

Dirty Jokes, Tasteless, Jokes, Ethnic Jokes

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There once was a man from Nantucket
Who kept all his cash in a bucket.
But his daughter, named Nan,
Ran away with a man
And as for the bucket, Nantucket!¹

Let's start with a few basics. Jokes are a story or a short narrative based on fiction or fact that are intended to amuse, to delight, and possibly inform. Jokes contain a subject and a predicate and very often a direct object. Something is said, something is done, and more often than not, someone is the butt of the story. All jokes are, to some degree or another, edgy, irreverent, iconoclastic. In making fun of somebody or something jokes push the conventional verbal, conceptual, and cultural envelope. Which means that every joke has the potential to offend someone or to be an affront to something.

Essayist David Galef correctly points out that a joke is not bad just because it is offensive. Every joke risks goading someone's sacred cow. "Language is never neutral," says Galef, it is all about content and context. The point is, every utterance is a potential slight, but given the proper context, anything is potentially funny. However, in the wrong context nothing is funny.² Here is an example of a joke that, at first, seems "politically correct" and "totally inoffensive":

Two men are knocking back beers in a bar on the ninetieth floor of the Empire State building.

"You know, there's a slipstream around the seventieth floor," says one, opening a window, "and if you jump out here, it'll suck you back in at the fiftieth floor."

"Ah, c'mon," says the second, more than a little drunk.

"No, really" says the first. "I'll show you." So he jumps out the window, comes in through a fiftieth-floor window, takes the elevator up, and appears triumphantly back in the bar.

"Hey, I'm going to try that," says the second guy. He jumps out the window, falls ninety floors, and is killed instantly.

"Hey," says the bartender, looking hard at the first man, "you can be a real bastard when you're drunk, Superman."³

You've got to admit that this is a funny joke! It's got an interesting premise, its logical, it moves well. And, it has an unusual and surprising punch line. So, who can be offended? Superman is not a person! Superman is a fictitious comic book character! True enough, but as Galef points out, even such a seemingly innocuous joke can prove to be offensive to alcoholics, recovering alcoholics, and families who have suffered pain and loss due to alcoholism. The simple fact is every utterance has the potential to offend. "Writing or speaking humorously is like playing with matches; it can burn the one who's trying to light up the darkness."⁴

The issue I am pursuing here is not whether a joke is ethically correct or ethically objectionable. Rather, the issue is, how is it possible that an utterly tasteless joke, a joke that many consider to be crude, rude, inappropriate, highly offensive and even harmful be considered to be funny? However, even though I will argue that given the right context, the right audience, any joke can be considered funny, I am not saying that they are acceptable, correct, or ethical. The issue here is an epistemic one and not normative.

It all starts, of course, with the joke teller. Like any good sales-person, the joker needs to sell him or herself as well as their joke-product or comedic bit. Whether the joke is delivered by a professional on stage or by a friend over dinner, more often than not, jokes succeed or fail depending upon how well they are presented. Getting a laugh at a comedy club or neighbors kitchen table is as much a trick of timing as it is a demonstration of true wit.⁵ But in the end, the joke only has viability if the audience thinks it's funny. Just as the three iron-clad rules of real estate are "Location, Location, Location," so too, a successful jokes is all about "Audience, Audience, Audience." The life cycle of a joke is like the physics of sound. A noise must be emitted and received for the circuit to be completed, for sound to occur.

Ted Cohen argues that all jokes are conditional.⁶ That is, all jokes have conditional requirements connecting the teller and the audience, i.e., common knowledge, common background, common language, common cultural presuppositions, prejudices, and myths. A conditional joke is one that can only work with a certain audience, an audience that shares a common frame of reference with the teller. In conditional jokes, in all jokes, the audience must supply something in order to get the point of the joke and to possibly be amused by it. A successful joke transaction is one in which the teller and the hearer are mutually joined in a common feeling, insight, or recognition.

