

# Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

## Encountering God

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# Editorial

Allan Rudy-Froese

Some kinds of religious humor are not hard to pull off. There you are in a grand cathedral with a few dozen whispering pilgrims. The place is immense—not at all like your church back home. You walk reverentially to the statue of Mary and child and then on to a taller statue of an intense man with a book in his hands. Is it Isaiah, Luke, a saint? You gaze up to the colorful stained-glass windows and then on to the grand ceiling held up by sturdy columns. With your neck and eyes strained to peer to the heights, you are captivated by angels, meditating the immortal God of the heavens.

And then someone in the quiet cathedral loudly flatulates.

Here in this moment of rapture with the Holy, a gaseous human sound pierces your mediation. The high and holy God you have been pondering has been dropped into the aisle.

There would be many reactions to such an event from those scattered throughout the cathedral. Some would laugh aloud and then almost immediately try to stifle their innate response. Others might smile and let out a small laugh to themselves or a friend close by. A pilgrim or two would try as best they can to pretend it did not happen—but may chat about it later. Yet others who hear the ripping interruption would show their offense by grimly looking around to eye the guilty party.

## High and low

Religious humor, in this form, is composed of the sudden and surprising incongruity between the high and low. The immortal God, God's angels, and the sacred are high. The low is the mortal human with noxious gases, an entirely necessary but private orifice, and an all-too-human sound. Bringing the high and the low together in this way often results in laughter or at least an amused giggle. And it is not just those who are immediately present who find it funny. Those who are looking in on the scene (the fourth wall: we who are reading presently) can keep laughing by witnessing the many responses of the pilgrims. We can laugh at those who pretend that nothing happened and at those who are looking in the low light for the vulgar culprit.

The humor of high and low is not just for the religious realm. The comedy troupe Monty Python plays on this kind of humor over and over again: kings and queens, lords and ladies, knights, bishops, and the well-heeled are all brought down to their earthy selves. In a song by Monty Python, those whose musical compositions take us to the heavens are brought low, even unto death and the grave with “decomposing composers.” Here is just one verse:

*Verdi and Wagner delighted the crowds  
With their highly original sound.  
The pianos they played are still working,  
But they're both six feet underground.*

Humor that brings high and low together is common in cartoon strips, television and film comedies, and stand-up comedy routines. Parents are rated with a checklist by their smarty-pants six-year-old and found wanting. Politicians and lawyers are endlessly portrayed as the “bottom of the barrel” in multiple ways. The comedian speaks about a profound, heartfelt experience and then drops the F-bomb. The emperor found without those dapper clothes is the classic joke in this genre. While these



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highs and lows play on caricature, these categories still stick, or we wouldn't laugh.

We may think that comedy that trades in high and low is a cheaper or simpler form of comedy, like slapstick and physical humor. Indeed, my story of farting in the cathedral is scatological humor, the lowest of all. (Really, Allan, you had to go *there*?) Most readers of *Vision* are from this “low” church tradition, which does not have us gazing at statues and ceilings to seek for the sacred. We are simple worshipers whose highest point of gaze is the Christian sibling

next to us in the pew. True, if we dare to look higher, we can take in the recently homemade banner. Furthermore, our children are right here with us in worship, and we welcome their lovely innocent sounds.

While it is true that we are not a cathedral people, there remain echoes of the high and the low in our religious life when it comes to how we think

about laughter and humor. In her article “The wit and wisdom of humor,” Melissa Hofstetter relays the experience of church folks silencing their laughter or R-rated conversation when the pastor walks by. Playwright, director, and actor Johnny Wideman, in “Clench and release,” notes that when Theatre of the Beat performs live dramas in churches on current churchly issues, they often have a “plant” to get the laughter going. We actually need to give permission to laugh in church. Moreover, two of our writers, Wideman and Andrew Unger, in “A time to laugh and a time to speak,” wonder if there is a connection between our lofty tenet of pacifism and our lack of ease with humor on churchly issues.

Have we produced a people who are so serious about our godly and special mission in the world that we cannot thoroughly enjoy a belly laugh?


While we continue to wrestle and dance with the idea of a high God and a low humanity, one of the remarkable themes that runs through this volume is a clear acceptance of our bodies as made in the image of God for humor, laughter, play, and joyful celebration. In the last twenty years or so, we have become more comfortable theologically and otherwise with these fleshly and earthy bodies as the location for God’s presence in the world. This volume affirms and contributes to this ongoing religious conversation about the human body in relation to God. When working in the area of laughter, humor, and joy, we cannot help but go to the body. We are taken here to the human body that smiles, laughs, giggles, weeps, clenches, sings, releases, praises, and plays. The body is good—and not low at all, especially in the eyes of God.

### **Serious and humorous**

Another topic in the realm of humor—religious and otherwise—is how we get from serious to funny. Here we look to the horizontal rather than the vertical. We are interested in the chasm to be spanned or the journey to be taken from trauma to laughter, tragedy to comedy, structural racism to joy, or catastrophe to praise. All of our writers wrote in the midst of a global pandemic and the individual, communal, economic, and national

crises that have remade our lives. We all dared to write about laughter, humor, and joy in the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others at the hands of oppressive, white, racist people and systems. By March and April of this year, I questioned whether we could even write and publish a volume on laughter during times like these.

It turns out that this volume on laughter is balm for the weary soul. While therapists Hofstetter and Pierson help us here in direct ways, all



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of our writers helpfully take us to places where we look with brutal honesty at the world as it is and the possibility of laughter and joy. In Nekeisha Alayna Alexis's article "I *will* rejoice," she introduces us to testimonies from African American women who are deeply shaped by a tradition imbued with deep trust in God and profound spiritual practices that sustain body, soul, and community in the midst of continuing oppressive systems. The

following reflections from W. Jean Mayes, Stephanie Coleman, Regina Shands Stoltzfus, and Ashlee Pierson display how this deep trust in God, close community, and honest testimony about what has been, what is, and what could be can enable laughter and joy to flourish. Likewise, in "Shout to God with joyful praise!" Carrie Badertscher and David Cramer describe joy as a wellspring that goes deeper than our experience of laughter. In "Playing together," Susan Fish tells of gathering quarantine-isolated persons together on Zoom to read dramas. New friends are made and laughter abounds when a space is made to play together—even if the play is a murder mystery. In "Walking together hand in hand," Ben Borne relays his own story of how he copes with new employment realities, the death of a loved one, and being a gay man in hostile settings, while remaining a man of joy and humor. In "Welcoming another through laughter," Pratik Bagh, a newcomer to the United States from India, gives testimony to the warm welcome he received at a local church when he and his wife, Shabnam, arrived in Elkhart, Indiana, a few years ago. As he describes, a gentle smile and shared laughter can go a long way in bridging cultural, racial, and national boundaries in initial encounters.

In this volume, we wrestle with the deadly serious and the knee-slappingly humorous. This move to laughter in the midst of personal and societal catastrophe is perhaps not so much a bridge to cross as a dance

where tears mix with laughter, pain mingles with joy, and tragedy and comedy tango. We are not in this alone, and by the grace of God, serious and funny miraculously belong together—otherwise, we would never be able to laugh.

### **The labor of laughter**

While these pages reveal that laughter, humor, and moments of joy are often spontaneous, living a life that has capacity for these good things often requires hard work and lifelong engagement. The joy inherent in the

**Sarcasm, hyperbole, and the absurd, along with physical and scatological humor, have been with us since Adam and Eve and will remain until the apocalypse—and perhaps long after.**

Black Joy described by Alexis is embedded in spirituals, the bonds of community, and continual prayer and singing. It takes investment. The playwright spends countless hours working and reworking the play alone and with others to find the place where the church might laugh in that one line that is a stinging, yet humorous, indictment of the church. In “The Mennonite clergy card,” Jim Loepp Thiessen reminds us that the “work” of telling and retelling funny stories and making up new ones from daily

life has a way of sustaining our sense of humor. Our readers of the Bible (preachers and otherwise) take hours—even years—of dedicated study to find that human and humorous moment with Job, Sara, Abraham, Jesus, and many others who we all thought were such serious people. Michele Rae Rizoli, Paul Keim, Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau, and Ben C. Ollenburger take us to the Bible and allow us to see the comedy therein. They mine this high-held, serious book for its earthy characters and dialogues that are not unlike our own in their familiar comedy.

We may wonder whether this humor that we find in the Bible is intended by the authors. One way to find out is to get into the texts and stories named by our writers and try them with friends. Be curious and use your voices and bodies as you retell these stories. Get down on the floor with Job and his friends. Go close to Jesus and hear his irony. Finding the funny takes investment. Bible study would be much more entertaining and sustaining if we read the text with a sense of the full range of human emotions and bodily expression. Sarcasm, hyperbole, and the absurd, along with physical and scatological humor, have been with us

since Adam and Eve and will remain until the apocalypse—and perhaps long after. The laughs are there for the finding.

In an editorial meeting when this volume was in the works, someone asked, “I know that we can produce something good that is *about* laughter, but will it be funny?” I think the answer is yes, you will laugh. You will be giggled and joyed into new ideas, spiritualities, and ways of looking at the Bible, church, community, and politics. Comedians are some of the best social, political, and religious critics of our age. There is a slanted view of reality that ushers us into some of the most potent realities of personal, communal, political, and religious life. Take a look, for instance, at Jacqueline Hoover’s, “Face veils and face masks.” Her article ushers us into the comic clash of COVID-19 facemasks and burqa-clad Muslim women. We laugh with Muslim women at, among other things, the hypocrisy of Western Christianity’s reluctance and even stern opposition to accept veiled faces.

In this issue, we hear from comedians and joyous leaders in the church who masquerade as pastor, therapist, playwright, actor, antiracism professional, academic, communications expert, administrator, and novelist. Thanks be to God for those among us who bring on the comedy, testify to joy, make us laugh, and at the same time usher us into God’s gospel for our time.

### **About the author**

Allan Rudy-Froese is associate professor of Christian proclamation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, and adjunct professor at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario. He teaches preaching, voice, storytelling, and performance theory. Allan divides his time between Kitchener, Ontario, and Elkhart. On the frequent road trips back and forth, he listens to theologians, rock and roll music, and comedians.



# Walking together hand in hand

## Sadness, seriousness, and joy

Ben Borne

I will never forget March 2020.

Have you ever experienced a time in life when it seems like when it rains, it pours? That was my March 2020.

There was one week in particular when it felt like a hurricane was ripping through my life. People started feeling the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning to sweep across the nation. I felt it too. Everything began to shut down. No more going to school. No more going into work. Social connections cut off. I lost my job. One of my grandparents went into the hospital that week too—which later turned into a brain cancer diagnosis.

That week.

That was a heavy week.

I cried about it for a few hours. But, somehow, I came through still smiling, still finding joy.

Someone close to me remarked, “I don’t know how you do it. You still find a way to laugh through it all.”

My ability to laugh and smile through it all is an integral part of who I am. In recent years, I have come to realize that the deep sense of joy I experience has been a gift my entire life. It has carried me through some tough stuff. I had significant adverse childhood experiences, which resulted in a constant anxiety and fear of never being enough. But my sense of humor and my ability to lean into a sense of joy have always balanced out the more shadowy sides of my life experience. It is with this experience as a background that I can make a few observations about joy, laughter, and humor.

## Sadness and joy can walk together hand in hand

Have you ever noticed that funerals can be both incredibly sad and particularly joyful—and, dare I say, even humorous—events? The first time I noticed this was at the funeral of a member of my congregation. I had not seen my good friend in a long time. He had moved away for university,

and it just so happened that this funeral was the first time we had seen each other since he left. It was during his winter break, and we were excited

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to see each other. I distinctly remember the congregation gathered before the funeral service began. My friend looked up at me, we made eye contact, and we started smiling at each other.

This is sadness and joy walking hand in hand together.

More recently, I had an uncle who had suddenly passed away. It was truly a tragic death for our family. In the days after he had passed leading up to the funeral, we would share funny stories

about my uncle. I suspect this is a shared experience for many other people too. As the week went on, I had recorded the stories I had heard about him to be used during the eulogy that I would deliver. At the funeral, I would be crying and laughing my way through the eulogy, and so would some of the people in attendance. We were experiencing deep joy and sadness as we remembered and celebrated his life.

This is sadness and joy walking together hand in hand.

### **Seriousness and joy can walk together hand in hand**

My first foray into exploring the nature of humor was in the !Explore program through Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 2008. As part of this program, we were asked to bring a theological question to explore during our time in the program. I explored the question, *Does God have a sense of humor?* For some reason I had the idea that faith had to be a stern and serious topic that could not be taken lightly. I felt that my ability to tackle pain, struggle, and sadness with a sense of joy and humor was incongruent with the seriousness of faith. But over the years, I've realized that seriousness and joy are able to walk together hand in hand if we allow them.

Recently, a friend of mine remarked how I carried myself through the heaviness of the conversations around sexual orientation and gender identity in the church. This was particularly obvious to me at the Mennonite Church Canada conference in Saskatoon in 2016. The conversations were challenging for many, especially for me as a gay man. It is hard to sit in a room full of people and feel like they are talking about you. It is

hard to hear other stories of pain and anguish, and it is hard to hear from those who fundamentally believe that same-sex attraction is wrong. However, when I stood up to lead music during worship services, the sheer joy

of congregational singing together made me feel connected to those around me even when we disagreed from time to time.

**If I could talk to someone, and we could smile together or laugh a little bit, it always disarmed or deescalated the conversation because humor and joy have a magical ability to connect people.**

I also had some difficult face-to-face discussions during the Being a Faithful Church process. I remember instances where people wanted to get into the nitty gritty of scriptural interpretation with me right away to prove their point. But that was never my objective in these conversations. My objective was to build relationships with others so that they could get to know me, and I could get

to know them. By doing so, I felt it would be far easier to have productive and healthy discourse on these difficult and often personal subjects. Truth be told, if I could talk to someone, and we could smile together or laugh a little bit, it always disarmed or deescalated the conversation because humor and joy have a magical ability to connect people.

### **Laughter brings us together**


Social psychologists Laura Kurtz and Sara Algoe write in their study on laughter, “For people who are laughing together, shared laughter signals that they see the world in the same way, and it momentarily boosts their sense of connection.”<sup>1</sup> This rings true for me. Humor, laughter, and joy help me connect. This is the critical piece lying underneath the examples I have shared above. In all of these difficult settings, being able to experience a glimpse of joy or share in laughter allows us to connect and ultimately support each other through difficult circumstances.

Sometimes we are shy about using humor because it can seem irreverent or inappropriate. However, I fundamentally believe when we numb

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Jill Suttie, “How Laughter Brings Us Together,” *Greater Good*, July 17, 2017, [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_laughter\\_brings\\_us\\_together](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_laughter_brings_us_together). For the study, see Laura E. Kurtz and Sara B. Algoe, “When Sharing a Laugh Means Sharing More: Testing the Role of Shared Laughter on Short-Term Interpersonal Consequences,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 41 (2017): 45–65.

our ability to laugh together, we prevent ourselves from building deeper connections with each other. Do not get me wrong, I have made my fair share of mistakes with my sense of humor in the past. However, what I am suggesting is that using humor strategically and at the right moment can help build the relationships we want to see with each other.

After graduating from Canadian Mennonite University, I landed a career in corporate communications. Over the years, I have written speeches, content for social media, advertising copy, and the odd video script here



**We have to keep leaning into joy, humor, and laughter to stay connected and to brighten up the shadowy sides of our collective life experiences.**

and there. I have learned it is important to tap into a wide array of emotions and stories to communicate your message, including using humor and making people laugh together. And I believe this is more important now than ever before.

If you have been living under a rock for the past while, this might be a shock, but we are living in trying times right now. Building community and a shared

worldview together is more important than ever. We have to keep leaning into joy, humor, and laughter to stay connected and to brighten up the shadowy sides of our collective life experiences.

So next time you get behind the pulpit or sit across from someone face to face (or over a video chat), I encourage you—no, wait, I *implore* you—to think about how you can facilitate laughing together in a way that creates connection and ultimately builds up community across the street and around the world.

