

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF LIFE

some thoughts on developmental and defensive uses of humour



In these hard times, with many services closing, humour can be in short supply, but **Nick Barwick** explores how humour has many uses, including self-development, self-defence and self-care

Common parlance - 'I didn't know whether to laugh or cry' - recognises the intimate connection between comedy and tragedy, humour and pain. To shed our troubles is to 'laugh them off'. 'To have the last laugh' is to triumph over adversity - or indeed, over *an* adversary - just as to 'laugh in the face of' whatever threatens, is to assert our emotional invulnerability, even if that face is death's. And so, with each 'cry of laughter', we make an affective counterclaim against a world that assails us, and a resolution, both of and against, the frustrations, disappointments, losses and disillusionments that characterise our pain. For this reason, there may be much truth in the witticism: 'He who laughs, lasts'¹.

An important aspect of humour's function, I suggest, is to help us manage the multiple 'falls' of life - that is, a world

post *The Fall*, where, free but no longer provided for, mortality epitomises our desire to do more than we are capable of and to be more than we are. In 'the gap' that characterises this world, aspirations and creative acts are inevitably shadowed by frustrations, losses, and myriad 'falls' and it is humour that is often used, both developmentally and defensively, to lighten the shadow and to manage the psychic residue of these falls: humiliation and shame.

Although these related affects have distinguishing characteristics (humiliation, for example, may be seen as rooted in oedipal relations, shame in pre-oedipal ones) for the purposes of this article I focus on an essential quality they have in common, that is a profoundly disturbing and painful feeling of inadequacy.²



... if I laugh at any
mortal thing
'Tis that I may
not weep.

Byron (1821)



The pleasure and the pain

Although my focus is on the relationship between humour and pain, it is important to remember that this is not the whole story. Certainly, most psychoanalytic theory, from Freud³ on, suggests that it is the difficulties of life that tend to promote development, since we are, through such experiences, alerted to the world of reality and challenged to develop our mental capacities in order to manage ourselves within such a world. Even Winnicott, who gave so much weight to the importance of a holding environment in the healthy development of the individual, emphasises the importance of disillusionments, frustrations and the challenging impingements of reality, as long as they are reasonably well-timed and in manageable doses. After all, in the space between a realisation of a need and its gratification, the creative gesture, the cry, the protest, the very stuff of communication is generated. And yet, this perspective on development and on learning, vital though it is, can lead to an underestimation of the importance of pleasure and, as Ann Alvarez⁴ points out: 'Pleasure should not be thought of as inferior to pain in its capacity to disturb, alert and enliven.'

Humour, pleurably, offers stimulation. For a child, indeed for all of us, it can make the world a more exciting as well as a less frightening place to explore. Learning, it helps us see, can be both challenging and fun. Above all, being, as Freud⁵ would say, essentially 'rebellious' in nature - that is, a breaker of boundaries and a means by which the ego is able to launch 'a momentary mutiny' not only against social mores but against its 'grey and severe mentor', the superego - humour is both promoter and product of a flexibility of mind⁶, of a capacity for spontaneity and playfulness, essential to creative living.

But enough of the creativity, spontaneity and playfulness of humour, and back to loss, disillusionment and pain.

Humour's chicken soup for the bruised soul: three types of humour

Lawrence⁷ refers to the necessary transition from narcissism to socialism which we must make if we are to mature as human beings and as a society. The complex journey of maturation is complicated by the fact that not only must we learn to deal, along the way, with our own bruised narcissistic vulnerabilities, but with those of others. Embedded, as we are from the start, in the wider matrices of family and social history, we are shot

through both with shared human aspirations and the half-digested psychic residue of countless shared falls. Humour is a key method of managing humiliation and shame resulting from these falls, and can lead, at best, to personal and social development, at worst to oppression, persecution and/or neglect.

Humour can usefully be identified as taking three forms: *reflective*, *deflective* and *projective*. By using these terms, my hope is to capture something of their varied relationship to the 'mirror' (the earliest mirror, according to Winnicott⁸ being that of the primary caregiver's eyes) and how the quality of that mirror determines, in large part, the extent and limits of our capacity to see ourselves via the perspectival lens of humour and to celebrate, tolerate and, where necessary, transform what we see.

Reflective humour: Case example

Paul, a second year undergraduate, came to discuss his difficulty in meeting deadlines. After an excellent start in the first year in which he was identified as a star pupil, things had, in the second year, got 'a bit wobbly' and he had begun to lose confidence. It made no sense, he said. He was working even harder than before and reading far more widely than required. Still, he just could not 'get ahead'. 'Get ahead of what?' I asked. 'Sorry; I mean, get on.'

