

The First Unitarian Church of Hamilton
Sunday 4th July, 2010, 10:30 AM

"A Priest, A Rabbi, and a UU Minister Walk Into a Bar..."

Speaker: Robert Nielsen

I asked the powers that be what topic I should choose for my sermon, and was told, "Talk about whatever you want to talk about." So I have selected as my topic today, "The Perils of Small Press Publishing in a Rapidly Deteriorating Economy."

Well, that's how I began my speech at my son's wedding. There was a long silence. And then somebody suddenly got it and laughed, and then they all laughed. Except for Aunt Maud. And then I assured them I was actually going to say a word or two about the happy couple. But I had their attention. And since this was to me a very spiritual occasion, I felt no guilt having used - well, humour - as a spiritual practice. Later I was asked by a friend to speak at his daughter's wedding because she wanted me to give my "Publishing Speech."

What do you get when you cross a Unitarian Universalist with a Jehovah's Witness? Somebody who comes knocking at your door, but for no apparent reason.

You've probably heard that one, and others like it on numerous Sundays, as speakers carried on the noble UU tradition of injecting a little levity.

I checked out "UU Humour" on my machine, and read about good UUs following what they call "The Ten Suggestions", and then there's the one about the latest UU miracle - someone saw the face of Ralph Waldo Emerson on a tortilla.

Was I the only one in the room, when The Rev. Victoria Ingram stood before us, wondering whether she had a sense of humour? Just before Rev. Ingram got up to deliver her sermon on Covenanting Sunday, Beverly provided a glowing tribute. This was followed by our loud and prolonged clapping. The first words Rev. Ingram said were, "Maybe you should save your applause until after the sermon!"

As soon as those words were out, I thought, "Bingo!"

I laughed. You laughed. We knew that here was the perfect person for the job.

But what if she had said something else? What if she had said, "I'm sorry, but I don't really believe in applause within the confines of a holy sanctuary. I find it disrespectful, and, well, frankly, things are gonna change around here."

Would that landslide victory have been in the bag?

Yes, humour is a tricky phenomenon. My son in law plays horn in the Pittsburgh Symphony, and they were going to New York to play Carnegie Hall. Bob planned to take his 12-year-old daughter Madeline as a special treat. I phoned to congratulate her.

"Hey, Madeline," I suddenly asked. "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?"

"I dont know, Grandpa. How?"

"Practice practice practice!"

There was a long pause. Finally, a little voice said "I didn't know that, Grandpa. Thank you."

Yep, I can understand why the actor Edmund Gwenn said on his deathbed, "Dying is easy. Comedy is difficult."

Remember when you were a little kid? How you would tell a joke and hope for a laugh? But chances are you'd hear "Tickle me with a feather." Or "So funny I forgot to laugh." Or the worst: "Are you trying to be funny?"

I recall as a kid getting a great laugh, but the kids weren't laughing with me, they were laughing at me. And in some bizarre way this incident had to do with spiritual practice. Negative style.

I was in Grade 4 at General Somebody or Other School in Edmonton, and my mom and dad used to sleep in Sundays but send me off to Sunday School. They would give me a dime for the collection basket, but one day I wanted to buy some black balls at the corner store afterwards - so I put in my dime - and took out a nickel change. My fellow inmates seemed to enjoy this very much.

I had learned something about humour; it isn't always kind. It's not always a laughing matter. But "humour" is the key word to a large lexicon, which includes: jocularity, waggishness, satire, irony, light humour (or humour lite), flippancy, repartee, wisecracks, pleasantries, banter, raillery, badinage...Oh yes, and howlers:

Having been a teacher, I knew that stumbling on a howler was the the only thing that made it possible to mark those wretched exams. I published a book of howlers; my favourite was from a geography paper: "Holland is a low, lying country."

Some of them deal with religion:

Question: Who composed the Hallelujah Chorus?

Answer: God.

Q. Describe the last supper.

A. It is Jesus and the 12 apostrophes having their last meal together.

Because of his beliefs, Martin Luther was denounced and restricted to a diet of worms.

Q. Who was sorry when the prodigal son returned?

A. The fatted calf.

Define "vacuum".