When a joke works, it is because the joker is telling a story and using assumptions, knowledge, cultural references and a background that an audience recognizes, understands and can react and respond to it. The simple reason why jokes "do not" work is because we do not all share the same life experiences the same frame of reference. In the end, we are a society divided by different tastes because we are a society of different backgrounds and experiences.⁷ The conditional nature of joke telling explains why jokes, comics, and comedy are so subjective, community specific,

generational, or niche based. Joke telling is like popular music. Popular or commercial music primarily speaks to a very specific audience, very specific demographic slice of pie. That is why most parents and children are separated, surprised, and amazed by what each of them consider listenable, enjoyable, danceable popular songs and singers. I remember my father saying to me: “Elvis screams, Sinatra sings!”

Let’s unpack this principle to its logical conclusion. What it means is that nasty jokes, naughty jokes, nefarious jokes, sexual jokes, misogynistic jokes, racial jokes, anti-religious jokes, scatological jokes (no matter how graphic, crude, perverse, despicable, and derogatory) can, depending on the tastes and receptivity of the audience, be considered acceptable fodder for comedy. In other words, be considered funny!

Let’s be very clear about this. I am not talking about jokes that “might” offend Emily Post’s refined standards of aesthetic sensibility and good taste. Or jokes you probably shouldn’t tell your mother. I am talking about jokes that intentionally, happily, push the limits of sadomasochism. Jokes that far exceed playful childhood scatology. Jokes that are gleeful about necrophilia, cannibalism, and torture. Jokes that viciously diminish, denigrate, and defame the basic human rights of various political, racial, or ethnic groups. Jokes that celebrate and advocate violence, mutilation and death. Jokes that demean women, the LGBTQ community, and the physically impaired.

No matter how counter intuitive it may seem, a joke that some or many might deem as offensive, vulgar, even unethical doesn’t mean that the joke is aesthetically flawed and not funny to a particular audience.⁸ As Cohen somewhat reluctantly insists, “do not let your convictions that a joke is in bad taste, or downright immoral, blind you to whether you find it funny.”⁹ Ethics, common sense, and good taste aside, the humor of a joke depends “absolutely upon who tells the joke and who hears it.”¹⁰

Let me offer a few rather mild, but nonetheless rather dubious jokes that I think are insensitive, politically incorrect, and, perhaps, even immoral. Nevertheless, they do have a certain currency with disgruntled former Catholic grammar school students and rabid fans of MAD Magazine:

Q: “What’s black and white and red all over?”

A: “A crushed nun!”

Q: “What’s that black stuff between an elephants toes?”

A: Slow natives.”

A baby seal goes into a bar. The bartender, says: What can I get you to drink, little fellow?”

The seal says, “Oh, anything: Just as long as it’s not a Canadian Club!”

It is hard to deny that, no matter how jejune and tasteless, these jokes contain an element of humor in them. Nevertheless, sharing these jokes with the wrong audience is a guaranteed recipe for comedic failure and social contempt and banishment.

In an interview in the *New York Times Magazine* comedian Jeff Garlin suggested that stand-up comedy is a two way street. Theoretically, a comic has a right to tell off-colors jokes, anti-women jokes, rape jokes, any kind of jokes. However, when a comedian forgets that there is an audience in front of you, or who your audience is, then, said Garlin, “you’re going to pay a price for it.” The biggest mistake that any comic can make is to mindlessly assume that the other person’s sense of humor is the same as their own.¹¹

According to Gershon Legman, the underground sexual theoretician and indefatigable encyclopedist of dirty jokes, sex jokes, or erotic humor is by far the most popular form of joke telling. In his magnum opus, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke*, he claims that all cultures in all centuries have had an oral and/or written tradition of sexual humor and joke telling. Legman asserts that sexual jokes are part of human culture because sexuality, in all of its varied and peculiar manifestations, is an elemental part of human nature itself.¹²

He claims that we make jokes about sex out of curiosity, and as a natural expression of our interest and desire. We tell jokes as a way of overcoming our hesitancy, and as a way of transcending our fear, neurosis, and guilt concerning sexual matters. We tell sex jokes to help normalize an otherwise forbidden or, at least, hidden topic. We tell sex jokes as a way of flaunting authority, as a means of transcending cultural conventions, and as a means of violating taboos. Sexual jokes are also a way to express illicit sexual rage and perversions of every kind. Sexual joke making is a means of compensating for that which is unavailable to us in reality. In addition, lest we forget, sexual jokes like pornography are a vicarious means of having sexual pleasure.