This little interaction caught the tone of our work. I would offer, for reflection, a phrase of his or 'slip of the tongue', hoping that it might lead to some exploration, some insight. He would respond with an earnest apology for his miscommunication - that was not what he had meant at all. In the end, I commented on the process rather than the content: about his concern at 'slipping up' and about how important it was that he corrected any ambiguity and misunderstanding he thought might result.

This observation led, by freer association than usual, to an acknowledgement of how his anxiety about 'slipping up' was most acute in seminars where first and second years 'had to work together.' Though tempted to take up the potential resentment inherent in this phrase, instead I myself freely associated to an aspect of his family circumstances about which he had given a few details earlier, specifically his relationship with his sister, younger than him by barely a year. His description of this relationship was one of strong feelings of protectiveness, evinced, for example, by his story of how once, in a sledge race, his sister had fallen off the sledge, split her lip and chipped two of her front teeth on a protruding rock. From that point, even though he loved sledging, he had never taken to it again. Some weeks later he recounted this dream:

I was walking down this icy street. People were struggling, but not me. There is a girl ahead of me and no matter how hard I try, I cannot get ahead. Suddenly, I do this long stride - more like a glide - and swish past. But as I come round the front of her, I trip and end up on my face. I remember thinking - 'that was stupid, that was so stupid.' Then I look up and this girl is looking down at me. Except she's not a girl anymore, but me. And I am smiling - not smirking, but smiling in a warm kind of way. And the me standing there puts a hand out to the me on the ground and says, smiling, 'that was stupid.'

With this, Paul looked directly at me, in a way which he had rarely done before. His eyes were watering a little, but he said with good humour nonetheless, 'Do you think sometimes I get ahead of myself?'

This is a good example of 'reflective humour'; humour that both signals and encourages transformation and is reliant upon and indicative of a modified superego; one that, rather than wielding accusations or persecutory guilt, remains empathic to the narcissistic wound experienced even whilst acknowledging the omnipotent 'error of one's ways'. It is a humour that makes learning tolerable, even welcomed, for, as Bollas⁹ comments: 'A patient is a straight man to his unconscious and it is a long time, if ever, before he comes to enjoy the comedy.'

At heart, reflective humour is based upon the infant's experience of an empathic but modifying mirroring - the face of a caregiver who, though remaining empathically attuned to the tragic 'fall', also re-presents it with an element of amusement - a capacity to witness aspects of painful experience from a comic perspective. Without such transformative interaction, the child is likely to be 'over-serious', unable to access the consoling pleasure of humour, of lightness of touch and of play. When this is so, a core aspect of the therapeutic work will be, through a modification of the superego and the liberation of the capacity to play, the facilitation of the development of humour's reflective function.

The flight from 'unpleasure': deflective humour

The infant looks to the caregiver, both to help make meaning out of his or her experience and to *learn* how to make it. The mirroring process is internalised and becomes the basis of how we look or look away from our experience of being human. If, in presenting affect-charged experience to the caregiver, the latter, rather than meeting, through attunement, with that

affective life presented, through humour distracts, diffuses and/or defuses it, the infant begins to learn not only that there is something inside them that is not tolerable and needs to be turned away from but also how, through humour, to do the turning.

Deflective humour is frequently used in families as a way of managing difficult emotions; to distract rather than transform. (The child cries; the parent quickly responds with clowning

and without a sufficient foundation of empathic attunement; the child forgets both the cause of pain and their sense of pain). A similar process can be seen at work in some forms of organisational life. For example, both medical and military staff use deflective humour to manage anxieties aroused by the particular faces of mortality with which each must deal as part of their profession. Thus for soldiers, sudden bursts of 'larking around' - infectious, yet to the outsider, often quite out of keeping with context - are a common means combatants use to distract themselves from extreme pain and mortal danger. Indeed, what is sometimes referred to as 'gallows humour', can become *de rigueur* in such contexts, since it can proffer a temporary, if illusory, triumph over fears of mutilation and death.

Freud, in his brief paper, *Humour*⁵, referred to this as 'the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability'. Sustained and relentless use of such deflective humour, however, both by individuals and organisations, can lead, over time, to profound desensitisation - a carelessness about self and other - where comic perspective all but obliterates, rather than tempers, tragic perception.



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Case example

Simone was a successful postgrad student. Bubbly in nature, she was, as she said herself, 'the life and soul of the party'. Even more perturbing then, that she found herself looking in the mirror sometimes and weeping. She had no idea what this was about and such 'bouts' came without apparent warning.

Speaking at a great rate, she told me how she was going to go to mainland Europe during the summer break with her best friend. She had, she laughed, asked her how long she could put up with her. Her friend had replied 'two weeks'.