### **About the author**

Ben Borne is the co-owner of a community consultancy in Saskatoon but spends his free time volunteering for the church in various leadership capacities and in Sunday worship. He is passionate about critically engaging with faith through the lens of the human experience, and vice versa. Ben holds a Bachelor of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies from Canadian Mennonite University and a diploma in public relations from the University of Victoria.

# The wit and wisdom of humor

Melissa Hofstetter

Humor frequently involves a prophetic element of truth-telling, and in that spirit, it seems appropriate to set this essay in its historical context.

**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.**

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 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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

**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 age-old question: What's so funny?<sup>2</sup>

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.

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 Bi-

ble 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 Agnesis of the Corpus Callosum (AgCC).<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Without the corpus callosum, and other smaller commissures, our left hand literally would not know what our right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3).<sup>7</sup> 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

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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 Agnesis 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 agnesis of the corpus callosum, undergo surgical commissurotomy to remedy uncontrolled seizure disorder.

formation of wisdom.<sup>8</sup> 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

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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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, *Understanding Wisdom*.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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

**I 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.”**

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> This area

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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.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, we tend to give a cognitive appraisal as to whether we consider something funny.

Finally, from a socio-emotional standpoint, we enjoy humor and laughter. When we find something truly funny, it is emotionally gratifying.<sup>16</sup> This is

probably due to the activation of dopaminergic pathways, stimulating the reward centers of the brain.<sup>17</sup> 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-

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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

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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.

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?

<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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*.<sup>20</sup>

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

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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

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.

# Playing together

Susan Fish

They called themselves The Church of Grover’s Corners, the group of friends who gathered regularly to read aloud the play *Our Town*, which is set in the fictional town of Grover’s Corners.<sup>1</sup> I decided I needed some



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of their version of church when we approached my least favorite day of the year—the day after the autumn time change. A diverse group gathered in my living room, and we drew names out of a hat to assign roles before reading Act 1 of *Our Town*. We took a break for soup, read Act 2, ate dessert, and then read Act 3.

Over the next year or so, I gathered different people for similar events. People as young as seventeen and as old as

eighty-three read Charles Dickens, a contemporary mystery, and a Shakespearean comedy of love.

Then the pandemic struck, and there were no more gatherings.

My job as the acting children’s ministries coordinator at my real church came to an end, too. I had entered that role with preconceived notions about what a children’s ministry coordinator was like. They should most definitely have an active Pinterest account and be super-good at crafts. And they should say words like “super-good” often.

But I began to apply lessons I had learned many years ago when I taught at a private school. The school’s founder, Friedrich Froebel, believed we are all made in the image of God to be creative and to play. Froebel wrote that play “is not trivial, it is highly serious and of deep significance.” And he observed further that “the spontaneous play of the child discloses the future inner life” of the adult.<sup>2</sup> Adopting this philoso-

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1 See <https://louisvillerenaisissanceproject.com/2019/05/02/the-church-of-grovers-corners>.

2 Friedrich Froebel, *The Education of Man*, translated by W. N. Hailmann (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1907), 55.

phy helped me in this last year to realize my ideas about children's ministry were misguided: children are not simply cute but are people on a spiritual journey whose path to God is through their play.

During the pandemic I began to take play for adults far more seriously.

### **Playing in the midst of pandemic**

At first, I struggled as COVID-19 spread across the world. I watched a friend set up a field hospital, another who works as a cardiac nurse, and others helping refugees or low-income folks. These seemed noble tasks and ways of incarnating Jesus in a very broken world—but also things I could not do.

Then, one of the attendees from one of the play nights suggested I try hosting one online. It was about a month into quarantine, and by this time we were all well acquainted with Zoom fatigue. But I agreed to

try, with an idea about a play that would resonate—an Agatha Christie closed-room mystery—since we were all kind of stuck in a room with a killer stalking us.

Suspecting that reading a three-act play virtually would be a long slog, we decided to read an act a week, with no one reading ahead in the script. A dozen people gathered online, most of them strangers to one another.


What was most surprising was how life giving and *fun* this playing was for all. The first night, I could not sleep for

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hours, drunk on the heady brew of laughing together, something I had nearly forgotten. The next week, I started to see what made this work: unlike most Zoom calls where people need to make conversation, a play gives us a script to operate from; at the same time, unlike merely watching Netflix, every participant needs to be exactly that, a participant, fully engaged in the process of co-creating and discovering the plot. By the time we finished the end of Act 3, no one wanted to get off the call, and instead we stayed on, talking to our playmates about life and death and stories and relationships.

## The play of perichoresis

Twice more, I hosted different groups reading the same play, and each time, the same thing happened. I pulled together a fourth group. Our last night was one of the most intense nights of protests against racial violence. I wondered whether people would show up. When they did, and we did our weekly check-in, I asked whether doing this in the face of all that was happening in the world was frivolous or necessary. No one thought it was unimportant.



**Perichoresis names how the Father created the Son, how the movements of love between them are the Spirit, how it is the nature of love to create, and how out of the dance (or play) of this love came all creation.**

It is easy to see the temporal and eternal value of nurses and pastors and social workers and to see play as “the childish ways” we put behind us as we grow up (1 Corinthians 13:11, KJV). But after a year of working with kids and

valuing their play, followed by these remarkable evenings, I have become convinced of the vital importance of play for all people—indeed, that we become more like God when we play.

There’s a theological concept called perichoresis, which names how the Father created the Son, how the movements of love between them are the Spirit, how it is the nature of love to create, and how out of the dance (or play) of this love came all creation.

The monk and mystic Thomas Merton once wrote, “What in God might appear to us as ‘play’ is perhaps what He Himself takes most seriously. At any rate the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance.”<sup>3</sup>

Merton has a point: unlike children who just play, too often either we dismiss play as lacking meaning or we try to impose meaning on it. When I think about Jesus saying, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3, NIV), I think back to the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire*, where Olympic runner and future missionary Eric Liddell explains his running to his disapproving sister, saying, “God made me fast, . . . and when I run I feel His pleasure.”

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3 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 261.



I also think about what the mystery writer P. D. James once said in an interview: “To say that I am a Christian writer suggests that I write to propagate the faith or to explain my own spiritual life. I don’t. I write detective stories and I write them as well as I can. I love the form, I love the structure, and within that I hope I say something true about human beings, about life. Inevitably my own view of life which is fundamentally religious tends to come through.”<sup>4</sup>

## Playing at church

The group that inspired me called themselves The Church at Grover’s Corners. It is tricky these days to be the church when we cannot physically

**I’ve been challenged to wonder about the nature of the church through playing together with these folks.**

**These experiences of play, though virtual, have a real depth and honesty to them I rarely experience in church.**

gather, share communion, sing together, or do all the many things that are part of an incarnational faith. But just as we question whether the image of God is a physical matter or whether it goes deeper, so I’ve been challenged to wonder about the nature of the church through playing together with these folks. These experiences of play, though virtual, have a real depth and honesty to them that I rarely experience in church. Some of those participating are believers, while others would never step foot in a church. But as we play and laugh together, we

also share bits of our lives together and talk about baptism and punishment. We reflect on the issues of the day, with the same play being as different as the day on which we read it.

One of the chief qualities of play is the element of surprise. It is why not knowing what’s coming in the play has been a key part of this. It explains the delight I felt that first evening and still feel every time I gather to play with people. It makes me believe that God is in this. I think of the scene in the children’s book *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, when two of the children go to see the slain body of Aslan, only to be stunned that he is no longer dead but alive.

What happens next is how I want to close, with a picture of what God invites us to in play:

<sup>4</sup> Interview by Martin Wroe in *Books and Culture*, March/April 1998, 14–15.

*A mad chase began. Round and round the hill-top he led them, now hopelessly out of their reach, now letting them almost catch his tail, now diving between them, now tossing them in the air with his huge and beautifully velvety paws and catching them again, and now stopping unexpectedly so that all three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia; and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind. And the funny thing was that when all three finally lay together panting in the sun the girls no longer felt in the least tired or hungry or thirsty.<sup>5</sup>*

### **About the author**

Susan Fish is a writer who writes and plays from the front porch of the home in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, which she shares with her husband, dog, and three young adult children. She is embarking on a Master of Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College this fall. She is super bad at crafts.

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5 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 164.


# Don't make me laugh!

## Humor in the book of Job

Paul Keim

*Der Vogel, scheint mir, hat Humor.  
–Wilhelm Busch<sup>1</sup>*

On a high school exchange program in Germany the summer after my junior year, one of our resident teachers was Frau Butt. With typical adolescent perspicacity, we found this hilarious and were constantly sharing



**One of our resident teachers was Frau Butt. With typical adolescent perspicacity, we found this hilarious and were constantly sharing humorous asides predicated on her name.**

humorous asides predicated on her name. One lazy, bilingual afternoon the resident wit offered yet another joke at her expense. There was a burst of laughter, but then my friend Sherman suddenly stopped and exclaimed, “That’s not funny! I just found out Frau Butt’s husband died last year.”<sup>2</sup>

That was enough to sober us up—then. By the end of the summer, however, after we had come to know Frau Butt better, the going-away gift we presented her was an ashtray with the inscription

(in English): *Place your butts here.* She loved it. The specter of loss and grief had wiped the smiles off our faces. Two months of growing familiarity and fondness returned them.

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1 The poem from which this line is derived depicts a bird fluttering on a branch, caught in tree sap, aware of a keen-eyed cat creeping toward it. Awaiting its imminent demise, the bird decides that it might as well sing its heart out as long as it can, culminating in the poet’s whimsical remark: “It seems to me the bird has a sense of humor.”

2 Even at the time, the exclamation “That’s not funny!” struck me as odd, since whatever was said obviously made us laugh. What Sherman meant by the term, no doubt, was that the new information about death rendered our joking inappropriate.

## The standard reading of Job

If there is any book of the Bible that should wipe the smiles off our faces, it is the book of Job. Nowhere does biblical literature paint a more poignant picture of physical and mental anguish. The character Job is introduced as a pious non-Israelite from the ancient East who has it all, whose blessings seem to line up perfectly with his virtues. Suddenly he is crippled by a series of devastating losses, announced by messengers in rapid

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sequence.<sup>3</sup> They report the loss of property and progeny. A morally compromising depiction of God appears in the framing narrative. YHWH engages with “the Satan” in a contest to see whether the bragged-on piety of Job is authentic. At first Job persists in his integrity, but then he succumbs to the trauma that has engulfed him and curses (no euphemism!) his existence. Deeply troubled by his lament, his friends engage him in a cycle of increasingly acrimonious dialogues of recrimination. The vexing question of human suffering and its relation to the moral order has remained with us over the centuries and is no less acute today.

The literary and theological legacy of Job has long been fixed as that of a faithful hero of steadfastness and longsuffering for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>4</sup> For Christians, Job’s sufferings come to foreshadow those of the crucified Christ. As early as the Testament of Job (first century BCE) and extending into its modern reception, Job’s struggle is against Satan rather than God. What remains in this reconstruction of the book of Job is a model for the way the faithful might handle suffering and how the community of faith might support those who suffer pain and loss. There would seem to be little room for humor in this reading. In fact, it bears all the hallmarks of a tragedy.<sup>5</sup>

3 Reflected in the German proverb “Hiobsbotschaft,” a Joban message.

4 Cf. TJob 27:1-5; James 5:11; Quran 21:83-84.

5 Embodied in Kallen’s rewriting of the book as a Greek tragedy.

## Comedy amid tragedy in Job

There is much about the standard reading of Job that is askew. In order to maintain such an image of heroic steadfastness, important segments of the

**The careful reader notices immediately that all of the characters have been endowed by their creator with a facility of language that equips them to utilize elements of the comic in the midst of the tragic.**

book of Job must be neglected and overlooked. Moving from Job's deep lament (chap. 3) to the impassioned debate with his friends that follows, the careful reader notices immediately that all of the characters have been endowed by their creator with a facility of language that equips them to utilize elements of the comic in the midst of the tragic.

First of all, there are eight explicit references in the book to laughter (Hebrew *śahaq*) of various kinds.<sup>6</sup> But there are many more passages that exhibit a comic framing of situations in the midst of debate. These are not intended to evoke laughter but represent interaction rituals in literary terms like those that Goffman refers to as "face work" in conversation.<sup>7</sup>

For example, in the midst of Job's first response to his friend Zophar, toward the end of the initial cycle of dialogues, Job exclaims in exasperation:

*If you [all] would only keep silent,  
that would be your wisdom. (13:5)<sup>8</sup>*

This ironic reversal of the conventional image of the wise comes after more than five hundred words have already been exchanged among the friends. And why not? Speech was the currency of wisdom. As the preamble of the book of Proverbs makes clear, the purpose of that didactic collection is, among other things:

*To understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles. (1:6)*

6 See 5:22; 29:24; 30:1; 39:7, 18, 22; 41:5 [H 40:29], 22.

7 Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 5-45.

8 Perhaps Job is also evoking the profound empathy first expressed by the friends when they sit with him for a week in silence (2:13).

One might say that sages were paid by the word. But at this point in the controversy, once everyone has had the chance for barbed riposte, Job wryly asserts that their silence would be wiser than their speech. He makes this ironic declaration in the midst of accusing the friends of “speaking falsely for God” (13:7). Their wordy “wisdom,” Job maintains, is a pathetic attempt to “plead the case for God” (13:8). To be sure, the tropes of wisdom literature allow that verbal reticence may be a virtue, especially for those who imagine themselves wiser than they are:

*Even fools who keep silent are considered wise;  
when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.  
(Proverbs 17:28)*

Perhaps it is doubly ironic that Job’s chiding is itself verbose and will provoke an increasingly acerbic debate for another thirty-one chapters.

### **Humorous terms and literary devices**

Many of the key terms associated with humor and the comic defy narrow definition. There are subjective and objective features. What constitutes

**What constitutes humor, what kinds of laughter, what is considered comic—all these overlap on closer observation into a broad fabric of phenomena, many determined heavily by culture and language.**

humor, what kinds of laughter, what is considered comic—all these overlap on closer observation into a broad fabric of phenomena, many determined heavily by culture and language. So for the purposes of these reflections, I will be using key terms rather broadly. Humor is that which makes us laugh, or smile, or chuckle, or giggle, or guffaw, or silently reflect. The recognition of humor may be enhanced, or blocked, by factors such as interpretation or translation. What seems funny in English may not meet the standard for humor in the Hebrew

original. And elements of the comic in Hebrew, especially those using word play, may not translate into Greek or Syriac or other language as witty. Furthermore, it can be difficult to determine if a text is deliberately humorous when the meaning is unclear or when dealing with variant readings, or in the midst of a serious treatise.

