

Kidding p. 1

“You Must Be Kidding”

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## READING

The Philosophy of Humor

by David Boersema

Despite our differences and peculiarities, there are some human universals. Some of them are biological: we all need to eat and drink, and we all need to sleep. But there are also

cultural and social universals: all cultures identify food taboos, kinship relationship rules, residence rules, and others. Even if different cultures use different criteria for who is part of

one’s family and who isn’t, they still all draw some distinction between who is part of one’s

family and who isn’t: ‘family’ matters across cultures.

One of those human universals is humor. It’s everywhere! Across cultures, across our life times, across generations, human beings find things – at least some things – funny.

It is

simply one of our basic modes of being in the world. No wonder, then, that philosophers from

Aristotle on have wrestled with trying to get a handle on what humor is.

One of the features of humor that has been noted and emphasized, is that it’s a form of human bonding. We share jokes and can’t wait to tell our friends what ridiculous thing our coworker

said today, or show our friends some funny picture (cat videos, anyone?). Humor is a way we connect with others, and, so, a way we become who we are as persons. Of course,

that sense of bonding can also have a dark side, when humor is used to demean or denigrate,

as with racist or sexist humor. (But what could possibly be wrong with this: ‘Question: What do

you call 1000 lawyers at the bottom of the sea? Answer: A start.’ Or this: ‘Question: What has

an IQ of 200? Answer: Texas.’)

Clearly, there are ethical and moral dimensions to humor. In addition, there are cognitive and epistemological dimensions: What makes something funny? What is going on in our minds?

First, for humor to work, the listener needs to get the joke. The five-year-old child, might think that this is funny: ‘Question: What do you give an elephant with diarrhea? Answer: Lots of

room’ but might not think this is funny: ‘Question: How many doctors does it take to change a

light bulb? Answer: It depends on what kind of insurance you have.' . . .  
Of course, there are non-verbal forms of humor, such as visual humor, the Marx brothers and Lucille Ball being classic examples . . . . However, verbal humor, especially jokes, is the main engine for both philosophical and non-philosophical enjoyment. Who can resist the sheer delight in reading actual newspaper headlines such as these?:  
'Local High School Dropouts Cut In Half' --'Lack Of Brains Hinders Research'  
'Iraqi Head Seeks Arms'  
Delightful? Yes, but also instructive about the importance of clear language and thinking.  
Humor and philosophy are definitely good bedfellows, and the lessons about clear thinking abound. As just one example, when trying to explain the concepts of falsifiability and the biased interpretation of evidence, what could be more instructive than this?: "A married couple is making breakfast. As the husband is buttering the toast he says, 'Have you ever noticed that if you drop a piece of toast, it always lands butter side down?' The wife says, 'No. It just seems that way because you remember the times when it makes a mess. Here, I'll show you. Watch this.' She drops a piece of toast and it lands butter side up. She says, 'See. I told you.' The husband replies, 'Well, obviously you buttered the wrong side.'" Kidding p. 2

## **THE SERMON**

Let me give you some background to this sermon. As I have mentioned before, for twenty-five years I did a weekly television program on the CBS affiliate in Rockford Illinois.  
One year, I returned home at the end of the summer to find a letter from a prisoner at a correctional facility an hour away. He told me he was a regular viewer of our program and through it had become interested in Unitarian Universalism. I regularly visited Ken Rogers and he became a member of our congregation through his contact with our TV program, me, and books which I provided. He died in prison of heart disease, so he never experienced a UU service in person.  
During one visit, as we were discussing Unitarian Universalism, Ken asked me, *What is funny about Unitarian Universalism?*" He was not referring to a funny-peculiar, @ but a funny - ha ha. @ Responding to that query seemed worthwhile so I did a lot of research on the internet and,

to my surprise; at the time I found almost no new material. There is a rather stable repertoire of UU humor. Perhaps we are more Afunny-peculiar@ than Afunny-ha ha.@ I found only a few UU stories I had not used at least once in a sermon. I decided that it might be worthwhile to compile them to see what it was they say about us.

