

What Makes us Hysterical, is Historical:  
Line or Blur?

*“If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”* from George Orwell’s original preface to *Animal Farm*, which was rejected by Faber and Faber for being too critical of Stalin

*“Pushing for a culture of respect is not the same thing as cancelling culture. Bigots are so hormonal right now.”* Hannah Gadsby’s response to Shane Gillis

I would really like to say there is no line in comedy. But this happened on a Wednesday evening at All Souls, in 2018.

Imagine if you will, September in Tulsa, when there’s a smidge less water and a dollop more oxygen in the air because daytime temperatures have recently dipped below 90 degrees and 90% humidity, for at least 9 hours.

All Souls’ Executive Director of Lifespan Religious Education is launching our Adult Programming/Faith Formation for the church year with a Wednesday evening kick-off event, called *“Stand Up” for Social Justice!*”

The idea came to her when she went to hear our beloved and longtime, ex-Youth Director and a few other church members perform in a local comedy club. She heard their stand-up routines, mostly focused on current events, and thought, *“This would be great at All Souls!”*

Emerson Hall, our fellowship hall, is full of people who have given thanks for their meal and their community, who have broken bread together, and are now ready to enjoy the show.

After an opening song, the first act is our member Eileen and her 9-year old daughter Liz, (names have been changed to protect all of us) retelling a true story about what happened the year before at a children’s choir rehearsal. Our part-time, former Catholic, youngish, choir director is in the audience, with her currently Catholic parents who she has invited to All Souls for the first time. As far as I know, no one has spoken with our choir director about the skit being in the show.

Principals and teachers from our partner schools are also present as it is an evening in support of our work for justice in the community and we have a thriving Partners in Education program at three local, underserved schools.

The skit is meant to be a spoof or satire of the Unitarian stereotype that our children have no manners and are so eager to question authority that they show no respect for authority. It is also meant to reveal that even in liberal religious communities there are not only opportunities to learn and grow, but also consequences for our choices and actions.

Here's what actually happened the year before. Liz, age 10, was disrespectful during a children's choir rehearsal. She said "Fuck" out loud to her choir director, in front of the other singers and choir parents. She also proceeded to dance - with her middle fingers up in the air to the song they had been rehearsing - *Three Little Birds*. Conversations about covenant and respect ensued, consequences were negotiated - suspension from the choir program for three weeks and an apology to the community - and right relationships were restored.

As the audience was settling in, they turned their attention to the stage and watched as Eileen and Liz acted their way through the rehearsal ... all the way through the insult. Then we all watched, stunned, as Liz began to dance, wiggling her hips, with both her middle fingers extending up from her soft, child's hands ... mimicking herself singing *Three Little Birds* ... as her mother continued with the narration of the story. The potty-mouthed climax accentuated by Liz's gyrating hips, lasted for a long time.

I don't know how our members felt or were responding. At that point, I was too focused on our guests who were squirming in their seats. I started wandering from table to table, doing damage control. Finally ... not soon enough ...the skit ended. Confused, intermittent applause followed, as eyes blinked and people lowered their gaze to avoid making contact across the tables with their lovely fall decorations.

Unfortunately, there was little if any laughter, and rather than debunk any stereotypes or demonstrate that Unitarians have morals and there are consequences for bad behavior in our covenanted non-creedal communities, the poorly planned and executed comedic skit, reinforced (or worse yet, introduced) the widely held view that liberal, (white) people, including our youth, have no respect for adults, authority figures, or God and therefore cannot be trusted to follow the generally agreed upon rules of society, or to embrace an ethical lifestyle. (I include race in this description because the principals and teachers who were our guests were mostly African American)

**Rule #1, Know your audience.**

**Rule #2, Be funny. Being funny is more art than science. If you're not funny, you're in more trouble of being misunderstood and/or of pointlessly offending people.**

In the next sketch, Jane, former Youth Director of All Souls, dove right into the ditch already dug by the previous performers.

