

LIGHTENING BOLTS

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Humor is a Curious Thing

Even though curiosity killed the cat, it gives new life to humor. In fact, I believe it may well be the most important technique for seeing humor in the world. In her book, *The Comedy Bible*, Judy Carter teaches her readers four basic questions for finding the humor in a situation. It starts with taking a familiar experience and asking, “What’s weird, scary, hard or stupid about this?”

The movie *Comedian* is a documentary that follows Jerry Seinfeld as he spends a year writing a brand new stand-up routine. One scene shows him in a restaurant with Colin Quinn, another comedian, as they talk about the concept of “think tanks”. Seinfeld says, “What is *that* all about?” and from that moment on the two of them create a comedy routine by reenacting what think tankers might say to one another. With questions such as “What do you think?” and “Do you think?” they come up with a funny way of looking at this topic.

Historically, inventors have been recognized as the epitome of curiosity since their curious exploration has led to great discoveries. In a 1960 study, D.E. Berlyne identified several curiosity catalysts. Among them were incongruity and surprise. The cool thing is, incongruity and surprise are also elements of humor.

A few years ago, I was the auctioneer for a Rotary Club fundraiser. Two bald men were holding a large Persian rug which was the next item to be auctioned off. I asked myself, “What’s weird about this?” Then it occurred to me and I said to the audience, “What are the chances of this, two bald men holding a rug?” It not only got a great laugh, it appeared in the local paper. Now if you don’t think this is funny, you need to ask yourself why. See how this works?

But what do you do if you’re not a humorist and just want to use curiosity for your own well being? Let’s say you’re stuck in traffic and can feel your blood pressure start to rise as you obsess about being late to an important meeting. One way to handle this is to focus on the stress thereby giving it more fuel, making your obsession intensify thus leading to a raised vein on your forehead and a very great potential for a heart attack or ill advised use of your middle finger. I call that the blatantly negative, ego driven, self centered pessimistic point of view which is unhealthy at best.

Another way to see the situation is to be curious about it. Why is the traffic slow? What's going on around me that might be funny? What do the other people look like? Why am I asking these questions out loud? All of these inquiries could lead to something funny and reduce the level of stress you're experiencing.

For instance, once I was stuck in traffic and right beside me was a Sheets' gas truck. On the side of the truck was an ad for Sheets' "Delicious Nachos". Being curious, I immediately wondered what was strange about that. Then it occurred to me. An ad for Mexican food was on a truck full of gas! And when I eat Mexican food, I'm full of gas. The coincidence made me chuckle and reduced the stress of the traffic.

Curiosity is nothing more than asking questions about everything. The more you ask, the more you'll find the humor. Plus you may also find that there are other interesting things going on. You'll never know until you try.

So in the words of Mr. Spock, "Be curious and prosper."

HUMOR IN REAL LIFE: FUN in the Hospital

I recently had the privilege of serving as the main speaker for the leadership team from Inova Alexandria Hospital in Northern Virginia. The event was their post holiday celebration party and was held in a beautiful meeting room at a local Italian restaurant.

I gave a presentation about humor and leadership and then the CEO of the hospital spent time wandering the room, microphone in hand praising the staff. At the same time, staff would offer praises to their colleagues as well as humorous comments about their hospital or department.

One manager was asked to comment on the festivities and he responded, "This is the best wedding I've ever attended." The crowd of leaders burst out laughing.

Each person was given a gift bag and the CEO discussed their plans for future team building activities such as bowling, white water rafting and visiting a local cavern.

Not only did I have a wonderful evening with this group, it was clear to me that their hospital was a fun place to work and that from the very top, fun and camaraderie was encouraged. In the midst of all the stress of healthcare today, these folks knew how to find the proper balance.

JUST HUMOR: A FUN-raising Pitch

The following true exchange occurred between my father and an elderly man in the community back in the 1950's when my father was an administrator for Emory & Henry College in Emory, Virginia.

Culberson: Good morning, I'm G.C. Culberson and I'm soliciting funds for the Emory & Henry College Marching Band Uniform Procurement Fund.

Elderly Man: Eh? I didn't hear you.

Culberson: I said I'm G.C. Culberson and I am soliciting funds for the Emory & Henry College Marching Band Uniform Procurement Fund.

Elderly Man: Eh? You'll have to talk louder.

Culberson: I am G.C. Culberson and I am soliciting funds for the E&H College Marching Band Uniform Procurement Fund.

Elderly Man: I'm sorry I can't hear you.

Ticked off, my dad walked off the porch, down the walk and kicked open the gate.