[the jokes]

Here goes:

What is a Unitarian Universalist? An atheist with children.

A

You might be a UU if . . .

you have ever been in an argument over whether or not breast milk is vegan.

when you dress for a formal evening out you wear a little black dress, pearls, and Birkenstocks (and your wife thinks you look great!)

you are unsure about the gender of God.

you think the Holy Trinity is "reduce, reuse and recycle."

you study the "ten suggestions" instead of the "Ten Commandments."

the only time "Jesus" is mentioned at your church is when someone trips or stubs a toe.

your child says to you before eating dinner at a friend's house "I'll remember to say my 'pleases' and 'thank you's' but I'm not going to say that dinner pledge of allegiance'."

A

When George Bernard Shaw was sixteen, a Unitarian visited the family. Shaw asked his father

what a Unitarian was and received the reply, "Unitarians are people who believe that Jesus did not die on the cross, but when last seen was running down the other side of the hill of Calvary." Until he was thirty, Shaw thought that was what Unitarians were.

A

The four UU sacraments are:

Infant Dedication,

Marriage,

Memorial Services, and

Argument.

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A

Religious Holy Books:

Judaism: The Torah

Islam: The Koran

Christianity: The Bible

Unitarian Universalism Roberts' Rules of Order.

A

In, *Of Human Bondage*, Somerset Maugham said: *A Unitarian very earnestly disbelieves in*

*almost everything that anybody else believes, and he has a very lively sustaining faith in he doesn't quite know what.*

A

We UU=s are so committed to process that if we had to form a firing squad we would arrange ourselves in a circle.

A

What do you get when you cross an insomniac UU with a dyslexic? Someone who stays awake at night wondering if there is a dog.A

UU#1: "UUs don't know enough about the Bible."

UU#2: "Some of us are self-taught, and know a lot. Like me"

UU#1: "Oh, yeah? I'll bet you five bucks you can't recite the Lord's Prayer."

UU#2: "You're on. Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

UU#1: "All right, I was wrong, you're right -- you win."

A

At a gathering of denominational executives, ministers, priests, bishops, and lay representatives, a fire broke out. Someone yelled "FIRE" and the representatives acted accordingly:

The Baptists immediately called for water.

The Quakers sat silently waiting for the Spirit to speak.

The Lutherans quickly made a long list of objections to the fire and nailed it to the auditorium doors.

The Presbyterians met and voted to refer the issue of fire to a committee which would publish a detailed report to be presented at the next meeting of the session.

The Fundamentalists declared the fire to be the wrath of God to punish us for our sins

The Episcopalians formed a tasteful procession and left the auditorium for sherry!

The Congregationalists yelled "Every man for himself" while the United Church of Christ representatives yelled "Every person for herself/himself."

The Unitarian Universalists called all their friends to share and celebrate the experience.

Kidding p. 4

A

Well, it seems as though there was a fire in the church district, and all the members of the churches there, who lived in the local area, ran out of their houses and gathered in front of

their respective churches. Since the fire was spreading rapidly, they only had enough time to

run in and grab one thing:

The Catholics immediately ran into their church and grabbed the host from the altar and brought it out to safety,

The Baptists ran in and rescued the baptismal fount.

The Presbyterians ran in and saved the cross, and

The Unitarian Universalists without any hesitation or debate (a first in the history of the church) ran in and grabbed . . . . . the coffee pot.

A

Q: What do you call a dead Unitarian Universalist?

A: All dressed up with no place to go.

A

Or there's the old story about the Unitarian Universalist who died, and was off on the great

journey. She came to a crossroad in the road, with three directional signs. One said, This Way

To Heaven. Another said, This Way to hell. And the third said, This Way To A Discussion

About Heaven and Hell. Of course, the Unitarian Universalist went to the discussion.

A

Once upon a time, there was a man who had no religion, but was a very good and honest

fellow. At death, he found himself in heaven. A kindly looking gentleman was waiting for him.

