The wit and wisdom of humor

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Humor frequently involves a prophetic element of truth-telling, and in that spirit, it seems appropriate to set this essay in its historical context. It must be acknowledged that, in the year 2020, the world is witnessing some of the most un-funny times in modern memory, marked concurrently by global pandemic, consequent wide-scale quarantine and social isolation, worldwide economic downturn, food scarcity in developing countries, and international protest against racial injustice—all within a span of mere months. Yet, perhaps as a sign of the Lord's sense of humor, a group of scholars had predestined themselves to undertake the study of laughter from multiple vantage points for *Vision* 2020. From a human perspective, whatever may be said of hindsight, it seems that foresight is not 20/20.

The world is witnessing some of the most un-funny times in modern memory. Yet, perhaps as a sign of the Lord's sense of humor, a group of scholars had predestined themselves to undertake the study of laughter.

The theology and psychology of humor

The reader may or may not find the above punchline amusing, but humor often involves a recognition of incongruity, its resolution, a cognitive appraisal of amusement, and an emotionally gratifying and socially-connecting experience.[1] So, humor is cognitive, emotional, and social, and it is worthy of both psychological and theological examination. In this essay, I attempt to do so only with great caution. For, apart from its historical backdrop, there are ever-present dangers inherent to writing on humor that could make an author wary. For instance, one of the cardinal rules of comedy, already violated here, seems to be, *Never explain your jokes, lest the analysis of humor become its assassin*. A writer who dares in any way to broach "the science of funny" runs a real risk of humorlessness. This is

1 See C. Warren and A. P. McGraw, "Differentiating what is humorous from what is not," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110 (2016): 407–430.

a shame because there must be room for whimsy, play, and wonder in the exploration of human wit and the wisdom in humor. Indeed, much is left to explore, as currently there is no scientific consensus on an answer to the age-old question: What's so funny?[2] This in itself is amazing since so many of us implicitly know funny when we see it. Regretfully, it is doubtful that this mystery will be solved by the conclusion of this treatment, though biblical scholars, pastoral theologians, and psychologists, alike, are no strangers to quixotic pursuit of unsolved mysteries.

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For instance, when I was in seminary, I wanted to know the depth and fullness of what it means to be human. So I studied the New Testament by day and neuroscience by night, alternating between the Synoptic Gospels in the Bible and the synaptic gaps of the brain, occasionally confusing my notes and leaving them forever intermixed. The two sides of my life, ministry and psychology, were always in a constant, playful conversation around the intricacies of the human psyche.[3] And though I make no promises to be funny here, I attempt to address humor in the same way—through the lenses of both psychology and ministry. When viewed together, these two disciplines give rise to a kind of binocular disparity to our vision, which, I believe, renders a depth of perception to humor—incongruity and its resolution, with connection and reward.

Indeed, there is a dimensionality to humor, though it often comes so naturally that its complexity can be easy to overlook. I failed to notice it, at first. When I began my interdisciplinary back-and-forth on the psyche (both *the mind* and *the soul*), I was utterly blind to the ways that humor might also rely on a kind of lively side-to-side interplay between the right and the left hemispheres of the brain. Neither had I insight, from

2 Again, see Warren and McGraw, "Differentiating."

3 In some ancient Greek texts, *psyche* refers to the *mind*; but in New Testament Greek, it more commonly refers to the *soul* and, indeed, to *life* itself. See H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

a neurological perspective, that we are social creatures, literally, in the neural "fibers of our being"—that even our neurons are deeply connected and responsive to one another through a cosmically vast neural network, communicating in the quick-witted language of electrochemical nerve impulses. What a basis for a theological anthropology—and a theological gelotology (the study of laughter!).

