

Laughing at Death

Death Anxiety, the First Cause of Laughter;
Laughter can be savage but in faith and grace a guard against fundamentalism.

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We play with death anxiety in the many expressions of humor. This is a concept that first occurred to me from reading Ernest Becker, whose writings made me increasingly aware of how vital a motivator the denial of death is in human emotions, thought, and behavior. Our sense of humor, our laughter, the comic in all its manifestations, is no exception. Becker says:

... the laughter: this is really a reflection of a very advanced stage of faith and grace, and it's another thing the youth do not understand. Perhaps when and if they succeed in getting back on the road, getting over some of their alienation, they might understand the smile and the laugh. (Bates, 1977, p. 224)

... to live is to play at the meaning of life. (Becker, 1973, p. 201)

Jokes

Laughter comes suddenly, bursting out, as a momentary rush of pleasure. Peekaboo! Where did Mommy go? Oh! There she is—Smile!—my world is intact after all. Here we see that even with infants, existential uncertainty is already taking its initial peeks at us—and we're smiling.

At first we can't tolerate Mommy's absence for more than a few blinks of an eye. A glimpse of human helplessness is all a baby can stand without furious, full-decibelled cries of separation terror. As youngsters grow, they try to immunize themselves against the scary world by venturing without Mom into escalating tests of courage against monsters, both real and imagined. The fundamental incongruity between ideal and real—between dreams of utopia and hard waking reality, which is our existential condition, gradually dawns on us. We are inescapably vulnerable and doomed creatures for whom, even in ordinary life, tragedy lurks.

This is monstrous in itself. There is no guarantee that we will see tomorrow, let alone age 70. Reassurance from Mother no longer works. The mother of all monsters, the randomness of fickle fate bringing tragedy and death, this inevitability haunts our days and dreams. And what is our refuge? Social culture comes to our rescue, with songs and stories, rituals and belief systems, the sacred canopies, ego-boosting, life-enhancing, and death-denying. We feel immortal, enveloped in our culture as valued members in a meaningful universe (Pyszczynski et al., 2003, pp. 18-27).

The dread of death is terrifyingly magnified when we consider the possibility that our life and death could be insignificant in a meaningless indifferent universe. Participation in the transcending cultural drama lends meaning and enables us to keep such dark concerns out of mind: unconscious, suppressed by the security blanket of social verities enfolding us in their comforting embrace.

Without the transcending envelopment of cultural belief systems for understanding the world and our function in it, we might just cower in bed shrouded in depression, or in mortal terror for fear of a careening car or a malevolent virus. Culture provides us with 'cover,' with a sacred canopy, to use Peter Berger's (1967) apt image. All viable cultures, whether religious or

secular, are ‘sacred’ at their root because they provide meaningful answers to the otherwise threatening questions of existence. But especially in modern times, we have seen that the fabric of culture is not always so tightly woven; is not impervious. We have come to see that it is, in fact, a ‘fabrication,’ a social construction, and in a very real sense ‘fictional’ (Anderson, 1990; Becker 1971; Berger, 1966). And when the existential cover that culture provides is pierced, it is very often humor that serves as the first line of defense. Through laughter we cope with that peek through the sacred canopy, and then quickly patch it up again.

Joking – Existentially Vital

A joke penetrates the loosely-woven fabric of the fictional cover for a snapshot, a peekaboo beyond its boundaries. From the suspense and expectations of the buildup to the instant of the punch line, we prepare for and peek into an aspect of the abyss of our ultimate fate. But rather than cowering in fright, we are evolved to laugh, taking it in good humor at that moment of resolution. We turn our fear into fun; we play with it. As a joke teller builds up our expectations, it is as if he or she is blowing up a balloon. We expect to be startled—the bursting balloon is going to jolt us with a bang.

This understanding of jokes helps explain why ‘being able to tell a good one’ is so dependent on timing. We normally keep our existential concerns covered up, and when a hole is punched (punch line) in the woven fabric cover, our psychic guard employs laughter in defense as we quickly close the opening. The laugh, following the buildup of tension, comes with the delectation of relief, just when the predicament and its disguise are ‘discovered.’ The abyss is revealed, but only just glimpsed, and then immediately resolved. But it can only be a snapshot. An open shutter exposure, forcing us to stare at our morbidity and mortality, would never work. It would be intensely unfunny, literally terrifying. The shutter has to close quickly, so we can return to our normal cover, as the fictional ‘reality’ of our transcending cultural story is reaffirmed. As we will see, in contrast to jokes, expressions of humor in irony and fooling or folly can change radically from the joke mechanism. Irony permits a more continuous, but partial, opening of the shutter. In folly the whole of culture is turned inside out.