Said the gatekeeper of heaven, "What religion are you sir?". The man said, "I have no religion."

The gatekeeper said, "Well, where would you like to spend eternity, then?" The man shrugged.

"What are some options?"

Together, they strolled through the halls of heaven, looking in different rooms. In the first, a

great congregation knelt before a great glowing figure, their faces to the ground and their

hands outstretched. The man didn't think that looked too good. Next, they stood outside a large

sanctuary where a preacher was preaching loudly, to many "Amens" and "Hallelujahs." St.

Peter put a finger to his lips and said, "And at this door, we need to be ver-r-r-r-r-r-quiet."

"Why?" asked the newcomer. "Because," St. Peter replied, "Those are the Southern Baptists,

and they think they're the only ones here." In another, a great congregation knelt before a

fellow hanging from a big cross. The man didn't think much of that either. And indeed, in every

room, the man found less than satisfactory situations in which to spend eternity. So, finally the

gatekeeper said, "Okay, there's one last option." They walked down the hall, and the gatekeeper opened the final door, behind which were a great congregation dancing in a big

ring around a huge coffeepot singing "Coffee, coffee, coffee!" He found a home with the

Unitarian Universalists.

A

A Unitarian Universalist service may seem strange to outsiders. Everybody sings "Praise Be to Whom It May Concern" and then somebody speaks and nobody listens - and then everybody disagrees. And if you disagree, then you'll fit right in.  
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A

A young UU was visiting a Christian church when the pastor asked if she was saved. She said,  
"In my church, we try not to get lost."

A

Three children were talking about their religions. "I'm a Catholic," said one, "and our symbol is the cross." "I'm Jewish," said the second, "and our symbol is the Star of David." The third child said, "I'm a Unitarian Universalist and our symbol is a candle in a cocktail glass!"

A

A young girl was drawing a picture in her church school class. . The teacher asked her, "What are you drawing a picture of?" "I'm drawing a picture of God," was the reply. "But nobody knows what God looks like," objected the teacher. "They will," said my daughter, "when I get my picture done."

A

During Sunday School, the teacher asks the class, "Can you tell us what happened on Easter Sunday?"

One kid responds: AEaster is when Jesus was born.@

Another in good UU style insists that Easter is when the flowers bloom. Finally, one very precocious kid says, "Easter is the day when, after he had been crucified and then placed a tomb, on the third day, Jesus rolled back the stone . . . Then he walked outside and saw his shadow, so we have six more weeks of winter."

A

A group of UU church school children were trying to determine the sex of a rabbit. "There's only one way to decide," one child, in good UU fashion, said "let's take a vote on it." There was a problem later when Harold became a mother.

A

A convict on Death Row, the night before his scheduled execution, was visited by the warden. The warden, in talking with the condemned man, said, "Usually at this point, persons in your situation find great comfort in talking to a member of the clergy. With that in mind, would you like us to send the prison chaplain over for a visit?" The convict replied, "Well, warden, I have to tell you - I was raised a Unitarian Universalist." The warden then said, "Well, then, would you like to talk to a math professor?"

A

Q: Why are UUs such bad hymn singers?

A: We're too busy reading a line or two ahead to see if we agree with it, to sing correctly  
Kidding p. 6