There are many passages in the book of Job that support the thesis that the author(s) of Job makes use of literary strategies we identify as

humorous. Here are some examples, not an exhaustive list, arranged by theme/type:

1. *Imputations of Bloviating*

a. 8:2 (*Bildad*)

*How long will you say these things,  
and the words of your mouth be a great wind?*

b. 11:2–3 (*Zophar*)

*Should a multitude of words go unanswered,  
and should one full of talk be vindicated?  
Should your babble put others to silence,  
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?*

c. 15:2 (*Eliphaz*)

*Should the wise answer with windy knowledge,  
and fill themselves with the east wind?*

d. 16:2–4 (*Job*)

*I have heard many such things;  
miserable comforters are you all.  
Have windy words no limit?  
Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?  
I also could talk as you do,  
if you were in my place;  
I could join words together against you,  
and shake my head at you.*

2. *Irony*

a. 7:17–19 (*Job*)

*What are human beings, that you make so much of them,  
that you set your mind on them,  
visit them every morning,  
test them every moment?  
Will you not look away from me for a while,  
let me alone until I swallow my spittle?*

b. 9:11–12 (Job)

*Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him;  
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.  
He snatches away; who can stop him?  
Who will say to him, “What are you doing?”*

c. 18:3 (Bildad)

*Why are we counted as cattle?  
Why are we stupid in your sight?*

d. 20:6–7 (Zophar)

*Even though they mount up high as the heavens,  
and their head reaches to the clouds,  
they will perish forever like their own dung.*

3. Incongruity

a. 7:21b (Job)

*For now I shall lie in the earth;  
you will seek me, but I shall not be.*

b. 8:14 (Bildad)

*Their confidence is gossamer,  
a spider’s house their trust.*

c. 11:12 (Zophar)

*But a stupid person will get understanding,  
when a wild ass is born human.*

d. 12:4 (Job)

*I am a laughingstock to my friends;  
I, who called upon God and he answered me,  
a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock.*

e. 19:13–19 (Job)

*He has put my family far from me,  
and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me.  
My relatives and my close friends have failed me;  
the guests in my house have forgotten me;  
my serving girls count me as a stranger;*



*I have become an alien in their eyes.  
I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer;  
I must myself plead with him.  
My breath is repulsive to my wife;  
I am loathsome to my own family.  
Even young children despise me;  
when I rise, they talk against me.  
All my intimate friends abhor me,  
and those whom I loved have turned against me.*

f. 17:13–14 (Job)

*If I look for Sheol as my house,  
if I spread my couch in darkness,  
if I say to the Pit, “You are my father,”  
and to the worm, “My mother,” or “My sister,” . . .*

g. 20:15 (Zophar)

*They swallow down riches and vomit them up again;  
God casts them out of their bellies.*

h. 25:5–6 (Bildad)

*If even the moon is not bright  
and the stars are not pure in his sight,  
how much less a mortal, who is a maggot,  
and a human being, who is a worm!*

4. Sarcasm

a. 12:2 (Job)

*No doubt you are the people,  
and wisdom will die with you.*

b. 12:3 (Job)

*But I have understanding as well as you;  
I am not inferior to you.  
Who does not know such things as these?*

c. 13:25 (Job)

*Will you [Shadday] frighten a windblown leaf  
and pursue dry chaff?*

d. 15:7–9 (Eliphaz)

*Are you the firstborn of the human race?  
Were you brought forth before the hills?  
Have you listened in the council of God?  
And do you limit wisdom to yourself?  
What do you know that we do not know?  
What do you understand that is not clear to us?*

e. 21:3 (Job)

*Bear with me, and I will speak;  
then after I have spoken, mock on.*

f. 21:14–15; et alia (Job)

*They [the wicked] say to God, “Leave us alone!  
We do not desire to know your ways.  
What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?  
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?”*

g. 26:2–3 (Job)

*How you have helped one who has no power!  
How you have assisted the arm that has no strength!  
How you have counseled one who has no wisdom,  
and given much good advice!*

h. 38:1–3 (YHWH)

*Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:  
Who is this that darkens counsel by words without  
knowledge?  
Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.*

i. 38:21 (YHWH)

*Surely you know, for you were born then,  
and the number of your days is great!*

Perhaps we can imagine these and other rhetorical formulations in the book as part of a “fleshing out” of the incongruities of the situation: pious Job’s misfortune, YHWH’s wager with the Satan, euphemisms of blessing and cursing, a self-negating lament, the foolish and harmful talk

of caring friends, a futile insistence on justice, the tedious mansplaining of an overconfident youth, a divine theophany that answers none of Job's questions, a fairy-tale ending.

### Job as comedy

Acknowledging that the purpose and genre of the book have been the source of much controversy, William Whedbee proposed that “when the

**We should sharpen our wits and attune our ears to the many ways in which the wisdom of the fool and the foolishness of the wise engage us in vivid dialogue with reality, as it appears and as it is.**

poem of Job is set in its full and final literary context, replete with Prologue and Epilogue as well as the Elihu speeches, the most apt generic designation of the book is comedy.”<sup>9</sup> Few scholars have accepted this proposal, though the extensive use of irony in the dialogues has not gone unnoticed. Some have objected on literary grounds—that is, how a work so full of anguish could be considered a comedy. Others have rejected the compromised role of God as theologically questionable. Still others assume that an

overemphasis on the comedic features of the book is tantamount to dismissing its serious intent.

Among the few who have been inspired by Whedbee's proposal, Abigail Pelham argues that these disturbing features are intentionally built into the book.<sup>10</sup> She attempts to show that the “darkness” of its genius is not incompatible with its comedic structure. She concludes: “It may be that the author has written a comedy for the express purpose of exposing the tragedy that lies at the heart of human existence: the tragedy is that it is a comedy.”<sup>11</sup>

Nothing about the depiction of Job's situation is funny. But the way literature both reflects human life and challenges our assumptions about the world means that we need a balanced perspective. To take everything in the Bible with the same level of seriousness is to distort its message.

9 William Whedbee, “The Comedy of Job,” *Semeia* 7 (1977): 1.

10 Abigail Pelham, “Job as Comedy, Revisited,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 1 (2010): 89–112. This reading is reminiscent of Carol Newsom's brilliant reading of Job as a “Polyphonic Text.” See Carol A. Newsom, “The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26, no. 3 (2002): 87–108.

11 Pelham, “Job as Comedy, Revisited,” 93.

Nothing that obscures our view of the truths about ourselves and about God can be a theological virtue. The friends learn this lesson the hard way (42:7-9).

In the midst of the natural and moral orders in which we live and move and have our being, we should sharpen our wits and attune our ears to the many ways in which the wisdom of the fool and the foolishness of the wise engage us in vivid dialogue with reality, as it appears and as it is. Then, like the bird on the limb, even when we are stuck in the sap and our mortality is stealthily creeping towards us, we can decide to sing our hearts out. We should live, and read our Bibles, with a sense of humor.

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### **About the author**

Paul Keim is professor of Bible and Religion at Goshen College, Indiana, and regularly teaches Greek and Hebrew courses at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He speaks seven languages and can read at least fifteen modern and ancient languages.


# A time to laugh and a time to speak

## A homily on Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

Andrew Unger

In this most famous passage of Ecclesiastes, Solomon (or was it The Byrds?) tells us “there is a time for everything.” There is a time, he says, to weep, to search, to scatter stones, to dance even (although not for Mennonites apparently), and even a time to laugh.

Sometimes I wonder, though, if we as Mennonites have abandoned the laughter as eagerly as we seem to have left out the dancing. Given a



**Ecclesiastes could be read as if Solomon is presenting dichotomies—situations that never cross paths—as if the time to weep and the time to laugh cannot ever coincide, as if times of speaking and staying silent are fixed rather than fluid.**

certain lens, this passage in Ecclesiastes could be read as if Solomon is presenting dichotomies—situations that never cross paths—as if the time to weep and the time to laugh cannot ever coincide, as if times of speaking and staying silent are fixed rather than fluid. I think this reading of the passage is unfortunate, but common, especially when it comes to humor. We (I don’t just mean Mennonites here) tend to think of the time to weep and the time to laugh as very far apart. We often put humor in its own tightly constricted box in terms of context and content. People will say things

like “now is not the time” or “that isn’t funny” or “too soon.” And in these dark times we’re living in now? Well now, certainly, isn’t the time to laugh, some might say. Others argue that it is precisely in dark times that we need humor the most. These are arguments everyone has, but I think that we as Mennonites have too often placed humor in a particularly restrictive box.

In fact, those growing up in conservative Mennonite homes might wonder when exactly the “time to laugh” would ever come. If the Scriptures acknowledge that laughter has its place, why were our Mennonite ancestors (or mine, anyway) so strict on this matter? In her 1989 article

on humor in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Mennonite Brethren writer Katie Funk Wiebe paints a pretty bleak picture of Mennonite humor. “Unseemly light-hearted behavior,” she says, “was often summed up in the word ‘levity.’ In addition, the Mennonites were concerned that houses of prayer and worship not be turned into houses of entertainment and mirth through humorous allusions and stories.”<sup>1</sup> The restrictions were so severe, Wiebe says, that “true stories were preferred to fiction.”

And, of course, satire fares no better, according to Wiebe. “Satire as a comment on the human condition has not been used successfully in Mennonite periodicals,” she notes, “even if clearly labeled satire, indicating

that the point of view expressed is likely to be the opposite of what is expressed.” It got so bad that in the early 1980s, *The Gospel Herald* had to stop publishing cartoons and humor columns due to negative feedback from readers.

This restriction on humor has not been confined to our churches but has reached into our homes. In one of my own family history books, I read about a great aunt who believed laughter to be, quite literally, a temptation of the devil. In her home, laughter and light-heartedness were considered frivolous, and my great aunt was confused to see, one evening, her father and brothers laughing

together. It makes me sad to think of my great aunt, who wanted so much to be able to relax and laugh, thinking of these desires as sinful.

No doubt things have changed since Wiebe wrote her article or since my great aunt viewed laughter as a temptation of Satan. However, I do think that some Mennonites, whether in church or at home, still can be rather skittish when it comes to humor, and I wonder about the origin of this uneasiness. I think our history of living through dark times has shaped our view of humor. We tend to be very careful in delineating the line between the sacred and profane. But then I also wonder (and this is pure speculation) whether Mennonites of the past may have thought

**I read about a great aunt who believed laughter to be a temptation of the devil. In her home, laughter and light-heartedness were considered frivolous, and my great aunt was confused to see her father and brothers laughing together.**

1 Katie Funk Wiebe, “Humor,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989, <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Humor&oldid=143606>.

of humor as a weapon. I doubt this was ever articulated in these words, but I do wonder whether comedy was abandoned along with the sword. Perhaps there was an unconscious understanding that a commitment to humorlessness went hand-in-hand with a commitment to nonviolence.

Because it certainly is true that humor can be used as a weapon. In his critique of the evangelical Christian satire website Babylon Bee, Jonathan Hollingsworth notes that “Christian satire continues to miss the mark because it fails to do the work of good satire, which at its heart, fittingly enough, is a prophetic art. The Biblical prophets found their witness

**When humor is used to attack the vulnerable, it certainly can be considered a form of violence; this is the weaponization of humor.**

not in mocking the vulnerable, but in challenging the powerful.”<sup>2</sup> Here I think not only of the biblical prophets but also the way in which Jesus Christ, himself, used, if not satire, certainly allegory, in his critique of the powerful. I am also reminded of the great Jonathan Swift, an Anglican clergyman who used satire to point out flaws in the eighteenth-century Irish upper class. (He even has

a brilliantly biting satirical sermon about falling asleep during sermons, which is worth a read.) “Satire that punches down, rather than up,” Hollingsworth says, “is not only ignorant—it’s oppressive.” This analogy, that of punching, is a helpful one. When humor is used to attack the vulnerable, it certainly can be considered a form of violence; this is the weaponization of humor. If this is how humor was being used, perhaps Mennonites were correct to find it problematic. On the other hand, this view of humor seems to ignore its other roles, because humor can also be there when we need a time to embrace or to heal or to speak. In fact, humor that “punches up,” like that of Jonathan Swift, often speaks more powerfully than any literal commentary.

There is also a third direction the punches can be thrown. I call it “punching sideways.” This is where I would place self-deprecating humor. I think a lot of the humor on *The Daily Bonnet* would fall into that category. I’m writing about my own cultural and religious background and, in some cases, I’m quite literally writing about myself. Just recently someone

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Hollingsworth, “The Babylon Bee, Transphobia, and Why Christian Satire Still Misses the Mark,” *Medium.com*, 2016, since removed by author.



on Twitter commented: “I’m beginning to think *The Daily Bonnet* is just like your journal.” I suppose that’s true—at least some of the time.

We need to be reminded that there is a “time to laugh” and that this time need not come so infrequently. Let’s also remember, though, that humor is about a lot more than just laughter. If we are using humor to punch up (or sideways)—if we’re using humor to embrace and heal and speak—maybe the box that we place it in need not be quite so constrictive.

### **About the author**

Andrew Unger is best known as the author and founder of the satirical news website *The Daily Bonnet* and author of the new novel *Once Removed* (Turnstone Press, September 2020). Andrew is a writer, public speaker, and educator from southern Manitoba, whose work has also appeared in *Geez*, *Rhubarb*, *Ballast*, *Preservings*, *CBC.ca*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and *Friends Journal*, among many others. He is a graduate of the University of Manitoba and lives with his wife, Erin, in Steinbach. If you go back far enough, he is probably related to you.

# Church with 250 members splits into 250 churches

LANCASTER, PA

After a particularly heated membership meeting this past week, the South Lancaster Mennonite Church has decided to split the entire congregation into more manageable units of one.<sup>1</sup>

“At first we decided to just split into two groups: those in favour of buttons on their shirts and those who preferred hooks,” explained Johan Landes, former South Lancaster elder and recently appointed pastor of

**Johan Landes says he has excommunicated his past-self for differences on clerical celibacy, but is concerned that a future version of himself might also disagree.**

Johan Landes Memorial Church. “But then the button-users started talking amongst themselves and found they had differences of opinion on baptismal water temperature. Those wanting hot and those wanting cold split into their own groups. So then we had pro-button pro-cold, pro-button anti-cold, anti-button pro-cold and anti-button anti-cold groups. I figured it was settled, but upon further discussion, the groups

realized they couldn’t agree on whether to sing five or six hymns each Sunday, and so there was an anti-button anti-cold pro-five group and an anti-button anti-cold pro-six group, and a pro-button anti-cold pro-five group and . . . well, you get the idea. The groups just kept getting tinier and tinier. Eventually we all decided to each form our own churches . . . but there was some opposition to this idea, too.”

The once thriving South Lancaster Church is now 250 (253 to be precise) individual churches, although the division has still not stopped.

“This whole starting-your-own-church thing has got me studying theology,” explained Landes. “And now I keep changing church doctrine every day. I don’t even agree with myself anymore!”

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: This piece was originally published in *The Daily Bonnet* and is reprinted here with permission.

Johan Landes says he has excommunicated his past-self for differences on clerical celibacy, but is concerned that a future version of himself might also disagree.

“Who knows what I might believe this Friday afternoon,” explained Johan Landes. “I always get a little too liberal when the weekend is approaching. Being my own pastor is a lot harder than I thought. You get so much criticism from all sides, and it’s almost impossible to get the people to agree.”

Pastor Johan is arranging an ecumenical reconciliation service between his various selves for Sunday morning . . . although he can’t figure out whether they should use real wine or just Welch’s grape juice.

# Jesus Laughed

## Re-imagining Jesus as the life of the party

Michele Rae Rizoli

*“At its best, laughter is subversive enough to enable the truth to be told.”*

*—Dr. Richard Fraser*

Several years ago, a friend introduced me to a beautiful project titled *Jesus Laughing and Loving*.<sup>1</sup> It is an online art exhibition of images of Jesus bringing joy to the world. In one of them, Jesus is roller skating, in another Jesus is juggling in front of an amused crowd, and in another Jesus’s com-

**The images we carry of Jesus are not only visual. We might also imagine how Jesus is saying something when we listen to him through Scripture.**

panions are sitting at a table, laughing at a joke. The people who envisioned this art project noted that most images of Jesus in Western art have shown him suffering, dead, or in solemn, austere settings. (I’d also mention they mostly portray Jesus as a white man, but that is a discussion for another space.) *Jesus Laughing and Loving* is a whimsical collection by diverse artists from around the

world that opened my perspective to other ways of thinking about our God who becomes fully human.

The images we carry of Jesus are not only visual. We might also imagine *how* Jesus is saying something when we listen to him through Scripture. Was he being compassionate? Was he angry? Could he be sarcastic? Was he preaching or teaching? Was he joking or teasing? What tone do we hear when his stories are directed at “sinners”? What tone do we hear when his words are directed at us? What was his voice or personality like? What kind of friend was he?

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus Laughing and Loving* (Beecroft, New South Wales: Major Issues and Theology Foundation, 2012), <https://www.miat.org.au/jesus-laughing-exhibition.php>.

## The preachy Jesus

I grew up with some version of what I call “preachy Jesus.” Sure, there were pictures of him quietly rescuing lost sheep, patiently knocking at my heart’s door, or gazing into the distance while gently patting well-behaved children on the head. Yet somehow, every time he opened his mouth, in my head I heard pronouncements instead of amusing stories, directives instead of invitations, boring words instead of intriguing ones. And he was always verily, verily serious! My own imagination leans toward the humorous in life, so it was difficult to connect with this serious-all-the-time image of Jesus.

