

The Coyote and the Marshmallow Buddha

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It was my first day of seminary and I was wondering what in the world I had done with my life. I had traded in my suit and briefcase from the corporate world for the blue jeans and backpacks of the Berkeley world. I had uprooted my family, jeopardized our financial well-being, and was living at my mother-in-law's while we looked for a place to live. I was surrounded by really smart people, most of whom were younger and better versed in Unitarian Universalism than I was. Why I had done all this? Because I had been called to a new life, a life of ministry. On that first day of school I wondered if the call had been to a wrong number.

In a fog of doubt and uncertainty I walked into my first class, "Minister, Ministry and Identity". The class appealed to me because I figured it would help me figure out what kind of minister I might become. My anxiety level increased when I saw that almost everyone in the class was in his or her third year of school.

The professor asked us to close our eyes and settle in for a guided meditation to begin the class. As I settled in my chair and relaxed into my breathing, he invited us to imagine ourselves as ministers and picture what we would be doing as a minister. At first no image would come to me but soon a very clear picture became fixed in my mind. It was not a picture I liked at all. The picture I had of myself as a minister was that... of the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man.

For those of you who may not know who the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man is, he was a 35-foot tall marshmallow monster that terrorized New York city in the movie Ghostbusters. If you cannot picture what the Stay Puff Marshmallow man looks like, imagine the Pillsbury Dough Boy on steroids. It is not a pretty picture, ESPECIALLY if it is the picture of a minister.

I started sweating and tried hard to change the picture in my mind. The harder I tried to change the image, the more pronounced each rippled marshmallow muscle became. With all my psychic will and energy, I watched the Stay Puff man slooowly transform into the rough image of a 35-foot marshmallow Buddha. Before I could transform the picture into something more respectable, the professor brought us out of our meditation and asked us to share what we envisioned with the rest of the class.

I frantically wondered what I could say about my image that would not have me kicked out of school for being a fraud. I sat on my hands when he asked for volunteers. My sense of embarrassment and stress grew as I heard my classmates eloquently describe visions of people like Jesus, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr. People saw themselves serving food to the hungry, fighting social injustices and offering love and healing to those in need. The thought flashed in my mind that I should excuse myself and admit that I had made a big mistake about this ministry thing.

When it was my turn to share I decided to tell the truth and live with the consequences. I recounted my meditative tale and said that I thought a marshmallow Buddha actually was a great image for my ministry because I was someone who believed humor was as important to the spiritual journey as any other spiritual practice. And, I added, one of the main questions I brought with me to seminary was how, if at all, humor and laughter could be incorporated into religion and the serious profession of ministry.

At times, I still wrestle with the question today. What role **does** humor and laughter play in our spiritual quests and why is it one of the most important tools we have as we skip and stumble through our life journeys – especially when the world seems gray?

For many people humor and religion do not mix. I know that one of the reasons for my embarrassment during the guided meditation was that I have been programmed, to some extent, to believe that religion and ministry are too serious and important to have fun with. Sacred scriptures and the icons of religious traditions are to be solemnly revered, not laughed at, or with. The notion that laughter and folly are the devil's handiwork can be traced to many religious perspectives over the course of history.

In the year 390 the theologian Chrysostom preached a sermon against laughter and playfulness that articulated the argument against humor in church and religion:

“This world,” he said, “is not a theatre, in which we can laugh... and we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins... It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil.”

Many of these sentiments were shared by our Puritan ancestors and may even be heard in some congregations this morning. Concerns about laughter and the sacred are not confined to Christians of course. A sect of early Indian Buddhist scholars once separated laughter into six different classes. These classes ranged from what they called “sita,” which is a faint, almost imperceptible smile to “atihasta,” which is a boisterous, uproarious laughter where one's whole body shakes.

The scholars drew these distinctions as a way to distinguish the regal monks and aristocrats, from the vulgar and uncouth lower classes. They would be horrified if they saw the sculpture of a laughing Buddha I keep on my altar or the picture of the laughing Jesus that hangs on one of the walls at Starr King School for the Ministry, where I attended seminary. To these scholars, Buddha, or Jesus for that matter, would never have broken into uproarious laughter.