The spectrum of the tone, taste, aggression and ferocity of the language and imagery involved in sexual joke telling is rather amazing. Erotic jokes range from guarded and subdued to poignantly pornographic, violent, and explicit. Linguistically, most, but not all, sex jokes heavily traffic in profane language. Profane language is considered irreverent language. Profane language is considered vulgar, common, dirty language. However, as comedian George Carlin (1937-2008) asked of his various audiences:

“Can someone explain to me why certain words are considered dirty? Why is it,” said Carlin, “that of the 400,000 (plus) words in the English language, seven of them (S _____, P _____, F _____, C _____, C _____ S _____ _____, M _____ _____ F _____ _____, and T _____) are thought to be too dirty and improper to use on TV and in most newspapers? None of these

words,” said Carlin, will “infect your soul, curve your spine and keep the country from winning (a) war.”¹³

Fellow, dirty-mouthed comedian, Lewis Black is in complete agreement with Carlin’s original comic premise. Language, says Black, is a tool and a means of communication. Furthermore, says Black, we use different kinds of language to express ourselves differently. For example, “When you’re watching a body of water rise up and crush everything in its path, don’t words like ‘Son of a Bitch’ or ‘Holy Shit’ cross your mind? Does anyone really think, ‘Aw, Pshaw’ or ‘Pussy feathers?’” So too, says Black, a “good dirty joke” needs “good dirty language.”¹⁴

Black warns that you don’t get laughs just by swearing. After the first few times you have heard them, four letter words, in and of themselves, are not funny. On stage, just saying “dick” or “fuck” is not going to get you a laugh. To get a laugh you have to develop and deliver some quality “dick” and “fuck” jokes. In other words, comedy is about the joke, the language is just a colorful and playful delivery system.¹⁵ “When you are not delivering the goods... (a good joke),” says Black, “all the ‘fucks’ in the world won’t save your ass.”¹⁶ Conversely, it can be argued, if the joke is a good one, there is no limit to the range and raunchiness of the language and the number of times the F-bomb or bad language is used. The classic case in point being the infamous joke called *The Aristocrats*.

Arguably, *The Aristocrats* is the dirtiest joke in the English language. According to Gershon Legman its origin dates back to the vaudeville and burlesque days of show business, and the joke has long been recognized as the benchmark of grossness and sexual excess in the extreme. Today, *The Aristocrats* is rarely performed on stage, but it continues to be told by comics to other comics both as a way of demonstrating professional competence and as a form of competitive one-upmanship. According Penn Jillette and Paul Provenza, producers and directors of the 2005 documentary *The Aristocrats*, the joke is now an “insiders’ joke,” exclusively told by professionals to professional. The joke has become an “acid test of talent, wit, and unflinching nerve, who can out-cringe whom?”¹⁷

The skeleton of the joke is simplicity itself. There is a standard opening setup. “A man walks into the office of a well-known talent agent and says, “Sir, have I got an act for you...it’s a family act!” The middle of the joke is a blank slate and offers an opportunity for the gleeful expression of the obscene and perverted imagination of each individual comic. There is but one rule, “unspeakable obscenity” is to be spoken here! No topic, no form of language, no gesture, and no matter how disgusting is out of bounds. The goal of the joke is to achieve “shock and awe!” Therefore, every version of the joke must, by tradition, be a gleeful and outrageous depiction of sexual depravity ranging from bestiality to pedophilia. Finally, the joke ends with the rather unexpected punch line: “We call ourselves....*The Aristocrats!*”