## Jesus as jokester

Along the way, I was introduced to biblical storytelling using methods of learning and telling Scripture by heart.<sup>2</sup> A whole new world of possibilities opened up, freeing me from the written text and giving me hermeneutical

**Jesus’s tone is more often filled with humorous truth-telling and amused laughter. His relationships are marked by gentle compassion, true friendship, deep listening, and gregarious engagement. In my mind, he often has a twinkle in his eye.**

tools beyond the words. This approach to Scripture recovers the ancient oral nature of the Bible, placing it in the realm of narrative and drawing on resources like imagination, context, geography, and embodiment. When preparing a text, one might think about things such as where people are in relation to one another in a scene, the looks on their faces, or the other people present in the room.

Today I hear and imagine Jesus quite differently. His tone is more often filled with humorous truth-telling and amused laughter. His relationships are marked by gentle compassion, true

friendship, deep listening, and gregarious engagement. In my mind, he often has a twinkle in his eye.

Like the time he rescues Zacchaeus from the bullying crowd and tells him, “I’m going to *your* house today!” (Luke 19).

Or when, after the resurrection, he appears to his frightened friends with a simple “Hi, guys!” (Well, according to Luke 24:36–46, he actually

<sup>2</sup> See Network of Biblical Storytellers International, <https://www.nbsint.org/>.

says “Shalom” and then asks for something to eat, but I’m contextualizing.) Imagine the nervous laughter in that scene!

Or when he engages the Samaritan woman in some well-side banter (the water cooler of their day), only to flip the conversation into serious matters about true worship and fulfilling lives (John 4).

Or when he impresses Nathaniel with the cool trick of knowing what he was thinking minutes before and with a teasing comment about Nathaniel being the truest Israelite (John 1:43–51).

This shift to a Jesus who laughs and jokes is not just a trick of the mind. If we look closely, there are indications right in the biblical narrative that Jesus was more than “preachy.” Consider that Jesus drew crowds of dedicated followers. The miraculous healings notwithstanding, surely to some degree that kind of popularity would require a magnetic per-



**People who will never come to a lecture or a worship service will engage issues around a good meal in a non-threatening environment, where laughter is embraced and encouraged.**

sonality and some good stories to keep people’s attention. Matthew’s Gospel even implies that all Jesus did was speak in parables all the time (13:34).

According to the writers of the Gospels, Jesus also drew a lot of criticism for the company he kept and the amounts of drink and food he consumed (Luke 7:34). It seems he knew that some of the best conversations happen when we are gathered with other people informally. People who will never come to a lecture

or a worship service will engage issues around a good meal in a non-threatening environment, where laughter is embraced and encouraged. Think about Nicodemus and an evening chat with Jesus in John 3. Imagine that Scripture only captures one small moment of a longer friendly interaction. Maybe they had been up there for a while, talking about all sorts of things that were leading up to the born-again puns Jesus was playing with. Was there laughter in their exchange?

### **Jesus as *festiero***

When I was in seminary, our professor of New Testament, Dr. Leif Vaage, told us an amusing anecdote about a paper he wrote in Spanish, where he had stated that Jesus was *festiero*. The paper had apparently generated some controversy when he tried to translate it into English and ended up calling Jesus a “party animal.” That idea of Jesus as a party animal set

my mind whirling. To be fair, *festiero* is a hard word to translate. Anyone who knows a little Spanish (or in my case, Portuguese) will recognize that the adjective comes from the word for “party” or “feast,” *fiesta*. *Festiero* is a positive word to describe someone who enjoys going to parties. We all know them, those people who make all the difference in the success of any gathering.

My upbringing in a Latin-American culture (Brazil) certainly gives a positive bias toward Jesus being a *festiero*. In that context, social gatherings are open-ended and can just as easily erupt into dancing as into heated philosophical discussions. The North American idea of party animal is

more about the indulgences of partying and sides more with the Pharisees’ negative connotation of excess. Maybe that is one reason I took so long to consider Jesus as the life of the party.

Jesus’s first recorded miracle, according to John 2, is to extend the life of a beleaguered wedding celebration by conjuring gallons of fine wine to keep the party going. In reading that story, I was always a bit troubled by his apparent

curtness with Mary as she tells him about the wine predicament. But if we can imagine that Jesus was there with his friends, possibly on the dance floor, and if we add laughter to his exchange with his mother—“What’s that to me, woman?”—it paints a lighter and more humorous picture of their interaction. They are party co-conspirators rather than opponents, as Mary becomes the catalyst for his public ministry.

### **The human, earthy Jesus**

One of the last things Jesus did was to gather with his friends for a meal, to celebrate the Passover feast. Maybe when he washed their feet, it was not a solemn moment but a jovial hosting gesture toward his friends, with a bit of laughter thrown in to ease the tension of an awkward moment. Maybe it gained seriousness only in retrospect.

To imagine Jesus as the life of the party, as a teller of jokes and riddles, as an earthy storyteller surrounded by friends, is to imagine him in all his humanity. To accept the invitation to see this dimension of God-become-flesh is to enliven our experience of reading the Gospels and possibly to help us find new depths and spiritual connections with those narratives

**To imagine Jesus as the life of the party, as a teller of jokes and riddles, as an earthy storyteller surrounded by friends, is to imagine him in all his humanity.**

and with the Divine. The foreword of *Jesus Laughing and Loving* asks: “Why do we want to deprive Jesus of laughter?”

Why, indeed?

### **About the author**

Michele Rae Rizoli serves as one of the pastors at the Toronto United Mennonite Church. She is enriched by the practice of biblical storytelling and sees humor as a way to connect with people of all generations.



# Of course she laughed!

## A homily on Genesis 18:1–15 and 21:1

Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau

### The audacity of God's promise

Of course she laughed! A baby birthed by her ninety-year-old body. The impossibility of it all.

Twenty-five years earlier, she and Abram left their wealth and life in the land of Ur. It's only been twenty-five years, but it feels like a lifetime. When they left Ur, she had already carried the shame and sorrow of infertility. It marked her then at the age of sixty-five; it marks her now at the age of ninety. That shame and sorrow never goes away; rather, it is woven into the fabric of her life.

Now, after a day of feverish activity—baking, preparing, and serving up a feast in the heat of the day—she stands at the entrance of the tent,

**Now, after a day of feverish activity, she stands at the entrance of the tent, listening to these three strangers reiterate this promise from God that her tired body would bear a son. Of course she laughed!**

listening to these three strangers reiterate this promise from God that her tired body would bear a son. Of course she laughed!

She recalled how the shame and sorrow of infertility allowed her body to be passed off as a sister, not a wife. She cannot forget how she was given to other men when she and Abram were refugees. The shame and sorrow turned into bitterness that even after *that* the joy of children was not hers, and she was only getting older. That bitterness so possessed her that she dominated another woman's body, giving that woman to her own husband—never asking for consent, just as her own had never been sought.

When that woman, Hagar, became pregnant, her shame and bitterness only deepened, and the woman whose life she already controlled became her punching bag. She heaped abuse onto Hagar—so great was her

When that woman, Hagar, became pregnant, her shame and bitterness only deepened, and the woman whose life she already controlled became her punching bag. She heaped abuse onto Hagar—so great was her

own pain—but it did not help relieve anguish. Instead, it only increased it. There are some wounds that are so intractable—there is some shame that is so permanent—that finally the only way left to face it is to laugh.

Yet God appears to her in the form of these three strangers. In their voices, there are echoes of the divine promise for this woman. She is a woman so bold for ever believing the promise in the first place, so broken from such deep sorrow, and yet to be blessed with her very heart's desire.

God comes to her even though she terrorized another woman. God comes to her not because she has learned something from her suffering and not because she has repented for her sin of oppressing Hagar.

Rather God comes to her because that is who God is: a God who always comes to us where we are—with all we've done—asking us again and again to join in the creation of blessing, to participate in the making of our hearts' deepest desires.

But it will demand all of Sarah. There is no way to bear this blessing without the birthing, which every mother knows at some point feels like dying. The primal forces that will never be controlled but can only be joined by breathing through and pushing beyond that point that feels like dying into the joy of new life.

Standing there hearing the audacity of this promise, knowing what her ninety-year-old body would be required to do, of course she laughed!

But when that laughter was heard and named, she denied it.

"I did not laugh," she said.

God replied, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

There is no wiggling out.

There's no denial.

There's no hiding.


All of who we are and what we have done is visible to God. God bears that truth and uncompromisingly insists that we bear that truth also. This is not to crush us but to empower us for the birthing that is to come.

### **The divine midwife**

Friends, we who are white are experiencing the need for feverish activity in the heat of these days, and there is no age exception. Messengers are coming to us and challenging us these days to bear the truth of our shame, our silence, our privilege, and our complicity with systems that oppress. We dare not laugh it off. We must dare to do the work of relearning the history of this country. We must dare to use resources like the *1619 Project*

in the *New York Times Magazine*, which marks the four-hundred-year history of slavery in this nation.<sup>1</sup>

For those of us who are white, this reading may feel like dying. Opening ourselves to stories and traditions and music and wisdom of our African American brothers and sisters may feel threatening. Releasing the



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For all of us! For  
every one of us! For  
us all together!**

power we currently hold may feel frightening. And God is with us, a divine midwife to this “labor of love” in which we will breathe and push through that which feels like dying into the joy of new life. For all of us! For every one of us! For us all together!<sup>2</sup>

Friends, as we join God in this birthing process, be assured there is laughter on the other side of this birth: the laughter of unbridled joy at the miracle we will hold in our arms, arms that are made to be linked with all our human

and non-human siblings even as we are held by our Divine Mother. This is our fierce, tender Divine Mother who will not deny any of her children from being carried by the river of the water of life.<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

## About the author

Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau is part of the pastoral team at Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana.

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1 Jake Silverstein writes that the essays are “on different aspects of contemporary American life, from mass incarceration to rush-hour traffic, that have their roots in slavery and its aftermath. Each essay takes up a modern phenomenon, familiar to all, and reveals its history.” See Jake Silverstein, “Why We Published *The 1619 Project*,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/20/magazine/1619-intro.html>.

2 See Valarie Kaur, “3 Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage,” TEDWomen2017, [https://www.ted.com/talks/valarie\\_kaur\\_3\\_lessons\\_of\\_revolutionary\\_love\\_in\\_a\\_time\\_of\\_rage](https://www.ted.com/talks/valarie_kaur_3_lessons_of_revolutionary_love_in_a_time_of_rage).

3 This is a reference to an image of the River of the Water of Life, which was used in the worship videos for Eighth Street from Pentecost through the month of June.

# I will rejoice

## Reflections on Black Joy

Nekeisha Alayna Alexis  
with W. Jean Mayes,  
Stephanie Coleman,  
Regina Shands Stoltzfus,  
and Ashlee Pierson

I start and end most of my days with Black gospel music. Rising in the morning to Richard Smallwood’s “I’ll Trust You” or “One More Time”

**We who others deemed less than human—for us to not only be here but to be here and *singing*? This in and of itself is testimony. It is witness. It makes joy. Black Joy.**

by Rev. James Moore and the Mississippi Mass Choir or Bri Babineaux’s “Make Me Over” calls forward my deep gratitude, stillness, and worship. Closing my eyes at night to Marvin Sapp’s “Perfect Peace” or Hezekiah Walker’s “Grateful” brings me deep reassurance into sleep.

These days, Ricky Dillard’s “You’re the Lifter” has become a new staple. In this song, the huge choir provides a sure foundation, repeating the words:

“When I’m down, You cheer me / When I’m weak, You strengthen me / When I’m broke, You fix me / I’m assured You’ll never leave me.” Meanwhile, each incredible lead vocalist, April Hall and Tamela Mann, weaves Scripture together with her story to proclaim with raw emotion and powerful praise God’s care, protection, healing, provision, renewal, accompaniment, and elevation. It is a sight to listen to and see.

I have cried unexpectedly with delight and awe watching videos of Black gospel performances. We who others deemed less than human; who were expected to go extinct or be perpetually enslaved; who remain targets of state-sanctioned violence; who some overlook intentionally and others violate though their indifference, ignorance, and complicity—for us to not only be here but to be here and *singing*? This in and of itself is testimony. It is witness. It makes joy. Black Joy.

Although this form of musical expression would undoubtedly wow others regardless of their backgrounds, the peculiar joy I feel is as defiant as it is uplifting. It is intimate with and embodies Black resilience and overcoming even as it radiates excitement and happiness. It is keenly

**Black Joy is keenly aware of tragedy and fear, especially generated by White supremacy. But even as it is familiar with heartache and keeps an eye on its adversaries, even as it has known bitterness, Black Joy chooses, savors, and inhabits the very, very sweet.**

aware of tragedy and fear, especially generated by White supremacy, combined as it often is with patriarchy, economic exploitation, heterosexism, and so on. But even as it is familiar with heartache and keeps an eye on its adversaries, even as it has known bitterness, Black Joy chooses, savors, and inhabits the very, very sweet.

Ultimately—and this is something I had to remind myself even in this reflection—Black Joy’s *center* is *not* pain nor Whiteness nor racism. Its center is *Blackness*: it is pride in Black forms of beauty, creativity, ingenuity, and thriving. Its center is personal and collective

awareness that it is *good* to be in the melanin we’re in, to speak with our tongues, to laugh with and at ourselves, to wear our hairs the ways we want. It is rejoicing in our cultures, which span the globe, and our histories, which comprise much more than shackles and chains. In a distinctly Christian sense, Black Joy finds its full strength in God, is sustained in Jesus, and is celebrated with the Holy Spirit. It comes from knowing that Jesus’s triumph over death and despair is also our victory: that we are free and free indeed *right now* and regardless.

When I first thought of a piece on Black Joy early in the year, the world was both radically different and essentially the same as it is now. The US president was just as unabashedly White supremacist in his rhetoric, policies, and leadership. The list of Black people killed in a new era of police murders was already too long. Emboldened racists and their tone-deaf cousins were already being blatantly and latently anti-Black. Then COVID-19 stormed in, and the nations quickly felt the fallout of skyrocketing infections and death; physical distancing and isolation; and, in the US edition, a health crisis turned into another political battleground. Then came the extrajudicial executions of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd and another surge of Black grief and rage and un-

precedented uprisings. Describing Black Joy was tricky business in “normal” times. It is even more complicated, but perhaps more necessary, to write about it in such precarious and decidedly un-funny times.


Because Black Joy is as varied as it is vibrant, I felt a treatment of it needed more than a single story. So I put out a call to others to describe how they define, create, experience, and express it *and* decided not to over-edit or over-explain the responses I received. It is my joy, my Black Joy, that the following magnificent women accepted the invitation. I feel grateful for their insights and yield now to their voices.

## Black Joy and prayer

W. Jean Mayes

The portion of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:11 reads, “Give us this day our daily bread”—or, to paraphrase, “Give us the food we need today.”

Looking around at the world today and the climate we live in, one can see this is truly a hard time in our history. There are instances when



**My prayers are my portal to the throne of God’s grace and mercy that keeps me anchored in the Lord. I know that I may not always be happy, but in the midst of it all, I still have perfect peace and joy in the Lord.**

making the right decision can be difficult and life can become overwhelming. It is a time of great anxiety, never really knowing what the day will bring. Yet, I am maintaining a balance that will see me through.

During the moments that seem to overtake me, Jesus places this portion of Scripture in my mind’s heart. The verse takes on a powerful request. It is no longer bread for my body but nourishment for my spirit. My mind’s heart cries out to the Holy Spirit, “Give me the spiritual

strength I need to see past today and, Lord, guide me safely into your tomorrow.”

My parents taught me the Lord’s Prayer as a child along with this bedtime prayer: “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.” Together, these prayers keep me grounded as this world swirls into chaos.

I didn't understand the importance of these prayers as a child, but as an adult I understand their depth. They are my portal to the throne of God's grace and mercy that keeps me anchored in the Lord. I know that I may not always be happy, but in the midst of it all, I still have perfect peace and joy in the Lord.

## The anchor of Black Joy

Stephanie Coleman

Black Joy.