The neurology and sociology of humor

My first glimpse into the neurological sophistication of humor dawned on me as a seminarian and a doctoral student. At that time, a very special group of people honored my colleagues and me by graciously allowing us to study from the fullness of their humanity. These wonderful people had a condition called Primary Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum (AgCC).[4] In normal brain development, the corpus callosum is the major interhemispheric pathway that develops in the brain, composed of more than 200 million nerve fibers that form white matter tracks connecting the left side of the brain to the right side of the brain.[5] Primary AgCC occurs when, in the absence of other brain abnormalities or intellectual deficits, the corpus callosum fails to form *in utero*, leaving a chasm substantially unbridged between the hemispheres.[6] Without the corpus callosum, and other smaller commissures, our left hand literally would not know what our right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3).[7] Since it is one of the later brain structures to complete its development in the lifespan, the corpus callosum has been speculated to play a role in human maturity and the

4 In the Lee Travis Research Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary, led by Dr. Warren Brown, my own dissertation research was a linguistic analysis of stories told by those with Primary AgCC when being shown emotionally laden pictures from the Thematic Apperception Test, while other colleagues more directly studied humor and Primary AgCC. Over the years, many of the researchers in Dr. Brown's team were blessed by an ongoing research relationship with these individuals who so generously gave of their time and their life experiences.

5 Warren S. Brown, ed., *Understanding Wisdom: Sources, Science & Society*, Laws of Life Symposia 3 (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2000).

6 Warren S. Brown, Lynn K. Paul, Melissa Symington, and Rosalind Dietrich, "Comprehension of Humor in Primary Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum," *Neuropsychologia* 43 (2005): 906–916.

7 See the works of Roger W. Sperry and Michael S. Gazzaniga and colleagues for discoveries on "split-brain" patients who, unlike congenital agenesis of the corpus callosum, undergo surgical commissurotomy to remedy uncontrolled seizure disorder.

formation of wisdom.[8] But, in addition to wisdom, it also seemed to play a role in witticism. Over the course of years, I saw first-hand what colleagues were already uncovering in their research. People who lacked the largest connection between the two cerebral hemispheres struggled to grasp the subtleties of jokes. Though this is too simplistic an explanation, with a disconnection between the (linguistic) left and the (more emotionally astute) right hemispheres, they simply did not "get" narrative humor. Suffice it to say that this could have a profound impact on social and emotional functioning.[9] During this time in my life, I learned from these gracious people and from my research mentor, Dr. Warren Brown, that the fullness of humanity arises not from any of an individual's abilities but from our connection to others—the power of community. Spirituality and abundant living, such as in the body of Christ, are best found in life together.

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Humor plays a crucial role in our life together, and in our social, emotional, and cognitive functioning and development. Socially, humor is part of how we connect as humans. Laughter is the behavior most closely associated with humor.[10] It can serve as a social signal to those around us. Perhaps you have noticed that you do not laugh quite as much, nor as hard, when you are alone as compared to when you are in the company of good friends. Laughter serves as a social connector apparent even in infancy. Who has not delighted in the giggles of a baby? Babies' survival depends on the bonds they form with their early caregivers and surrounding community.

8 Brown, *Understanding Wisdom*.

9 People with Primary AgCC also struggled to understand nonliteral language, proverbs (what biblical experts might call "gnomic apperception"), and some aspects of theory of mind; that is, perspective-taking (Brown, *Understanding Wisdom*). More recently, Warren S. Brown and Lynn K. Paul identified these symptoms as part of a neuropsychological syndrome that presents in Primary AgCC. See Warren S. Brown and Lynn K. Paul, "The Neuropsychological Syndrome of Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum," *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* 25, no. 3 (2019): 324–30.

10 Cf. Caleb Warren and A. Peter McGraw, "Differentiating What Is Humorous from What Is Not," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110 (2016): 407–430.