In the documentary, 100 different comics joyfully shared their version of the joke with the viewing audience and their fellow comics. Each version was deliciously decadent, sexually outrageous, uncomfortably frank, but, nevertheless, hysterically funny. Unfortunately good taste, professional prudence, and, on the advice of my attorney, I cannot share with you a full version of *The Aristocrats*. Nevertheless, allow me to offer a fill-in-the-blank version of the joke—sans vulgarity and graphic sexuality. Feel free to try your hand at what *The New Yorker* calls, not just the “dirtiest joke in the English language,” but “the filthiest joke in the world.”¹⁸ The Aristocrats goes as follows:

A man walks into the office of a well-known talent agent and says, “Sir, have I got an act for you.” The agent, having seen it all in his 40 years in the business, looks doubtful, but indicates that the man should go on. “Well, sir,” the man says, “it’s a family act.” The agent roll his eyes, but before he can respond, the man jumps right in. “First,” he says, “I come out on the stage and accompanied by an old-time piano rag, do a bit of soft-shoe dance. My wife joins me, and I take her by the hand. Then I bend her over, lift up her _____ (article of clothing) and tear off her _____(article of clothing). Next, I whip out my _____ (body part) and start to _____ (verb) her. As she’s _____ (verb ending in ‘ing’) with pleasure, my son comes onstage and pulls out his little _____ (body part), which my wife starts to _____(verb). After a moment, our daughter enters from the left, kneels down and starts licking the boy’s _____ (body part). Overcome with pleasure, he _____ (verb ending in ‘S’), and some lands on our daughter’s _____ (body part). All the while, the music is playing, becoming more and more dramatic. Then the baby crawls onstage, in her adorable footie pajamas and start to eat the _____ (bodily waste) right off her sister’s _____ (body part). The baby _____ (verb ending in ‘s’), and my daughter slips in the ensuing puddle. Her face gets caught in the boy’s _____, (body part) and my wife, still _____ (verb ending in ‘ing’) away on his _____, (body part) tries to pull the two of them apart. Off balance, she slips and lands face-first in the steaming pile of _____ (noun). The motion of her popping off my _____(Body part), along with the music rising to a mighty crescendo, causes me to _____(verb) all over them, while they slip and slide in the _____(noun) which by now is now covering the stage. Just at that moment, a container of confetti opens up in the rafter, and my entire family gets up and leaps on top of my shoulders, fanning out like the petals of a flower, with the baby perched on top.” “Finally,” the man says, “when we’re all completely covered in _____ (noun), _____ (bodily fluid) and confetti, we throw our hands in the air: Ta-da!” The agent, stunned, pauses

for what seems like an eternity before saying, “Jesus, that’s a hell of an act. What do you call it?” The man, rubbing his fingernails on the lapel of his natty, pinstriped coat, lifts his nose to the air and says, in his most sophisticated voice, “We call ourselves...The Aristocrats!”¹⁹

Ironically, in the end, *The Aristocrats* may be funny not just because it is, shockingly salacious and uncomfortably prurient, but because it is outrageously bombastic and iconoclastic. The joke itself is terribly tasteless and absurd, and it is its very absurdity that makes it hilarious. Added to that, at least concerning the film *The Aristocrats*, is the energy and excitement of the individual comics acting out and performing the piece. In some sense, *The Aristocrats* is as much as dramatic farce as it is a joke.

By the way of aside, having defended the richness if not the purity of dirty jokes and the use of bad language, I’d like to offer my two favorite sex jokes. You will notice that nary a naughty word is to be found in either one of these jokes. There is absolutely no use of Carlin’s forbidden “sexual seven” terms, or even any “explicit” description of sex. Nonetheless, the set-ups and the punch lines of the jokes listed below are undeniably sexual, naughty and funny. Consider two examples:

Example #1: Super Sex

For his 90th birthday a man’s friends decided to give him a visit from an expensive, high-class call girl. The evening of his birthday, she appeared at his door, and when he opened the door she said, “Happy Birthday! Your friends have sent you a gift! I’m here to bring you super sex. So what will it be?” The man thought for a moment, and then he said, “Sweetie, at my age, I think I’ll have the soup.”