Elderly Man: Don't kick the gate.

Culberson (in low voice): To hell with the gate.

Elderly Man: And to hell with the Emory & Henry College Marching Band Uniform Procurement Fund.

HUMOR RESOURCES

Here are some resources to help you enhance your own curiosity:

Capacchione, Lucia & Van Pelt, Peggy (1996). *Putting Your Talent To Work*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.

Crainger, Stuart, (1999). *The 75 Greatest Management Decisions Ever Made...and 21 of the worst*. New York: AMACOM

Gelb, Michael J. (2002). *Discover Your Genius*. Quill.

Orben, Robert (2000). *Speaker's Handbook of Humor*. Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster.

von Oech, Roger (1983). *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can be More Creative*. New York: Warner Books.

HUMOR AT WORK:

A Joke of a Career: The Curious World of Bob Orben

Imagine waking up at 4:00 a.m., putting on a pot of coffee, reading several newspapers and then writing 25 jokes for well-known comedians, a prime time talk show, a political candidate and the President of the United States. That's what Robert "Bob" Orben did as one of the most prolific joke writers in the United States and possibly the universe (current access to universe databases prohibit confirmation of the latter claim).

I've been privileged to know Bob for several years. He is a wonderfully kind and humble person whose career showed that underneath the glitz and glamour of rubbing elbows with the giants of Hollywood and Washington, DC, was a never ending curiosity about what makes people laugh.

At the tender age of 18, Bob was demonstrating magic in New York City when he read *Smart Talk for Magicians* and thought, "I could do that." One year later, Bob wrote his first book on comedy patter (the verbal monologue used during a performance) called *The Encyclopedia of Patter* specifically for magicians.

Since then, he has written the time tested newsletter *Current Comedy* plus 47 books and for speakers and show business types of which the most recent is a wonderful blend of one liners and personal stories called *Speakers Handbook of Humor* (Merriam-Webster). Beyond the numerous publications, he also wrote comedy for comedian Dick Gregory, the Red Skelton Show and the Jack Paar Show and was the Director of the White House Speechwriting Department for President Gerald Ford.

Bob said that curiosity played a major role in his career because the basis of good comedy writing is to look for humor everywhere. As he scanned newspapers for material, he would look for any idea or concept that would make a good joke. However, since he was writing material for other people, he always had to consider what would work for the comedian *and* the audience.

Bob suggests there is no real "formula" for writing comedy but there *is* a routine. During the peak of his career, his goal was to write 25 jokes per day. Whether it took him two hours or ten, the goal remained the same. As most writers will attest, the only way to succeed at this goal is to just do it, seven days a week. By creating this habit of writing, Bob cranked out successful jokes day after day.

But it didn't end there. Because he was curious about what jokes worked, Bob would listen to the audiences' reactions and recognize patterns of success which could be used in future joke development.

When asked if this focus on humor affected his personal life, Bob said he often told jokes in social situations and in hindsight could see the humor in stressful situations (although he admits it was tough to see at the time). In addition, he was always on the lookout for humorous material that would present itself in his day-to-day routine.

We can learn from Bob's career. First of all, if we really want to be good at something, we must develop a routine which puts us in the right environment to do that thing every day. Bob says, "You can't reward yourself by taking a day off and not doing it." It's about grinding it out every day. Seeing humor in our lives requires that we create a humor-seeking routine every single day.

Second, we must be curious about everything. Going through life without questioning what's going on makes us complacent. Asking questions about every detail allows us to understand and react in a new and curious way. Plus, the more questions we ask, the more likely we'll see some humor along the way.

Bob Orben certainly did more than his part to bring humor to our world. He did this by satisfying a curiosity and turning that inquisitiveness into a gift for others. Thanks Bob.

QUOTE: Every morning I get up and look through the Forbes list of the richest people in America. If I'm not there, I go to work. – Robert Orben

HUMOR ME

Ronald P. (Ron) Culberson, Director of Everything! at FUNsulting, etc., is a speaker, humorist, author of *Is Your Glass **Laugh** Full?* and former hospice social worker whose mission is to work with organizations that want their people to lighten up by using humor to minimize stress and maximize effectiveness. He is a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP), the highest earned award from the National Speakers Association, and is one of less than 7% of speakers worldwide who have received this designation. He has provided entertaining and informative programs to over 70,000 people in more than 600 associations, government agencies, non-profit organizations and *Fortune 500* companies.

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BACK QUOTE

Humor is another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. Humor can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. – Victor Frankl