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Responding to A Not So Idiotic Essay  
by Martin Woulfe

Part I

One cannot doubt that humor is a familiar theme – I fancy that I know this topic, first-hand, from class clown in grade school to the vestibule of the church. I laughed at the jokes and antics of droves of comedians from my youth – Carol Burnett, Mel Brooks, Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy, Monty Python, SNL comics, etc., even Jerry Seinfeld.

But of course, the times they have a-changed, and comedy along with it. These comedians being considered here – many of whom were new to me - reflect a significant generational challenge. I recognized Ellen, Stephen Colbert and Travon Noah. But I simply have not kept up. Perhaps an important shift started in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when a writer for the New Yorker asked, seriously, “Can anything be funny ever again?” Obviously, we did begin to laugh again. But these comedians often share at a much more personal level. I was reminded of Mark Twain’s observation,

*“Everything human is pathetic.*

*The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow.*

*There is no humor in heaven.”*

Part II

I read Brian’s paper and, to borrow a phrase, there was much that was “relatable.” I was impressed with his narrative, humor, and honesty. Like Brian, I

gravitated into the hospice. Patients were often candid yet kind. Awkward, I learned to pause, then step inside, and introduce myself.

I'll relate one encounter: I met a young man, seemingly enmeshed in tubes, cords and gauze. His eyes were alert. I guessed that he was a decade younger than myself. After I shared my name and identified myself as a chaplain, he answered that his name was Reuben. "Rueben," I asked? "Like the sandwich?" He grinned. So much for the ice-breaker. We discovered a powerful connection. When we talked, he stopped coughing. This introduced me to the power of the I-Thou experience, which I think that some of these comedians accomplished on-stage.

Personally, I have begun to retire the metaphor of the wounded healer from my vocabulary, feeling that my gift is to be comforter rather than a healer. I don't think that we ever do fully heal from deep trauma. I'm reminded of a story that Ruppert Lovely shared about a student who asked his teacher why scripture stated that God put love on the heart. The response was, so that when the heart breaks, love can fall in.

### Part III

Truth and anger are evident in Hannah Gatsby "Nanette" as she moves from comedy to confession and ultimately into outrage. In her case, her humor does come close to Holy Rage and I do not doubt pain was the secret source of humor.

I have witnessed times when a fellow UU accomplished the same as Gatsby. One individual included the story of sexual abuse committed by her father – the audience sat in stone cold silence, not unlike the silence when Gatsby shared details about the assault and humiliation she suffered. Both took a terrible risk, baring their soul onstage – I think that the preacher risked more because the same people return,

week after week, year after year. They now know your pain. Most of us keep it locked up. Perhaps we all carry the seeds of trauma within but my preaching class teacher us, “Don’t bleed on them.” Which is exactly what Gatsby did – but she did for good effect. Now that we know her pain, what next? Are we to pretend that we didn’t hear? Perhaps she has given others the courage to tell their stories. We should be pleased if we could accomplish as much on a Sunday.

#### Part IV

I noticed how the comedian and her stage is not unlike the preacher in the pulpit. Sanctuaries are supposed to be havens of safety, hence the name, but the stage is something else. But there is certainly as risk in either venue. One can speak one’s truth in either, but it’s probably rare for a preacher to bomb so badly that the listeners storm the front and confront that speaker.

I considered the inevitable comparison of the comedians and the clergy. In some respects, a stand-up routine is akin to preaching a sermon. We speak our truths. We expect a particular reaction. How telling though that the world of the comic, the lights are dimmed, so that the comedian can focus on her material. In our arena, the lights are turned up, so we can see the people. Both comics and preachers use illustrations often drawn from person experience. We hone our skills and the timing – I suspect that each comic has rehearsed their routine as finely as a candidate rehearses their MFC sermon. Perhaps as much can be at stake for both. We use humor, perhaps on occasion even weaponize to make a point. Perhaps George Bernard Shaw was close to the truth when he stated, “If you want to tell the truth, make them laugh, otherwise

they will kill you.” A key difference is that in our tradition, the sermon is but one aspect of the relationship.

Just last week, I exchanged pulpits with an African American Southern Baptist colleague – a racial and theological pulpit swap, if you will. At 11 am, we both stepped onto each other’s pulpit to shared our message. Differences abounded – even though we both addressed the same theme. I spoke for a full hour, without a manuscript, as was customary there. Worshippers called out the name of Jesus, and the word Amen was practically an exclamation point to whatever I said. Was there tension? Perhaps the first time we arranged an exchange, several years ago. My friend experienced more tension, speaking to a roomful of silent people who scribbled notes on their Sunday bulletin. We have learned, that the more we sprinkle humor into our sermons, the more enthusiastic our congregations respond. If we do this twice more, it will become a tradition.

## Part V

Over the years, I have watched occasional snippets of Colbert, and Ellen, and Trevor. I appreciate Ellen’s brand of comedy, which is often grounded in her struggle with conventions and the larger culture. Pretty familiar stuff, really, but guaranteed to get a laugh. Trevor Noah’s comedy a wide range, some of it a familiar strand resulting from being a stranger in a strange land. Having lived in Ireland, having a daughter who is a dual citizen of Spain and the US, and a wife who is a Spanish National, there have been countless hilarious episodes stemming from one of us using the wrong word, gesture, or by getting confused by cultural difference, trying to explain the United States

to foreigners, etc. At times, each one of us has felt like Mark Twain's *Innocent Abroad*. Naturally, not every experience has been filled with mirth. My Spanish relatives used to love and admire the US. One even wrote the preface for a guidebook about Disney World. Now, they are terrified of visiting here. The context here is so toxic, is it any wonder that comedy must evolve as it has?

VI

Many moons ago, I was pleased to learn from our then minister-in-residence that ministry is a unique privilege. I've never forgotten that insight. That, due to our role, other people, even strangers, can and do invite us into some their most significant moments of their lives. We have an access to people that comedians can only dream about. That privilege, to be welcomed into a deep relationship with others, especially wounded people, exists as long as we do not take advantage of others for our own ends. This is true despite whatever self-consciousness may exist on our part or despite the gravity of the situation at hand. Yes, I thought, as I read Brian's paper, we are essentially interns all over again, no matter how much experience and competence in this endeavor we acquire. Each situation is new because the people are new as if the context, and we just cannot know everything to prepare us. But we can learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others. We can rise to the occasion and bless rather than curse. We can offer comfort in a world that too often is bruised and hurting. And perhaps that is where hope ultimately resides.