**Jane:** *"How's everybody doing? No, really, how are you?"*

**BP:** *That's how it started.*

**Jane:** *I know "How are you?" is usually a rhetorical question, but I truly want to know. When most people ask how you are, they don't expect to hear that you've:*

- 1) Been on antidepressants since Tuesday, November 8, 2016, and spend A LOT time in bed... and NOT doing any of the fun stuff ...*
- 2) Or that your bank account is drained from the money spent on cognitive-behavioral, pharmacological and retail therapies, not to mention the yoga, meditation and self-medication...*
- 3) Or, that you're triggered by every pudgy white guy you see ... because of that time you were almost raped at gunpoint.*

*The produce guy at Reasor's is going for, "Fine, and you?"*

*But when I ask, "How are you?" I really wanna' know,*

*And I think you should too.*

*So, here's how I am – mad, sad, scared and super-aware of my dominant culture bias – a hair trigger on a machine gun, in part, because of #Me Too.*

*Yeah, I was one of "those" college girls. Ya' know, asking for it.*

*I'd had too much to drink one night out with friends and went by myself to sit in the car and get some fresh air when a short, un-athletic white guy wearing a red satin jogging suit and a wedding ring on the hand that covered his face stopped at my car window and told me to, "Open the effing door or he'd blow my head off."*

*Guys, I know some men are confused by this #me too thing – about what is and isn't appropriate – but that is very bad flirting.*

*Rape fantasies that are not mutual do not turn a woman on, which – should be your goal.*

**BP:** At this point, I begin scanning the room again, and head over to the tables where our guests are sitting.

**Jane:** *The headlines and statistics indicate that lots of men don't know that little fun fact about consensual sex, mutual pleasure ...*

*Not any of you, of course, or my husband, or anyone in my family.*

*OK, maybe that one uncle. The first time Festus met my best friend, he pulled out his Taco Bueno receipt, and said,*

*“Look, I ate tacos for lunch and my number was 69. I think it's a sign, baby. Get it?”*

*Epic fail pick-up line; she was NOT turned on.*

**BP:** I'm back on damage control, wandering between tables, beginning to apologize as I sense people are thinking about leaving. I don't see our DRE anywhere. I spot Marlin in the back corner of the room, deep in conversation with someone. About what, I know not.

**Jane:** *So, anyway, I had an out-of-body experience and began to direct myself like an actor in play:*

*‘You're a good girl, you're dressed appropriately, trying to do the right thing by coming outside to sober up....Appeal to his **higher angels** ...*

*“You don't want to do this? I said ... and I don't have my purse with me ... ”*

*“Just open the door, lady – I don't want your money, I want to eff you!”*

*“Oh, you want to eff me. Why didn't you say so? You don't want to **blow my effing head off**. You want to **blow my head off effing!**”*

*Luckily, about that time, my friends came outside to check on me, and he ran off.*

*But not before he gave me an STD – PTSD that is.*

*And here's the problem – Sexually Transmitted Trauma isn't just perpetrated by gun toting predators parading in red satin jogging suits, y'a know, like they do.*

*Just the other day, a regular looking guy in a big pick-up truck was blocking the driveway to Chico's,*

*So I tooted my horn and gestured to him, could he:*

- 1) Scoot up,
- 2) a little bit ...
- 3) so I could pull in...

*He pulled into the parking lot, and rolled down his window, "Yeah, darlin'," he said in a sweet Southern drawl, "Whatcha' have in mind."*

*"Um. I needed you to scoot up a little bit so I could pull in..."*

*When he realized the mis-interpretation of my hand signals, his tires squealed as he sped out of the parking lot, obviously humiliated and angry.*

*What exactly did he think I was suggesting?*

- 1) That he pull in to the Chico parking lot.
- 2) And do what
- 3) With his little what?

**BP:** I leave the tables full of principals and teachers and tell Marlin there's trouble. Benefit of the doubt, I think he had figured it out by then too.

By the time I get back to the tables, people are standing and leaving. Marlin is madly texting our DRE trying to figure out what's next on the evening's line-up while striding toward the backstage area to stop another inappropriate, or not-funny, or culturally insensitive act from coming on.

Meanwhile, the act continued.