The evolutionary importance of humor is astonishing. With our level of self-consciousness and no sense of humor, terror and something like a cower-in-the-cave option might have stopped the human experiment in its cradle. Humor, wit, irony, you name it—laughter and the comic depend upon death for their existence. At root, from amusement to satire to the zany, all are predicated upon our existential death anxiety. Or, put another way, if we lacked humor, it is questionable, given the fundamental terrorizing incongruity of mortality awareness in creatures who dream of immortality, whether human beings would have survived at all.

Freud and Woody Allen

“Tell the lighting man to cut the overheads. They emphasize my nose,” nervous Woody says, preparing the stage for a comedy performance. “The spotlights make my glasses gleam. Kill ‘em. Good. But the wing lights make me look skinny.” When the stage is pitch black Woody announces, “Perfect. Now I feel I look my best.”¹

In this comic strip and in his film *Annie Hall* (1977) in which he prominently displays Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*, Woody Allen lets us know that it isn't only sex that has him in psychoanalysis. He is also obsessed with the darkness of his fate in a mortality-cursed body. Woody is the epitome of a death-haunted soul, doing his darndest at using laughter to gain some sense of control of his life. He typifies the truism that comedians are not the healthy-minded cheerful robots of William James (1902, p. 121; Keen, 1974, p. 74). For the Woodys of the world, laughter is literally life saving.

“Politics is the art of the possible,” Woody jots down, “psychoanalysis, the art of the impossible.”²

Psychoanalysis of humor began with Freud's (1908) *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, in which humor is analyzed in terms of the emergence of repressed sexuality and aggression, veiled in socially acceptable terms, making it unobtrusive rather than explicitly violent or illicit. I suggest that a further function of humor is to expose and assuage our deep terror of death. Humor protects our cover as we explore and analyze the imagery, affect, and significance of our mortality, and humor enables us to project death's curse onto others. If instead of wishing death on them, we are psychoanalyzed or self-analyzed and self-realized enough to laugh at ourselves, at our own death denial, humor may help us attain a more advanced stage of living in faith and grace.

Irony

The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death ... but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive. (Becker, 1973, p. 66)

The human condition itself is ironic, as Becker says in this epigraph, referring to our need to shrink from fullness of life in the confinements of our cultural belief systems. The magnificently ironic possibility of irony is that we can use it to adapt to our ironic condition, to learn to enjoy living, not by gritting our teeth at life's many situations of paradox, ambiguity, and dissonance, but by smiling at our finite selves even while dreaming of infinite possibilities. Irony gets at our existential predicament with less directness than jokes, and therefore is not confined to momentary outbursts. It is instead more a mindset, a way of thinking and experiencing life. It sees the incongruities and knows that we can't stare them down, and so looks at them obliquely, indirectly, out of the skeptical corner of a humor-seeking eye. Rather than as an outburst of laughter, we can even laugh privately, silently, whimsically, internally, at ourselves and, ultimately, at death itself.

A sense of ironic humor gives access to the fullness of self-consciousness, to a kind of Socratic self-realization. We rely on our comic sensibility to give us a protective cover of amusement as we learn, ironically, to appreciate the conflicts of incongruity, ambivalence, and discordance that are inherent in the human condition: to live fully we have to appreciate fully that we die. This is something to laugh about, and in doing so, we laugh at our own denial of death.

The ironist keeps the cultural cover under tension most of the time. The incongruities can burst into a fabric-puncturing witty ironic joke, but irony is much more than this. In addition to glimpses of our death-anxiety, the explosive but fleeting exposures of our mortal vulnerability,

the ironic mind gradually learns to be subconsciously aware of our death-denying constructions, and keeps the cultural cover stretched into near-transparency.

We manage a creative tension between ideal and real, between dreams of utopia and the wakeful world of suffering and death. And inasmuch as we maintain an ability to smile ironically at our conflicted human condition, our energy can be engaged to function creatively around the tension. The very indirection of irony provides an element of detachment, but it is detachment crucially combined with self-realization. Thus we are able to take not just momentary glimpses, but open-shuttered views of existential reality, albeit in a sort of night vision looking for laughs!

We say one thing but mean another. We say we are mortal and infinity is beyond us, while believing that we are made in the image of the eternal Life Force God. It appears that the best strategy we have is to laugh at our predicament. To handle that cognitive dissonance creatively is a signpost on the way to the wisdom of self-actualization.