The painful sense of deep 'unwantability' was something I found, initially, quite difficult to attune to, even though the tragic sense beneath the comic take was identifiable at an intellectual level. It took quite a while to sensitise myself, in terms of my countertransference, to the tremendously painful affect beneath the jocular skin. Only once did I manage, to some degree, to do this and was able, usefully, to find a way to slow her racing narrative and reflect back both words and something of the emotion which she had difficulty in reflecting upon herself. At those moments, just as she had done when she caught herself in the mirror, she began to weep (though, now in the presence of an empathic other, with some relief).

Projective humour: rebellion, repression and power

The capacity to maintain a sense of humour - especially the capacity to be witty - may, in itself, signal potency (of mind at least). However, an aspect of the empowerment the disempowered feel in utilising humour is often also derived from the diminishment, in their own minds at least, of the power of the oppressor. The manner in which primitive feelings - powerlessness, humiliation, shame - can be pushed, through humour, from oppressed onto and even into oppressor, suggests that projective processes are at work.

Instead of a case example, let me instead draw upon a cultural phenomenon often used in the service of projection, namely jokes.

In 1938, Freud, having managed to obtain the appropriate paperwork to leave Vienna, was required to sign a form saying that he had not been mistreated by the Nazis. This, so the story goes (a story Freud himself told his son), he did, adding, 'And I can thoroughly recommend the Gestapo to everyone.' This 'joke' has a keen double edge. Not only does it protect the victim from

the full weight of intensely distressing affect (four of Freud's sisters failed to escape) - that is it deflects - it also 'attacks' the oppressor/persecutor, ridiculing Goebels himself, who oversaw Freud's exile, as an inadequate, humourless, dimwit.

It is difficult to raise an objection against this beautiful (if in the end untrue¹⁰) example of humour's triumph over adversity. Nevertheless, used beyond the point of crisis, unchallenged and unchecked, projective humour, though offering the joker (and their audiences) pleasure and temporary relief from the disturbing affect accumulating around external and internal abuse (that is, from humiliation and shame), can be deeply damaging. This is because, as an outcome of these projections, those who are projected onto and into, whether socially powerful or not, are reduced to caricatures, stereotypes: to part objects rather than whole. When those who are projected into are without social power, the victims are not only seen as less than human, but can be dealt with as such. This is Eddie Waters (the comedy teacher in Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians*¹¹) dark revelation when, just after the war, following a visit to a concentration camp, he returns to West Germany to witness a fellow comedian's gig: '... quite normally, he's going along, getting laughs, he tells this joke about a Jew ...I don't remember what it was... people laughed, not inordinately, just ...easily. And I sat there. And I didn't laugh ...and I discovered there were no jokes left. Every joke was a little pellet, a ...final solution.'

In the face of such human catastrophe, it seems almost irrelevant to consider the abuser as well as the victim. Nevertheless, if we are to resist a never-ending current of projection and counter-projection, it is essential to remain aware of our capacity to rid ourselves of the half-digested detritus of our narcissistically wounded and humiliated selves as well as of our susceptibility to the detritus of wounded and humiliated others. In short, we all have the capacity to be abusers as well as be abused; and this is so in our relatively localised lives as it is in our lives as members of broader social groupings.

Lest this all seems far removed from the day-to-day lives of ordinary students, let me finish with one final jocular offering: at a party, a young Texan student approaches a Harvard graduate and asks, 'So where do you come from?' The Harvard man replies, 'I come from a place where we do not use prepositions at the end of sentences', to which the Texan returns, 'So where do you come from, a**ehole?'



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Another testament to the liberating power of wit: its capacity to deflate the oppressor, to empower the potentially oppressed by refuting the role of humiliated and shamed? Certainly, we may take vicarious satisfaction in witnessing the symbolic castration of a snob. Yet there may be a sleight of hand. The Texan's response, and our understanding of it (indeed if we are one of the select few who do), requires quite a sophisticated understanding of grammar - what prepositions are and where, according to Latinate principles, they should be. Thus educated wit is at once denounced and claimed. Why would it be claimed unless we shared something of the snob's own aggressive need to establish superiority? And why would we need to assert such superiority unless we felt prey to our own persecutions, to our own humiliation and shame? Thus the undigested aspects of self and society are shunted back and forth and humour is enlisted both to give licence and force to such shuntings. That this joke - and ones like it that challenge social superiority and mock pretention - is apparently representative of the type of humour most favoured by Americans¹², may be significant. It would certainly make sense in the context of a nation forged out of a struggle against the social superiorities and prejudices inherent in colonial oppression.

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