Example #2: Bear Hunting

Bob was excited about his new .338 rifle and decided to try bear hunting. He traveled up to Alaska, spotted a small brown bear and shot it. Soon after there was a tap on his shoulder, and he turned around to see a big black bear.

The black bear said, “That was a very bad mistake. That bear is my cousin, I’m going to give you two choices. Either I maul you to death or we have sex.”

After considering briefly, Bob decided to accept the latter alternative. So the black bear had his way with Bob.

Even though he felt sore for two weeks, Bob soon recovered and vowed revenge. He headed out on another trip to Alaska where he found the black bear and shot it dead. Right after, there was another tap on his shoulder. This time a huge grizzly bear stood right next to him.

The grizzly said, “That was a big mistake, Bob. That bear was my cousin and you’ve got two choices- either I maul your to death or we have rough sex.”

Again, Bob thought it was better to co-operate with the grizzly bear than be mauled to death. So the grizzly had his way with Bob.

Although he survived, it took several months before Bob fully recovered. Now Bob was completely outraged, so he headed back to Alaska and managed to track down the grizzly bear and shot it. He felt sweet revenge, but then moments later, there was a tap on his shoulder, He turned around to find a giant polar bear standing there.

The polar bear looked at him and said, “Admit it, Bob, you don’t come here just for the hunting, do you?”

Depending upon who’s telling the joke and the audience to whom it’s told, ethnic and racial jokes can either prove to be delightful and delicious or dehumanizing and disgusting. Unfortunately, playing on the words of Thomas Hobbes, ethnic jokes too often prove to be “nasty, brutish, cruel, stereotypical, and demeaning.” However, I want to point out that good ethnic humor need not and should not be this way.

It can be argued that ethnic humor evolves out of our natural tendency to compare and measure ourselves against others. As a species, we are a competitive group and we and revel in the opportunity to laugh at people not like us, and others whom we regard as rather different and or peculiar in their customs and habits.²⁰ For example, the English laugh at the French, the Belgium’s deride the Dutch, the Swedes scorn the Danes, the Chinese cackle about the Japanese, the Democrats disparage the Republicans, the Chicago Bears defame the Green Bay Packers, and vice versa, of course. Some of these comparisons are clever, and many are cruel. Here is an example of one that is right down the middle:

The Greeks vs. the Italians

A Greek and Italian were debating who has the superior culture.

The Greek says, “We have the Parthenon.”

The Italian says, “We have the Coliseum.”

The Greeks says, “We had great mathematicians and philosophers.”

The Italian says, “We created a world empire and established Pax Romana.”

And so on and so on for hours, until finally the Greek lights up and says.... “We invented sex!”

The Italian nods slowly, thinks, and replies, “That is true—but it was Italians who introduced it to women!”

A lot of ethnic humor sarcastically play-on certain long established and popularly recognized cultural traits and particular idiosyncrasies of a group or ethnicity. Many of these kinds of jokes are more playful than they are negative or derogatory. For example:

Q: How did the Irish Jig get started?

A: Too much Guinness and not enough bathrooms!

Q: What do you call it when an Italian has one arm shorter than the other?

A: A Speech impediment!

Q: What goes CLOP, CLOP, CLOP, BANG, BANG, BANG, CLOP, CLOP, CLOP?

A: An Amish drive-by shooting.

Q: What do you get when you cross a Unitarian with a Jehovah's Witness?

A: Someone out knocking on doors for no apparent reason.

