



Laugh with me & you can laugh at me The uses & abuses of multicultural humor

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While back our colleague Eileen Sheridan was trolling the web for culture stuff as she often does (<http://www.worldculture.com>) when she ran across an item called "Encuesta Internet para auto-evaluar su Cubanidad" a fun filled "Internet questionnaire to assess your Cuban-ness" (<http://home.earthlink.net/~leobueno/cubania.html>). In its then present version 10.2, it listed some 271 items about Cuban culture, literature, radio, TV, etc. These items were designed to make the reader smile and laugh, and, above all, identify. It was just the sort of cultural and intercultural humor that helps people appreciate their own culture, laugh about it a bit and share it with others, stereotypes and all.

Cubanidad reminded us of Jeff Foxworthy whose "You'll know you are a Redneck, if..." sayings lovingly massage stereotypes and remind us of the reality of class in the USA today. (www.jefffoxworthy.com/homepage.shtml) It also forced us to reflect a bit more on the uses and abuses of humor in diversity and intercultural work.

When it comes to ethnic and gender humor, many of us in the diversity and intercultural business are "bathroom laughers"--we don't let other folks know we find a lot of this stuff funny and we even feel guilty about finding it funny ourselves. Like the legendary "bathroom drinker" we hide our humor and poison our enjoyment. Friends in Alcoholics Anonymous will tell us that there is nothing funny about being a bathroom drinker. It is a destructive trap. Yet, anyone who has been to an A.A. meeting will discover that the right kind of laughter is one of the more powerful cures there and in other 12 Step Programs.

Political correctness (which allows women and people of color to be puritans, too) is toothless in the face of the irrepressible human instinct to laugh. Why? Humor is a part of culture, itself. In our definition, that means that it is something that helps a group of people survive and succeed in their environment. Humor preserves difference in earthy, juicy ways even or perhaps particularly in the face of repression. Women have laughed at men for centuries and vice, and we suspect will do so for centuries to come. Laughter is a way of feeling safe in the face of what we do not understand. It does not absolve us from the effort to understand, support and care about others.

Rita Risser's (<http://www.expertcenter.com/nsa/workshop98/rita/ritahome.html>) recent study of the actual results of sexual harassment cases in court which we reported in an earlier edition of this website reveal that the courts see humor and joke-telling as part of the real world of the workplace which they have no desire to regulate, unless the form part of a strong persecutory pattern of an individual or a singled out group of people. Laughter helps us see where we fit in and where we do not and is part of a normal socialization process. What needs to be explored is how such laughter can become part of a multicultural context without being destructive or assimilative.

Humor is, of course a double-edged blade. We are reminded of the bitter campaign of satire, derision and dehumanizing humor that accompanied Hitler's persecution of Jewish people in the 1930's and reduced them to empty stereotypes, objects to be disposed of rather than citizens to be cherished. At the same time, I also remember an influential and very politically correct diversity

trainer condemning and dismissing Jewish comedians as purveyors of internalized repression.

Humor can be used as irony, mimic, satire by both sides in any argument. It is in the best interests of us all that we use it in loving and empowering ways. It is about enjoying our foibles, failures and limitations. It is about bonding in our humanness with each other, telling it so that both we and others can recognize ourselves in it.

This is an unfinished discussion. One of the major unfinished discussions of intercultural work. I have spent some significant and disciplined time working with humorists to explore the questions. No one likes to have humor used against him or her on a consistent basis. Most of us have also learned important lessons from humor, even that which has poked fun of us. Talking about it and sharing it with others can keep us from getting truly grim in the intercultural business.

Best Practices - diversiTIPS

Workplace humor can be a minefield and there is no guarantee that what we say will be appreciated or resented but the situation will not improve by it self unless. Here are a few guidelines that may help you be more effective and less afraid of using good humor.

- 1) **First person experience is usually the best**, freshest, and because it is told about oneself, the least likely form of humor to be rejected by others. These are the "A funny thing happened to me on the way to..." stories. As in interculturalist I like to tell others about my own failings to perceive intercultural cues as part of my training of people who will work in new cultural environments. I often tell a story about the new relative with a South American accent who when I invited her to an Easter family potluck dinner told me she would bring "jam and bread." "Strange," I thought, "but, well, why not?" I prepared my usual Easter specialties, ham and horseradish, salad, etc. Imagine my surprise when I saw her walking from her car bringing a large HAM. The story when I tell it is not about making fun of her accent but about making fun of the senior interculturalist (me) who could have been far more perceptive about these things.
- 2) **Use humor to lighten a situation, not to make light of it.** This is a tough distinction, but an important one. We are often caught in meetings where the logic has become a trap. Humor can provide just the right dose of lateral thinking that can bring us out of gridlock. It can be used to bond us to each other to resolve the challenge we have in front of us or it can be used competitively to divide and conquer. Where we are committed to creating results with each other, this is a critical choice. This kind of humor is about our common experience or condition, and could start, "Well, we could look at it this way..." and then puts a humorous perspective or metaphor on the situation. Everybody has a laugh and we return to our task refreshed with better possibilities that "out-of-the-box" thinking might free us to find a better solution to our challenge.
- 3) **Ask others for their perspectives humorous or otherwise.** When a dominant or in-group is together they often bond on their own kind of humor an the situation becomes exclusive of those who don't belong to

that group. If other groups are feeling confident a productive repartee may emerge. Otherwise, it may be important to break the flow of the dominant group to bring others in, e.g., "We seem to be on a roll here, but may be missing something by being so into our own thing, can you add some perspective...?"

- 4) **Study humor.** During the past several years I have made it a point to look carefully for and at humor, to find things that are funny and not offensive, to look at what seems offensive and how it could be modified to make it acceptable. I was for a long time a regular subscriber to the "Laugh of the Day" type sites on the Internet. Some of their items are fantastic, some outrageous, some truly awful and some just blah, but it keeps me looking and thinking about the nature and uses of humor. I also carry on a dialog with a professional humorist about our mutual experiences. The whole issue of humor and correctness takes on another dimension when you work with it consciously instead of simply reacting to jokes and stories on the hoof.