Irony is a cultivated taste for which we are not all born equal. It can be quite dangerous to mock the underlying denial of mortality inherent in our fundamental cultural belief systems. The ironist may be ostracized, may feel the restraining arm of the censor, and may even experience social death. The price for self-realization is often high. Recall that Socrates was put to literal death! But it is worth cultivating the ironic taste, for fullness of life depends on an ability to smile even as we taste the ashes.

The Evolution of Laughter

Man alone suffers so excruciatingly in the world that he was compelled to invent laughter.

- Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power*

We have a tendency to think of laughter as an unqualified positive emotion, ignoring or denying its dark side. Humor has been good, absolutely critical in fact, for human survival, but most laughter is red in tooth and claw, it bites and wounds. While it is indeed good for us to experience laughter and good for those who get us laughing, all too often our laughter is aggressive, biting, and wounding others.

Our sense of humor has a cutting edge, one that has contributed to how we have evolved, competitively. We compete using humor against one another, in-group versus out-group, our universe of meaning against the competition. It may be “only” playful and teasing, but can easily and often go all the way to vicious and deadly. It is ironic that although laughter has been necessary for us to survive, it also threatens that very survival because it pits our success in life against the lives of others of our own kind. In competitive survival, much of our joking is aimed at putting us on top and putting others down, even all the way down, dehumanized out of the human race, trash-talked, as worse than dead waste. It can savagely cut others, demean and hurt, and be deadly serious.

Ostracizing humor

Telling jokes, and laughing at them, are ways of adjusting status in one’s own favor. (Alexander, 1986, p. 258).

The claim developed earlier is that we are enveloped in cultural belief systems that support us as valued members of meaningful universes, and therein lies a competitive rub. We mortals long for the immortality of the gods. We do not want our universes of meaning to be confined to the finite. We are far from content with meaning that is limited to mortal life. Our cultural belief systems are meant to give us lasting significance, connecting us to universals, to everlasting Truth, to the Infinite. There can only be one Truth with a capital T, so belief systems that compete with our own must be wrong.

Seen in this light, ostracizing humor is directed not only at maintaining our own self-esteem, with feeling good about ourselves; it is also directed at making us feel god-like, of lasting worth, better than and above Those Others with a different belief system. If you can make fun of Them and their culture, then you are clearly a superior being in a favored universe of meaning. If you can associate them with creatures lower on the great chain of being, then you are higher, certainly higher than they are, at any rate. Put them all the way down, link them to the inanimate, to waste, to bodily excrement, to the dead, and competitively speaking, you have life and they do not. Your god lives and their god is dead. Laughter directed at putting others down, and even if it doesn't lead directly to torture and slaughter, in its imagined acts of cleansing life and exterminating evil, it still qualifies as ostracizing humor, and can be savage.

The sociobiologist R. D. Alexander (1986) proposes that there are two related forms of ostracism humor: the explicit type, such as ethnic, racist, and sexist jokes (which clearly disparage an out-group while intensifying feelings of affiliation in the in-group); and the implicit, which also reinforces in-group affiliation, but ostracizes more subtly. He would include in the latter category Leacock's (1938) definition of humor as "...the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the artistic expression thereof" (p. 3).

Leacock makes gentle fun of us; those of us, that is, who are already secure members of our greater culture, and thus in no serious danger of being ostracized explicitly. Our ritualized mannerisms and pastimes (adding distraction to distraction, as T.S. Eliot would say) in our teacups and lattes, our golfing and bird watching, make easy pickings for Leacock's veiled satire. He parodies stuffed shirts, Ibsen plays, and Greek tragedies. All good-natured teasing of our pretensions, to be sure, but usually the target of the humor is in-group, and is not cut out, put down, or explicitly scapegoated. One biography said of him, "[Leacock] makes us laugh, but tells us nothing about what we are laughing at, as the great parodist does" (McClelland & Stewart, 1979, pp. 40-41). "The slapstick for him everytime - never the rapier" (p. 23).

But we can see that his benign contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the artistic expression thereof, is a cover up. This is what cultural cover does: cover up the Ibsens and the Greeks. Their stories are too real, too frank about the cruelty of humankind, too dangerous to the 'health' of our culturally fictitious healthy-mindedness (cf. Becker, 1973, pp. 13-20). Leacock holds his rapier behind a veil but even says of himself: "... I have, I admit, the unfortunate and weak-minded disposition that forces me to smile with hatred in my heart" (1912, p. 204).

Alexander finds that the categorizations of other humor theorists fit roughly into his explicit and implicit divisions, describing the latter as humor associated with empathy and the former as wit with hostility. They all intensify the affiliation of those in the in-group for one another and ostracize the out-group. Thus satire, ridicule, mockery, sarcasm, and the grimly jocular, bitterly cynical sardonic all qualify as explicitly ostracizing, hostile wit. We genuinely cut people down with these weapons, and as well, by using scurrilous, grossly or indecently abusive humor—foulmouthed, vulgar, obscene, vituperative, insulting, offensive—all explicitly hostile.