A

A Hindu, a Jew, and a Unitarian Universalist were traveling one night in the midst of nowhere, and the weather turned bad. They started looking for shelter, and found a farmhouse. They knocked on the door and were greeted by a gentleman who understood their plight. "You're welcome here, fellas. In fact, I have a guest room upstairs. But there's only room for two to sleep up there. One of you will have to sleep in the barn. That's not a problem, though, because the barn is warm and I just put a fresh bed of hay out there." So the Hindu, the Jew, and the UU decided to draw straws to see who would sleep in the barn. The Hindu came up short, and he picked up the pillow and blanket the farmer had provided and went out to the barn. The Jew and the Unitarian were getting ready for bed when a knock came on the bedroom door. It was the Hindu, and he said, "Fellas, I'm upset. There's a cow in the barn, and I know he's being bred for slaughter. That just doesn't sit well with my faith." Since the Jew had drawn the next shorter straw, he volunteered to sleep in the barn instead, and he picked up the blanket and pillow and went out. The Hindu and UU were about to climb into bed when another knock came at the door. It was the Jew. "Fellas, I'm sorry, but there's a pig out there, and knowing my dietary restrictions and the fact that that pig is obviously being bred for market, I just can't stay out there." So the UU said, "That's okay. I'll go out. I should have volunteered in the first place, knowing your concerns." So he picked up the blanket and pillow and headed to the barn. The Hindu and the Jew were just about to turn out the light when another knock came at the door. It was the cow and the pig.

A

Surely you know about the bigot who was so angry at one of our churches that he burned a question mark on its lawn?

A

So a young woman walks into a fabric store and asks the clerk for 9 yards of filmy material. The clerk says "What are you going to make?" and the young woman says, "I'm

getting married and am making a negligee for myself as a present for my husband."

The clerk

says, "But 9 yards is way too much material for a negligee." The young woman says, "I know

it's a lot, but I'm marrying a Unitarian Universalist and they would rather seek than find."

A

Hearing that a great flood was coming

\$\$\$Roman Catholics said their rosaries,

\$\$\$Methodists joined in prayer,

\$\$\$but UU's formed a class to try to learn to live under water.

A

An airplane was about to crash and the flight attendant asked a UU minister on board to pray. The minister responded, "Let us all join hands for silent meditation."

or : If an airplane were about to crash, among the passengers

\$\$\$some people would cry,

\$\$\$some people would pray,

\$but a Unitarian Universalist minister would try to organize a committee on air safety!

Kidding p. 7

A

**QUESTION: How many church people does it take to change a light bulb?**

*Charismatic:* Only one. Hands are already in the air.

*Roman Catholics:* None. They use candles.

*Pentecostals:* Ten. One to change the light bulb, and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

*Presbyterians:* None. God has predestined when the lights will be on and off.

*Episcopalians:* Eight. One to call the electrician, and seven to say how much better they liked the old bulb.

*Mormons:* Five. One man to change the bulb, and four wives to tell him how to do it.

*Baptists:* At least fifteen. One to change the light bulb, and two or three committees to approve the change. Oh, and also bring a casserole.

*Lutherans:* None. Lutherans don't believe in change.

*Methodists:* A whole congregation. One to change the light bulb, and the rest of the congregation to be sure that he doesn't backslide

*Unitarian Universalists:* We chose not to make a statement either in favor of or against The light bulb. However, if you have found in your own journey that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance



about your personal relationship with your light bulb and present it next month at our annual I light bulb Sunday service in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life, and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

Or

Q. How many UUs does it take to change a lightbulb? A. 300:

12 to sit on the Board which appoints the Nominating and Personnel Committee.

5 to sit on the Nominating and Personnel Committee which appoints the Buildings & Grounds Committee.

8 to sit on the Building & Grounds Committee which appoints the Light Bulb Changing Committee.

4 to sit on this Committee which chooses who will screw in the Light Bulb - those four then give their own opinion of Ascrewing in methods@ while the one actually does the installation.

After completion it takes 100 individuals to complain about the method of installation, another 177 to debate the ecological impact of using the Light Bulb at all, and at least one to insist that back in their day, the lit chalice was quite enough, thankyouverymuch!

Q: How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?

A: First, let's decide just what we mean by lightbulb, and how one might be changed .

.And let us examine whether it truly acknowledges the dignity and worth of the light bulb to ask it to change.

A

Q: What do you get when you cross a Unitarian with a Jehovah's Witness?

A: Someone who goes around knocking on doors for no apparent reason.

A

A traveler couldn't find the local Unitarian Universalist church. After looking in the center of

town, in the suburbs, and out in the surrounding countryside. the traveler asked a farmer "Am I

too far out for the UU church?" The farmer's reply: "Nobody is too far out for them."

