

## The spirituality of humor

Rich Heffern | Apr. 27, 2010 NCR Today

In New Mexico a few years ago I attended a conference on Native American spirituality held at the Santa Fe Indian School. Native peoples from all around the Southwest came for this yearly weekend gathering. After everyone had registered, inked in their name tags and found their seats, Joe Savilla, the convener of the conference, walked to the podium, surveyed the assembly with a grave face, then said, "Before we begin ... does anyone have any good jokes to share?" Maybe four or five attendees shared, starting the conference off on just the right note. Then Joe followed with a prayer. I still remember some of the jokes. Here's one:

*A New Mexico farmer was visiting his Texas cousin's ranch one day. The Texan, anxious to impress his relative, took him out on the front porch, spread his arms wide and said, "Why, I get in my truck in the morning and it takes me all day to get to the other side of this place!" The New Mexican shrugged and answered, "Yup, I had a truck like that once."*

Did you know the words *human*, *humor* and *humility* all have the same Indo-European root -- *ghom*, best translated by the English word *humus*.

Humus is key to any ecological system, whether it be forest, grassland or glade, and it is vital to any garden. The best garden humus, of course, is a combination of rotting vegetable matter: kitchen scraps, autumn leaves, grass clippings. Mixed together and left to rot, the humus pile becomes a rich, fertile soil in which to grow vegetables. I garden every year and tend my humus, or compost, pile carefully. Daily I add to it, and every other week turn it and wet it, so that the microorganisms can do their work effectively, breaking the organic matter down into a rich, loamy, aromatic substance that, when added to the garden, works miracles.

One can readily see the connection between humility and humus. What could be more humble than a pile of rotting organic matter, destined to push up carrots, radishes and corn? Yet nothing is more helpful to growth. Humus is fecund. It's willing to serve. It's a kind of earthy parable for life. When living matter ends its service, it dies into the compost pile ... and gives birth to new life. Earth swallows us up but at the same time it is a womb, a place where birth, renaissance and resurrection all occur. Our human adventure is similar to the sacred saga of humus.

Humor is also a kind of compost in which the organic elements of life mix, ferment and stew, either giving birth to new ways of seeing and understanding, or just reconnecting us with the humble humus of our earthly origins.

*One day a friend came to Nasruddin's house (in ancient Persia) to borrow a donkey. "I'm sorry," said Nasruddin, "but I've already lent it to somebody." Just then the donkey made a loud braying noise from the back of the house. "Nasruddin," the man said, "I just heard your donkey! It's out back." Angrily, Nasruddin asked his friend to leave the house. "What kind of friend are you?" he yelled after him. "You believe my donkey, but you don't believe me."*

One of the important roles humor plays is as a reminder that we are human, that humans share qualities that range from nobility and altruism at one extreme, to avarice, selfishness and cowardice on the other. Humor is

more often than not a kind of realignment with the force of life that laughs at our meager attempts to impose our own order on things. Humor reminds us all that, as humans, we share at our core the same frailties, vulnerabilities. Humor often thumps us on the head with the message that we are not in control.

Humor constantly reminds us of our humanity, and of the creative and spiritual potential within. "There is, in fact," writes Jungian analyst Helen Luke, "no real spirituality without the laughter which a sense of humor brings." Humor helps us literally to revel in our humanness. It offers new points of view on every situation. It takes the facts of our existence and plays with them in creative and insightful ways.

*When a cat is dropped, it always lands on its feet, and when toast is dropped, it always lands buttered and jellied side down. It was proposed to strap giant slabs of buttered toast to the back of a hundred tethered cats; the two opposing forces will cause the cats to hover, spinning inches above the ground. Using the toast/cat array, a high speed monorail could easily link New York and Chicago.*

In the cafeteria at that New Mexico conference, my wife and I sat near two children. There was hush in the conversations; the voices of the two kids could be heard clearly in the room.

*Q. "Why did the chicken cross the basketball court? A. He heard the referee calling fowls. What sits on the bottom of the ocean and shivers? A nervous wreck."*

The girls giggled -- and the world, for the moment, seemed whole and complete. We humans grow from the energy of our laughter more than we grow from our gravity. The child, discovering the magic of humor, finds a new plateau from which to view life differently.

Heard any good jokes lately?

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