Next to the pleasure that many of us derive from making fun of others, the origin of much of ethnic humor is self-generated. That is, we love to make fun of ourselves. Most, but not all, ethnic groups have created a treasure-trove of self-referential stories, anecdotes, and jokes that examine and celebrate their collective habits, customs and peculiarities both in their adopted communities and their countries of origin. Sociologists contend that much of ethnic humor and storytelling is a response to the experience of migrating to new lands and becoming both linguistically and ethnically the "outsider." According to folklorist James P. Leary developing a strong culture of humor and storytelling within immigrant/ethnic groups allows them to simultaneously hold on to the past while being in the present. In effect, says Leary, humor allows them to be "bicultural." It allows them to overcome the malaise of being "strangers in a strange land." Self-deprecating and self-referential jokes becomes the language of assimilation and integration while yet retaining some of the manners and morals of the old world. Their jokes afford them the status of being both insiders and outsiders.²¹

Leary and other students of ethnic humor are quick to point out that the key to ethnic humor is not always the old world content of the joke as much as the tone, topics, language, and delivery of the joke. In Wisconsin and Minnesota, for example, Ole and Lena are the stars of the local Scandinavian humor. The long time host of NPR's *Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor is a big fan of Ole and Lena jokes. According to Keillor, Lena and Ole are not "simple," but rather

they are people of simple values and a parochial life style. They are rural folk, farmers and laborers. They have been in the Midwest for generations, but they still speak “Scand-lish” and their humor is dry, prosaic, prudential and never over the top. Consider two examples of “Scand-lish” humor:

Example #1: Anniversary Party

Ole and Lena were celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary. After the guests left, Lena looked at Ole and punched him real hard in the shoulder. “That’s for twenty-five years of bad sex.”

Ole thinks about it and then reaches over and Punches Lena hard in her shoulder, “That’s for knowing the difference!”

Example #2: Death Scene

Ole was dying. On his deathbed, he looked up and said, “Is my wife here?” Lena replied, “Yes, Ole, I’m here, next to you.” So Ole asks, “Are my children here?” “Yes, Daddy we’re all here,” says the children. “Are my other relatives also here?” and they say, “Yes we are all here,” Ole says, “Then why is the light on in the kitchen?”

Sam Hoffman connoisseur of Hebrew humor and author of the play and the book *Old Jews Telling Jokes* points out that, by in large, Jewish folk humor is urban, urbane, about being the chosen people, about “making a living”, and, of course, there are lots of jokes about being a Jewish mother. According to Hoffman, for generations Jewish mothers have occupied a central role in Jewish culture. Traditionally, Jewish mothers ran the household, kept a laser like focus on the children, participated in the life of the synagogue, and kept her husband on the straight and narrow. And how did these extraordinary women accomplish all of this? Simple, says Hoffman, with huge doses of whining, constant nagging, and tons and tons of disemboweling guilt!²² Consider some illustrative examples:

Example #1: Hanukkah Guilt

A Jewish mother gives her son two ties on the first night of Hanukkah. The following morning, when he comes down for breakfast, he is wearing one of them. The mom says, “What’s the matter- you didn’t like the other one?”

Example #2: Mothers and Sons

Three older Jewish women, sitting on a bench in Miami. First one boasts, “I have such a wonnerful son. You know what he did for mine seventy-fifth birthday?”

Chartered an airplane. Got all my friends from Great Neck, flew them down here for a party at the Fontainebleau Hotel... in the grand ballroom! They made a chopped liver look like a svan! You could die from it! Seven-piece orchestra, we partied till two in the morning. What a nize boy.”

Second lady says, “Well, you have a nize son, but let me tell you about my boy. Took me around the world onna cruise....Princess Line, two wholes weeks.... Ve Played shuffleboard on the deck.... We sat at the captain’s table. Parties every night. Such a great kid.”

Third lady: “Vell, you have nize boy and you have a nize boy, but let me tell you about my zon Marvin. He live in New York City. He zeas a psee-kye-a-trist [psychiatrist] tree times a veek...two hun’dred dollars an hour...and all he talks about is me!”

