UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

HUMOUR AND DISTRESS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF PEOPLE WHO USE HUMOUR IN TROUBLING SITUATIONS

BY

WENDY EDEY ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION.

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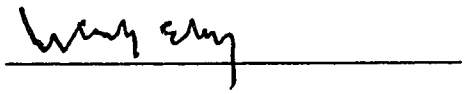

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled HUMOUR AND DISTRESS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF PEOPLE WHO USE HUMOUR IN TROUBLING SITUATIONS submitted by WENDY EDEY in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION in COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY.

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December 16, 1994

For David

With All My Love

ABSTRACT

This descriptive study is rooted in the author's early efforts to utilize humor as a tool in psychotherapy. It draws data from interviews with seven people who addressed the question: How do you employ humor in situations which trouble you? Dominant themes include: humor is powerful and dangerous; humor is better than distress; humor is a method of communication; we will survive if we share humor; humor is a key which opens locked doors; and, humor is a spotlight which you can direct. The study identifies rules which each person unconsciously employs in the process of creating humor as a response to distress. The childhood origins of these rules are explored. Some participants learned to use humor by imitating older relatives. Others developed their humor skills as they experienced success in using humor to change the behaviour of others. The findings are evaluated in the context of the author's desire to understand the failure and success of humor in therapy. Some evidence is presented in support of the observation that therapists who choose humor are acting on their own habitual tendencies to employ humor in response to distress.

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PROLOGUE

June and I sit together, talking earnestly in my family room. She is teaching me about humor, has been teaching me about humor for sixteen years. But tonight we are discussing it formally, assembling the data for a pilot study which I hope will lead me to my Master's thesis. June is crying, crying when we are supposed to be discussing humor.

June is a humor expert. She is not a cartoonist, nor a stand-up comic. In her professional life she is a scientist, an administrator. In her personal life, a daughter, a wife, a mother, a friend. To me she is a friend, a very humorous friend.

June knows a lot about me and the things which trouble me. She knows, for example, knows from listening to years of my incessant whining, that I hate my birthday, hate the whole month of September, partly because my birthday is in September. She also knows I would wish for a more voluptuous feminine figure. These are things you pick up in a long friendship.

One September, June invited me and my family to spend a Sunday evening in her living room. When we arrived we were greeted in song by a chorus of friends singing "Happy Birthday to You". On a tray in the

kitchen were two enormous, breast-shaped zucchini cakes garnished with baby bottle nipples. June said this was an opportunity to make me stop whining about September, to give me both a happy birthday and a decent pair of breasts. June is an expert in humor.

So why is she weeping?

CHAPTER ONE

HUMOR AND PROGRESS

Introduction

My interest in the relationship between humor and distress has grown steadily during a life in which the two are closely connected. When I decided to turn my academic attention to the matter, I looked for others who were willing to tell me about their experience of the relationship between humor and distress. In the telling of their tales they revealed the personal sequences and patterns which characterize the hatching of humor from the egg of trouble.

This writing is the description of those hatching sequences. Before I undertook this study, and the personal introspection which accompanied it, I tended to speak of "laughing at our troubles" or "using humor in difficult times" as if referring to a single, homogeneous process. By the time I had finished the project, I was keenly aware that the mechanism through which distress passes when it transforms itself into humor is unique to each person. One person will find humor where another finds none. What's more, one person will deem it inappropriate to seek humor while

another will call upon humor, fully expecting it to appear.

The project also made me aware that I had been harbouring some presuppositions about people I describe as "having a great sense of humor." I believed they worked hard to develop that sense, that they probably wished they were even more humorous. I never imagined that they might have regrets, that they might wish they could resist the impulse to create humor. I believed that every person on Earth tried to be as humorous as possible, that the propensity to create humor was probably related to a certain kind of intelligence, that humor could solve almost any problem. My findings raise questions about all these presuppositions. The investigation focuses on the beliefs which each participant holds with regard to humor, to similarities and differences among the eggs of trouble and the chicks of humor which emerge.

Awaiting the Arrival of a Humorous Therapist

I grew up on a farm. Eggs on our farm had possibilities. They could be breakfast food, baking ingredients, cash in Mother's pocket, rotten eggs, healthy baby chicks, dead chicks, strutting adult

birds. It all depended on who fertilized the eggs, who laid the eggs, what happened to the freshly laid eggs, the amount of protection and nurturing which was offered to the hatchlings.