The polite teasing of Wodehouse and Leacock, on the other hand, puts down gently, so Alexander would call that ostracizing empathic.

Affiliative Humor

... perhaps the original source parted into two streams ... clear and undefiled, the humor of human kindness ... and the polluted waters of mockery and sarcasm ... (Leacock, 1938)

Alexander, a hard-nosed sociobiologist, admits that his views are typically regarded as cynical. He doubts that there is any humor untainted by ostracism. But he nevertheless encourages us to work toward such a high level of the art, the ideal of affiliative humor with no out-group. We could start by training ourselves to recognize the subtle ostracism of humor that appears to be empathic. Stephen Leacock's humor skirts prejudicial ostracizing by choosing indistinctly demarcated targets, in which conceivably we all could be included.

Affiliative humor, clear and undefiled, would include us all in an affirmed group and be directed at the scourges common to all humankind. Pain and suffering, disease and death are the kinds of afflictions we all share, so humor directed at these qualifies as affiliative and non-ostracizing, with the one caveat that those succeeding in making others laugh at our vulnerability and mortality place themselves a bit above the rest of us. In their creativity they are more god-like and we less so. That aside, helping the cancer victim laugh existentially at her nemesis is a high calling, for it is affiliative, life-affirming, and even therapeutic. Caveats should be mentioned in the therapy connection in that laughter in the sickroom can be at the expense of others, and even of the victim, so it can be ostracizing. It isn't necessarily purely affiliative, so should be prescribed with care and caution (Elgee, 1993a; 2002).

At a less exalted level, scatological humor can also be used both ways. To identify an out-group with excrement is to insult them with disgusting filth and dead waste, so is ostracizing in a most undisguised way, as mentioned above. But when making fun of our excretory functions, in our shared animality, we can all be affiliated (Elgee, 1993b).

Alexander's conclusion is that we should encourage "efforts toward social harmony on grander and more nearly universal scales, perhaps through explicit and deliberate promotion of effects of humor that integrate and diminution of effects that ostracize" (Alexander, 1986, p. 117 [265]).

At this point, we might remind ourselves of the epigraph that began this essay. Speaking of youth, Ernest Becker said: "It is deadly earnest to them, this world they face, and they simply cannot laugh without making some kind of triumph over it" (Bates, 1977, p. 224). This sounds very much as if in his experience, teaching at Berkeley in 1968 during the Vietnam War, the humor of young people was strictly ostracizing. Pointing ahead, I will suggest that affiliative humor is central to creative and constructive belief systems. Exploration of the natural history, maturation, cultivation and nurturance of this faculty is a fruitful area for further study, though beyond the limitations of this essay.

Folly: Through the Looking-Glass

Otto Rank's prescription for neurosis: the "need for legitimate foolishness" (1958, p. 49).

The way to freedom and curious wonder is to recognize and comprehend the arbitrary, predetermined, and artificial structures that order our lives. The way to knowledge of culture and society is to explore one's inner fantasy life. The way to honor intelligence is to know and laugh at its limitations. The way to celebrate creation is to play with its silly mysteries. The intention that comes through in [Lewis Carroll's] *Through the Looking-Glass* is, in effect, the meaning of mankind's comic capacity, and it is this: I will play with and make ridiculous fear, loneliness, smallness, ignorance, authority, chaos, nihilism, and death; I will transform, for a time, woe to joy. (Polhemus, 1980, p. 248)

As our self-consciousness developed, laughter and a sense of humor evolved as a necessary component for the survival of the human animal. Thus the history of laughter and our apprehension of the comic, even in their archaic forms, warrant examination. Early in my burgeoning interest in the subject, I was perplexed by the genre of folly. We certainly do laugh when people act the fool, we regard an appreciation of the ridiculous as a part of our sense of humor, and if the days of the court jester are gone, the fool continues to be honored in the circus tent, as well as in some religious traditions. But I found the early modern concept of folly to be foreign to contemporary sensibility. What did it mean, 500 years ago, when Erasmus so praised it in his *Moriae Encomium, The Praise of Folly?* (1942, [1509])

My understanding of folly has been greatly enhanced by Peter L. Berger's marvelous book (1997), *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*. This work has been of great help for exploration of the humor literature, and stands out in the genre because Berger writes with his tongue in his cheek and irony in his eye, and we hear lots of comic overtones. He relates a wealth of funny jokes with a panache the best comedians would envy. I found it an absolute delight to read. Who says you kill jokes when you dissect them?

