

Laughing, Swearing, Kissing

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There are times when being a minister brings an abrupt halt to all conversation. One of those times is when someone swears. It goes something like this, “Expletive!” Long pause, while speaker looks at me – often with a sheepish grin – “Sorry, I shouldn’t swear in front of a minister,” the guilty person apologizes. Now, of course, all eyes are on me and it’s my turn to hit just the right note of saintliness. Sometimes I respond with a weak joke, something on the order of “You’re forgiven...this time.” I’ve ventured a brief version of the theological constructs suggesting that clergy shares a simple humanity with everyone else. I haven’t yet tried responding, with a dead pan: “That’s okay, I swear like a sailor myself.”

The truth, of course, is that I do swear, because I share humanity and basic biology with every other human being on the planet. Nearly every language contains a compendium of swear words. Swearing shares traits across those languages. According to my sources, the two major categories for swearing remain constant; they usually relate to deity or to body parts and bodily functions. For example – fans of the movie *Gone with the Wind*, will remember the famous line Clark Gable uttered as he turned his back on the plantation. “Frankly, Scarlett, I don’t give a damn.” This is, of course, a short version of the epithet which calls upon the deity to destroy someone or something forever. Skipping across the generations to another memorable movie scene, those who absorbed the dark humor of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, may also remember the one word that echoed through the canyon as Butch and Sundance jumped off the cliff to the river below. (Sh---t). A third category of swearing relates to relatives. Some Spike Lee films offer abundant examples, none of which I’m going to share with you now.

I do my really good swearing when I’ve botched up a project I’m working on, or when I’ve managed to slice my finger instead of the loaf of bread, or when I’ve just had it and ‘I can’t take it any more.’ Oh, I swear extremely adroitly when a computer destroys a half-written sermon, or otherwise makes my life miserable.

Most researchers seem to think that women swear less than men, and only a few posit the theory that women may swear as much as men – but, in more specific situations. That calls to mind the men I’ve known who sometimes pepper their language with swear words, and women who let loose a volley of swearing only when arguing with a family member. I was surprised to read that women swear in groups of women as a sign of trust. I’d always thought of that swearing as a sign of feeling free from a male-dominated culture, it’s a new idea to think of it as a signal of the bonding happening in a group of females.

So, as we continue to look at the purposes of swearing, we can also wonder whether good people, or those who are presumed to be saintly (like ministers), should pursue a cultural taboo against all swearing. Brain biology suggests that swearing will always be with us. Swear words are remembered and processed differently than other language. The words themselves are remembered as whole units, and they are processed in the lower regions of the brain devoted to emotion and instinct. Some studies show that people who’ve suffered brain damage that left them aphasic (unable to talk) can still swear.¹

¹ How Swearing Works

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It's good to know that someday when my brain has dwindled to the size of a walnut, and when someone apologizes for swearing in front of a minister, I won't have to search for a witty or forgiving response, I can just swear back at 'em.

Humor, research has shown, releases certain anxieties, it helps one to be more flexible in the face of difficulty. I can dissect my own earlier attempt at humor about dwindling brain abilities two ways. I have some anxiety about being singled out as somebody who's not really human. I also have some anxiety about the future state of my thinking capacity – will it last as long as I do? If you found humor in my declaration it could have been because you feel a spark of anxiety about those topics yourself.

Studies have shown that humor and the laughter associated with it, have the ability to reduce our anxiety. At Allegheny College students were told they would receive an electric shock in 12 minutes. They then were left to listen to either a humorous tape, a dry speech or nothing at all. The shock never materialized, but, the students who were exposed to humor rated themselves as less anxious than those in the other groups. From this we can take practical advice: if you know you're going into an anxiety provoking situation you can help alleviate the stress you feel by seeking out jokes, reading, or film that makes you laugh.

A second study showed that people who have a sunnier disposition to start with, will get even more benefit from humor than their less happy peers. Another study showed that those sunnier people were also able to withstand depressive changes in environment with less effect on their good mood.² I noticed long ago that when I was feeling depressed my environment looked depressed: unkempt, disorderly, cramped. These studies suggest it might be good for you sense of well being to create a space that lift your spirits encouraging you to appreciate life and the humor that comes your way.