What is it? What does it mean? What does it look like? How does it feel? How is it expressed? These are just a few of the many questions that floated in my mind and my spirit as I sat with these two words.

Being a person of color. A follower of Jesus. Born and raised in the state of Louisiana. Having spent time with and lived for short periods

**Black Joy is encased, cocooned, surrounded, sustained, encircled, insulated, and protected by my inner peace, which is sustained by the Holy Spirit. Black Joy is the pride in my Divinity and Holiness.**

outside of the United States of America. Recognizing and being aware of the times I was required, willingly and unwillingly, to change my perspective, adjust my voice, and become someone different to make others comfortable. All of that and more caused a bit of discomfort and dis-ease. Why? I had made the decision to live by the words of our Apostle Paul to "live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18). However, after sitting with the passage—after taking a moment to re-examine, to embody, to consider,


to reflect, and to more fully love on myself—I see clearly and understand that my Black Joy is in my inner peace.

Black Joy is encased, cocooned, surrounded, sustained, encircled, insulated, and protected by my inner peace, which is sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Black Joy is the pride in my Divinity and Holiness. When I remind myself that Black Joy is an inner peace, an internal knowing, I am anchored.

Peace and Joy are twin siblings. When Joy is in the room, Peace is not too far behind.

This place called Black Joy is a destination. It is an anchoring space where peace can transcend and transform when understanding has gone



**Stillness anchors  
and reignites my  
Black Joy. Indeed,  
my Black Joy is my  
conscious choice  
and place of refuge  
when the world  
around me is falling  
apart because of  
who they think  
I am. My Black  
Joy must be alive  
and well in me at  
all times.**

on vacation. Black Joy must be continuously and courageously sought, especially during those times when a brother can't breathe (George Floyd) or jog (Ahmaud Arbery). Black Joy is the place I retreat to when the life of my vibrant sister is lost under questionable circumstances (Sandra Bland). Black Joy is the space I choose to consider when my little brother can't play in the park (Tamir Rice).

When I am attentive to the attack on my Black Joy, my inner peace strengthens my being. When I say to my soul, "The joy of the Lord is my strength" (Nehemiah 8:10), peace arrives to encamp around me, and stillness becomes my place of retreat. Stillness anchors and

reignites my Black Joy. Indeed, my Black Joy is my conscious choice and place of refuge when the world around me is falling apart because of who they think I am. My Black Joy must be alive and well in me at all times.

*I am that I am.  
I am Black Joy!  
There is only one power.  
The power of joy.  
The power of Black Joy!  
I am Black Joy!  
I am that I am!  
I am that I am!  
Black Joy.*



## Black Joy and Black culture

Regina Shands Stoltzfus

One of the things that brings me joy, and for which I am eternally grateful, is the love for Blackness, Black culture, and Black people that was instilled in me by my elders, especially my mother.

My mother, Joyce Collie, moved from Miami, Florida, to Cleveland, Ohio, as a young woman. One of the first things she did in order to make

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friends and find community was to join Karamu House, the oldest African American theater in the United States. In addition to participating in community theatre, she joined a writers' group and helped co-found a small, non-profit publishing company called New Day Press. They took their name from the last stanza of "Lift Every Voice and Sing": "Facing the rising sun, of our new day begun, let us march on, till victory is won." This little company took on the

mission of publishing African American history books for children, filling a gap left by mainstream publishers.

When I was thirteen, Mom cast me in my first play—Langston Hughes's *Simply Heavenly*—and passed the community theatre bug onto me. It was a small part (the town drunk), but I reveled in learning along with the rest of the cast the beauty of Hughes's exploration of the joy and pain of Black life and love.

When I look back on the foundation my mother laid for me, I see how amazing it all was: a working class Black mama making sure her kids knew the glory of their culture. Yet none of these things seemed extraordinary to me when I was a kid. It was just our life. Blackness was, and is, creative, beautiful, and everywhere.


## Maintaining Black Joy through laughter and affirmations

Ashlee Pierson

LAUGH

*Not that anything is funny about what is happening  
But the fact that we are still here  
To use the word of God to sustain our faith in times of fear  
Our Black people are tired of dying  
God help us please!  
Use your voice and laughter in the face of the adversary  
Continue, to rise up Black Kings and Queens  
It only will get better when we are respected, valued,  
heard and seen!*

These unprecedented times call for silence and action. Silence to listen to the heart of God to retrieve wisdom; then wisdom applied for action



**It can be very difficult to have joy deep down on the inside—as our ancestors sung—when it appears the world is caving in and again justice is not served. Maintaining Black Joy is possible because it is intentional, and it takes a lot of work.**

to continue to fight for equality and justice. That can be done through prayer, protest, voting, organizing action committees, or running for a political office, among other things. When this is accomplished, the seeds of Black Joy are planted.

The recent killings and protests can make us become angry, anxious, afraid, depressed, and uncertain. These valid feelings can take a toll on us and even those around us. It can be very difficult to have joy deep down on the inside—as our ancestors sung—when it appears the world is caving in and again justice is not served. Maintaining Black Joy is possible

because it is intentional, and it takes a lot of work. Some things in life were designed to throw us off course and defeat us, but recovering is a personal decision. One way to recover from being shaken and disturbed is acknowledging that things are different for you, whether in mind, health,

or strength. When you choose to recover the seeds of Black Joy, Black Joy will flourish.

Self-care is a strategy to improve our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Self-care is being mindful of your needs and doing something about it. For example, when feeling overwhelmed, one may go for a walk with a friend and vent. However, things are not so simple to do when a culture, a people, and a history are (still) under attack. It is not easy to cope with such disgusting and unfair treatment that seems to have no end, but I encourage you to laugh. Of course, laughter seems paradoxical, but laughter can be viewed as a new way of self-care for the Christian during the unrest. Laughter is medicine that can soothe the weary and troubled soul, according to Proverbs 17:22. Scientifically, laughter also reduces stress hormones and triggers endorphins to be released to make one happy and even relieve pain.

*Laugh because you are not defeated!*

*Laugh because you survived!*

*Laugh because your life matters!*

*Laugh because you have a resounding voice!*

*Laugh because God laughs!*

In addition to laughter, reading and meditating on the Word of God, dancing, singing, speaking positive affirmations, and therapy have been a beneficial and necessary self-care concoction to maintain peace and joy

**Channeling anger into laughter takes skill and faith. Three times in Scripture God laughed at the wicked and their plans (Psalms 2:4; 37:13; 59:9). We can do the same too for relief.**

and improve moods. I dance and sing because Isaiah 61:3 declares that the garment of praise was given for the spirit of heaviness. Since I could remember, praise has proven to shift things in the spirit realm as well as in the natural. Furthermore, reading and meditating on the Word informs me of God's will and promises. God is a God who will never leave, forsake, or fail God's beloved! I affirm what I meditate on—those sweet reminders even when it is hard to see the Scriptures being fulfilled. The Scrip-

tures were designed to read us (if we allow them) and give us grace and permission to be angry at what is happening around us and to not sin as believers of Christ because of it (Ephesians 4:26–32). Channeling anger

into laughter takes skill and faith. Three times in Scripture God laughed at the wicked and their plans (Psalms 2:4; 37:13; 59:9). We can do the same too for relief.

Lastly, while declaring affirmations during challenging times, be very careful of your speech because there is life and death in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21). The world will only reproduce what you put out. Just as the world was framed with words, your world will also be framed with your words (Hebrews 11:3). To speak “life” (or to speak well) sincerely is the demonstration of unstoppable and unbreakable Black Joy. And if you cannot laugh now, I promise: there will be Joy after this! (Psalms 30:5)

### **About the authors**

Nekeisha Alayna Alexis is a Trinidad native turned New Yorker who now calls Elkhart, Indiana, home. She is a graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary where she works in marketing and communications, and as Intercultural Competence and Undoing Racism coordinator. Her happy color is bright grass green and her deep desire is liberation for every body.

Rev. W. Jean Mayes is a lifelong resident of Elkhart, Indiana, where she ministers in a local congregation. Her happy color is violet, and a song that uplifts her spirit is “(Lord, Prepare Me to Be a) Sanctuary.” Nothing brings a smile to her face like a rainbow in the sky and the smile of a newborn baby.

Stephanie Coleman, MBA, lives in Elkhart, Indiana, where she is the director of programs for the Elkhart Education Foundation. Her backyard, which is bordered by huge trees that provide great shade on sunny days, a variety of annuals and perennials, and is visited by all sorts of wildlife, is her personal sanctuary.

Regina Shands Stoltzfus is originally from Cleveland, Ohio, and currently lives in Goshen, Indiana. She is professor of peace, justice, and conflict studies at Goshen College. Her favorite happy color is red.

Ms. Ashlee Pierson, LCSW, MDiv, DSW-c, lives in New York City. Cats never fail to bring a smile to her face, making her heart light and her mind temporarily forget everything around her.


# “Shout to God with joyful praise!”

## Finding joy beyond laughter

Carrie Badertscher and David C. Cramer

### Joy beyond laughter

When we think of joy, our thoughts instantly go to Raelly Kate (Carrie’s youngest daughter). She exudes joy in a way we have not witnessed in any other person. There are times when



**The epitome of her joy comes out in the highest pitched squeal as it squeezes through her bright smile. She is the picture of the “glorious, inexpressible joy” that Peter writes about. It’s a joy that goes beyond laughter.**

joy seems to completely fill her little body, making her arms flap and her feet bounce. The epitome of her joy comes out in the highest pitched squeal as it squeezes through her bright smile. She is the picture of the “glorious, inexpressible joy” that Peter writes about in one of his letters (1 Peter 1:8). It’s a joy that goes beyond laughter.

Another individual in our church who exudes joy is our dear sister Bonnie Brown. Bonnie is a matriarch in our church and always sits in her wheelchair

on the left side of the sanctuary. It is as if you can feel Bonnie’s joyful presence before you can even see her. There is deep joy within her and it radiates onto the space and people around her.

What is most gripping about the joy these individuals possess is that their joy does not appear to be dependent on their current situation or circumstance. Both of these individuals, in their own journeys through life, have faced barriers and struggles that could have drained the joy from their heart and the hope from their reservoir. Yet, their joy has remained steadfast because the source of their joy has remained steadfast.

### Shouting for joy

When you do a search for the word *joy* in Scripture, you repeatedly find a startling image: the people of Israel *shouting* for joy. Sometimes their

joyful shouting is so loud that it can be heard from far away (Ezra 3:13); sometimes it even makes the earth shake (1 Kings 1:40). When most of us

**While God’s people are indeed angry at the injustice of the world, according to Scripture they find great joy in the pursuit of justice. Those who fight for justice can indeed shout: shouts of joy to be partnering with God.**

think of joy, we might picture someone smiling or laughing. But *shouting*? What could possibly cause someone to shout with joy?

The emotions that most naturally cause us to shout today are anger and sorrow. There’s a lot to be angry over or sorrowful about right now. At times like these, the injustice and suffering in the world are enough to make one want to shout. Perhaps this is why those who devote their lives to the cause of justice are sometimes perceived as joyless, angry people. The term *social justice warrior* is used more often as a derogatory term

than as a term of praise. We imagine those fighting for justice joylessly shouting others down, whether literally or over social media.

But while God’s people are indeed angry at the injustice of the world, according to Scripture they find great joy in the pursuit of justice. As the Psalmist writes, “There is joy for those who deal justly with others and always do what is right” (Psalm 106:3).<sup>1</sup> And according to Proverbs, “Justice is a joy to the godly, but it terrifies evildoers” (Proverbs 21:15). Those who fight for justice can indeed shout: shouts of joy to be partnering with God.

### **Joy grounded in faith, hope, and love**


The joy we see in our community and read about in Scripture is grounded in the theological virtues. This joy is grounded first in *faith*—faith that the God of the universe is a God of justice and that God is therefore working right alongside those seeking justice. Again, the Psalmist writes, “Let the whole world sing for joy, because you govern the nations with justice and guide the people of the whole world” (Psalm 67:4). Even in the bleakest of times, those working for justice can find joy in the knowledge that God is actively working behind the scenes to renew and restore: “But let all who

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations are to the New Living Translation (NLT), the preferred translation of our congregation, with slight modifications toward greater gender inclusivity.

take refuge in you rejoice; let them sing joyful praises forever. Spread your protection over them, that all who love your name may be filled with joy” (Psalm 5:11).

This joy is grounded second in *hope*—hope that ultimately justice will prevail. Even in times of distress, we can have joy in the hope-filled confidence that someday all wrongs will be made right. As Isaiah writes, “To



**It is because our joy is grounded in faith, hope, and love that Paul can instruct us: “Always be full of joy in the Lord.” This joy isn’t based on our present circumstances. If it were, then our joy would be fleeting indeed.**

all who mourn in Israel, he will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair. In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks that the Lord has planted for God’s own glory” (Isaiah 61:3). Paul writes about this joyful hope in his letter to the Romans: “I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in God. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13). We can have joy in the knowl-


edge that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well,” as Julian of Norwich records the words Jesus spoke in her *Revelations of Divine Love*.

This joy is grounded third in *love*—love for those on whose behalf we seek justice and love for the God who loves us unfailingly: “But as for me, I will sing about your power. Each morning I will sing with joy about your unfailing love. For you have been my refuge, a place of safety when I am in distress” (Psalm 59:16).

It is because our joy is grounded in faith, hope, and love that Paul can instruct us: “Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). Or simply: “Always be joyful” (1 Thessalonians 5:16). This joy isn’t based on our present circumstances. If it were, then our joy would be fleeting indeed. Rather, our joy is based on our faith in Christ, our love of God, and our hope in God’s kingdom, in which “sorrow and mourning will disappear,” and we “will be filled with joy and gladness” (Isaiah 51:11). When that day comes, there will be no response more natural and appropriate than to “shout to God with joyful praise!” (Psalm 47:1).

## Joy in the midst of heartache

The *glorious, inexpressible joy* that Peter describes is more than happy flaps and dancing feet, although these are beautiful outpourings of joy. Joy, as we see it in Scripture, is not a feeling based on mood or current circumstance. It is not the absence of pain, heartache, or trouble. Joy is an attitude embraced by God's people. It is the sincere decision by a believer



**All too often we are made to feel like we have to hold either heartache or joy—that we must first put down grief in order to pick up joy. What we see in Paul's letter is that there can be joy even when the heart is aching and laughter is elusive.**

to trust in God's love and goodness. Joy is the anticipation of the promised redemption and restoration that is coming. It is not simply reframing all that is bad into something good. It is the deep belief that God is working to renew and restore every last part of us and this world.

In a letter to the church in Corinth, Paul writes, "Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything" (2 Corinthians 6:10). All too often we are made to feel like we have to hold either heartache or joy—that we must first put

down grief in order to pick up joy. What we see in Paul's letter, however, is that there can be joy even when the heart is aching and laughter is elusive.

This year has been a difficult one, to say the least. People are dying from a virus that has no vaccine, racism and violence scream loudly from our television screens, and the deep complexities of homelessness have come right to our doorsteps here in South Bend. Our hearts are aching, for ourselves and for our sisters and brothers. It is all right to sit in that ache, in the grief of it all. Our world is broken, and it is painful to live here.

Yet, we can also choose joy, knowing that God didn't leave us here in this broken world alone; and because of the resurrection, we do not grieve like people who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). God's presence is near, providing hope, peace, and joy even in the ashes of grief and heartache. God is working to make all things new (Revelation 21:5). And so, with the apostle Paul, we "pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in God" until you "overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit." Amen.



## **About the authors**

Carrie Badertscher is community pastor at Keller Park Church and founder of Keller Park Ministries. She lives with her husband, David, and their three children in the Keller Park Neighborhood of South Bend, Indiana.

David C. Cramer is teaching pastor at Keller Park Church and managing editor at the Institute of Mennonite Studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He lives with his wife, Andrea, and their two kids in the Keller Park Neighborhood of South Bend, Indiana.