Social connection is not separate from biology but is deeply intertwined with it. Those who understand the developing brain and its neuroplasticity—that neural connections constantly change throughout the lifespan to better adapt to their environments—can appreciate the connection between our lived social experiences and our very physiology. Indeed, it may be worth abandoning the phrase "nature versus nurture" altogether, in favor of "nature *via* nurture." Since even biology can be shaped by social experiences over time, there may be some truth to the saying *Laughter is the best medicine*. Laughter likely helps to form and firm social bonds, and, in turn, social support from community is associated with better health through lower levels of immune suppression and through a decrease in stress hormones.[11]

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Humor has even been found to have a role in mate selection. Research by Theresa E. DiDonato and colleagues indicates that, especially for women, humor may be used consciously or unconsciously as an assessment of whether someone may be a suitable partner, particularly by the way that humor might convey a potential partner's competence and warmth.[12] Though never conscious of using humor as a dating assessment myself, I do remember one interaction in my twenties with a blind-date. He introduced himself by saying, "I'm a comedian; I do comedy improv." I smiled and commented on our complementarity: "That's great! I'm a therapist; I do tragedy improv." Would he resonate with my kind of playfulness? Would he "get" me? A few dates revealed that he would not.

It is important to have people in our lives who get us. It turns out that similarity in neural responses can predict proximity of friendship. Perhaps one could call it "the science of 'click'" between close friends—the way

11 As cited in David G. Myers and C. Nathan DeWall, *Psychology*, 11th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

12 Theresa E. DiDonato, Mellisha C. Bedminster, and Joanna J. Machel, "My Funny Valentine: How Humor Styles Affect Romantic Interest," *Personal Relationships* 20 (2013): 374–90.

someone who gets us reliably well "strikes a chord" that resonates in the neural firing within us.[13]

Neurocognitive research suggests that humor activates diverse parts of our brain, far beyond the corpus callosum, reaching into cortical areas like the temporo-parieto-occipital (TPO) region of the brain.[14] This area likely draws associations from our store of memories (temporal), perceptions (parietal), and imagery (occipital) for sophisticated cognition. Cognitively speaking, humor likely involves first recognizing incongruity and then processing resolution. The TPO region of the brain is thought to be responsible for this kind of high-level cognition.[15] Furthermore, we tend to give a cognitive appraisal as to whether we consider something funny.

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Finally, from a socio-emotional standpoint, we enjoy humor and laughter. When we find something truly funny, it is emotionally gratifying.[16] This is probably due to the activation of dopaminergic pathways, stimulating the reward centers of the brain.[17] For most of us, it just feels so good to laugh, especially with friends. It feels good to be connected.

Humor and ministry

Turning now to consider ministry, through the years in my ministry to pastors, I have found that many clergy do not feel connected, but are rather socially isolated. Recently, someone posed the question: "Why do people think that ministers are so humorless?" It made me pause and speculate on the splitting and projection to which I suspect ministers are regularly subjected. By splitting and projection, it is possible that minis-

13 Carolyn Parkinson, Adam M. Kleinbaum, and Thalia Wheatley, "Similar Neural Responses Predict Friendship," *Nature Communications* 9 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-017-02722-7.

14 Pascal Vrticka, Jessica M. Black, and Allan L. Reiss, "The Neural Basis of Humour Processing," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 14 (2013): 860–68.

15 Vrticka, Black, and Reiss, "Neural Basis."

16 Warren and McGraw, "Differentiating."

17 Vrticka, Black, and Reiss, "Neural Basis."

ters may be consciously or unconsciously held at a distance by their parishioners or by others in the community, kept as "other" to preserve the intrapsychic function that ministers may serve for them. Since humor and laughter are social connectors where presumably some identification or shared experience takes place, perhaps perceived humorlessness functions to regulate distance. Many ministers feel interpersonal distance acutely through loneliness. In a scenario that many pastors may find familiar, once when officiating a wedding, I noticed what appeared to be unnecessary self-consciousness and self-censorship of R-rated humor whenever I passed by at the reception. People were reticent or unwilling to let me in on their humor and jokes. Since I am bivocational, with no notable social impediments in my life otherwise, it was easy to discern that my stole, the representation of my pastoral presence, was the conversation- and joke-stopper.

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Reciprocally, pastors sometimes struggle with the question of how human they can allow themselves to be within their parish and the wider community. Can they be afforded the vulnerability and playfulness of a spontaneous gesture?[18] Perhaps inhibition related to boundary maintenance on the side of the minister does not lend itself easily to spontaneity and unguardedness, both so necessary in humor and play.