Humor is so powerful that even anticipating watching a favorite video boosted beta endorphins (associated with alleviating pain) and Human Growth Hormone (active in developing and maintaining cells).³ Once the laughter begins other benefits have been observed. Studies at the University of Maryland School of Medicine show that laughter caused 'the inner lining of blood vessels, the endothelium, to dilate or expand in order to increase blood flow...average blood flow increased 22% during laughter, and decreased 35% during mental stress.'⁴

Laughter may be, as Reader's Digest reminds us, 'the best medicine.' Cheaper than prescription drugs, you can have a healthier heart by playing a DVD that makes you laugh every time you see it. And, I can almost assure you that if you are laughing, and if there are people within hearing distance, someone will want to know what's so darn funny, and look for an opportunity to join the fun. That's a good choice, and one that is biologically determined. As soon as we hear laughter, a brain response triggers the premotor cortical region, priming our facial muscles for a smile.⁵ This mechanism may be what makes those annoying laugh tracks on situation comedies work so well. But, the mechanism also helps us in real life, urging us to join the giggles if we are at all able to do so.

² How Humor Makes You Friendlier, Sexier

³ Thought Of Laughter Boosts Happy Hormones

⁴ University of Maryland School of Medicine Study Shows Laughter Helps Blood Vessels Function Better

⁵ Laugh And The Whole World Laughs With You: Why The Brain Just Can't Help Itself

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Laughter is contagious. Laughter is a part of the social glue that brings us together. We are designed to share our laughter. But, Robert Provine has found that laughter doesn't always accompany profound humor. It is a wheel that greases our social interactions. With the help of students, Provine noted 1200 cases of laughter in natural settings. The students recorded who spoke before the laughter, who joined the laughter, and other details. Provine concluded that a lot of laughter accompanies the most mundane comments, like "Well, here's John at last." He also had ample evidence to show that laughter is a social experience, he suggests that "the critical stimulus for laughter is another person, not a joke."⁶

Laughing brings us together, and it seems it may ease the anxiety that builds in social settings. Appropriately applied it seems to serve to help build group cohesion, and a sense of belonging. Of course, swearing does some of the same things. Swearing, I'm told, can help establish group identity, cement membership in a group, express trust, and camouflage a person's fear or insecurity.⁷ Think of a group of women experimenting with and expressing the trust in the group with swearing. Think of groups that declare themselves through swearing. For example, in the 1960's swearing helped to create a barricade between the people who saw themselves as the 'real revolutionaries' (for instance the SDS, the Weathermen, and the Black Panthers) and the 'oppressor'. Think of how one person emulates another's habits for swearing, I remember watching my mother become more proficient at swearing as she developed a stronger relationship with one of her friends. Laughing and swearing are two sides of the same coin, when it comes to cementing relationships, and creating a sense of group cohesion.

Unfortunately, all that good bonding can soon take an 'in group' and 'out group' turn. Creating humor at the expense of others and the laughter we share eases our path into the group we want to join, and raises the barrier between 'us' and 'them.' But, humor used in this way can backfire, too. A couple of weeks ago, I went on a corporate fund-raising visit with TEAM. When we three TEAM folks sat down at our appointment with the president of the company, I introduced myself as a Unitarian Universalist minister. As the spokesperson for the group I began describing TEAM, including the fact that we are a non-partisan, multi-racial and multi-faith group. The president asked if we included Mormons. We hastened to assure him that LDS congregations were welcome, but, none had joined yet. He then asked, "What do you get when you cross a Mormon with a Unitarian Universalist?" and quickly offered the answer, "Someone who knocks on your door with nothing to say." I smiled, and said, "Well, I see you've heard of Unitarian Universalists before, so we'll just move on." It was an awkward moment, it left all of us a bit befuddled, but, we did indeed move on.

Was he trying to ease some tension with a joke? Was he trying to find a place for himself with a moment of laughter? Was he even vaguely aware that the joke wouldn't be welcome, but, would instead be mildly offensive? Does he think that Unitarian Universalism is a joke, and does he think I would share that opinion? Was it a test to see if I had the 'good sense' to go along and get along?

At that moment I was simply trying to get back to my agenda for the corporate visit. If he wanted to dispel tension, it didn't work. Research on human interactions around laughter show

⁶ The Science of Laughter

⁷ How Swearing Works

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that women laugh 126% more than men in cross-gender encounters.⁸ Laughter seems to have something to do with male dominance. So if that male company president wanted to take a dominant position in the meeting, that joke wasn't effective for that move either. I wasn't laughing 126% more than anybody at that point. The incident – which took less than 2 minutes at the outset of a 30 minute visit – demonstrates how we can misjudge the setting and create not just an awkward moment, but, a gulf in a relationship that might be extremely difficult to overcome.