# Mennonite woman feels really guilty for not feeling guilty enough

STEINBACH, MB

Days after a pleasant holiday season in which she was a gracious and generous host, a local woman reports feeling “just really awful” about the fact that she felt really good about herself.<sup>1</sup>

**“I liked it a lot better when I was sinning on occasion,” said Braun. “Then at least I could find the source of my guilt. But this is driving me nuts.”**

“I was lying awake all night worried about the fact I couldn’t think of a single thing to feel guilty about,” said Mrs. Helen J. Braun. “I can’t remember the last time I had a clear conscience like this . . . and it really bothered me.”

Braun says she racked her brain trying to think of something she’d done wrong, whether it was a greedy thought, an impolite word, or a misplaced pickle, and couldn’t think of anything at all.

“I liked it a lot better when I was sinning on occasion,” said Braun. “Then at least I could find the source of my guilt. But this is driving me nuts. I just don’t know what to do.”

Braun reports telling her pastor about the problem who informed her that this guilt was a natural consequence of her Mennonite upbringing . . . and was nothing to feel guilty about.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: This piece was originally published in *The Daily Bonnet* and is reprinted here with permission.

# Clench and release

## The healing, unifying power of laughter

Johnny Wideman

### Undergoing acupuncture


Bertolt Brecht once said something about good art being more like the blacksmith's shiny hammer than a polished, personal hand-mirror. He meant that art is meant to shape us, not to vainly reflect ourselves back at us for admiration. But the thing is, Brecht stole a bunch of his ideas from his female colleagues. So I'm going to say that Brecht had it wrong. Art is neither a mirror nor a hammer; it's a needle. And needles make me squirmy.

When I sit down for bloodwork, I get the strong feeling that I'd like to leave but can't. Everything stops, my knees buckle, and suddenly my

entire existence melts into the disorientation of a Dali painting. So it might come as a surprise that I willingly subject myself to acupuncture.

I suppose the decision began with a question: "Did you sustain a head injury?"

This is a question I have grown somewhat accustomed to over the years; however, in this specific case, the question was posed by an Osteopath. He was referring to the posture of my shoulders, neck, and head. He noticed that my muscles were stuck in a sort of guarded position that might be natural when responding to the cry, "Watch out!" but would be very much unnatural for just about anything else. It seemed I was stuck in a perpetual Chicken-Little sort of shrug, pulling my shoulders toward my ears as if in preparation for the sky to fall.



**Bertolt Brecht once said something about good art being more like the blacksmith's shiny hammer than a polished, personal hand-mirror. Brecht had it wrong. Art is neither a mirror nor a hammer; it's a needle. And needles make me squirmy.**

And yes, to answer his question, I did sustain a head injury. At the age of seven, I filled a laundry sink with blood and a cranium with seven stitches. This wound, and supposedly the long practiced posture that

**The needle reminds the body that something is wrong there, that the tension is unnecessary. The hope is that you'll slowly begin to release because you realize that protecting yourself with this tension is no longer helpful.**

resulted from it, was earned when a fist-sized bolt fell from a tire swing directly upon my albino bowl cut. And so, having dealt with chronic pain for the past twenty-odd years, I reluctantly decided to give needles a try.

In the acupuncture clinic, everything was *portrayed* as very relaxing. Soft, borderline-infantile pastel colors, lulling ambient “yoga” music, delicate lavender aromas rested gently upon the acrid smell of my own nervous sweat. I lay my face into the small, toilet-seat-shaped hole of the massage table. My arms were

perched below me, palms to the ceiling, relaxed, and I was momentarily surprised to feel supported, calm, even reassured by the soft-spoken acupuncturist. Until, of course, she began filling the palms of my hands with needles. Directly below my face. Shiny, little lightning rods of panic. Then she turned down the lights and left the room. Leaving me to sit, alone, in the rolling, trance rhythms of yoga tunes for what felt like millennia.

My understanding of body tension is that our muscles tighten to protect. When an acupuncturist sticks a needle into a sore spot, it sends a message marked *urgent* to our brain. The body all of a sudden pays attention to this flagged spot in new ways. It realizes that the tension we had previously accepted as normal doesn't need to be there. The needle reminds the body that something is wrong there, that the tension is unnecessary. The hope is that you'll slowly begin to release because you realize that protecting yourself with this tension is no longer helpful. Therefore, this sharp, momentary pain is used to help remind the body to relax.

### **Art as communal acupuncture**

It's no mistake that our communities are often referred to as bodies. When our communities are in conflict, the tension we feel becomes a palpable thing. We clench to protect our weakest, sorest spots, and brace for impact. When that collision comes, in that hard, earth-shattering sort of way, we feel it in deep ripples throughout our entire being. It can shift

us. But we tend to the place of impact; we nurture and ensure our injuries are addressed by knowing specialists. But when we brace and the impact never comes, then what? What happens when we never get to release that initial clenching tension? Do we remain frozen in this protected position? Do our collective bodies and communities slowly see their postures over-compensate?

I believe that, as pacifists, we have learned to avoid anything that causes pain to others. We have learned to associate conflict with violence,

**We've convinced ourselves that the pain of facing these conflicts (the needle poke) far outweighs the pain associated with protecting ourselves against it (our posture-altering clench). Because of this, the source of our sore spots goes unaddressed.**

confrontation with pain, and therefore we've become masterful over-lookers, practiced in the art of avoiding the elephant in the room. We've convinced ourselves that the pain of facing these conflicts (the needle poke) far outweighs the pain associated with protecting ourselves against it (our posture-altering clench). Because of this, the source of our sore spots goes unaddressed, and living with tension becomes normal. But by allowing art—theatre in my case—into our painful church places, we allow art to act as this needle poke. When choosing to sit together, feel together, I believe

that good art, and the unique responses it elicits when aimed at our collective tensions, is more akin to acupuncture than to entertainment.

### **Theatre of the Beat**

In 2011, I founded a traveling social justice theatre troupe called Theatre of the Beat. Our mission is to create plays based on the topics that our communities intentionally avoid. The idea is that these topics, in their unaddressedness, have a sort of power over us in that we clench and brace against them. But since the Mennonite community has entrusted us with using theatre as a way of releasing this tension, we have created several specific events where we, the body, join together to intentionally feel a carefully crafted moment of discomfort in hopes of releasing these underlying tensions collectively.

For example, throughout 2017–19, Theatre of the Beat was touring #ChurchToo to Mennonite communities in order to begin conversations about the taboo topic of abuse of power and its relation to sexual assault.

The final piece of the play, *Lodged in the Body* (written by Scout Rexe), featured a carefully cultivated crescendo of discomfort; and from my place at the back of the sanctuary, I saw a physical thing, a squirm, swell through the audience every night. It resembled the awkward beginnings of “the wave” at a sporting event. Typically, it started in the front, middle of the audience—one small section. Then it would begin to ripple out among the crowd, spreading to the point of actually being able to hear it: the din of weight shifting, the creak of folks wanting to get up, wanting to leave but staying politely seated. This is honestly one of the best things about staging plays in churches: not only do pews have a magnetic quality (we aren’t used to walking out of church); the worn wooden ways of those benches also magnify the sounds of our discomfort far more than red cushy theatre chairs.

**Everyone’s attention was collectively directed on this same spot of suffering. The needle found its sorest spot. The result was a holy moment, occurring like some sort of group exorcism where we finally acknowledged the tension.**

With *Theatre of the Beat*, our audiences would gather together as a congregation, seated in their sacred space, intentionally committed to sitting through some form of collective processing. With *#ChurchToo*, it was conversations about sexual abuse and acknowledging the shame and secrets we’ve held onto for so long. So, in this case, everyone’s attention was collectively directed on this same spot of suffering. The needle

found its sorest spot. The result was a holy moment, occurring like some sort of group exorcism where we finally acknowledged the tension we’ve held onto for so long. Then, we shuddered together like a dog expelling water, shaking it off, holding our breath, slowly settling into the sigh that seemed to flood through our bodies in that special way where something metaphysical physically transforms into flesh.

### **Permission to laugh**

From on stage, there are moments when you can hear the audience collectively hold its breath, bracing. In these moments, the audience, the body, is not a “they” but a “the”: the sum of various individuals. A sum who chose to gather despite our collective fear of needles. We came to be healed. We came to do the right thing. And once we’ve gathered, it is then

the theatre actors' job to remind everyone that it's OK to feel here, that it's OK to react and to respond, even audibly.

This is done by giving permission to laugh. This moment is designed to invoke a moment of release in the audience straight out of the gate. Usually this takes the form of a safe joke, a joke that won't divide but will ease, a moment of levity that puts everyone on the same page. The goal here is a giggle more than a guffaw—something easy. But the objective is

**If done well, when the pressure builds up and the audience gets needle-squirmy, they will know that they can release that tension with a chortle, tsk, sigh, or sob, but the sound of our unclenching will come, and our bodies will ease into motion.**

to elicit an actual “LOL.” Because all it takes is one person to physically, audibly laugh, and the rest of the audience will follow suit. (During our opening of *#ChurchToo*, director Matt White sat at the back of the theatre and loudly guffawed at anything that slightly resembled a joke.) Because once that ice is broken, the audience learns that their own individual reactions, whatever they may be, are welcomed. Which is important, because especially if your play is dealing with difficult, entrenched topics, the audience is already concerned about offending someone around them. It's

imperative that you give the audience encouragement to react naturally. And if done well, when the pressure builds up and the audience gets needle-squirmy, they will know that they can release that tension with a chortle, tsk, sigh, or sob, but the sound of our unclenching will come, and our bodies will ease into motion.

Clench. Release.


### ***This Will Lead to Dancing***

During the Being a Faithful Church process, the Canadian Mennonite Church was inviting congregations to discuss the big C's position on LGBTQ+ inclusion. During this time, Theatre of the Beat commissioned me to write *This Will Lead to Dancing*, which toured to churches who were undecided on where they stood on this topic. Then, in July of 2016, we staged the show at the National Mennonite Assembly in Saskatoon. We had a team of Mennonites in Saskatchewan working together to find volunteers and deal with logistics; Theatre of the Beat then rented a conference room, flew out the cast, and on the evening after “the vote” regard-

ing LGBTQ+ inclusion, we performed *This Will Lead to Dancing* for over two hundred Mennonites.

During the conference the tension in the community was palpable. I sat in on every discussion regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion. At one, a stranger prayed over me (without consent) in a drive-by “laying of hands,” asking God that “the scales would fall from my eyes.” People were stressed. Voices were strained. Emotions were high. And yet, even still, over two hundred Mennonites gave up their evening to sit through a show about these very tensions.

*This Will Lead to Dancing* is a dramedy. It’s quite serious and yet at times quite absurd. For example, at the end of the piece, the audience



***This Will Lead to Dancing is a dramedy. It’s quite serious and yet at times quite absurd. At the end of the piece, the audience shares communion made up of oatmeal raisin cookies, which are passed around by the ghost of Menno Simons.***

shares communion made up of oatmeal raisin cookies (made by congregants from Wildwood Mennonite Church and other Saskatchewan churches), which are passed around by the ghost of Menno Simons. Menno appears as a hunger-induced vision to a starving queer youth. The youth, Sam, is one week into a hunger strike, demanding that her church change its views on LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Sam decides to break her fast by encouraging her whole congregation to have communion together, and so Menno begins passing out trays and trays of cookies so that the audience

gathered can “break bread.” Then, while dancing deliriously to the sound of ambulances arriving in the distance, Sam leads a hymn written by Menno Simons himself.

This moment, when described plainly, sounds like a bad, borderline sacrilegious joke. But the release this scenario facilitated in the crowd was beautiful. Tear-filled voices sang along with Sam and Menno and created harmony in a way that seemed to simultaneously acknowledge pain and unity. It was one of the most sacred theatrical moments of my life. After the show, audience members came forward and embraced the actors, weeping and laughing, somehow acknowledging the horrifying silliness and pain that had been so deeply understood by everyone in that audience.



## The healing, unifying power of laughter

There is nothing more unifying than laughing together. George Gordon Byron, a poet and a revolutionary during the Greek War of Independence, once said, “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” When a joke is understood by all, when we laugh together, we are truly and deeply community. To laugh at the same joke means to understand the context of that joke, and in doing so, we remember that we are united. That we do share commonalities with each other. So when a joke is relat-

**When a joke is understood by all, when we laugh together, we are truly and deeply community. To laugh at the same joke means to understand the context of that joke, and in doing so, we remember that we are united.**

ed so specifically to us, as a body, we can laugh despite the tears, because we feel it together. We were all uncomfortable; then we all laughed. We simultaneously relate to our own pain as individuals and to our experience as a collective entity.

The needle poke stirs our tensions out of stillness, the bottom of our emotional wells are swirled. As this tension builds, we clench. But then laughter expels it from us. We shiver it out of our mouths, or our tear ducts, and all the dark, sticky, tense feelings that collected at the bottom are geysered forth from

the ol’ blowhole. With the laughter comes the release of pain. All the negative feelings that have been trapped flutter away like an open window cleansing a stuffy room. It’s thermal dynamics, really. The release of fidgety bundles of energy that simply want to move but haven’t been acknowledged. Because when heat gets excited, it expands to the places around it, it wants to spread to the places it has never been. Restless! Squirmy. Thermodynamics says that heat moves from one spot to the next because it’s looking to equalize. It will do whatever it takes, even if it means explosion.

Our bodies, our churches, our communities will eventually explode if we don’t learn to release these tensions and acknowledge our collective clenching. Social thermodynamics suggests that the energy of a group—the unique sum of the unique people observed in this unique sanctuary environment—behaves the same way that heat does, the same way that muscle tension does. As much as we resist it, we need the needle. We need to have these sore spots pointed out. Because our buried emotions, our clenching, will inevitably build if not released. Expanding! Seeking equalization, or

calm, peace. The reminder that we're in this together. And that everything is going to be OK, together.

Fin.

### **About the author**


Johnny Wideman is a short-storyist, a playwright and actor, a member of Playwrights Guild of Canada, and a recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award for his work in theatre from Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo.

# Welcoming another through laughter

## Going beyond formal greetings

Pratik Bagh

The smile is the door to laughter. However, this door of ours never opens to some. We choose to keep it closed. If you cannot smile seeing the other person, you would never think of engaging with that person in laughter.



**Laughter deepens the friendship. When we fail to smile at new people, we miss the opportunity to welcome and get close to them. And in such a case, laughter cannot take place.**

Laughter deepens the friendship. When we fail to smile at new people, we miss the opportunity to welcome and get close to them. And in such a case, laughter cannot take place.

My focus here is not on the laughter that intends to mock someone but on the one that works as the Greek pronoun. Both *he* and *ho* in Greek are relative pronouns, which introduce a dependent clause and connect it to the independent clause. So, even though

laughter is not something that we plan, it indeed connects people whenever it happens. I would call it a burst of healthy and unplanned laughter (*he, he, ho, ho*).

### Connecting through laughter


My wife and I came to the United States from India. As we arrived on a weekend, the first thing we longed for was a church. We had recommendations to attend a specific Mennonite church, but that was not the only reason we chose to continue there. In our very first visit, we felt not only welcomed but also free to laugh. What made us feel free was the lovely smiles on people's faces. They not only greeted us with a smile, but they also went further and laughed with us, as if we are no different than them. Despite the cultural, linguistic, and contextual differences, we could enjoy

the conversation, as it was not a formal interview but an enjoyable time filled with laughter.

One thing that is going to remain with my wife and me forever from that church is their litany: “God of peace, Christ of peace, Spirit of peace, you are calling us to be peacemakers; today we light this candle as a reminder of our calling.” When we Anabaptists say that we are peacemakers, we also mean that we long to create an atmosphere in communities where laughter can occur; for only where there is peace (in relationships, lives, and communities) is laughter possible. Laughing can be used as an effective medicine for racism, hostility, and depression. Choosing to put the Christ-given joy on our faces as a smile can make us free.

### **The welcoming smile of Jesus**

I imagine that Jesus had a smiling and welcoming face. I cannot imagine a person who is so kind, loving, wise, and caring *not* having a smile on his face. I recall the incident in the Gospels where children come to Jesus, and the disciples try to prevent them. A child never longs to go to a cheerless stranger. And it was not just one child but children that Jesus allowed to come to him (Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). Such was the attitude, nature, and personality of Jesus that even children longed to connect with him.



