

# Laughter in the Dark

By prison stand up comic Don Meinshausen

*“Go to the music of laughter; there is your enlightenment and refuge”*

Satire is truth and joy from the darkness. It is also the fire that heats and lights the way out. Much of what is popularly known about politics comes from humor and always has been. Even ancient authoritarian rulers would sometimes employ a jester. They were there for entertainment and commentary as seen in Shakespeare’s King Lear. Since the jester was the only one who had freedom of speech he could also be the reality check in a court of sycophants and favor seekers. Humor provided with enough wit and discretion can be very constructive criticism. Humorists are not seen as power hungry or violent and therefore are seen as safe. Today with late night talk shows, comedians along with the Daily Show, the Colbert Report, the Onion plus sites all over the internet comedy is everywhere. Humor often provides the first warnings of the lying and stupidity that is the hallmark of authoritarian structures.

Humor also provides our first impressions of new developments. Eccentricities of new arrivals and other strange phenomenon are explained, fairly or unfairly, by humorists. Immigrants bring their own viewpoints and satirize their own just like our native comics. In order to avoid any touch of racism it is an understandable taboo not to make fun of any ethnicity but your own. Other than that there seem to be no other taboos in comedy. What does become acceptable or shown on mainstream media is another question entirely.

Why is humor so important? It is speaking truth to power. It is fact hidden in fiction. It is wisdom disguised as foolishness. When you laugh at a joke it is a sign of understanding of what is not spoken about. Humor has always been a way for subversive critiques to be spread. Witness the jokes that formed the underground cultures of the late Soviet empire or in Cuba today. In America humorists were part of the civil rights movement, the anti war movement, the anti drug war movement and the war against censorship supplying critiques and leadership through such personalities as Dick Gregory, Mort Sahl, Cheech and Chong, Paul Krassner and even the Democratic senatorial candidate Al Franken.

Humor is also a healing as described by former editor Norman Cousins as he cured himself of a disease through comedy. It is wonderful for reducing stress and a great ice breaker. It can be a way of asking for or providing information. It is a gift of a smile to the receiver. The laughter caused by it is a reward to the giver. This exchange of grace usually involves little or no money. Humorists are rightly regarded as being part of the wisest amongst us. Humor accomplishes the loss of ego that is required by many spiritual disciplines such as Buddhism. This is one reason why humorists are immune from attack and seen as a social asset.

America’s most famous humorist and very controversial writer was Mark Twain. He put great critiques of racism, imperialism, slavery, hypocrisy and war in his work disguised as humor and helped the medicine go down. Humor is the greatest of the unrecognized art forms. It has escaped serious study because it is an antidote to being too serious. The ancient Greeks regarded drama as the equal of comedy. They saw laughter as the food of the Gods. Beware of those who advocate dogma who do not have a sense of humor.

Humor is also a great source of philanthropy. Danny Thomas funded St Jude's Hospital in response to the divine help that he received in his career. Jerry Lewis has done his MS telethons for decades and Whoopi Goldberg and others have done benefits for the homeless. Doing such work helps their career as Bob Hope and other USO volunteers have noticed. But benevolence should be acknowledged and rewarded no matter what the original intention.

It may one day be an accurate measure of an idea's success of how much appreciation its comedian's gets. If a joke does not make a new or accurate witty comment or description about life the joke ultimately fails. This happens no matter how much establishment or even professional support is given. Funny is or isn't. It takes skill, timing and some luck but it's basically a way of measuring pain and mis-communication.

We now expect our romantic leads and heroes to joke, especially under fire. We also expect our humorists to discourse on the serious issues of the day. That is expected and desired since a person can be measured by what they find to be hilarious. Wit is defined as intelligence and amuse comes from the Goddesses or a muse of inspiration.

After the long night of the soul of the thousand years known as the Dark Ages, we now allow even our preachers to tell a humorous tale from the pulpit once in a while. You have to grow a lot to have the humor of a child. We now understand that the lack of humor is a sign of no love or laughter in their upbringing and also of great trauma. Now when we study our history, politics, culture and even theology we can understand that when we have lost our sense of humor we have also lost our way.

One of the aspects of marijuana use is the giddiness it causes. Everything seems funny even when its not. At the same time everything can seem cosmic as well. Humor is a way of changing consciousness or looking at common things in an uncommon way. Humor also integrates many seemingly discordant aspects just like pot as well as causing riotous confusion. One cannot do many chores of work while just laughing or smoking pot. So many people look on telling jokes and pot use as a sign that one will not work; especially if they have had a hard life. Work and play are both necessary for life and living.

Seriousness can be an important aspect of comedy. It is important to remember that comedy is an important part of any serious endeavor. It helps us to deal with pain and lack of understanding. It is part of many arts. Musicians, dramatists and comedians interact with each other not just socially but on camera as well. Perhaps this is because they all smoke pot together as a joint project. Woody Allen is now considered to be one of our most serious directors and even his comedy is very cerebral. Bill Maher, talk show host, comedian and infamous pothead, comments on serious issues on CNN. It all comes together. At least it does so for me after a few good hits.