The fact that humor, anxiety and the urge to bond are so closely allied helps us to see just how an attempt at humor could lead an offended person to feel anger that needed to be relieved through swearing. (Fortunately, I didn't take that route in our corporate meeting.) There may not be any way to eliminate the potential for ill will that accompanies bonding with humor. The need for identification with a desirable group, and dominance over other groups deemed less desirable, can always lead us into dangerous uses of humor. Within our own congregation, the potential for divisive humor exists. With apologies to the knitter's group, I'll use them in fanciful example. Suppose the knitter's group, which meets in a coffee shop, elected to bond with humor by making fun of fumble-fingered-folks who can't knit. With a little ingenuity (and this group has a bit of ingenuity to spare) they could create a whole series of jokes and witty remarks about non-knitters. What might be the response of a visitor to the group who was struggling to learn basic stitches? What might be the response of people who overheard the snickers and snippets of the conversation? We know what it would be: they would quickly learn that this is not a group for them. Likely they wouldn't approach the group to ask about knitting, or to seek help with a failed project. They might even conclude that all knitters are snobs who look down on non-knitters.

There are other ways this ingenious group could share laughter that would help find the cohesion they seek. They could take turns bringing a miserably failed project, and with good humor, share both the goal and their result. They could share the in-group humor of knitter's jokes that didn't rely on the fumble-fingered as the butt of the joke: (for example)

A woman is knitting as she drives. Pretty soon, her speed has crept all the way up to 95 mph--and she passes a parked police car. The car gives chase. Officer Bob turns on his siren, but the woman, oblivious, doesn't notice him. Finally, he pulls up alongside her car and yells, "Pull over! PULL OVER!" She looks at him, looks at her knitting, and yells-- "NO! It's a CARDIGAN!"

Or,

Question: Why don't crows spend all their time Knitting?

Answer: Because they're too busy crowchetting.⁹

Laughter, while it is a great benefit to us, is also a potential landmine in human relations. The same humor that helps us become allied with some folks, may also hurt and alienate others.

⁸ The Science of Laughter

⁹ Orillia Vail, 10 years old

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Therefore, we will all do well to be mindful of how we use humor to cement participation in any of the groups to which we belong.

But, if humor has its pitfalls, then kissing is even more dangerous. Studies have documented that even though a budding relationship is going along just fine, it can come to a halt when that first kiss just doesn't 'feel right.'¹⁰ Kisses carry all kinds of information that has yet to be deciphered. We are aware of the sexual implications of kissing, and may have experienced the phenomenon of the 'kiss of death' in a beginning relationship. Scientists are studying and speculating about what kind of information is carried. They know levels of oxytocin (social bonding) and cortisol (stress) change when male/female partners kiss, but sometimes in surprising ways. Males levels of oxytocin rose after kissing, but, female levels did not. Clearly the story of how couples develop intimate bonds involves something more than a kiss...laughter, and even swearing, may have roles to play, too.

This business of being human has so many facets to it, there are many questions remaining about how couples and groups develop the bonds that hold them together. With early data before us, it seems only fair to suggest that laughing, swearing and kissing are human phenomena over which we have limited control. We can't always predict when a kiss will fail us, when humor will invoke ire instead of laughter, and when swearing will unite a group against the world. Yet with all the problems they present us, this trinity of behaviors allow us to release anxiety, find acceptance in a group, and develop intimate relationships. Laughter, swearing, and kissing --- what a wonderful world we inhabit!

Resources:

1. *How Swearing Works*, Tracy V. Wilson at <http://people.howstuffworks.com/swearing.htm>
2. *How Humor Makes You Friendlier, Sexier*, Steve Ayan at <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=laughing-matters>
3. *Jokes Not As Funny As You Get Older*, Danny Kingsley, http://www.abcnet.au/science/news/health/HealthRepublsh_932837.htm
4. *Thought Of Laughter Boosts Happy Hormones*, Judy Skatssoon, http://www.abc.net.au/science/news/health/HeaalthRepublsh_16078675
5. *University of Maryland School of Medicine Study Shows Laughter Helps Blood Vessels Function Better*, unattributed, <http://www.umm.edu/cgi-bin>
6. *Laugh And The Whole World Laughs With You: Why The Brain Just Can't Help Itself*, unattributed, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/12/061212213922.htm>
7. *The Science of Laughter*, Robert Provine, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/node/22238>
8. *A Kiss is Still A Kiss, Or Is It?* Science Daily, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/08/070830121629.htm>
9. *Affairs of the Lips: Why We Kiss*, Scientific American, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=affairs-of-the-lips-why-we-kiss>

¹⁰ A Kiss Is Still A Kiss, Or Is It?
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