**The world today is promoting leaders who are tough and crude in words and person. But the Bible calls us to be Christ-like leaders who have time for children, tax collectors, persons with physical ailments, and those considered sinners.**

The world today is promoting leaders who are tough and crude in words and person. But the Bible calls us to be Christ-like leaders who have time for children, tax collectors, persons with

physical ailments, and those considered sinners. Jesus was highly knowledgeable, mature, and most busy, but he had time to smile and spend time with these people considered unimportant by society and made them feel welcomed and loved.

### **Expressing welcome through laughter**

How often do we let our need to be mature take away the opportunities for us to rest and enjoy the beauty of laughing and creating friendship? Some differentiate between joy and happiness, saying that joy need not

involve laughing, but I argue that the most excellent means of expressing joy is through laughter and a smile. It shows love, care, concern, and acceptance of another person. In our world filled with racism and fear of the other, laughter and a smiling face can make a difference, allowing us to connect beyond our differences.

Even a tiny smile can work as door, as I have experienced as a person of color. Let us keep some smiles on our faces to show that we are glad the other person is around. And let us be open to laughing. Because when you laugh with a person who is different than you, you are indirectly allowing that person to touch your heart. Shared laughter can bring people close beyond our differences.

### **About the author**

Pratik Bagh is an MDiv student at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He is also a volunteer pastor at the Asian Indian church in Pittsburgh, where he lives with his wife, Shabnam, and daughter, Shanice. He comes to the United States from India, where he belongs to the Bhartiya General Conference Mennonite Church (BGCMC).

# “A time to laugh”

## Laughter in the Bible

Ben C. Ollenburger

“Laughter is the Best Medicine.” That was the title of a joke column in the *Reader’s Digest*, which my grandparents subscribed to many years ago. I entertained myself by reading their old *Digest* issues when my parents and I traveled from Oklahoma to Kansas to visit them. Whether laugh-

**It may be that my family’s rich inventory of stories drew me to the Old Testament. That and, of course, God.**

ter really is the best medicine surely depends on the malady it hopes to treat. For a ten-year old boy, it provided adequate treatment for boredom. Even so, the *Reader’s Digest’s* jokes provoked less laughter than did the stories my parents and grandparents told. It may be that my family’s rich inventory of stories—from

the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, the depravations of World War 2 and from stories about random people, incidents, and their own foibles—drew me to the Old Testament. That and, of course, God.

### Abraham and Sarah’s laughter

Stories form much of the Old Testament—and perhaps most of what we remember of it. In “popular” culture, the Old Testament has a reputation for wrath, anger, judgment. Those features should not be denied or erased. But along with them there is some really funny stuff. Have you ever fallen down laughing at something a comedian said? Well, Abraham did; he “fell on his face laughing” (Genesis 17:17),<sup>1</sup> not at a funny quip or a comedian’s routine but at the fantastic thing God had just told him: that at one hundred years old, he would become the father of a son whom Abraham’s ninety-year-old wife, Sarah, would bear. Abe found God’s announcement to be hilarious, and he fell down laughing. Sarah was similarly amused when she overheard the announcement: she laughed to herself.

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1 Quotations of and references to biblical texts generally follow the NRSV, which I have modified in some instances in faithfulness to the Hebrew.

And her own response is amusing, while frank: "After I am worn out, I'm going to have pleasure?!—also, my husband is old" (Genesis 18:12). Though Sarah had laughed to herself, God knew and asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?" (v. 13). Apparently, Sarah again overheard and said out loud, "I didn't laugh." To which God replied, laconically, "Yeah, you laughed" (v. 15).

That wasn't the last time Sarah laughed. To her surprise, she did have pleasure, apparently, and Abraham did, too: Sarah bore a son. "God,"

**The laughter may be because this ninety-year-old woman could conceive and bear a child, or because her decade-older husband could help make it happen. Perhaps it was holy laughter at the miraculous work God had done.**

she says, "has made laughter for me; all who hear me will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6). The laughter may be because this ninety-year-old woman could conceive and bear a child, or because her decade-older husband could help make it happen. Perhaps it was holy laughter at the miraculous work God had done. I'm sure it was that . . . and the other things as well. But was it also, perhaps, vindictive? Sarah, long childless, had arranged for Abraham to provide a child through a surrogate, Sarah's Egyptian maid Hagar. Hagar had born Ishmael, but now Sarah had her own son, Isaac.

And she engages in a pun: in Hebrew, the name Isaac means "he laughs/will laugh," and when Sarah said God "made laughter for me," she spoke Isaac's name.

For those familiar with the few elements of Isaac's story in the Old Testament, laughter would not be the first thing to come to mind. In the next chapter—Genesis 22—Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac at God's command. It's hard to see something funny after that, or even before, when Abraham responds obsequiously to Sarah's instruction—and God's endorsement of it—to send Hagar and Ishmael to almost certain death in the desert. No laughing matter, that.

### **Mocking laughter**

Western philosophers have not looked favorably on laughter. To be sure, it is hard to imagine Plato or Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes or René Descartes laughing, never mind Immanuel Kant. But they did comment on laughter. Their specific reasons for disparaging laughter differed, but they

seemed to agree on one point: laughter tends to be, on one hand, an expression of scorn for another party, and on the other hand, an expression of superiority on the part of the person laughing.<sup>2</sup> Whether their point is a sound one generally, these philosophers could draw on the Bible for support.

Many of the biblical texts that mention laughter, or describe a person laughing, have to do with someone mocking someone else.

**Many of the biblical texts that mention laughter, or describe a person laughing, have to do with someone mocking someone else.**

Habakkuk 1:10 describes the Babylonian army laughing at cities that would hope to defend themselves with walls: “At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up earth to take it.” When King Hezekiah sent couriers to invite all the people of Israel and Judah to Passover, they “laughed them to scorn” (2 Chronicles

30:10). In Proverbs, Wisdom—personified as a woman—promises to laugh when those who refuse her counsel experience dread (Proverbs 1:26). In the New Testament, Jesus provokes mocking laughter. When he announces that the presumably dead daughter of a synagogue ruler is merely sleeping, not dead, the people around him laugh at him (Matthew 9:24; Mark 5:40; Luke 8:53).

While all of these examples describe laughter as mocking, they do not occupy the same space on a register of scorn. The laughter of the Babylonian army is that of a vastly superior force expressing amusement at the effort of feeble opponents. The laughter that Israel’s and Judah’s people direct to Hezekiah’s couriers is dismissive. And the laughter Jesus provokes is of the *Yeah, right!* sort of usually justified disbelief. But Wisdom’s laughter has a different quality, expressing glee at the consequences suffered by those who ignored her counsel—*Schadenfreude* is an appropriate German term: in this case, joy, laughter at someone’s predictable misfortune.

That sort of laughter the Bible also attributes to God, who laughs at the wicked because God “sees that their day is coming” (Psalm 37:13). When the nations and kings and peoples conspire against God and God’s anointed, “the One who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them


<sup>2</sup> John Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>.



in derision” (Psalm 2:4). Psalm 59:8 says much the same about God’s laughter at the nations: they belch out with their mouths and have swords between their lips, but God laughs derisively. In 2 Kings 19:21 (cf. Isaiah 37:29), God laughs scornfully at Sennacherib, the Assyrian king whose imperial army lays siege to Jerusalem. This is not laughter provoked by something funny; neither is it joyful laughter—as at a feast, where “wine makes merry” (Ecclesiastes 10:10).

### **Laughter as confession of faith and resistance**

I think of laughter in these passages from Psalms and 2 Kings as disarming and fortifying. The wicked who wield domestic power (Psalm 37),



**Life does not always imitate art, and laughter does not always disarm the imperial power, even if it may fortify the oppressed or beleaguered. But if Easter doesn’t make you laugh, maybe you haven’t been reading along in the Bible.**

the nations who wield international power (Psalms 2 and 59), and the army that wields imperial power (2 Kings 19) are laughed at, exposed to ridicule, disarmed in light of the incomparable power of God. These texts implicitly encourage communities in which they were read, and continue to be read, to laugh along with God—and to do so even when imperial forces exercise all the evident power, and God is not in evidence. This is laughter as confession of faith and resistance.

Comedy has been a medium of social and political critique from antiquity. When the leaders of the Greek city states were engaged in continual war, the comedian Aristophanes laughed at them through his play *Lysistrata* (411 BCE). In it, the women of Greece agree to withhold sex until the men stop fighting. Peace soon followed . . . in the play. It does not always follow on the ground. Life does not always imitate art, and laughter does not always disarm the imperial power, even if it may fortify the oppressed or beleaguered. But if Easter doesn’t make you laugh, maybe you haven’t been reading along in the Bible. It’s good medicine.

### **About the author**

Ben C. Ollenburger is professor emeritus of biblical theology at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

# Face veils and face masks

## Finding humor in the midst of pandemic

Jacqueline Hoover

“The last thing we needed . . . ,” says a burqa-clad Muslim woman to her friend. A burqa covers a women’s entire body, including a mesh over the eyes. In this meme both women also wear face masks. They need yet another layer of facial covering to shield themselves from COVID-19. The flimsy cloth of the burqa



With permission from StareCat.com.

does not provide enough protection.

This meme made me laugh when I first saw it, but is it disrespectful for a Christian to laugh at this meme depicting Muslim women? Will it offend Muslims? We certainly should not laugh at people who are different, but can we laugh with them?

Even if we do not want to laugh, we might still find it difficult to resist smiling at a funny meme.

But now even those not wearing burqas are struggling with face masks. Many countries have encouraged or required wearing face masks to ward off COVID-19, especially on public transportation. And so COVID-19 has challenged Western perceptions of face coverings. Before the arrival of the coronavirus, many Westerners disliked Muslim women covering their faces. It was thought to hamper good communication. It was interpreted as a sign of women’s submission, if not oppression, and a security threat. Over the last decade, “burqa bans” have sprung up in several European countries, as well as in Québec and Morocco. These bans seek to exclude Muslim women covering their faces in public spaces.

## Burqa jokes

There is a whole genre of burqa jokes. They play on the anonymity of the burqa. A recently published little book called *Burqa!* illustrates the point. The book provides several illustrations focusing on the women's hidden eyes. In one scene a young child screams "Mama" in the middle of several women in black burqas. The child is lost and distressed; he cannot identify which woman is his mother. In another scene two burqa-clad women meet. One says, "Have we met before?" The other one responds, "Only from seeing each other." Anonymity also gives women power; their eyes cannot be controlled. In yet another scene two men stand in the middle of a group of women in burqas. The one man says to the other, "You never know if your wife is observing you." The gaze of the masked woman can even be threatening. It is not for nothing that this scene is labeled "Psychological Terrorism." It evokes a chuckle as it confounds the notion that the burqa renders women powerless.<sup>1</sup>

## Veiling and COVID-19

The burqa is sometimes confused with the niqab. However, they are different. The burqa covers the eyes with a mesh, while the niqab leaves the eyes exposed. The burqa and the niqab are not mandatory in Islam, and rather few Muslim women wear them. The burqa is found in Afghanistan. Muslim women who cover their faces in the West usually wear the niqab. A far greater number of Muslim women wear the hijab, a veil that covers the hair and the neck but not the face. Some Muslim women do not veil at all, arguing that the Islamic sources do not require it. Women who cover their faces with a niqab or a burqa often believe that they benefit spiritually. They demonstrate their inner dedication to God outwardly by covering the whole body. Veiling is a marker of piety.<sup>2</sup>

Because veiling signals piety and modesty, veiled women in some Muslim countries suffer less harassment in public than unveiled women. The veiled body thus gives freedom of movement. Conversely, in the West

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1 Simona Bassano di Tuffillo, *Burqa! 24 illustrations accompagnées de Ma vie à Kaboul de Jamila Majahed* (Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2015), illustrations 3, 11 and 16. The translations are mine.

2 This suggests that Muslim women "who do not cover are somehow less pious and faithful." See A. Brenda Anderson and F. Volker Greifenhagen, "Covering Up on the Prairies: Perceptions of Muslim Identity, Multiculturalism and Security in Canada," in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, edited by Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 62.

the veiled body attracts attention. It signals the alien and the other, and it no longer provides protection. Veiled women and especially niqabi women report being harassed and physically abused in Western streets.

**It is remarkable that COVID-19 has people in Western countries covering their faces and changing their perceptions of face coverings. What was resisted on security grounds is now encouraged for the common good.**

But COVID-19 changed this. Some niqabi women say that their situation has now improved. One British Muslim woman who wears niqab notes, “There’s a marked difference to the way I’m being perceived. Nobody is giving me dirty looks because of my gloves and the covered face.” Suddenly, niqabi women are the experts on covering the face in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>3</sup> Will this more positive attitude towards face veils last? Some niqabi women are optimistic. One woman from Pakistan notes, “I

think that this gives everybody the opportunity to step into our shoes for once.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The niqab and face mask**

It is remarkable that COVID-19 has people in Western countries covering their faces and changing their perceptions of face coverings. What was resisted on security grounds is now encouraged for the common good. A leading Indian-British-American scientist asserts that not wearing a face mask should be perceived “as ‘anti-social’ in the same way as drunk driving or failing to wear a seat belt.”<sup>5</sup> The anti-social has become social. A Canadian scholar writes, “We have all become niqabis now!” and she points

3 Anna Piela, “Muslim women who cover their faces find greater acceptance among coronavirus masks—‘Nobody is giving me dirty looks,’” *The Conversation*, April 10, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/muslim-women-who-cover-their-faces-find-greater-acceptance-among-coronavirus-masks-nobody-is-giving-me-dirty-looks-136021>. This article also notes that some mosques advise niqabi women to wear a medical face mask under the niqab because the simple cloth of the niqab does not actually provide much protection.

4 Hafsa Lodi, “Niqabi women speak out about the surge in mainstream face-covering,” *Arab News*, May 11, 2020, updated May 12, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1673056/lifestyle>.

5 “Coronavirus: Wear masks in crowded public spaces, says science body,” *BBC (British Broadcasting Company)*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53316491>.

to the hypocrisy of forbidding face veils and encouraging face masks.<sup>6</sup> This led to a catch-22 in France. Someone could be fined on public transport both for wearing a face covering and for not wearing a face covering.<sup>7</sup> What is the proper response? To laugh, or to cry?

Perhaps it goes too far to compare the niqab and face masks. Muslim women veil for religious reasons, and people wear face masks to reduce the spread of COVID-19.<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Bucar, a scholar of Muslim fashion, is not sure that COVID-19 face masking will lead to reduced religious prejudice.

*While I would like to say yes, I don't think this will be the case. Banning face veils in the West has been about gendered Islamophobia. It's not really about covering faces. . . . I think most non-Muslims will not make the connection that face-veiling for religious reasons and public health reasons both depend on ideas about the common good, and that they are both motivated by ethical concerns even if those concerns are of course different. At least, that is a connection they won't make without actually learning more about religious modesty.*<sup>9</sup>

Bucar distinguishes religious and health reasons for covering the face, but she sees both motivated by ethical concerns for the common good. How so? Face masking reduces the spread of COVID-19, and the veiled Muslim woman upholds the propriety of the public sphere with her modesty.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, the niqab has caught the imagination of the fashion industry. In February 2020, as COVID-19 began to take its toll in Italy,

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6 Katherine Bullock, "We are all niqabis now: Coronavirus masks reveal hypocrisy of face covering bans," *The Conversation*, April 27, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/we-are-all-niqabis-now-coronavirus-masks-reveal-hypocrisy-of-face-covering-bans-136030>.

7 Lou Stoppard, "Will Mandatory Face Masks End the Burqa Bans?" *The New York Times*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/style/face-mask-burqa-ban.html>.

8 Thomas Sealy, "Is there a difference between a niqab and a face mask?" *Open Democracy*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/global-extremes/there-difference-between-niqab-and-face-mask/>.

9 Hafsa Lodi, "Niqabi women speak out about the surge in mainstream face-covering," *Arab News*, May 11, 2020, updated May 12, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1673056/lifestyle>.