Humor and play in Jesus and the Gospels

Humor and play are nevertheless prominent in the wit and wisdom of Jesus. Jesus of the Gospel is a punster, and yet most of this gets lost in translation to English. Robert Stein notes that when the Greek New Testament is back-translated into Aramaic, some of these puns come sharply into focus.[19] For instance, in Matthew 23:24, Jesus notes to blind guides: "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." Even the English hearer can

18 See F. Robert Rodman, ed., *The Spontaneous Gesture: Selected Letters of D. W. Winnicott* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

19 Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 13.

appreciate the visual contrast of the imagery, but the cleverness in the linguistic incongruity is lost. When back-translated to Aramaic, it's clear that Jesus contrasts straining the *galma* and swallowing the *gamla*.[20]

I imagine and trust that playfulness serves as a useful interpretive lens for viewing much of the Gospels. My doctorate is not in biblical scholarship, but if I may be allowed the vulnerability of a playful and spontaneous gesture, I interpret John 21, for example, with a twinkle in the eye. The Gospel accounts offer some binocular disparity in Peter's name: "son of Jonah" (dove) in the Synoptics (e.g., Matthew 16:17) and "son of John" (or *Johanan*, God's graciousness) in the account attributed to John (John 21:17)—terms that are previously employed in a pun in the book of Jonah (4:2). If we employ an exegesis of playfulness and humor, a depth of meaning arises from the resolution of this incongruity in Peter's name. An unsolved mystery hangs in the balance in John 21. Will Peter continue to live and behave in a flighty way (son of a dove), already thrice denying and fleeing from going "where [he does] not want to go" (v. 18), like Jonah? Several hints indicate textual playfulness here. Peter stands dripping on the beach (not unlike Jonah, regurgitated by a big fish) to confront the risen Christ who cooks breakfast over a charcoal fire like the one with which Peter had warmed himself when he denied Christ three times and fled. And so Jesus asks him thrice, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" as he extends an invitation to restore Peter as a son of God's graciousness. For, indeed, when Peter would later come to Joppa (Acts 9:39), the very seaport from which Jonah fled God's will (Jonah 1:3), Peter would choose, instead of flight, to follow the risen Christ in word and deed. Note the resonance and rhyme between the accounts in Mark 5:38–42 (Jairus's daughter) whose resurrection Peter watched as Jesus pronounced in Aramaic, "Talitha, koum," and in Acts 9:36–42, where Peter followed in Christ's actions and speech by pronouncing (in back-translation to Aramaic), "Tabitha, koum." Indeed, when Jesus calls Peter "son of John" in John 21, I interpret this playfully

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20 Stein, *Method and Message*.

as an invitation to no longer be a "son of Jonah" but to accept forgiveness for his flighty transgressions.

With regard to the fish that the risen Christ was cooking for breakfast, I also employ an interpretive lens of humor. I trust that Thomas was actually a twin, given his nickname, Thomas Didymus (John 21:2). But might there be a playful, second meaning to this nickname—a double-entendre to "Thomas the Twin" that gives a depth of meaning? If we look through a lens of playfulness, we can imaginatively wonder whether the disciples lovingly persisted in calling him Thomas the Twin because he reliably demonstrated a tendency to eat for two! (I just view it as a playful possibility.) Then, with the 153 fish, deliberately counted and noted by the Evangelist (v. 11), Jesus and his 7 attending disciples (21:2) could have enjoyed a fish each to their full satisfaction (with two for Thomas the Twin), and there would still be 144 fish left over—12 times 12, reminiscent of the 12 baskets full of leftover crumbs from heaven's bounty of fishes and loaves (21:9) and the 12 tribes of Israel. Such humor and play can be employed in deep reverence—and sometimes insight arises as well.

About the author

Melissa Hofstetter is a clinical psychologist and ordained minister in the Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference. She is the director of Shepherd Heart Ministry Consulting. She has recently taught courses in pastoral counseling and congregational health at Azusa Pacific Seminary, and in neuroscience at Azusa Pacific University, as adjunct faculty. She lives in Pasadena, California, and attends Pasadena Mennonite Church.