Kidding p. 8

A

The famous Universalist minister Hosea Ballou argued with a Methodist colleague over the issue of eternal damnation. The Methodist asserted, "if I were a Universalist and feared not

the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle and ride away, and

I'd still go to heaven!" Ballou answered, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur

to you!"

A

A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted. After the sermon a UU asked the visitor, "So

how did you like it?" "I can't believe half the things that minister said!" sputtered the visitor in outrage. "Oh, good—then you'll fit right in!"

A

When he was still doing the Colbert Report, Stephen reported one night about how Billy Graham considered UU's a cult. Stephen responded by noting that we have three sacred texts: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Free to be You and Me.

A

A little Unitarian Universalist girl was sitting on the curb in front of her house with a sad look on her face. An older lady happened upon her and asked her why she looked so sad. The girl replied, "My kitty cat died." The woman, trying to be helpful, said to the little girl, "I know you're sad, but right now your kitty cat is with Jesus." The girl crinkled her nose for a second and replied, "What would Jesus want with a dead cat?"

A

A UU Sunday school Kindergarten class was discussing "prayer", and the children seemed aware that the way you end a prayer was with "amen." Does anyone know what "amen" means, the teacher asked. There was a long silence. Then one little boy piped up, with appropriate, computer-age gestures, and said, "Well, I think it means, like, "send"

A

There are very few Unitarians in Wyoming, and recently when one died the family approached a Methodist Minister and asked her if she could perform the service. She said she would be happy to do so, but first, in order to be on the safe side, she had to contact her bishop in Denver for permission. A few days later she received a reply, "Permission granted. Bury all the Unitarians you want!"

A

A Unitarian Universalist died, and to his surprise discovered that there was indeed an afterlife. The angel in charge of these things told him, "Because you were an unbeliever and a doubter and a skeptic, you will be sent to Hell for all eternity -- which, in your case, consists of a place where no one will disagree with you ever again!"

A

How can you tell a Unitarian Universalist? You can't; they already know it all. Kidding p. 9

There is a stereotype about UU's being emotionally cold. That's not us in my experience.

That may be how we look on the surface because what differentiates us from the rest of the religious community is our emphasis on reason, but that is not all we are about. We live in the real world. We are living, breathing, caring people who are seeking the experience of community and meaning that makes sense. All the reason in the world would be irrelevant if we did not have passion for living. Remember, we are the people who suspect that this may be the only life we have. How could we squander it on cold logic alone? It is our humanity BB our connections to one another and to life itself that keeps us coming back. The problem is, sometimes people get so caught up in the intellectual dimension that they don't recognize the importance of the human component and fade away unfed. But to realize the human connections, you must be involved in the day to day, or week to week, life of the church. We do, in fact, laugh warmly and enthusiastically at ourselves. At least, some of us. Dr Norman Cousins, a prominent Unitarian, was a longtime editor of the one time very popular magazine, Saturday Review of Literature. Cousins was viewed as a global peacemaker and was the recipient of hundreds of awards including the UN Peace Medal and nearly 50 honorary doctorate degrees. In 1964 following a very stressful trip to Russia, he was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis (a degenerative disease causing the breakdown of collagen), which left him in almost constant pain. His doctor predicted he was likely to die within a few months. Cousins disagreed and reasoned that if stress had somehow contributed to his illness (he was not sick before the trip to Russia), then positive emotions should help him feel better. He checked himself out of the hospital and into a hotel across the street where he began taking extremely high doses of vitamin C and most importantly spent a lot of time watching a continuous stream of humorous films and tv shows. He later reported that 10 minutes of intense laughter would give him two hours of pain-free sleep, when nothing else, not even morphine could help him. His condition steadily improved. Within six months he was back on his feet, and was eventually able to return to his full-time job at the Saturday Review. His experience, which he wrote about in his 1979 book **An Anatomy Of An Illness**, baffled the scientific community and inspired a

number of research projects.