Berger credits Erasmus as perhaps the first to present a "...full blown comic worldview. A world turned upside down, grossly distorted, and precisely for that reason more revealing of some underlying truths than the conventional right-side-up view" (p. 21). To be sure, Berger knows something about worldviews. In fact, he literally wrote the book on the subject! His seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) strongly influenced an entire generation of students. Like his contemporary, Ernest Becker, Berger advocated the inclusion of religious thought as an important and serious component of social science. So when Berger talks about underlying truths we should listen.

Erasmus' *Folly* reveals the pretensions at Truth in the Conventional View of Important Things, which is roughly what I am referring to in this essay as cultural belief systems, and what Berger refers to as socially constructed reality. The revelers in the world of Folly and fooling are making fun of the rules and customs of the social universe in which they have lately lived and been obedient. And now they are rebelling from that universe with laughter. The belief systems kept in place by the civic and ecclesiastical authorities are held up to ridicule and utter reversal. The celebrants are not peeking or glancing behind the cultural curtain, their whole society is up on the stage creating a counterworld and the established structures are banished to an out-group of scapegoats.

How can they stand this open-shutter exposure to death? It is a custom, a ritual, with celebration of rebirth and renewal so has a life-giving component (Becker, 1975, pp. 6-25). Originally, I suspect it might have begun because laughter and the comic began to penetrate the inchoate ironic mindset of the culture. Thus the sacred canopy, the cover-up of artificiality and

fictitiousness, became sufficiently transparent, leading to widespread questioning of its authority. As mob mimesis reached a critical mass, the established cultural belief system was overturned into chaos (Girard, 1972). Empowered in the moment, dethroning the overlords with mockery, getting drunk on wine and intoxicated in the spirit of denial (of death) the mob celebrated the Feast of Fools. But eventually came the day after, the social and political hangover, and with it the realization that this new counterworld was also unreal, itself a fictitious canopy. As forces of the old regime retrenched, regrouped, reformed, and finally returned, the cycle of carnival ritual resumed. Its history of self-limitation, of annual celebration and renewal, continued.

Belief Systems and the Denial of Death

Cultural belief systems function to persuade the populace that their society and their lives are of value, and thus that they gain meaning and purpose by allegiance to the Truth of their culture. In the ultimate test of the wisdom of living in this Truth, they believe that at their death, they will “rest” knowing that they have not lived and died in vain, without significance. It has not all been just sound and fury. All is not vanity. This is the legacy of Death, the final arbiter, and the Grim Reaper has us all in his grip; we are his slaves.

Death in this understanding, and there is much research to substantiate it (Pyszczynski, et al., 2003; Solomon, et al., 1998, 2002), is the principal motivator underlying our belief systems. Humor is a major means by which we keep repressed from immediate consciousness a morbid and paralyzing preoccupation with the specter of death. We use humor to free ourselves from slavery to death.

The medieval festival of carnival is not subtle about this. It neither glances nor looks sideways at death. It laughs at death straight on, or so it masquerades. Deny slavery to the cultural constructs and dance with death! The glances at our finitude that jokes toy with, and the sideways realizations of our mortality in the ironic mindset, are superseded in Folly and Fooling, a totally other and topsy-turvy world of outright death denial. Forget socially constructed reality, forget the cultural covering canopy, and overturn the religious and secular belief systems. Kick over the confining and restraining traces. Take charge. Get free. Let intoxication, rebellion, and unpoliced scapegoating of the recently deposed hierarchy release all primal energy and animal passions. This is the medieval carnival.

Ostracizing Laughter, Affiliative Laughter, and Romantic Denial in Folly and Fooling

Those festivals of long ago, as well as their modern day descendents in Mardi Gras and Carnival, hold up to ridicule the conventional cultural constructs. In the time of Erasmus, this could go on for weeks and months. There was much mirth and music, surely, and he personified Folly as Carnival Queen, a nurturing divinity, and “fountain and nursery of life” (Berger, 1997, p. 20). Erasmus, it seems, was well aware of how vital a sense of humor is to human life. While Folly is clearly making fun of the upended culture and ostracizing its power structure, she shows the affiliative power of the revolt for exponential mob growth and solidarity.

But Erasmus did not picture these occasions as full of nothing but new light, life, and laughter. There is plenty of make-believe and outright denial of death in his Folly. She was born in the Isles of the Blessed (Utopia) and “suckled by two jolly nymphs, to wit, Drunkenness ... and Ignorance” (1509, p. 104). Her companions were Self-love, Flattery, Oblivion, Laziness, Pleasure, Madness, Wantonness, Intemperance, and Dead Sleep (pp. 104-105). Here there is much self-deception and various forms of retreat from the fullness of life and self-realization into

social deadness, even oblivion. There is pseudo-escape of healthy-minded, cheerful robots with their fictions of the culturally condoned Truths, into intoxication with pseudo-joy in semi-death.