Sadly and unfortunately, there is a special codicil to the basic thesis that joke telling is a helpful means by which to navigate a hostile or new environment. During World War II, the Nazis regime attempted to carry out a plan, a “Final Solution,” for the complete extermination of European Jewry. Millions of Jews were packed into cattle cars and shipped off to concentration camps. Once there, prisoners were either selected for immediate extermination or forced into an inhumane work environment without sufficient clothing, food, or opportunities for rest. Numerous survivors have reported on the unrelenting horror and cruelty of the experience. Twelve to fourteen hours of work on less than 800 calories of food a day. A daily selection of those chosen next to die. The ever present stench of burning flesh in the air, and the ubiquitous cloud of grey ash that spewed forth from the incinerator chimneys. Clearly, it was a twentieth century version of Dante’s third circle of hell.

One of the most famous survivors of the camps was the psychiatrist and philosopher Viktor Frankl. Frankl lost most of his family in the camps and endured almost four years of hard labor at Auschwitz. In his deeply disturbing, yet profoundly moving book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl reports that he learned four essential life lessons while enduring the horrors of camp life. To being with, he found out that the medical community was wrong. The human body can cope with far more, torture, pain, cold, sleep deprivation, and starvation than what the medical textbooks tell us. Second, even in the face of senseless and arbitrary cruelty we have a nagging need to find meaning and purpose in our lives. “To live is to suffer,” said Frankl, “and to survive in to find meaning in the suffering.”²³ Third, forces beyond our control can take away everything we possess except one thing, our freedom to choose how we will respond to the conditions that we face.²⁴ Finally, he learned that humor, “affords us an aloofness and ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds....I would never have made it,” said Frankl, “if I could not have laughed. Laughing lifted

me momentarily...out of this horrible situation, just enough to make it livable...survivable.”²⁵ In addition, as another famous inmate, Eugene Jonesco, put it: “To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying.”²⁶

It’s certainly not the case that prisoners greeted each other at roll-call with, “Hey, did you hear the one about...?” Nor did they sit over their eight ounces of rancid gruel each night and swap nasty and satirical Nazi stories. Rather, said Frankl, inmates tried to use their imagination to create or see humor in any situation possible. For example, there is the story of a prisoner who points to a particularly severe and sadistic capo (a trustee, a prisoner/guard) and ironically says, “Imagine! I knew him when he was only the president of a bank!”²⁷ Listed below are a few more frequently repeated stories that come out of the concentration camp experience:

A prisoner bumps into a guard. The guard shouts at him, “Schwein” (pig)! The Prisoner bows and says, “Cohen. Pleased to meet you.”

Martha is standing next to Sara during the daily roll call and says to her: “You look good! Have you lost a little weight?”

Two prisoners are waiting to face a firing squad, when news arrives that they are to be hanged instead. One turns to the other and says: “You see, they must be losing the war because they are running out of ammunition!”²⁸

A prisoner wanted to commit suicide and tried hanging himself. But the quality of the rope in the noose is so bad it breaks. So he tried sticking his head in the oven, but they shut off the gas between two and five in the afternoon. Then he tried living on his rations. That worked like a charm!²⁹

German historian Rudolph Herzog maintains that these kinds of jokes are an expression of the Jewish prisoner’s desire to survive against all odds. These jokes are a desperate attempt to deny, if only shortly, the everyday terror of the camps. For Herzog, these jokes are an act of defiance. “My back is to the wall, (but) I’m still laughing.” These jokes are proof that I’m not dead yet: “I laugh, therefore I am!”³⁰ To laugh in the face of absurdity, does not negate the absurdity, but somehow it becomes, at least momentarily, just a bit more bearable.³¹

In the end, I think, ethnic jokes are “small anthropological essays,”³² little ethnic homilies that give us a perspective on our own cultural traditions and the practices of others. I think that the beauty and the larger purpose of ethnic humor is that it shows up our similarities more than our differences. It makes us aware of how much we are alike and how much we share. To me, a good

ethnic joke is really a “folk tale,” a piece of “folk wisdom” about something that crosses ethnic and racial lines. It can be argued, for example, that a Jewish joke, an Italian joke, or a Greek joke about a mother is really a story about all mothers everywhere, and probably applies to many, but not necessarily all, ethnic groups. To help demonstrate my point please feel free to fill in the following blanks with the ethnicity of your choice:

Q: What’s the difference between a (____ ____ ____ ____) mother and a pit bull dog?