**Jane:** *And my ex-husband was a good enough guy, but even he needed some coaching. During my **starter** marriage, I'd be cooking dinner, and he'd come up behind me and squeeze my boobs or grab my crotch.*

*"Honey," I'd say in my least bitchy, condescending and emasculating voice, "When you say hello, could you please be gentle. Kiss me, touch my face, stroke my hair first. Don't immediately grab my naughty bits."*

*He nodded, seemingly appreciative of the lesson I was so freely offering.*

*"I hear you. I cherish you. I honor your sacred femininity," I'd think I heard him say, "But please go right for my naughty bits," he was thinking. "It pisses me off when you touch my face or mess up my hair."*

**BP:** By now, I'm standing outside Emerson Hall (*"We're not corpse-cold this evening Ralph Emerson,"* I think ... ) apologizing over and over again as our members start leaving. Our guests are all long gone. I'm left humbly mumbling, *"I'm so sorrys,"* and *"Yes, we'll be following up,"* along with, *"No, this doesn't represent our values,"* to all who will meet my eye, reach out a hand, or still receive a hug.

Inside Emerson hall, the routine rolled on to a rapt audience, half the size of the original one,

*Ladies – can I get a Me Too!?!*

*Guys, I promise, we don't mean to lump you all into the bad guy category, but you have to admit there are a **LOT** of men out there giving you a bad image – especially, unfortunately, the white, heterosexual, property-owning, red-blooded American.*

*So, if you happen to be one of the lucky ones who fall into that top-of-the-food-chain category, you're the ones we need to hear from most of all.*

*As allies. As heroes.*

*Know that we want to say yes. We want somebody to love. And if women could have stopped sexism on our own, we would have done it already – a long time ago.*

*Fellas, we need you to learn and share what you know about by-stander intervention.*

*Walk your woke-ass journey of self-discovery, evolution and enlightenment with those who are still asleep.*

*Ask your men friends not to get defensive or say this is just how they were raised.*

*We were **ALL** raised with sexism and it's time to do things differently.*

*As **you** know, it's not about stopping the first thought, but getting educated and having access to a second thought – and then having a different, educated, compassionate reaction.*

*And no, for god's sake, they don't have to stop complimenting us, just ask themselves first – "Is this comment truly for her, or am I doing it to try to get something from her?"*

*Let them know we promise that if they show vulnerability instead of power over, we won't see it as weakness. Vulnerability is true strength to us. **That's** what turns us on.*

*All we're asking is to be treated the way we want to be treated.*

*Go beyond the Golden Rule, and stay Platinum Pony Boy.*

**BP:** And that was that.

Half of Emerson Hall was empty. Half of Emerson Hall gave Jane a standing O., perfectly embodying the cultural diversity represented in our congregation and the communities to which we are connected. Was it an embarrassing flop or a roaring success? Yes, it was!

Marlin and I stayed late that evening drafting a letter of apology that didn't throw our staff under the bus. We also divvied up the calls to our members and friends who had walked out. The next day, we sent our guests the letter. We sent several members a version of that letter.

***Rule #3, If you value your relationships, and you're not making lots of money doing standup – money which will allow you to pay off your student loans and the loans of your friends and family, think twice about trying to be funny on a public stage. Comedy's impact is powerful, and unpredictable.***

For this paper, I really wanted to say, there is no line. I wanted to say I'm a radical devotee of free speech. And that if we, as liberal religious leaders can't joke about ourselves, if we don't have a sense of humor, about any and every subject, then we are already lost with no hope of being found again, ever. Grace, not works. Mercy, not judgment. Humor in service of awakening, not literalism of the left. Your right to free speech and to joke freely stops when you slander me, and I can sue for libel. Please watch Monty Python's Jokes That Kill, and then let's sit down to discuss where the line is. Yes, there is room for the waking up among the woke.

Then I remembered what happened just a year ago at All Souls. There's no doubt a line was crossed that evening and I wish we hadn't crossed it. The relationships mattered more than the laughs. The relationships mattered more than any one person's or group of people's potential awakening to the #metoo movement or to the respectable core of religious liberalism. Hysterically, a decision was made that we would never perform comedy at All Souls again. (unless Rev. Justin Schroder returned for a reprise of Blues Brothers with Marlin)

***Rule #4, What is funny and what is not funny is cultural and contextual. Cultural norms are always in flux, therefore, what is and what is not funny, changes constantly. The line is *always* moving so it creates a bit of a blur.***

Today, lines are blurrier than ever. Who can say where the line between politics and entertainment is? Where the line between entertainment and journalism is? Where the line between public and private is? Is anything private anymore? Does it matter if nothing is?