Erasmus could also romanticize extravagantly, as demonstrated in the following portrayal of the deathless death of fools: “But to return to the happiness of Fools, who when they have past over this life with a great deal of Pleasantness, and without so much as the least fear or sense of Death, they go straight forth into the Elysian Field, to recreate their Pious and Careless Souls with such Sports as they us’d here” (p. 154).

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), in *Rabelais and his World*, describes the Festive Laughter of Carnival in the Middle Ages and Renaissance as “... of all the people ... directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants” (p. 11). This certainly sounds affiliative, but interestingly “it is at the same time mocking, deriding” (p. 12). This mockery and derision is made to sound benign since it is “also directed at those who laugh... They too are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed” (p. 12). They are laughing at death, but also playing with it— *they are revived and renewed*. They are laughing at play-death, pretending death is not real.

Kirby Farrell (1989) examined this phenomenon in a study of Shakespeare dealing with play-death, which he prefaces with an account of his own death denial. Farrell relates that he had read Becker’s *Denial of Death* some nine years before, and chanced upon it again, as if for the first time, while writing this Shakespeare book. Its pertinence to his new project was startling: “Thanks to my own powers of denial, Becker’s disturbing vision had disappeared without a trace under the magician’s handkerchief of repression. Even as I struggled to explain away the lapse I had a painfully comic sense of my own creaturely compulsion. After all, in my denial I had lately been rediscovering death is a safely disguised form: play-death in Shakespeare” (pp. ix-x).

In their idealization of the ambiguous laughter of the common folk, Bakhtin and Rabelais can be understood as describing the contagion of crowd behavior. We see how subtly the targets of the mob, the Catholic Church of the 16th Century, and the Stalinists of the 20th century, can be unnamed yet trampled. This is not affiliative humor, “pure and undefiled.” There are ostracized scapegoats to be found.

Erasmus, Bakhtin, and Rabelais, and perhaps to some extent Peter Berger as well, are caught up in the romance. They fail to emphasize the difference between the ostracizing and affiliative forms of humor, and to fully acknowledge these forces at work trying to control death dread.

Berger (1997) says “The grotesque, obscene, and scatological treatment of the body is an intrinsic part of this overcoming of fear—the most vulnerable, least spiritual aspects of human existence are magically rendered harmless in these parodies” (pp. 83-84). This is an aspect of humor for which an affiliative effect can be virtually universal. Even the parodist is stuck in a mortal body.

Quoting Berger again, “In the late Middle Ages, in a curious synthesis, folly merged with death, as expressed in the carnival-like ‘death dance’ (Totentanz)... Folly, which relativized and subverted all social order, finally foreshadowed death, which obliterates all social order once and for all” (p. 74). Yes, but what is curious about this? That is what all of these strategies are trying to do, they’re trying to get comfortable with, trying to get control of, trying to get free of slavery to Death. Dancing with Death is Laughing at Death in a supreme incongruity, a funny image, a good joke. And it is affiliative. Nobody is the butt of the joke and no one is made superior to another. We can all feel better. But it is obviously romantic denial of death.

Laughing at Death as a Religious Process

The Divine Comedy comes immediately to mind when we entertain deep thoughts about religion and the comic. This famous poem about the tortures of Hell and Purgatory ends in the Happiness of Heaven. Comedy in 1300 meant happiness, so this accounts for what today seems an incomprehensible title. Polhemus (1980) explains:

Dante usurps the word ‘comedy’ for the outstanding rendering in literature of Christian faith—save the Bible—and he purges it of laughter. The goal of Christianity is to transcend the world and the flesh. (p. 10)

At the other extreme, Balzac kept the transcendent out of his *Human Comedy*, the “*Comédie Humaine*,” a series of grim literary accounts of life as anything but sublime in his huge edifice about the miseries and mendacities of French society in the mid 1800s. Life laughs at us in our absurdity.

Berger (1997) wants to redeem laughter. He does it by elaborating on the Holy Fool idea and the concept of the comic as a signal of transcendence. He describes Kierkegaard as seeing “irony as a precursor of religious insight” (p. 27) with humor as an anteroom, “the last existential stage before faith as a sort of incognito faith” (pp. 27-28). Reinhold Niebuhr “thought that humor led into the ‘vestibule of the temple’ but that laughter must cease in the ‘holy of holies.’ This, probably not coincidentally, was also Kierkegaard’s view” (pp. 203-204). In this Berger is inclined to think that both were mistaken, and I, with some trepidation at disagreeing with two of my heroes, decidedly agree.