While I do my best to appreciate the perspectives of those who wish to separate laughter from the religious experience, I must admit I cannot, or will not, imagine a God, a religion or a universe that takes itself too seriously. Perhaps that is why I find these words of the American humorist James Thurber so comforting:

“If a thing can't endure laughter, it is not a good thing. Laughter is never out of date or out of place. Too often the intense person loses the ability to laugh and accuses those who see humor in pompous circumstances of being sacrilegious. Far from it! Parody, satire, and wit represent strong emotions, for we

usually parody and satirize only those things which mean something to us and when we use these forms with love and affection we are paying homage.”

I speculate that it was in this spirit of homage that the Greek philosopher Aristotle said “the gods too are fond of a joke.” How could they not be given the folly we humans engage in every day of our lives? Fortunately, we can find many examples in religious life that the gods, or at least the people who have written the stories we frequently attribute to the gods, “**got it**” that humor is part of the human condition, and is something to celebrate and not scorn.

The Zen Buddhist master Joshu Sasaki-Roshi was one such person. When he was asked why he had to come to America his answer was “I have come to teach people to laugh.” Zen Buddhism is one tradition in which laughter is viewed as a part of life and is considered a crucial element of spiritual practice. A student may be asked to reflect on a confusing, and at times humorous, koan, such as “what sound does one hand clapping in the forest make?” Or a student may be asked to do what Sasaki-Roshi asked his students to do - stand up first thing in the morning and laugh out loud from the belly for five minutes. He believed this practice was equal to many hours sitting meditation.

When I was younger I never found the Bible to be very funny. I remember one time I read a comic book version of a story from the Bible but it was as boring as the real book itself. That is why I was so excited to take a class in seminary titled “Bringing Biblical Humor to Life”. To my surprise and excitement I discovered that if read with a new set of eyes and with a deeper appreciation of the context and time, Biblical stories can be humorous and entertaining and therefore, at least for me, more real and powerful.

One such story comes early in the Hebrew Scriptures. You may be familiar with the story of Sarah and Abraham. Sarah was not able to have children for years and years. In resignation she offers her maid to Abraham so that he might have an heir. Many years go by and Sarah is in her eighties or nineties when God tells her and Abraham that they are going to have a baby.

Can you imagine what you would do if you were a woman in your 70’s, 80’s or 90’s and started feeling sick to your stomach every morning? Your husband or partner goes down to the drugstore and buys a pregnancy test for you as a joke. You play along with the joke and make a deposit into the test tube. The next morning you wake up and find that the specimen has turned the magic color and you are pregnant! Sarah and Abraham did what I think many of us would do when they found out she was pregnant; they laughed hysterically. The story tells us that God didn’t particularly like this but God must have gotten the joke because God tells Abraham to name his son, Issac, which means laughter. Sarah proclaims in her joy, “God has brought laughter for me, everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

I realize there are many ways to interpret this story but the message I am left with is that 1) anything is possible and 2) God, or for that matter life, has a great sense of humor. This is a theology that I wholeheartedly agree with.

A sense of humor is one of the most important traits we must have if we are to survive the pain and conflict that life brings us. Perhaps the Christian mystic St. Teresa said it best: “There is no spirituality without the laughter which the sense of humor brings.” When I first read that sentence I wanted to scream out YES, even though it speaks of two things which are difficult to define: spirituality and sense of humor. We sometimes struggle with the word spirituality as Unitarian Universalists. Although I don’t think we are unique in this struggle, I do think it is a word that confuses some. My most basic definition of spirituality comes from the original Latin word, *spiritus*, which means breath. In essence spirituality is the breath of life. When spirituality is defined this way, St. Teresa’s words sound even truer: there is no **life** without the laughter a sense of humor brings.