"Vacuum" means where the pope lives.

When Martin Luther got especially mad he went around nailing bulls to doors.

An epistle is the wife of an apostle.

A common element in humour is surprise. It brings us up short, and at its best it happens real fast. The sudden upsetting of the apple cart makes us titter, or snigger, or chuckle, or guffaw, or roar.

Here's my favourite example, from the works of my favourite humourist, our own Jeff Mahoney, that culture hero who took on the Hamilton Art Gallery - and won. Remember Tiger Woods? Well, here's Jeff.

A famous guy backs his Cadillac Escalade down the driveway of his \$2.5-million dollar home and hits, in succession, a fire hydrant and a tree. Or as my dog would call them, the bathroom suite.

To be accused of not having a sense of humour is the worst. Yours may be different from mine, but there is room for everybody. I love irony and sarcasm.

When Monty Python first appeared, a small crowd - including me - wouldn't miss an episode - for anything! "The Ministry of Silly Walks" was my favourite, followed firmly by "The Dead Parrot" sketch: "This parrot is pushing up daisies, it has joined the heavenly choir. This is a late parrot." "No it's not; it's resting."

An acid test of their humour was **The Life of Brian**. One review says: "Religious fanaticism gets a real drubbing in this irreverent and sometimes side-splitting comedy. Graham Chapman plays the title role of a reluctant 'saviour' born in a manger just down the street from Jesus." Some people love it, some find it blasphemous.

A comedy of similar ilk is "Father Ted". This Irish series is the funniest thing I have ever seen. It leaves others cold; some consider "Father Ted" as offensive to Christians, especially Catholics. Basically, you have three dysfunctional priests living in a manse on Craggy Island. One is Father Jack, a disgusting old reprobate. The others are Father Ted, an egomaniac, and young Father Dougall, a fool. When Father Ted mentions anything about Christian doctrine, Dougall invariably interjects, "You don't actually believe all that stuff, do you Ted?"

Other English shows having fun with religion are "Bless Me Father", "The Vicar of Dibley", and of course "Mr. Bean", with his Hallelujahs!

The original meaning of humour was "liquid." Ancient Greek and Latin medicine passed on to the Middle Ages the theory of four humours in the human body and that individual temperaments resulted from the predominance of one of these. "Wit" comes from Old English "witan" - to know - and denotes a kind of verbal expression which is brief, and contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise.

One writer who differentiated between wit and humour was Ambrose Bierce, a 19th century American author of **The Devil's Dictionary**, which he dedicated to those "enlightened souls who prefer dry wines to sweet, sense to sentiment, wit to humour". Ambrose defines "religion" as "A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable."

Freud separated "harmless wit", which evokes laughter that is without malice, from "tendency wit", which is aggressive, directing the laugh at a particular person, such as the courtier reading the inscription engraved by Alexander Pope on the collar of a dog he presented to King George II:

I am His Highness' dog at Kew.
Pray tell me Sir, Whose dog are you?

Is there humour in religion? How about **The Bible**? There is a joke in Matthew chapter 19 cracked by Jesus: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." A little hyperbole there; no knee-slapper, but you won't forget it.

Here is another Biblical reference, from the English comedy team "Beyond the Fringe"; they use it as the text for a mock sermon: "Behold, Esau my brother is an hairy man, and I am a smooth man." The sketch mocks a pompous minister, who sees a parallel between the Christian life and a tin of sardines. Finally he questions his congregation: "Is there a little piece left in the corner of YOUR life?"

There is no shortage of jokes about religion. Just check your email. One item is headed, "Even God Enjoys a Good Laugh". It argues that Jesus was black, Jewish, Italian, and a Native American: "But the most compelling evidence of all - 3 proofs that Jesus was a woman: 1. He fed a crowd at a moments notice when there was no food; 2. He kept trying to get a message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it; and 3. And even when He was dead, He had to get up because there was work to do."

Here are three sure-fire ways to handle spiritual concerns with a touch of humour:

1. Use humour as a means to steer people away from **WRONG** spiritual practices, by pointing out their weirdness.

This sort of thing pops up in the papers:

Rio De Janeiro - A Brazilian fortune teller received a prison sentence yesterday for selling "houses in heaven", on the installment plan. Contracts specified occupation after death with ancestors.

