see ourselves as we are, to be less self-conscious, and to cope with a world which we admit has serious problems that we need to work on seriously.

Let us use humor to open us to new insights. As Richard Gilbert says, "Let us learn to laugh at who and what we are, without self-degradation, without self-hatred, but with a sense of charity which allows us to forgive ourselves." Gilbert had a long ministry in our Rochester, New York congregation, and he retired last year. I close today with this meditation of his:

"May we learn to rejoice in the life that is ours despite the inevitable tragedies that beset us. May we learn to find in life something of the happiness that awaits those who can see its joy even in the gloom of hard times. May we learn not to be afraid of humor when that humor is whole and healthy and leads us to ourselves."

In the spirit of prayer and meditation, Gilbert says: "O God of laughter and of tears, of joy and sorrow, help us to understand that nothing is too sacred for laughter, nothing too sacrosanct for humor, no one exempt from their healing balm to the spirit."

In this flawed world we live in, with all the problems each of us face, all the losses we each endure, let us go forth from this beloved community and release "something of the laughter of life that we might become whole again."¹² Let our mouths be filled with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of joy...Blessed be. Amen.

¹² Gilbert, Richard (1997). *On the Cusp of Life*, 32.