Studies have shown that when we laugh, our bodies release a cocktail of hormones and chemicals that have startling positive effects on our system: stress is reduced, blood

pressure drops, depression is lifted, our immune systems are boosted.

Earlier this morning I discovered the "Laughter Online University's" website which I am going to explore further. Today they are concluding their "All American Laughter Unconference" in Pasadena at which their aim was to deliver:

! Skills, not pills. Discover a whole-body well-being workout that unlocks people's smile muscles and stretch their experience of joy as it teaches them simple and powerful self-care practices.

! Transform your current mental and emotional state.

! A refreshing new path towards integrated intelligence, mindfulness, well-being.

! Enrich your relationships., and

! Empower yourself.

Had I discovered this sooner, I would have seriously considered being there instead of here this morning.

Kidding p. 10

Over the years prior to his being nailed by the "me too" movement for his misogyny, Garrison Keillor told a lot of UU jokes on his Prairie Home Companion. Like, the one about the

Lutheran usher from Lake Wobegon who went to a national workshop on ushering where the

ultimate challenge was to try to usher a bevy of Unitarian Universalists, which he said, was a

lot like trying to herd cats. Or, he told about the missionaries the Unitarians sent to convert the

native Americans using liturgical dance. We got tremendous attention from his listeners, some

of whom were deeply offended by what they saw as his attacks on us. I felt some embarrassment at the inability of some of my colleagues and some of our laypeople to laugh at

ourselves. Garrison's response was to point out that most of his UU stories came from his

dinner parties with his UU friends.

The fact is that most of us claim to have great senses of humor, but far fewer are able to laugh at themselves. I still remember the couple at the First Parish in Bedford, the first congregation I served, who left our church for the nearby one in Concord, who told a friend

they could not take seriously a minister who made the congregation laugh so often.

One of my retired colleagues, Kit Ketchum, in her internet blog recently reprinted a sermon on humor she delivered some time ago. In it, she proposed a possible UU prayer:

*To Whom it may concern, God, Ground of All Being, Source of All Light, Divine Daddy, whatever,*

*Help us to relax about insignificant details, beginning tomorrow at 7:41 a.m., PDT.*

*Help us to consider people's feelings, even if most of them ARE hypersensitive.  
Help us to take responsibility for our own actions, even though they're usually NOT our fault.*

*Help us to not try to RUN everything. But if you need some help, please feel free to ask us.*

*Help us to be more laid back and help us to do it exactly right.*

*Give us patience, and I mean right now.*

*Help us to do only what we can and trust you for the rest. And would you mind putting that in writing?*

*Keep us open to others' ideas, wrong though they may be.*

*In the name of everything. AMEN.*

In that sermon, Kit observed:

*We laugh at the absurdities of life. We laugh to help ourselves accept the inevitable. We laugh with others and feel ourselves connected to them. We laugh to put our human bumbling into perspective. We laugh to let go of unwanted memories. We laugh to release emotion. We laugh to fight anger, fear, and depression. We laugh to ease an unhappy heart.*

*And we laugh to poke holes in egotism, both our own egotism and that of others.*

*We laugh at our politicians' antics and foolery; we laugh at the ridiculous things public figures do. And we gingerly and sometimes painfully laugh at ourselves, at our own egos, at our own ridiculous behavior.*

*Laughing at ourselves is probably one of the most important and yet painful things we can do.*

If you have found this a painful sermon, I suggest you consider yourself as somewhat humor-challenged. I encourage you to check out a Psychology today article by Dr.

Jeremy Sheridan on "Mastering the Therapeutic Art of Laughing At Yourself." He offers a 12

step program that I obviously do not have time to share this morning.

Kidding p. 11

I believe that one of the greatest gifts we need to nurture is our ability to laugh at life's insanity – today perhaps more than ever before. Humor is an important tool to help us persevere.

Subsequent to the service, I discovered this on the internet:

Amen.