A sense of humor may be even harder to define than spirituality. What do we mean when we say someone has a “good” sense of humor, a “sick” sense of humor or no sense of humor at all? Is a sense of humor something we are all born with or is it something we learn over time? What makes us laugh and why we laugh have been the subjects of much research over the years. The research seems inconclusive at this point, but there is one thing we can safely say about a sense of humor and its connection to our spiritual development.

Laughter heals the body and the spirit. The medical and religious experts agree on this point. The Bible tells us “a merry heart doeth good like medicine but a broken spirit drieth the bones.” The late Norman Cousins in his book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, tells the story of how he fought a life threatening illness in the 1960’s with a combination of medicine, positive attitude and laughter. He watched episodes of *Candid Camera* and old Marx Brothers’ movies as part of his daily treatments. He wrote: “I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain free sleep.”

The ability to laugh at ourselves may be the greatest healer of all. Some people seem to have an everlasting twinkle in their eye and a smile on their face. They are quick to laugh when the joke is on them and slow to laugh when the joke is on someone else. This perspective of life, the ability to take it and ourselves lightly, does not come easily. Perhaps that is why literature is chock full of so many characters who act as the jester, fool or trickster to help us see ourselves and our lives from a different, and less serious, perspective. The Coyote is one such character.

The Coyote takes on several roles in Native American mythology: creator of the world, messenger and wise fool. The coyote’s role of trickster is where we find ourselves most frequently. Every since a workshop I attended many years ago, when I learned my spirit animal was the coyote, I have been especially fond of coyotes. Webster Kitchell, whose words we read this morning, has written a delightful book titled *God’s Dog: Conversations With Coyote*. Kitchell describes the wisdom and folly Coyote teaches him, and can teach us:

“When Coyote is around there’s going to be trouble. More often than not the tricks of the Trickster backfire on the Trickster...So it has been in my life. I’ve never outsmarted anyone more than I have outsmarted myself. Every best intention has turned into an exploding cigar.”

We laugh at the coyote in the cartoons with the roadrunner and in other stories for many reasons but I hope one reason is because Coyote reminds us of ourselves. As Kitchell writes, when **we** are around there is going to be trouble. Sometimes we cause this trouble but most of the time it simply comes with life. How we respond to this trouble greatly determines the quality and nature of our lives. Are we able to dust ourselves off and go after the roadrunner once again or do we get stuck in the quicksand of life and simply run in place? Can we laugh at our silliness, and at times seriousness, or do we get frustrated and angry with ourselves and those around us?

I suggest this morning we dedicate ourselves to looking at those places in our lives where we may be taking ourselves too seriously and the cigar seems to keep blowing up in our face. These may be the places where a different perspective, a sense of humor or folly, could be most helpful. We might ask what the Coyote thinks of our troubles or concerns.

I realize some of you have come this morning with heavy hearts and the thought that laughter or a conversation with a Coyote could make it all better is ridiculous. Sometime our hurts are too deep or our pain too fresh for laughter to lighten our loads. It is in those moments when I find these words from my colleague David Rankin most helpful: “On the deepest level, laughter is a religious affirmation. It is a genesis of hope and faith. It is an amusement with life itself, a posture beyond all tragedy, a thumbing of the nose at calamity. Laughter is hope’s last weapon.”

Hope is one of the main reasons we come together as a religious community. Sorrow feels a bit lighter when shared with someone else while laughter tastes much sweeter. When we laugh, especially when we laugh with others, we seem to forget - if only for a moment - the troubles and sorrows that come with life. We are reminded, even in the midst of tears and hopelessness, that one day our spirits will feel lighter. One day we will smile and laugh again.

Remember to laugh. Laugh hard and laugh long. Remember how laughter heals your spirit and remember the happiness and joy it brings others. Remember the wisdom of a coyote or the whimsy of a marshmallow Buddha. And remember these words from the Buddhist tradition. They are the closest I have to a motto for life: May you participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world. May you participate joyfully in the sorrows of life.

May it be so. Amen.