There are religions that emphasize and utilize laughter. We need to explore further the question of whether such understandings include laughing at death and an appreciation for the differentiation between ostracizing and affiliative laughter. Berger only briefly discusses the Taoist and Ch’an/Zen traditions. Further inquiry into these belief systems offers tantalizing possibilities for future work.

For Polhemus (1980) “... the act of laughter and the surge of comic joy in a death-haunted, misery-prone creature could be, and sometimes has been, seen and felt as a natural intrusion of the miraculous into the self—as, that is, a religious experience” (p. 8).

Creative Illusion

In a deathbed interview conducted by Sam Keen (1974), Ernest Becker told him that the major thrust of his work was in the direction of creating a merger of science and religious perspectives. Earlier, Becker had written:

Science thought that it had gotten rid forever of the problems of the soul by making the inner world the subject of scientific analysis. But few wanted to admit that this work still left the soul perfectly intact as a word to explain the inner energy of organisms, the mystery of the creation and sustenance of living matter. It really doesn’t matter if we discover that man’s inner precepts about himself and his world, his very self-consciousness in language, art, laughter, and tears, are all socially built into him. We still haven’t explained the inner forces of evolution that have led to the development of an animal capable of self-consciousness, which is what we still must mean by “soul”— the mystery of the meaning of organismic awareness, of the inner dynamism and pulsations of nature. ... the hysterical reaction of 19th century believers against Darwin only shows the

thinness and unimaginativeness of their faith. They were not open to plain and ordinary awe and wonder; they took life too much for granted, and when Darwin stripped them of ‘special wondrousness’ they felt as good as dead. (Becker, 1973, p. 191)

Otto Rank (1936, p. 288) pointed out that heightened-self-consciousness for many of us moderns is the price we pay for the eclipse of the sacred dimension. This hyper-self-consciousness makes us skeptical of the received wisdom of cultural worldviews and belief systems, all of which Becker called cultural fictions. Without a believable religious or secular cultural canopy, we have illusion-deficiency, according to Rank and Becker, and are at risk of the functional impairment of neurosis. Granted, there are fully self-realized people who can handle heightened self-consciousness; but most of us have trouble getting to that level. We comprise the worried well, at the opposite pole from Becker’s healthy-minded, cheerful robots (Keen, 1974, p. 74). We are at risk of crippling neurosis. The healthy-minded, cheerful robots bask with equanimity under the protective cover of the prevailing cultural belief system, while the hyper-self-conscious skeptics stew in their existential angst.

Becker, a profound and believing religious thinker, recognized that to avoid severe neurosis we need illusion. He posed the most important questions: “On what level of illusion does one live? ... What is the “best” illusion under which to live? Or, what is the most legitimate foolishness?” (1973, p. 202) To ask such questions uncovers the existential incongruity in knowing that we are living in an illusion, while at the same time trying to live as if we believe unquestioningly in it. How can one live an illusion, knowing it is illusory?

This is the perfect incongruity, an affiliative possibility for laughing—*at ourselves*. Our mortal body is the problem and our funny bone comes to the rescue. We laugh at ourselves, not at another—only at ourselves, with our own in-group, at our illusions, and without an out-group. We don’t laugh at other belief systems. This can be a model of affiliative laughter, free of ostracizing the Other.¹

Becker answered his question as to the level of illusion at which we should live by saying it should be at the highest level. When we smile at our own belief system as illusory, we set the stage to construct a higher illusion. For our belief systems to keep reaching higher they are always works in progress, always evolving, always becoming. Becker is reputed to have had a marvelous sense of humor; he, no doubt, would have relished the idea of affiliative laughter enabling life at the highest level. If Becker is correct that most of us are hard wired for needing a belief system and creative illusions, then all of us, the healthy-minded and the angst-ridden skeptics alike, could benefit from an upgrade in our religious laughter software, both as a creative defense against death anxiety and as a brake on the magnetic pull of fundamentalism.

The always-under-construction illusion system could be a powerful use of humor for a religious perspective striving to avoid ostracism and build affiliative understandings. Considering a possible higher illusion, we subject it to criticism for its ostracizing tendencies and for the opportunities it gives us to laugh at ourselves. We put our neurotic angst to work, engaging paradox, irony, and whimsy, and use our imagination, smiling at our inflated idealistic ambitions, as we try to create of ourselves and of our religions, ever-maturing works of art, potentially even approaching sublime offerings to the life force.

