

Humor and the Spiritual

Thomas A. Burns, Ph.D.

2016

Klamath Falls, Oregon

For most individuals, it would not be at all apparent that humor bears any relationship to the spiritual. But when we recognize that humor is one result of artistic behavior and that art and spirituality are united in the less complex human cultures of our vast human heritage, we can realize that humor is in fact one device within art and the artistic that assists in directing us toward the spiritual.

How can this be so?

To make a start, we need to recognize that all art forms are meta frames within which certain behaviors are “permitted” that might well not be allowed outside of the special “time out” that the meta frame creates. Let's consider narrative or story as one of the most common art forms. A story usually is declared as such with an introduction: e.g. “Here's one I heard the other day,” or “That reminds me of the time when,” or “Once upon a time.” As soon as we hear any intro of this kind, a meta frame is created and we know that we are in a “time out” moment when the events that are/will be described are “fanciful” or historical and not real in the present. In this story framework, we can identify with the characters and the behaviors attributed to them, but we know they are only secondarily part of our current reality. The artistic “as if” frame is itself metaphoric [standing for reality] allowing the pretense that what occurs within it is real, when we know in fact that it is not. And because we know to make this distinction, we are safe and not directly affected by the described narrative behaviors. We are put in the position of being privileged and safe “onlookers.”

Of course, Narrative/Story is just one art form, but all art forms share in dwelling within this momentarily safe meta frame of metaphor [“as if”]. So, all art and all art forms [whether musical or plastic or graphic or verbal – or some combination] are at root metaphoric – referring to the real world and occurring in short “time outs” in the real world but not really “of” that real world. And within the metaphoric frame of an art form, metaphor is often employed further in the internal “message.” Characters themselves can be metaphors for example with humans as if animals [fables], and descriptions and dialog [pictorial or verbal or musical] within art forms often are metaphoric: “You lucky dog,” “The monkey of a moon rose over the table top ocean,” etc. Metaphor at several levels pervades all of art, most especially in the language of poetry, the lyrics of songs,

and the imagery of graphic art.

Why is the pervasiveness of metaphor in the frame and content of all of art so important? The simple answer is that metaphor asks us to consider one thing or action from our “real” [material] world “as if” it is some other thing or action in that world. e.g. “Matilda is just a worm taking in nothing but dirt.” Metaphor is a device that makes a connection between two otherwise unconnected entities or actions in our material reality [what we think of as our everyday reality]. I suggest that all of the arts are primarily in the business of presenting humans with the “surprises,” the “stimulations” that result from their experiencing these metaphoric claims of connection [and thereby shared identity] across our world of otherwise analytically and intellectually separated phenomena.

In contrast to the world understood in terms of things and events separated by time and space and revealed through the use of our analytical, objective, intellectual faculties [the material perspective on reality], the world as revealed through our synthetic, subjective, intuitive faculties [the spiritual perspective on reality] is all about discovering the fundamental connectedness of all things and events to the ultimate point of total unification – where all things become infinitely connected in one identity.

Through the “surprising” connections that art instills in our experience, art constitutes one avenue within all human cultures that first, bends us in the direction of knowing life from a spiritual perspective and that second, encourages us to “know” the importance of subjective reality in our lives.

Humor is one response we can be encouraged to experience to some of the surprises that come to us through the safe “as if” metaphoric envelop of art. Humor – itself often dependent upon metaphor [e.g. the pun], is a consequence within art. And when the ARTS are functioning in their primary mode – and not just as sensational entertainment, these ARTS are avenues available to humans to experience and know and dwell in spiritual reality.

Of course, most of human material and social culture has an artistic component without needing to be housed in full-on art forms. Humor [most commonly expressed metaphorically in verbal puns and various gestures] in everyday conversation provides relief from the technical task of information passing. Such little verbal imposed “time outs” reveal the degree to which even what we take to be our everyday materially focused reality is actually flavored and punctuated by quiet gestures toward the subjective/spiritual. As the material – spiritual domain is actually a continuum and not a hard and fast dichotomy, so the artistic –

instrumental domain is also a continuum. The formal Arts merely exist toward the spiritual end of this continuum. Humor within the arts and as “flavoring” in our everyday behavior is one vehicle that points us toward the spiritual perspective.

P.S. Some will wonder what is the role of religion in this discussion. The answer is that in the “scheme” as I view it, there is no necessity for religion at all. From this perspective, all religions are efforts by societies to institutionalize, encase, and capture spirituality by attributing absolute truth to their dogmatic rituals and beliefs and promoting absolute commitment by their followers to these restrictive rituals and beliefs. Art and spirituality [and humor as a vehicle within Art and the artistic] are far too fundamental and important for humanity to be circumscribed by religion.

For more on the role and function of Art in human culture, the reader may want to look at the essays under the topic of Art on my website, www.dynamic-humanism.com