

## ON THE FUNNY SIDE OF THE STREET

A friend of mine once got a gag tee-shirt for his birthday that said, “Putting the FUN back in DYSFUNCTIONAL.”

He is a psychologist. We all got a great laugh out of it. A few weeks later, when I was telling another psychologist I met at a meeting about that shirt, however, he became indignant. “It’s just awful,” he said, “to mock those poor dysfunctional people out there who are suffering so much. You should be ashamed. There’s never, never, never any fun in being dysfunctional.”

I dropped the subject. We didn’t see eye to eye. In my mind, no matter how “dysfunctional” people may be in any moment, if they start having fun whether they meant to or not, they feel better as long as the fun is bubbling up within them. And in my mind, knowing that fun can and does bubble up from within unexpectedly helps people.

Most things in life *could* be either tragic or funny, depressing or inspiring, sad or happy, depending on nothing but the way we look at them. My favorite example from my own experience happened several years ago in Michigan, where I and a colleague were co-facilitating a seminar. After a dinner capping the first half-day, we returned to the hotel. In the normal course of getting ready for bed, as we all must do, I sat on the commode in my bathroom. Immediately, with no warning, and for no obvious reason, the entire thing just fell apart. It broke into pieces, top and bottom both, and I found myself standing in a lot of water with powerful streams of cold water spewing out of the wall.

I tried to turn off the water, but discovered that hotels have it set up so that guests can’t do that. Only the engineering people in the hotel have the tool that turns the water off. So I rushed to the phone and called the desk. I told the person who answered to hurry to my room, there was a major bathroom emergency involving a broken toilet and a flood.

Within a few minutes, two young hotel employees, wearing their proper gray slacks and blue blazers, showed up. By this time, water was streaming out from under my door into the hallway and the entry to my room was a virtual pond fed by a horizontal geyser from the bathroom wall. I was wearing a soaking wet trench coat when the hotel people arrived, and I was about as dripping wet and bedraggled as a human being could be. Of course, as soon as they entered my room, equipped only with a useless plunger and their walkie-talkies, they were soaked and bedraggled, too.

They fled to the hall and called engineering. Someone finally came and turned off the flood. By this time, someone else arrived with a new key and room assignment for me, and all the hotel people were standing around the mess discussing how many floors

below me they would have to awaken guests and move them to other rooms. The water was about two inches deep in parts of my room. I packed hurriedly, grabbed my new key and headed for the elevators, which were the glass kind that run up the middle of the lobby. It was long after midnight by then, so I wasn't worried about making a spectacle of myself. Besides, how much more of a spectacle could I be, having just spent the last half-hour with a bunch of people looking at me sideways wondering what in the world I had done all by myself late at night that would destroy a toilet. Think about it. How many toilets have you ever heard of that self-destructed? My story was not plausible.

As I approached the elevator, a few straggles of clothing dangling out of my roll-on suitcase, I was still wearing only my soaked nightclothes and my sopping trench coat, buttoned crooked and unbelted. My hair was hanging, dripping into my eyes. I was barefoot. I thought about slinking into the stairwell instead of taking the elevator. "Oh, what the heck," I thought, "I have to get three floors up. What else could happen?"

I got on the elevator, and came face to face with a late-night reveler returning. He looked at me through foggy eyes, stared me up and down, and said, "Straight from the shower in a big hurry, huh? Honey, he must have REALLY p----- you off!"

I started laughing and I just couldn't stop. The whole thing was so beyond imagination of anything that could ever happen outside of some slapstick comedy that I was tickled to the core. I found my new room, salvaged my clothes for the next day, took a shower and went to bed, still laughing. In the morning, I woke up laughing, and realized I ought to call my colleague in case he called the wet room looking for me, as we were going to get together ahead of the start-time. He found the whole thing even funnier than I did, and we were both still laughing over it when everyone came into the meeting.

It seems pretty rude to laugh in front of people and not share the joke. So, I told the story, with enhancing color commentary provided by my colleague. When I finished, I realized that my colleague and I were the only people laughing, although there were some polite smiles here and there. For the most part, people looked astonished and dismayed. That was awkward. So we asked the group why they didn't think it was funny.

We got an immediate earful. Here's the best I can recall some of the comments:

"I can't believe this! If that happened to me, I'd never be able to stay in a hotel again. How awful! How humiliating! How can you even walk past the front desk? It's so embarrassing! You're in denial about it, I'll tell you that. When you come to your senses, it's going to take you a long time to get over this."

"Aren't you going to sue the hotel? This should NOT happen in a classy downtown hotel. Someone must be held accountable for this!"

“Did you get the a description or name of the man on the elevator? That was sexual harassment! He should be pursued and reprimanded.”

“Have you contacted an attorney? You should. You’ve got a great lawsuit here. Did you get hurt when the thing fell apart? Were you checked for injuries? What about pain and suffering – this kind of thing can leave a terrible scar on a person’s psyche.”

Finally, someone said, “I simply can’t believe you’re laughing at this. It was a terrible, frightening thing. Just out of the blue to have a toilet virtually explode! You could have had a heart attack. What’s so darn funny about it? How could this be any worse?”

I said, “Well it could be worse if it happened to me at my home and it was MY problem. As it is, I got a room upgrade and a story to tell, with only a half-hour of inconvenience.” But no one laughed.

We took a break and went on with the seminar. Many people had a hard time getting this story off their minds. During the small groups, facilitators reported to us, people kept bringing it up and saying how upsetting it would be if it happened to them. My colleague and I lost credibility, rather than gaining it, for describing this as a hilarious event.

As I reflect back on this and so many other things in my life that have seemed much funnier to me than they have to others, I have to acknowledge that the reverse is also true. I can recall many times that others have related “funny” things to me that didn’t seem at all funny at the time. And I have to recall moments when, in the company of someone in a cheerful, silly mood when I was feeling low, I couldn’t relate to the person or their light-heartedness. It’s true also that something that seemed awful or inscrutable or impossible “yesterday” has as often as not seemed inspiring, or filled with promise or readily resolved “today.” The things don’t change. The way I think about them changes. It doesn’t change because I work at changing it or even expect or want it to change, but because change is inevitable and intrinsic to the working of our minds.

It’s would be easy to get on a high horse and say that that psychologist in the meeting or those people in the seminar should “get a sense of humor.” It would be easy to judge them for being so serious in the face of something harmlessly funny. It would not be true to the human spirit to do that, however, or true to the way life works. It would not be compassionate to what we all have in common. When we’re thinking distress, we can only see distress. The facts of any case will look upsetting and people who see those facts differently will look strange. When we’re thinking humor, we can only see humor. The facts of any case will look funny. People who don’t laugh with us will look odd.

As wonderful as it is to enjoy the warmth and bask in the light of walking on the sunny side, none of us can do it all the time. We all naturally can find the humility to admit that, look forward to the sunshine when it’s there, and just take the walk of life as it comes.

The beauty of that walk is that when we embrace its infinite variety and walk in love and hope, there's as much to discover in the shade as there is to celebrate in the sun.

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