Another story from All Soul's past is illuminating. Two to three days after September 11th, 2001, one of our called ministers was asked to speak on a panel at the University of Tulsa. She purposefully wore a green pin, instead of a red, white and blue pin, and spoke about how patriotism leads to nationalism, which leads to war. As soon as the newspaper article came out with quotes from the minister at All Souls saying that our country's role in the world did more harm than good, by fomenting violence more often than fostering peace, the phone at church started ringing off the hook. The chair of the recently called minister's search committee wanted to revoke her call before her installation scheduled for November.

The following Sunday, in the second month of her ministry, she said she would refuse to stand during the patriotic songs chosen for the service. When Marlin said that would mean she could not be up on the chancel, she agreed to stand, as long as she could refrain from singing. The Sunday after that, Marlin preached about the free pulpit and how important it is to protect the freedom of a minister to speak their truth. For the two years her ministry lasted, there was a consistent clamor to recall her call. "*She couldn't lead a community as complex as this one,*" Marlin said. "*Not in Oklahoma culture,*" I added. That was then, this is now.

### **Rule #5 Trust matters.**

All Souls has grown ever more complex, culturally, over the last twelve years. As ministers, we try to see the lines clearly; those we can safely cross, those we will not cross because of our values, and those we choose not to cross because of the consequences. Now that our lives are shared *online*, and the spaces in between the lines are shrinking, it's more likely we'll stand on, trip or fall over lines, knowingly and unknowingly. Sometimes, crossing the line, means the end of a minister's career. Sometimes, it's good to be pushed over an old line.

There was one chapter in Trevor Noah's book, that helped me cross a line. Even the title of the chapter, *Go Hitler!*, pushes some of my buttons. But I've always loved Mel Brooks. Still, the scene was hard to swallow.

*"We built the whole set around Hitler. I'd warm up the crowd with a few songs, then the dancers would come out and do a couple of numbers. I'd crank up Redman's "Let's Get*

*Dirty” and start whipping the crowd up even more. People would start screaming and Hitler would jump into the middle of the semicircle and the crowd would lose it. Hitler would do his thing while the guys circled around him shouting, ‘Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler!’ And because this was hip-hop, the crew would do that thing where you shoot your arm out in front of you with your palm flat, bopping it up and down to the beat. ‘Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler!’ We’d have the whole crowd in a frenzy, a thousand people in the street chanting along with their hands in the air. ‘Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler! Go Hit-ler!’*

I can imagine the GA worship committee strongly recommending this story be cut from one of our sermons. I can also imagine them not recommending that it be cut, and our Jewish UU colleagues filing a formal complaint for systemic anti-Jewish, pro-Palestinian bias.

*“The name Hitler does not offend a black South African because Hitler is not the worst thing a black South African can imagine. Every country thinks their history is the most important, and that’s especially true in the West. But if black South Africa would go back in time and kill one person, Cecil Rhodes would come up before Hitler. If people in the Congo could go back in time and kill one person, Belgium’s King Leopold would come way before Hitler. If Native Americans could go back in time and kill one person, it would probably be Christopher Columbus or Andrew Jackson.”*

*“Yes, it was horrific. But I often wonder, with African atrocities like in the Congo, how horrific were they? The thing Africans don’t have that Jewish people do have is documentation. And that’s really what it comes down to. Holocaust victims count because Hitler counted them. Six million people killed. We can all look at that number and be rightly horrified. But when you read through the history of atrocities against Africans, there are no numbers, only guesses. It’s harder to be horrified, I guess. When Portugal and Belgium were plundering Angola and the Congo, they weren’t counting the black people they slaughtered. So, in Africa, Hitler’s just another strongman from the history books.”<sup>1</sup>*

Hitler is just another strongman. Wow! This insight freed up space in my memory banks and in my soul. Space previously occupied by generations of stories sewn together with threads of chosenness, bound tightly to a spine of specialness. Being chosen is intended to create a sense of belonging or inclusion and inevitably also creates experiences of exclusion and not belonging. “Thank you Mr. Noah,” I thought, as I finished the chapter,

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<sup>1</sup> 2016. Noah, Trevor. *Born A Crime*. London, Great Britain: John Murray Publishers.

for crossing a line many of my ancestors could not cross, thereby freeing me. As we go about the holy work of building beloved community, the challenge then is to learn and teach each other's histories, including the truths behind the stereotypes, the trauma behind the jokes, while not getting stuck in the fatal trap of essentializing identity.