Perhaps this would conform to Peter Berger’s redeeming laughter. It certainly contrasts with Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, in that it builds on laughter experienced in this world, in the here

and now. And in as much as it is non-ostracizing and potentially affiliative, it is poles apart from the low level of the ostracizing sardonic humor of Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*.

Earlier, we noted that the possibilities for the development of a flowering of affiliative humor should be explored. Might this be a talent that could be cultivated by religions, by cultures? Are some belief systems already teaching it, some humorists practicing it, social scientists studying it?

Concluding Testimonials

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman by Laurence Sterne, first published in 1760, illustrates the proposition that we laugh at death. Existential in its very form, the work is packed with irony, whimsy, and jokes. As Peter Conrad wrote, it is “forever commemorating death” (Sterne, 1991, p. xiii). This comic novel treats the passage of time in existential terms, is very much concerned with morbidity and mortality, and is piled high everywhere with the distractions of hobby horses and cultural fictions in many guises.

Sterne was a parson and apparently at times called himself Yorick, after Hamlet's jester. Shakespeare's Yorick is given but a brief appearance in *Hamlet*, and only in the form of his skull—perhaps the most famous skull in English literature. In the gravedigger scene, Hamlet muses and jokes as he holds the jawless skull: “here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? (5.1.207-9).

In Sterne's book, Yorick is Tristram's pastor and, in volume 1, earns himself a whole chapter (Chap. X1) in which there are many points of recognition of the relationship between death and humor. His “‘Cervantic humour ... describing silly and trifling Events with the Circumstantial Pomp of great Ones’ ... [uses] burlesque and irony (mock gravity)” in defining his tone, according to the Notes by Editor Melvyn New (Sterne, 1997, p. 552). Yorick's gibes and jokes beget enemies and revenge and he is persecuted to death. Oh yes, Sterne understood the power and danger of ostracizing humor! He described the dynamics that sociobiologist R. D. Alexander analyzed 200 years later.

In summary we have focused on 3 levels in the use of humor, from jokes to irony to folly, in which the exposure of death denial is increasingly evident, culminating in a proposal for a 4th level, the application of the smile and the laugh to modify death denial expressions in our belief systems. This answers the call of Ernest Becker and others for the critical and creative use of illusion in the growth of more satisfying religious/cosmological institutions in the 21st century. An understanding of ostracizing and affiliative humor, the dangers of the former and the strengths of the latter, is presented to facilitate the institutional change envisioned.

A New Yorker article dealing with these issues appeared recently: *What's So Funny? A scientific attempt to discover why we laugh*, by staff writer Tad Friend (2002) showcasing a titan of American improvisational theatre, Del Close (1934-1999). “Although Del Close never quite worked out all the details, he was convinced that laughter is related to our fear of death ... [he] said that there is very little difference between the realizations ‘a-ha we are going to die.’ and our laughter, which is ‘ha-ha’—he would say that ‘ha-ha’ and ‘a-ha’ are related industries.’ He willed his skull to Chicago's Goodman Theatre, where it sits in an acrylic box, intended for use in a future production of ‘Hamlet’” An internet tribute to Close indicated that the role he always wanted to play was that of Yorick.

Friend's survey doesn't comment further on Close's insight, except in a closing sentence, which asks, “What sometimes makes us giggle at funerals?” Despite coming so close Friend

pulls down the veil of conventionality and concludes “...no one really understands why we laugh when we do.”

Del Close, like Woody Allen, stands in the line of Erasmus, Shakespeare, Sterne, Kierkegaard, Carroll, Rank, Becker, Polhemus, Berger, and many others. All have recognized that there are intimate connections between death and laughter. I have attempted here to underline this connection as integral to life itself and to suggest further that there may be ways to use laughter more creatively in our belief systems in the service of escape from the savagery, torture and slaughter we inflict on others. That, as Becker said, would be to escape from evil.

In the end, Sterne bowed to death; laughing at it, he “died in jest” (Sterne, 1997, p. 615). His comic death bed scene was a precedent for that of Otto Rank, whose last word was “Komisch” (Lieberman, 1985, p. 390).

Komisch!

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Notes

¹ This is a description (Hirsch, 18) of a comic strip (Allen, 1978, Artist/Celebrity section).

² This is a description (Hirsch, 18) of a comic strip (Allen, 1978. Psychiatry section).

¹ The proscription against laughing at the belief systems of others does not mean that all such systems are equally worthy. They are not. In discussion with believers using the understanding developed here, awareness of the inadequacy and tentativeness of one's own beliefs could serve as an open stance for dialog. Such a conversation would of course have to be good-humored!