10 Elizabeth Bucar, *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 2–3.

fashion designer Marine Serre featured futuristic face masks at the Paris fashion show. Models dressed in face masks that resembled niqabs, and one model even wore an outfit that looked like a burqa.<sup>11</sup> The face masks were stylish but severe, a harbinger of what was to come. Not a laughing matter.

The Muslim fashion industry is booming around the world, mostly focused on the hijab, which does not cover the face. Some observers perceive Muslim fashion negatively as a form of Islamization of Western public space. Others evaluate Muslim fashion positively and equate it with freedom and creativity, even seeing its presence in the West as a form of integration into Western societies. However, fashion is about not only cre-



With permission from Shelley Knoll-Miller, *The Age Newspaper*, Melbourne.

ativity and freedom but also following norms that the industry sets.<sup>12</sup> The cartoon here evokes humor as it undermines common assumptions about Muslim women's oppression. It shows a woman in Western attire saying to a woman in a niqab and a long

black dress, "You must be so restricted and uncomfortable!" The woman in niqab agrees, looking at her feet, "I am! And I've only been wearing them for 20 minutes . . ." The woman in niqab lifts her dress to reveal bright red shoes with high stiletto heels. Indeed, her feet are very sore. The woman in Western dress assumes the niqab is restrictive. The woman

11 "Paris Fashion Week: Facemasks on show amid coronavirus concerns," *BBC (British Broadcasting Company)*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51672753>.

12 Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, "Introduction," in *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, eds. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 14.

in niqab thinks nothing of that but points to her painfully restrictive but fashionable shoes.

In a second cartoon (not shown here) a woman in Western dress asks a woman in a niqab, “What’s under your niqab?” The veiled woman responds, “My face, what’s under your make up?” This points to the fact that make-up can function as a type of mask. Some women are known to say that they cannot go outside of their homes without make-up, just like niqabis who cannot leave their homes without their face veil. Indeed, as one British observer comments, “Make-up can be used as a mask, to hide



“The era of men wearing niqab is the era of corona.”  
With permission from Amal Al-Ajmi.

insecurities and shame that people feel about their face and perhaps even how they feel about themselves in general.”<sup>13</sup> Make-up, like other forms of masking, can both hide and reveal, which provides a measure of control and protection.<sup>14</sup>

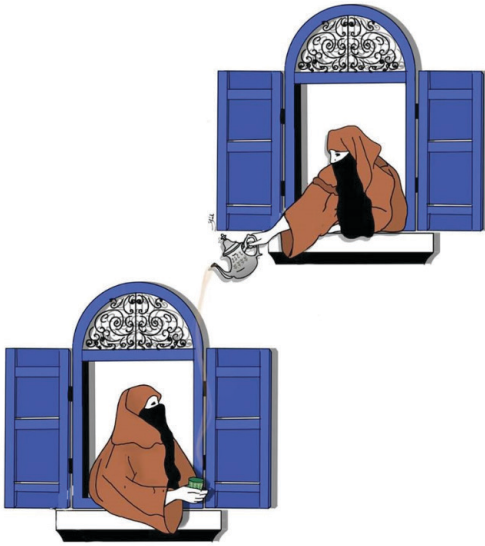
These two cartoons are humorous because niqabi women deftly evade assumptions about their restriction and oppression. The woman in the red shoes reveals that she is in the thrall of the fashion industry even though she wears niqab. In the second cartoon, the niqabi woman turns

13 Bella Gorman, “What does makeup really mask?” *Varsity*, May 5, 2019, <https://www.varsity.co.uk/fashion/17481>.

14 David Inglis, “Cover their Face: Masks, masking, and masquerades in historical-anthropological context,” in *The Routledge International Handbook to Veils and Veiling practices*, edited by Anna-Mari Almila and David Inglis (London: Routledge, 2018), 279.

the tables on her inquisitor to focus on her veil of make-up. It is easier to see masks on others than to see our own masks.

Kuwaiti artist Amal Al-Ajmi takes things a step further. She painted the picture on the preceding page in response to a Saudi tweet advocating the wearing of niqab as mandatory for all Muslim women. The tweet stated,



“Confinement story: So close no matter how far.”  
With permission from Ichraq Bouzidi.

“The era of men wearing niqab is the era of corona.”<sup>16</sup> COVID-19 has turned the world upside-down, and it seems that even men have become niqabis. While that might sting for some, it could also evoke a good laugh.

Face masks and face veils are similar and yet have different meanings and functions. The drawing on this page by Moroccan artist Ichraq Bouzidi depicts two women in traditional Moroccan veils. They are neighbors, and they used to like to drink tea together. COVID-19 made that impossible. Nonetheless, they found a creative solution to overcome the problem. Bouzidi entitles the drawing: “Confinement story: So close no matter how far.”<sup>17</sup> Face masks and face veils are themselves also “so close

ed, “People are racing to buy masks to protect them from corona, while Islam discovered the treatment 1400 years ago when it ordered the wearing of Niqab as a protection against viruses.”<sup>15</sup> It went viral but was deleted a few days later because of much criticism. AL-Ajmi’s painting shows a niqabi woman saying, “The era of men wearing niqab is the era of corona.”

15 Ruba Obaid, “How young Arabs are reacting to the COVID-19 crisis through art,” *Arab News (Saudi Arabia)*, April 13, 2020, updated April 14, 2020, <https://arab.news/jhmjh>.

16 The translation is mine.

17 Obaid, see note 15.



no matter how far.” Let us think how we can use the COVID-19 crisis to build bridges of understanding just like the two neighbors in the drawing. And let that include some good laughs over our veiled selves.

### **About the author**

Jacqueline Hoover is a freelance instructor in Islamic Studies based in the United Kingdom. She is a member of the sessional faculty at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, and an ordained minister in the Mennonite Church USA. She has taught recently in Malaysia, Egypt, Kenya, and the United Kingdom.

# The Mennonite clergy card

## Finding humor in the ordinary

Jim Loepp Thiessen

### Why I laugh . . . a lot

I'm guessing I don't need to make an argument for laughter or to convince you of its efficacy in producing a state of well being.

I laugh a great deal. My spouse teases me that I have a "low humor threshold"—meaning I easily descend (or is it ascend?) into laughter.

Ingrid and I laugh a lot.

We laugh with our children, and I often chuckle about the oddest things.

I laugh to cope, to transcend the moment, to gain perspective.

Under stress, I'll tell humorous stories to myself as a way of reliving times of hilarity.

Seriously.

I relive some of the lighter moments in ministry by telling myself the story again.

And again.

I laugh because I'm overcome by the joy and goodness of God.

I laugh because it helps me cope with the pain around me: never as a denial of what is but always in hope of what will be.

Laughter helps me release my grip and hold gently what has been entrusted to me. In that way it's supremely an act of faith. It's oh so cathartic.


Sometimes I laugh about the odd things in life that happen but never fully make sense. Good humor takes the most ordinary moment and looks at it anew. Consider the clergy card below. If we give this little card purpose and meaning when it has never had an actual life mission, what might happen? The possibilities are endless!

### The Mennonite clergy card

I was paring down stuff in my wallet recently, and I found the little card that proves I'm a pastor in the Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, my

denomination. There is such a card, in case you didn't know. In fact, I get a brand spanking new one every year.

In the early days, it had an Old-World, typed Mennonite simplicity about it—homegrown and unadorned. Recently, however, it was brought into the 1980s with a laminate upgrade.



**Even from a stewardship angle, it just makes sense that for someone to go through all the trouble of printing and signing these tiniest of pastoral legitimizers, there ought to be at least one time in ministry it could be pulled out and used!**

Even with that extravagance, however, no one has asked to see it.

Not once.

In almost thirty years.

Two years ago, our daughter, a Canadian on a Mennonite Voluntary Service assignment in Texas, was asked at the US border to . . . wait for it . . . prove that she was a Mennonite. The card would have worked perfectly, but alas, I wasn't at the border with her, and she didn't have the card.

What can you actually do with this little nugget? Even from a stewardship angle, it just makes sense that for some-

one to go through all the trouble of printing and signing these tiniest of pastoral legitimizers, there ought to be at least one time in ministry it could be pulled out and used!

Let's cut to the heart of it: No one wants proof you're a pastor. Even a Mennonite pastor. Never once has someone said to me: "You're a Mennonite pastor? Prove it!" They look at your socks and Birkenstocks and don't need further evidence. And when you mention your pastoral calling to folks outside of church, they don't want proof; they often just want to change the topic!

So here are a few possibilities with this card in terms of usage:

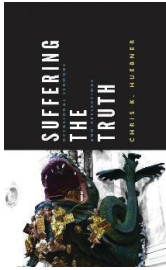
1. *Get out of contributing to potlucks.* You're at church and are invited to stay for lunch, but you didn't bring anything to share. Mennos know they're saved by grace when they can show up at a potluck gladly and freely empty handed. Now, however, out comes the little card. Bingo! Get out of contributing for free! No more awkward stares in the lineup. And if you've earned enough points (see below), you can even cover for the friend

- who invited you! Works especially well when you're at another church where they don't know you.
2. *Skip announcements at your annual spring conference.* The announcements just before lunch seem to go on and on. Flash your little pass to the ushers, they give you a polite acknowledgment, and out you go. No funny stares as you "run the gauntlet" to the exit. "They must be responding to an urgent matter," they think, because answering your phone whilst in session is out of the question, and texting is no excuse to leave. But you really don't need an excuse to leave because you have the card.
  3. *Get a pastor's special on conference swag.* While we're at conference, how about using the card to get the conference rate on swag (whatever that is). Almost every other card in my wallet earns me points! Even my driver's license potentially! So why not this one? Details would need to be worked out, but after buying, say, seven (a good biblical number) of whatever, you get a free compostable lanyard, or a \$2.00 coupon for the thrift shop, or even a T-shirt that says, "Ask me what's in my wallet." And with a looming shortage of pastors, we could use it in our branding: "Become a Mennonite Church Canada pastor, and thrift shop like never before!"
  4. *Attach a scannable barcode.* This would let your conference minister know you've purchased your eighth book on justice. As an added bonus, the barcode would help make the card look a bit more official, should anyone ever see it. It also creates a little accountability in the system. And wouldn't it make the conference minister's annual report a tad more interesting? "And finally, what kind of books did our pastors buy in MCEC in the past year?" People would be on the edge of their seats! Or, possibly, looking towards the exit, thinking, "I just wish I had one of those little cards!"

## About the author

Jim Loepp Thiessen is a pastor at Floradale Mennonite Church in Floradale, Ontario. He has been a pastor in Ontario for almost thirty years, where he has pastored established congregations and planted a church in Kitchener.

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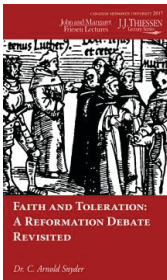


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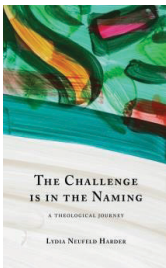


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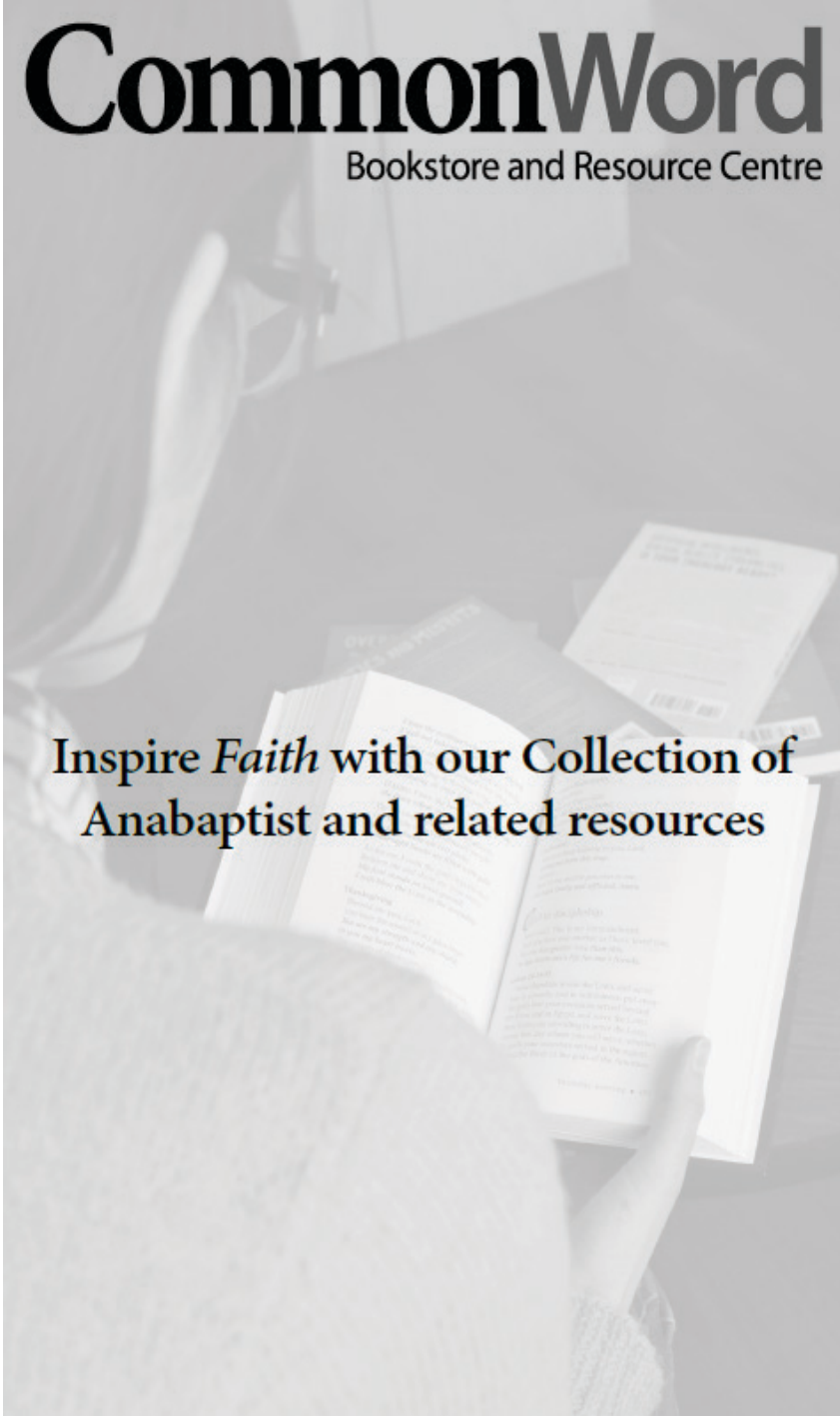
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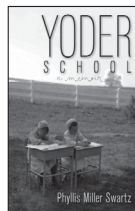
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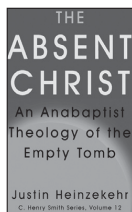
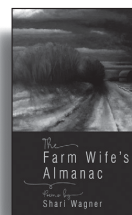
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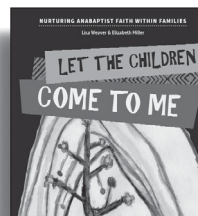
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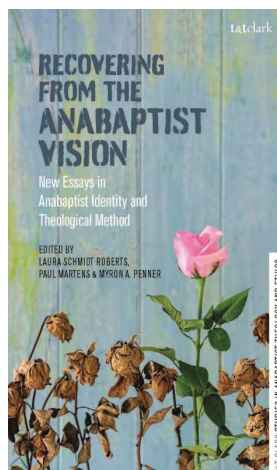
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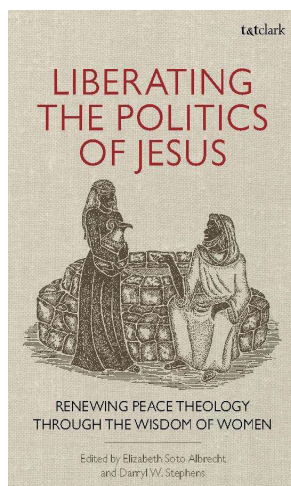


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