There is a line in comedy, but it shifts from culture to context to time in history. Humor and comedy are only one dimension of the unfathomable complexity of culture. As in all other discussions of culture, one way is not the only way. We can try to change culture by changing the rules, but usually new rules follow cultural change that is already well underway. Thus, I am in favor of allowing comedians to ply their craft, thereby allowing wisdom to emerge in the marketplace of jokes and ideas, allowing bad jokes to go the way of all bad jokes from time immemorial ... into the undeletable cloud where all bad jokes go to die?

This does not preclude being all in favor of creating and holding one another accountable to covenantal rules in congregations and associations, or creating and enforcing laws in civil society to protect the vulnerable and those who cannot protect themselves. But when it comes to comedy, I prefer to listen and learn what tickles each other's funny bones, and what offends or hurts. And then work together to create communities where we find a balance and can laugh at ourselves and each other, with ourselves and each other, AND feel affirmed, respected, trusted, seen, honored and loved.

**Rule #6, "If it's hysterical, then we know it's historical."**

I will end with two stories.

The first is a story the Dalai Lama tells of the time he and many other Tibetans were fleeing Tibet after the Chinese took power. They were walking through deep snow, their long robes frozen by the low temperatures. The ice on cloth made a clinking noise. If the Chinese soldiers were to find them, they would have been shot immediately. The Dalai Lama, trudging through the snow, said, "*I hope the Chinese soldiers don't hear our robes clinking and think that we are sending some kind of message - clink....clink/clink....clink ... clink/clink/clink.*" And he giggled aloud at the thought. "*How funny that would be!*" he continued. His companions disagreed, not finding it funny at all. And they walked on, the Dalai Lama giggling to himself.

My mother, Florence, also loves to tell war stories. With all our attention to trauma and healing these days, I've come to understand that she is still trying to heal her trauma in the retelling.

It was near the end of the war and the Germans were more and more desperate and aggressive. Her father was in hiding. Her mother and *Tante Clo* (her father's sister) were in jail. In 1944 my mother was about 12 and her sister was 17. The concierge at their *Tante Clo's* apartment told Annette, the older sister, that at night, he heard boots above him in the hall, and he thought it must be the Germans stealing from *Tante Clo's* apartment.

Indignant and determined, Annette and my mother, decided to do something. Arming themselves with a lemon squeezer from the kitchen drawer - "*I can't say why,*" my mother adds - they risked their lives, going out after curfew, to cross town, wearing slippers so as not to be heard, walking along walls so as not to be seen. When they arrived safely, they stood behind the door of the building, waiting for the German soldier to come ... ready to hit him over the head ... with the lemon squeezer. Thankfully, no German ever appeared. They got tired and sneaked their way back home. Only in this most recent retelling did I learn that their lemon squeezer had a foot-long wooden handle!

She laughs every time she tells us the story, even 75 years later. Just as she cries every time, she tells us about the day Paris was liberated and how big and beautiful and clean the U.S. soldiers were – and how they all chewed gum (which they had never seen). And how her 17-year old cousin *Biqui*, was shot in a pointless firefight in the street that day.

As one who was born tending to the tender, the sensitive and the solemn, I hope I will still giggle, and perhaps make someone else laugh, in the midst of tragedy. I have learned to laugh at lemon squeezers and South Africans named Hitler dancing and saluting their hearts out in their streets, precisely because humor, which is visceral and embodied, is a way to heal the trauma that is historical.

If giggling in the face of evil is good for the Dalai Lama and my mom, it's good enough for me.

And remember, stand up and comedy are transient.

While humor, like love, is eternal.