

Prairie Group 2019

“Can’t you take a joke?”

A response to “What Makes us Hysterical is Historical” by Rev. Barbara Prose

Matthew Johnson

I was very glad to be asked to be the respondent and not the author for this topic. How do you write an essay about “where is the line?” Then when Barbara sent me her paper, I thought, “aha! that’s how you do it. Through narrative, context, story, and real life.”

Barbara’s comedy night gave me hives. And we’ve been there, right? Maybe not quite so dramatic, but I’ve had worship associates tell a joke and thought “I’m going to have to clean that up.” Auctioneers who don’t know us make a crack that falls flat (thankfully) or only half the room laughs (worse). What Barbara’s paper does so well is use the story to elucidate a set of guiding principles for evaluating whether we should tell that joke or not, and how we might think about the line between prophetic humor and obnoxiousness.

Her principles are an Aristotelian ethic of comedy. Instead of a deontological approach that would make some clear rule, or a consequentialist “all for the greater good” (whose?) rubric, Barbara invites us to wonder about relationship, connection, context, and trust. Are you building trust that changes hearts through vulnerability and shared depth (Hannah Gadsby, Chris Gethard)? Are you finding ways to relate despite perceptions of difference (Ellen)? Are you creating relationship and understanding through a deep comedic autobiography/anthropology (Trevor Noah)? Of course one could be hurt by each of their words and acts, but it would be hard to argue that these folks are not interested in the virtues of relationship, connection, and honesty. They are aware of context – in part because each of them has been “out of context” often in their lives, because of their identity and social location. They notice what others fail to notice and give back the truth.

I would add two rules, both implied by Barbara’s marvelous paper.

Rule 7: “Punch up, not down.”

A concern for context and relationship reinforces the prophetic fool’s task to poke fun at power, to name the Emperor’s nakedness, to expose hypocrisy and contradiction. “Crazy wisdom removes our masks and costumes, takes away our clocks, compasses, and house keys, and calls into question our most cherished beliefs in God, country, family, and future” (Nisker 24). When comics “punch down” and make fun of those with less social power (including at one’s self as an act of punching down on oppression’s behalf, as Hannah Gadsby so beautifully explains) they are not holy fools but tools of empire. Also, it’s not very funny.



Rule 8: Aim for repair, healing, and being worthy of forgiveness.

Margaret Cho makes the decision to re-invite the audience, to see if she can do it better – and to explicitly honor the pain so many hold, to find a way to offer some repair and agency to those whose agency was damaged by the trauma they experienced and by Cho's clumsy first performance. We all err; sometimes badly. Comedy pushes, it exposes, it blows things up. Can there be comfort for the afflicted, too?

On the other hand, Louis C.K. totally fails the test of repair and healing. His initial written apology was narcissistic and defensive. No attempt was made to offer restorative justice to the women he harmed. And no self-reflection seems to have happened. His comeback tour is full of "anti-PC" tropes – jokes at the expenses of transgender people, people with disabilities, and others. It is a deliberate punching down and a conscious decision by a comic who used to display what appeared to be a keen self-reflective perspective.

Which leads me to my own story.

On a Sunday in early October of this year, I attended our city's second annual domestic violence awareness walk. Our Mayor has identified domestic violence as the city's number one priority; he often shares the statistic that of the juveniles arrested in Rockford in 2016 and 2017, 75% were known to be a witness or survivor of domestic violence. He has organized a survivors group to guide and inform the work (facilitated by a church member, they meet in our facility). And the city is in the process of establishing a "family peace center," an international model where survivors can receive compassionate, all-inclusive services (instead of travelling, and re-telling their story, to 15 different locations). I'm on the clergy work team for this project. Hundreds of us, including lots of clergy and civic leaders and survivors (some of who are clergy and civic leaders) and others, walked in the cold that afternoon.

The next morning, under a large picture of the walk and a good story about the work we are doing, the newspaper ran a smaller article: "Controversial Comic Louis C.K. to perform at the Coronado." We are, apparently, part of his comeback tour. The Coronado Theater, a beautiful art-deco auditorium, is a city-owned venue, though it is managed by an appointed board called RAVE, who delegates booking and operations to a management company, SMG.

I had read our readings for this session of Prairie Group, and the first draft of Barbara's essay. I was thinking about how to apply her rules, and to know where the line is. And when I read the story about Louis C.K. that morning, I was incensed. And I knew then exactly where the line was: where the line needed to be drawn for our town, our city-owned hall, and where I, as a person with male privilege and power, needed to draw a line.

I made calls, I encouraged others to do so. I had an op-ed published in the paper. I got called a Nazi. People said I was a bad Christian because I wouldn't forgive Louis for his actions, despite my repeated assertions that it wasn't my place to forgive him (I let the theological and denominational confusion slip by). I attended the meeting of the RAVE Board at the BMO Bank

Building, and alongside a spokeswoman from the Rockford Woman's March, Melissa Reynolds, we made our case. I brought my sign.



I read the names of those women who had come forward to name themselves and him: Dana Min Goodman and Julia Wolov, Rebecca Corry, Abby Schachner.

The RAVE Board is 11 men (10 of them white) and 1 Black woman. The woman, Martesha Brown, and the Latino man, Rudy Valdez, spoke in favor of cancelling the show. The white men weren't sure it was in their authority. They declined to vote.

The show will happen this Saturday. I'll be at our church auction, raising money for our mission and for refugee assistance in Tijuana, but I know others in our community be will protesting outside the theater.

Survivors in the congregation I serve, in the community, and strangers on the street thanked me for saying something, though I wish I had done more to organize others. I wish we could cancel him and his show. But we keep trying.

I was struck by the comments from the public that I was a bad Christian for not forgiving him for what he had done. At the same time all this was going down, I had banned a former member from attendance until he did therapy, after he had written (and signed his name) on a volunteer form that what he could help with in the church was sex. (Similar comments had gotten him suspended last time). In his response he said "it was a just a joke" and that I should forgive him. But he did not apologize – to me, or to the membership coordinator whose form he had used a tool of sexual harassment.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, writing about Louis C.K. in particular, and similar cases, reminds us that "The Jewish tradition teaches that repentance is really hard work, in contrast to the glib and easy way these accused perpetrators are seeking cheap forgiveness from popular culture. America is often perilously quick to welcome comebacks, in part because we don't really know what it means to atone."¹ She explains that what we are talking about here isn't forgiveness, but repentance – not the work of the harmed, but the work of the one who did the harm. That requires public statements of responsibility, internal and external work to grow, restitution and reparation, and apology – not to their fans, or to the media, but to those they harmed. None of that has happened in his case – though it did explicitly happen in the case of Margaret Cho.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/famous-abusers-seek-easy-forgiveness-rosh-hashanah-teaches-us-repentance-is-hard/2018/09/06/c2dc2cac-b0ab-11e8-9a6a-565d92a3585d_story.html

Where is the line?

Barbara has given us a roadmap to figure that out. But the deeper question, which she has also answered, is “what is the through-line?” What connects comedy, ministry, truth, and healing? The through-line is relationship. Vulnerability, trust, conscience, context – these are about honoring and building relationship. And honest, vulnerable, genuine human connection?

That truly is hilarious.