

HUMOR...What's funny and what isn't

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In the split second where you understand a joke, you experience a moment of “enlightenment.” It is well known that this moment must come spontaneously, that it cannot be achieved by “explaining” the joke, i.e. by intellectual analysis. Only with a sudden intuitive insight into the nature of the joke do we experience the liberating laughter the joke is meant to produce.

-Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*

Humor is a topic that is close to my heart, actually closer to my mouth—a little too close sometimes. Humor has gotten me into (and out of) more trouble than any of the other crazy things I have done in my past. I was the class clown, the joker, and the smart ass. To be honest, humor was/is a compulsion . . . luckily one that I have learned to control and utilize. Out of necessity, I have come to understand humor in its many contexts and applications.

What is humor?

More than just jokes or funny stories, humor is an essential quality that can help us form connections with each other. It brings us delight and joy, and when used well, it is one of the best things we experience.

Humor is a significant communication tool that can be used in a variety of ways: as a coping mechanism, a learning device, a bonding tool to develop rapport, a controlling tactic to maintain a situation, a reframing device to bring a new perspective, a way to reduce or disperse tension in a difficult moment, a distancing mechanism, a commentary, a means of healing, and, of course, a way of having fun, pleasure, and enjoyment. We all know that there is some truth behind every joke. Through humor, its various uses and applications, we are afforded different ways of looking at things.

Humor also makes learning easier. The more pleasure we experience while learning, the more likely we are to retain things, and, maybe even more importantly, to return for another experience of learning. Humor makes us smile and laugh, and through it we feel more connected to others and to ourselves. Humor is a gift that makes us feel young and hopeful.

Where does it all begin?

You probably can't recall the first thing that made you laugh. No doubt it was before you could understand language. Something in us seems to be wired-in for this kind of experience and expression. We love to see infants laugh. Something compels them to respond to certain things in this way. At some point in children's development, we can see the beginning of their sense of humor with pee-pee and kaka jokes. I always find it adorable when a child tells me a joke that makes no sense at all, yet they find it hysterical. It sounds something like this, "There was a cat . . . and he went to the store . . . and then . . . and then . . . he ate all the ice cream!!!" And the child is now laughing uncontrollably, and we are left to wonder what it is they find so funny. Somewhere inside them they are learning to recognize what a joke is; they just haven't learned what funny is—or maybe they have.

I have looked at more developmental charts than I ever wanted to, and nowhere was I able to find any reference to when a child's sense of humor begins to develop or how this happens. Isn't it odd that something so fundamental to all human beings seems to have been missed in the scope of trying to understand human development?

Humor is part of our biology, maybe biology in general. In Amherst, Moshe told this delightful story about a dog's sense of humor.¹ The story is taken from Alfred Brehm's *An Introduction into the Life of Animals*. Moshe describes an evening when Brehm and his wife were sitting in a room, Brehm reading while his wife was knitting, with their Great Dane lying near them. One of the balls of wool rolled to the floor, and Brehm "saw the Dane lying in front of him, and looking at him so intently, with such a brilliant kind of expression, that he [Brehm] became aware of it in spite of reading the paper. He took a look at the dog—he couldn't understand [the expression]—and then he heard his wife say, 'Look, the wool disappeared. Where is the wool?' . . . He didn't know what to say. He looked at the dog, and then, when she turned away looking for the wool, the dog who lay there, opened [his mouth] and showed him that he had the wool in his mouth, closed it again. . . . The dog so intently called his attention, showing him the funny joke that he had the wool. . . . A Dane is not an intelligent dog, but what would you think of a sense of humor like that? Heh? And when you read Brehm . . . he describes the character of the Danish dog. He does it with all sorts of animals, and it is a joy to read that book. . . . And there are thousands of stories that I tell that I remember until today from that book."

Why we feel better after we laugh

We all know that laughing makes us feel better, but do we have any idea why? Aside from possibly relieving some nervous tension in a situation, what happens in us? Recent research about humor and the brain can give us some ideas.

¹ Amherst Training Transcripts, Year 2, June 8, 1981.

In a study written up in the article “Why Clowns Taste Funny: The Relationship between Humor and Semantic Ambiguity,” researchers used Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to show that reward areas of our brains, the limbic system, light up much more when we hear and process jokes than when we hear ordinary speech.² The response increased relative to how funny the participants found each joke.

