

## The crying need for laughter

*The Royal Bank of Canada, in its Monthly Letter, Vol. 60, No. 2, asks if the world is running out of humour the way it is said to be running out of oil. It sometimes looks that way as we watch those so-called "comedies" on television. But not really — the best jokes are the ones that spring from our daily existence. The article looks at humour as a great gift to the human race. Excerpts follow:*

Humour, the moan goes up, doesn't seem to get around much any more. If it's not downright sick, then it's definitely green around the gills.

Nevertheless, in print, films and broadcasting, vast amounts of money and energy are being expended to make adults do what comes naturally to an infant who chuckles at the sight of his teddy bear. The airwaves are leaden with mercifully short-lived situation comedies; stand-up comedians proliferate on nightly talk shows; variety series sprout and wither within a matter of months.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation recently instituted a television quiz show entitled *Trivia*. On it, two teams matched wits to produce totally useless information. The purpose was to amuse.

To relieve the tedium, the quizmaster would occasionally toss out a question to the studio audience. One such went: "What is the most appropriate gift for a couple's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary?" Almost instantly, someone in the back of the hall called out, "Separate vacations".

With a sickly grin, the quizmaster quickly explained the significance of the sterling silver jubilee. Another laugh — live, on television — had been throttled at birth.

It was a striking instance of the difference between spontaneous and manufactured laughter — the funny *versus* the merely facetious....

### Unconscious humour

Humour has a kind of life of its own, and it can launch a sneak attack on the funny-bone at the most unexpected times and places. For example, a retired beauty queen attempted in a magazine article not long ago to describe a day in her life. She set off with grim purposefulness, then ran into a spot of trouble early in her morning. "I'll either have my answering service call to wake me up or I use a

dumb little alarm clock that ticks, ticks, ticks," she wrote. "Then I get ready in a hurry...I sweep all the last minute things that I've lined up on the bureau into a bag. As I'm leaving, I check my body to make sure I've got all my clothes on."

If only for an instant, this girl had turned the serious and dull routine of preparing to face the world into a comic turn on her own doorstep, presenting a ludicrous image to the reader's imagination. Often such a picture will be produced within a person's own mind.

\* \* \* \*

### Laughing at oneself

Laughing at oneself is one of the noblest and most difficult things a person can do, for it takes courage and intelligence to recognize your own foolishness and deflate your own pretensions and pomposities. The great men of humour have always laughed at themselves before anyone else. [Canadian humorist] Stephen Leacock was proud of his Doctorate of Philosophy, but he knew how to keep it in perspective. "The meaning of this degree," he once said in a lecture, "is that the recipient has been examined for the last time in his life and pronounced full. After this, no new ideas can be imparted to him."

\* \* \* \*

### Finding sources of laughter

Shared laughter is often the product of shared hardship or adversity; of people being up against the same vicissitudes. A few years ago Canadian author and broadcaster Tony Aspler wrote an endearing and eloquent tribute to the humour of the Jewish race. Jewish humour, he noted, has a bittersweet quality of world-weariness and self-denigration. The history of the Jewish people has shown them that a sense of humour is a strong shield against suffering....Aspler told the story of a Mr. Moses Greenbaum, who had worked hard all his life to build up a fortune and decided the time had come to enjoy his wealth.

A golfing addict, Mr. Greenbaum had a consuming ambition to play on a superb course which unfortunately belonged to a club whose membership was restricted to Gentiles. So he decided to build up a whole new non-Jewish identity in order to join the club. He moved to a new neighbourhood; he cut off all contact with his family and friends; he changed his name by deed poll to Charles Montmorency Ffoulkesmythe. His application

to the club was accepted. He was so delighted that he decided to use the facilities the very day his membership card arrived.

Among the delights of the club was an inviting-looking outdoor swimming pool with a large number of people sitting around it. The ex-Mr. Greenbaum immediately changed into swimming trunks, scampered out to the pool, and surveyed his fellow members before plunging in. The water was icy. The shock made him gasp: "Oy vey!" Looking sheepishly around as he trod water, he added in a loud voice: "Whatever that means...."

Many people regard as abhorrent the poking of fun at another people's social customs or national traits. But the Jews — and the Scots, the Irish and the Newfoundlanders — have been telling stories on themselves for generations.

### "Newfie" jokes

The vogue for "Newfie" jokes in Canada appears to have waned, and not before time, but that sometimes harsh and bleak island has produced a warm and generous breed of people who appreciate life's absurdities to the hilt.

For example, a small fishing village in Newfoundland had acquired a new fire engine after years of scrimping and saving by the town council. The old one was decrepit beyond repair, but its disposal had caused a crisis within the community. The council finally called a public meeting, and the entire adult population turned out. The air in the hall filled with tobacco smoke and suggestions for the fire truck's future. Someone suggested selling it for scrap, and other argued it would cost more to transport it to the junk yard than its sale would realize. Another advised mounting it on blocks and using it as a centre-piece for the children's playground. Various mothers objected strenuously on the grounds it would be too dangerous.

Tempers were flaring, husbands were snarling at wives, and the meeting was getting completely out of hand. Then came one of those inexplicable pauses that can cut a hubbub dead, and an ancient fisherman rose to his feet. Said he, "Why don't we just keep the thing and use it for false alarms?" Everybody went home laughing.

A sense of humour is the ultimate safety-valve on temper's head of steam. The situation, as the Irish put it, may be disastrous but it's never serious.

\* \* \* \*