And closer to home...

Toronto - Michael Us set a new record for Massey Hall last night. He failed to attract a single person to hear the presentation of a new religious formula to save humankind. The manager said it was the first time in history NO ONE turned up. The man said he has come as the Voice of Heaven in the name of the Creator of All Things.

Here's a lady who espouses a traditional religion, but is misguided in her approach. She's quoted in "In Westminster Abbey" by John Betjeman, an English poet laureate. The setting is World War II:

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans.
Spare their women for Thy Sake,
And if that is not too easy
We will pardon Thy Mistake.
But gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,
Don't let anyone bomb me.

Think of what our Nation stands for,
Books from Boot's and country lanes,
Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
Democracy and proper drains.
Lord, put beneath Thy Special care
One-eighty-nine Cadogan Square.

Huckleberry Finn is another who seems to harbour a wrong-headed approach to religion. But Huck is fine; it's his society that is out of joint. It condones slavery, whereas Huck is trying desperately to help the slave Jim to escape. This causes Huck heavy guilt, making him feel he has been "brung up wicked" and his "wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven."

Poor Huck is ignorant of traditional rituals. The homeless lad is taken in by the Widow Douglas, and answers the bell for supper:

When you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them.

The widow tries to help Huck by filling in gaps in his biblical education: "...she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him."

Later Huck sneaks out to join Tom Sawyer's gang and is caught by Miss Watson, the Widow's sister, "a tolerable slim old maid with goggles on". She tries to reform him:

She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so.

I tried it. Once I got a fishline, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool.

2. Use humour to advertise one's own religious practices Humour seems vital nowadays, when church attendance is sorely suffering. So why not stick signs outside churches? Donelson View Baptist Church sports, "Forgive your enemies - it messes with their heads." Then there's Goodwood United Church, with its "Free coffee. Everlasting life. Yes, membership has its privileges."

3. Use humour as an adjunct to a serious spiritual event, including a funeral. I was honoured to be asked to speak at the funeral of my dear friend James Simpkins. Jim died at 93, after a career as a superb illustrator and cartoonist. He was the creator of the famous Jasper the Bear, who appeared every week in **Macleans Magazine**, and is the official mascot of Jasper Park. He is also a bear smarter than your average park visitor, and an enemy to litter bugs.

Wondering what to say at Jim's funeral, I leafed through a book of Jasper cartoons. I had some cartoons enlarged, held them in front of the mourners, who included Jim's children, and read the captions aloud. One showed Jasper and his cubs seated atop a moving car, inside which an angry man is shouting at his wife, "Where are all the tame bears this park is supposed to be full of?" People started to laugh, and the laughter grew. Suddenly I could hear the giggle of a little girl. It sounded like a crystal bell. Jim would have relished that sound.

In closing I want to include my favourite UU, Henry David Thoreau, a humourist loaded with advice on living the rich spiritual life. This man writing in 1854 remains totally fresh today. Here he is addressing a couple of current concerns - coping with clutter and galloping technology.

Thoreau complains about his neighbours' house: "I wonder that the floor does not give way under the visitor while he is admiring the gewgaws on the mantelpiece, and let him through into the cellar, to some solid and honest though earthy foundation." He tells of an old deacon, who counted amongst his effects "a dried tapeworm", and who was about to move. Thoreau is disgusted that his "things were not burned; instead of a bonfire, or purifying destruction of them, there was an auction."

As to technological advances, you wouldn't have found Thoreau rushing to buy an iPod:

"Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are about improved means to an unimproved end. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world nearer to the new: but perchance the first news that will leak through in the broad, flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough."

Last week Val came in the house after trying to tame our overgrown garden. She picked up **The Spec** and saw this quote, which she immediately shared:

"What is a weed?"

"I'm stumped. What IS a weed?"

"A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered."

We both laughed. Why? What was funny? Why didn't I have to use a feather? Why didn't I forget to laugh? Why didn't I ask her if she was trying to be funny?

Let me leave it with you.