In another article, “Social laughter is correlated with an elevated pain threshold,” it was found that, “The results show that pain thresholds are significantly higher after laughter than in the control condition. . . . We suggest that laughter, through an endorphin-mediated opiate effect, may play a crucial role in social bonding.”³

While we may not be really surprised with these kinds of discoveries, it is interesting to understand some of the relationships that are developed in the brain when we laugh or get a joke. Our understanding of how our self-image is made up of thinking, feeling, sensing, and moving might be further understood, even expanded, through these kinds of discoveries in neuroscience.

I have another idea. As we know, our habits affect how we hold ourselves. Our diaphragm can be part of these patterns of tension and holding. When we laugh, the diaphragm (often beginning from a held place) moves up and down, eventually settling in a more neutral place. This new place is a resting point where there is more freedom to move in each direction (sound familiar?), different from where it was habitually held and resulting in a greater sense of ease in our breathing and in our selves generally.

Timing, orientation and manipulation = humor

These words are familiar to us all in how they relate to and comprise a well-organized movement. Of course, when Moshe spoke about timing, orientation, and manipulation, I don’t think telling a joke was quite what he had in mind, but it’s interesting how these same ideas relate to humor or telling a joke.

When something is off in someone’s timing, orientation, or manipulation in his or her movement, it is often perceived as funny. Most slapstick or physical humor comes from the disruption of one of these elements. But these elements can be seen in other kinds of humor too.

² Tristan A. Bekinschtein, Matthew H. Davis, Jennifer M. Rodd, and Adrian M. Owen, “Why Clowns Taste Funny: The Relationship between Humor and Semantic Ambiguity,” *The Journal of Neuroscience* 31, no. 26, (2011): 9665-9671.

³ R. I. M. Dunbar, Rebecca Baron, Anna Frangou, Eiluned Pearce, Edwin J. C. van Leeuwen, Julie Stow, Giselle Partridge, Ian MacDonald, Vincent Barra, and Mark van Vugt, “Social laughter is correlated with an elevated pain threshold,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society* 279, no. 1731 (2012): 1161-1167.

Of course we all know what the secret to telling a good joke is
TIMING!!! No differently than how a clumsy movement often has poor timing, a joke with poor timing just isn't funny.

The moment when we get a joke is a change in our orientation. We are heading in one direction, when all of a sudden it's shifted. It's the surprise, the unexpected and new perspective that makes us laugh.

The joke itself is like a manipulation—a set up, to bring you into a context which will lead to an understanding that will help you “get” the punch line.

Humor is also sometimes not funny. Humor can be divisive and alienate us from each other, and it can have implications that affect our mood, our physiology, and our self-image.

Humor, learning and...not funny...

As Feldenkrais practitioners, we function within the very specific context of *learning*. Although ideally all learning milieus would invite qualities of experience like feeling safe and feeling the willingness to make mistakes and ask silly questions, we all know this isn't the case. The kind of learning environment we strive to create has an even higher standard for these conditions for learning, conditions for insight, and conditions for wonder, and it's through this background that we need to understand humor and how it can best be used.

This is where the use of humor can become a bit trickier, because humor has the potential to disrupt someone's sense of safety. Understanding how to use it effectively is essential.

We also really never know what someone else might find funny, or more importantly, what they think is NOT funny. When using humor, and finding out about another's sense of humor, we inevitably encounter a boundary. Unfortunately, we only know we have encountered a boundary once we have already crossed it. And often at that point, it's too late.

There are a couple of ways we can deal with situations like this. One is to understand more distinctions about humor; the other is to respond to such situations in ways that can help us dis-alienate another person.

Distinctions in humor: At whose expense?

A joke is always at someone's expense: *yours, mine, theirs, or ours*. This isn't a bad thing, but it's a distinction that can greatly enhance our understanding of why and when something is funny.

When I make a joke at *your* expense, it may be very funny, but it also has the possibility of making you feel called out or picked on. When a joke is made about one person, others present may see the humor in it and even think that they are laughing along with that person. But that person may take it in another way.

It's also possible that another person may then wonder if he or she is the next in line to be the brunt of a joke. There exists the potential to disrupt or diminish the sense of safety, both for an individual and for the others present (especially in a learning situation).

I can make a joke at *my* expense, and again, it might be very funny. But if it is too self-deprecating, it can make you feel uncomfortable, to the point where you start to feel like this guy has a problem, and you might not want to learn from him.