A: Sooner or later the bull-dog let’s go!

Q: How many (____ ____ ____ ____) mothers does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Don’t bother! It’s all right! Don’t worry about me! I’ll just sit here in the dark!

Proof positive that Jesus was: (____ ____ ____ ____)

He lived at home until he was 30.

The night before he died he went out drinking with his buddies.

His mother thought he was God.

He though his mother was a virgin.

A son, calls his (____ ____ ____ ____) mother in Florida.

Son: Hi mom! How are you?

Mom: Not to good, I’ve been weak.

Son: Why have you been weak?

Mom: Never mind.

Son: Mom, what’s wrong?

Mom: It’s okay, don’t worry.

Son: Stop this, tell me! What’s wrong?

Mom: Alright I haven’t eaten in 38 days.

Son: That’s terrible! Why haven’t you eaten in 38 days?

Mom: Because I didn’t want my mouth to be filled with food if you should finally call!

Anthropologically speaking, jokes can help break down stereotypes and displace and disarm our fear and discomfort concerning our dealings with others. Comically speaking, I think that most ethnic jokes speak to the very core of what humor is about: making light of and laughing at life. Folk tales, stories, and jokes no matter how “off-color” and naughty, may not be the answer to all of life’s problems, but they can be a balm and offer genuine, if only temporary, comfort.

Putting aside the ethical implications of a joke, the simple fact is: Whatever the joke. Whatever the topic. Whatever the level of depravity. Whatever the level of lewd, lecherous, sexual raunchiness. Whatever the ethnic or racial vitriol of a joke, and no matter how decadent or declassée –someone, some audience might relate to it, might take some comfort in it, and might think it funny! Just ask southern humorist and stand-up comic Jeff Foxworthy:

“If you go to family reunions to pick up girls, guess what? You just might be a Redneck!”

“If your daddy walks you to school because you’re both in the same grade, guess what? You just might be a Redneck!”

Jokes such as these, jokes that celebrate being a “redneck,” “a person who suffers from glorious absence of sophistication,” propelled Mr. Foxworthy into the natural spotlight. And thanks to a series of TV shows, eleven *New York Times* bestselling books, and twenty Award winning and bestselling comedy albums his personal net worth is estimated to be in excess of \$100 million. Ain’t comedy grand!

Endnotes

¹ *Princeton Tiger* 1902, 59.

² Galef N.D., 24.

³ Galef N.D., 22.

⁴ Galef N.D., 22, 26.

⁵ Weeks 2002, 383-410.

⁶ Cohen 2001, 24.

⁷ Cohen 2001, 28.

⁸ Tallman and Schurtz, unpublished manuscript.

⁹ Cohen 2001, 83.

¹⁰ Cohen 2001, 85-87.

¹¹ Sternbergh 2013, 12.

¹² Legman 1996.

¹³ Krantz and Stenbor 2005.

¹⁴ Dougherety 2010, 10.

¹⁵ Dougherety 2010, 403.

¹⁶ Dougherety 2010, 10.

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- ¹⁷ Dougherety 2010, 251.
¹⁸ Denby 2005, 92.
¹⁹ Sinclair 2005, 12.
²⁰ Critchley 2004a, 69.
²¹ Critchley 2004b.
²² Hoffman 2010.
²³ Frankl 1963, xi.
²⁴ Frankl 2006, x.
²⁵ McGhee 1999, 20.
²⁶ McGhee 1999, 81.
²⁷ McGhee 1999.
²⁸ Herzog 2012, 6.
²⁹ Herzog 2012, 210.
³⁰ Herzog 2012, 5.
³¹ Cohen 2001, 63.
³² Critchley 2004a, 65.

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