Then there is the joke at *their* expense. You know, like a Polish, gay, Jewish, black, blonde or whatever joke, which, if you in any way identify with that group, well, we all know how insulting this can be. Of course it then compels me to ask . . . did you hear about the black, Polish, gay, Jewish guy who dyed his hair blonde? Okay . . . I won't go there. But maybe that made you chuckle a little—if it did, how come?

That joke brought us all more onto the same page, because it included everyone. It may not be the best example, but when a joke is about “us,” it always works. When it is at *our* expense, we can all laugh and feel safe.

This is why people feel comfortable making fun of their own population: a Jew can tell a joke about a Jew, a black about a black, a gay about a gay, and everyone is included (it doesn't work with blondes . . . oops . . . see, that's what gets me in trouble). And now we can more clearly see that when someone *from outside the group* makes the joke, it becomes about them or you—it is no longer about us.

Jokes about everyone or us are the hardest ones to find. They fall into two categories that usually imply a shared reference system. There are the jokes where the “us” is obvious, where even someone who just arrived into the group would laugh. The other is a category that develops over time. For example, in my trainings, as the safety (and the humor) develops, there is an unstated but consensual agreement about what is deemed acceptable as humor. When someone new arrives who has not *grown* into this agreement, however, it can appear unsafe and even be disturbing to the newcomer. This is yet another chance to either acknowledge or shift one's humor.

Whenever I teach, I have gotten into the habit of beginning with this statement: “I use humor when I teach . . . and sometimes it's not funny. So if I say something that you don't find funny, please let me know or speak to someone else and ask them to let me know, because the last thing I want is for your learning to be disrupted or viewed through this kind of lens.”

And you know what—it works! I know this because people give me feedback and tell me how a comment I made or a joke I told them made them feel. This feedback informs me, I learn from it, and I become more sensitive and more skilled in how I use my humor.

How do we dis-alienate someone?

Before we can dis-alienate, we have to recognize that we have alienated someone. We can't always know this, but usually the signs are there, and frequently we just ignore them. There are many indications of when we have crossed someone's boundary. Most often the expression is momentary, which is why it so easy to just forget about it and move on. When we do that, we have disrupted something in our relationship with that person and created a little more distance between us.

Can you recall seeing a fleeting look of shock on someone's face, or their expression freezes and then uncomfortably shifts? Maybe they hold their breath briefly, or there is that passing hurt look. Or maybe you have been on the receiving end and recognize it as having been your own experience. We all have seen or felt this, and we have all ignored both giving it and getting it. Once in a while someone will say, "Hey, that's not funny," but most often they just distance themselves. The question is, when we are the one who made the joke, how often do we stop and make it right again?

To do so demands going out of our way to respond to something when it's usually much easier to ignore it. We have to practice acknowledging that we have made someone uncomfortable, and then we have to make *ourselves* uncomfortable by responding *in that very moment*. Doing this often requires a huge shift in our self-image. Instead of barreling ahead as if nothing happened, we have to learn to be reversible, interrupt the moment, and do something about it. In fact, the only choices available are to ignore what we said and how they responded, freezing in an uneasy silence until something shifts, or back up (be reversible) and make amends.

How we respond in this situation could sound something like this:

"I'm sorry . . . I think I just upset you."

"You know, I meant that to be funny, but I think maybe it wasn't . . . I'm sorry."

"Did I just hurt your feelings? It really wasn't my intention . . . I'm sorry."

"Did I say something wrong? If I did . . . I'm sorry."

Saying these kinds of things, or some variation of them, feels awkward. And often the response is, "No, not at all . . . I'm fine." This is because it feels awkward for the other person as well.

I have practiced going out of my way to acknowledge a poor joke. Even when I get what seems like a neutral response, I continue the conversation and say, "Well, you may be fine, but I still feel bad that I said it."

And that makes all the difference in the world—a simple response that lets the other person know that you “saw them” and don’t want to let that moment go by!

The question is, are you willing to feel a little uneasy in order to further your rapport, or will you let that moment be the beginning of the estrangement of your relationship?

Whoever said changing your self-image would be comfortable?

When is humor appropriate or inappropriate?

Since we are looking at humor within the context of learning, we might look at the bigger question of when humor is appropriate or inappropriate. One thing that has a huge influence on whether or not something is funny is the setting in which it’s presented. We have all heard jokes that are really funny, but when told in a different situation, well, there’s that moment of awkward silence followed by forced laughter (maybe). Almost any joke is appropriate in the right circumstances, and most jokes will be deemed inappropriate in particular situations.

I have found only three settings where a joke seems to be inappropriate almost always:

1. If we are all in a room and someone rushes in and says that Jane/Jack/John (a person we all know) has died. A joke at that moment just does not work. In fact in the immediacy of any disaster, it is unlikely that a joke can work.
2. When someone farts loudly during an Awareness Through Movement (ATM) class! We all know this one; someone is side-sitting, turning, and all of a sudden *brrraapp* . . . and what happens? Nothing. They keep moving like nothing happened, like it wasn’t them! And we never say anything. We can’t, because if we do, we end up “pointing them out” and potentially disrupting their sense of safety in learning.
3. When someone is under anesthesia. In the book, *Mind-Body Therapy – Methods of Ideodynamic Healing in Hypnosis*, Ernest Rossi and David Cheek explain about how things are heard under anesthesia.⁴ They say, “The patient in surgical plane anesthesia is able to hear meaningful sounds in the operating room. *The deep unconscious mind is devoid of humor* [my italics]. It records and associates communications in a most literal way.”

In an ATM lesson one enters into a state that is very literal and concrete. For example, if I ask, “What would it be like to roll onto your back now?” The answer might be, “it would be nice,” or “okay,” or “fine.” It’s often not heard as an instruction to lie on one’s back.

A joke during ATM is often taken in this way, concretely, and hence often not understood. Because of this, we need to be more attentive when using humor in our lessons. And even when a joke is understood, what is the response? I jokingly say that a good response to a joke during an ATM is if you see their breathing change.

⁴ Ernest Rossi, Ph.D. and David Cheek, M.D., *Mind-Body Therapy: Methods of Ideodynamic Healing in Hypnosis* (New York: Norton, 1988), 119.

Now, is it possible to make a joke when someone farts in a class? Of course it is, but it definitely needs a very particular context. I can't imagine a joke about this working in the first ATM of a workshop or a series of classes. Bill Cosby says a fart is the prelude to intimacy. Our classes are intimate. People are getting more intimate with themselves, and we don't want to disrupt that. But if the person who farts makes a joke about it, or if the group has been together for long enough and knows each other very well, yes, then it might work.

Remember, all these ideas, while they may seem a bit dry, are there to help you use humor more often. Making people smile and laugh makes them happier!

I can't remember, much less tell jokes

Very often I meet people who say they can't remember or tell jokes. Here are two simple exercises that might help if you fall into either of these categories.

To remember a joke you need to tell it *to three people, right away*. It really does help. There is a much better chance of retaining it by practicing it. The more often you tell it, the more likely you will remember it.

To be able to tell a joke well is a bit harder. One of the mistakes people make is wanting and expecting a certain response. They think the joke is hysterical and get so excited telling it that they botch it up or spend too much energy and attention looking for and anticipating the same hysterical response from others.

Here is a possible continuum of responses to something funny:

Falling down peeing in your pants – uncontrollable laughing – belly laughing – laughing – giggling – chuckling – amusement – pleasure – smiling – interest – still listening . . .

Imagine you heard a joke that made you laugh uncontrollably. If you tell that joke expecting that kind of response, it might work, but too often it amps up how you tell the joke, looking too much for the same outcome. Think of telling the joke, but instead of expecting *uncontrollable laughter*, only expect *giggling*. If your expectation of how someone responds is taken two or three notches down on the continuum, it can help change how you tell the joke.

Conclusion (for the moment)

While the ideas here are interesting to consider, in reality they will neither help us tell a joke any better nor develop a sense of humor. They might give us some insights into understanding someone else's sense of humor, or even your own. Whether you use humor or just work in that field, I hope that what I have presented here will give you

more information about when it's working and when it isn't, what to do and what not to do, how to be reversible in it, and how to enjoy it more and more and more.

Whether you were the funniest person in fifth grade or you laughed at the funniest kid in fifth grade, humor is an acquired skill that gets better with practice.

Understanding your relationship with humor takes time (it took/is taking me a long time). Take your time, smile as often as you can, laugh as much as you can, and share that joy with everyone you know!

And...

As you can see, writing about humor is not so funny. I have done my best to interject a little bit of it here and there. In lieu of humor in this article, Katrin Smithback, the *Journal* editor, has peppered this issue with some of her and my favorite Feldenkrais jokes. I hope you find at least some of them funny.