I was an egg when I entered graduate studies in counselling psychology, an egg with possibilities. I expected to hatch as a competent, sensitive, successful psychotherapist. So I studied and waited, waited to become a psychotherapist who was competent enough, sensitive enough, successful enough to employ humor as a catalyst for progress. But the hatching therapist was not the humor-using therapist I had prepared to welcome.

Why did I expect humor? Well, I assumed I had been fertilized with it, had survived a good deal of distress because of it. For forty years people had been saying to me: "You have such a good sense of humor!" I was proud of it. It offered me hope when I felt only despair, paths where I faced dead-ends, air when I felt I might suffocate, dignity where there seemed only to be humiliation.

One time I almost died of fright while sitting on an egg of distress. I was certain that egg would hatch a monster and there was absolutely nothing I could do

to change the situation. There was no way I could stop sitting on the egg.

I took this unsolvable problem, this unalterable situation, this litany of absolute failure to a psychotherapist. It took her about five minutes to tease out humor from among my buried resources. Then she sprinkled some of the humor on the egg and beckoned me to sit on it again. She spent the next hour softening the shell, kneading my tale of woe. As she nurtured the egg, the yolk began to transform itself. Her pulling and teasing created new possibilities in that egg. When she sent me back out into the world, I could hardly wait to see what would emerge when it hatched.

With such a powerful experience in my history, I felt certain that when I hatched as a therapist, I would be a therapist who used humor. But this was not the case. Humor, the friend who had smoothed my ruffled life, opened closed doors, given me so many possibilities, would not come to me in the therapy room. Resources I had, but humor was not among them.

Professional Perspectives on Therapeutic Humor

The literature told me there were other

psychotherapists who could practice effective therapy with the help of humor. William F. Fry Jr. and Waleed A. Salameh (1987; 1993) had assembled two volumes of psychotherapeutic humor information; chapters written by seemingly competent, sensitive, successful psychotherapists. In the professional journals there were articles which described the use of humor as a tool; a technique; a strategy.

Machovec (1991) wrote that humor could be applied to psychotherapy to achieve treatment goals, make confronting reality less painful and diagnostically test insight and treatment progress. Mann (1991) used clinical examples to illustrate how therapists and patients might be affected by humor. He warned that humor should not take the place of seriousness in psychotherapy, but that it could help a patient become more integrated and more spontaneous in relationships.

Saper (1988) wrote about individual differences in the personalities of patients and therapists which could influence the effectiveness of humor in psychiatric healing. O'Connell (1987) wrote of the jokes he told to patients as they moved toward a "natural high". Yorukoglu (1993) described a process of asking clients to tell him their favourite jokes.

He would think about the jokes, then utilize their content to help the client in some way. In the case of a troubled child, he might tell the favourite joke to the parents, as an illustration of the issues which were bothering the child.

Lusterman (1992) drew parallels between the use of humor and of metaphor in therapy. He referred to humor's "disarming quality" and said humor could indicate a positive shift in the patient's perspective and strengthen the patient-therapist bond. He gave two examples to demonstrate how jokes told by the therapist helped to facilitate the goals of therapy.

Young (1988) identified three kinds of therapeutic humor: tactical, strategic and systemic. Tactical humor described a one-sided reaction--the reaction of client to therapist, or therapist to client. Strategic humor described the therapist's attempt to have clients see the participants in an interaction as having specific roles to play. Systemic humor referred to humor which actually changes the patterns of interaction in a system.

Prerost (1985) wrote of using imagery and humor to expand the alternatives clients might consider. Marcus (1990) gave two clinical examples to illustrate his use

of humor in predicting how clients would react in specific situations. In a similar vein, Ellis (1987) shared the lyrics of humorous songs which he wrote for his clients. The nature of the songs was heralded in their titles: "I'm Just a Fuckin' Baby", "Whine, Whine, Whine", "I'm Depressed, Depressed" and "Glory, Glory Halleluia! People Love You Till They Screw Ya".

There were writings proclaiming the benefits of using humor, articles warning about the dangers. Many of the authors used case studies to document their success.

As I read, I learned to attach names to different forms of humor. It interested me to see that some authors were most enthusiastic about using humor. Others were more reserved. Killinger (1987), while supporting the use of humor in therapy, framed her comments in the context of a doctoral study she had done eleven years earlier. In that study, she found that when therapists reported having used humor in therapy, clients did not always concur with the opinion that humor had been used. Golan, Rosenhien and Jaffe (1988) showed videotapes of humorous therapeutic interventions to 60 obsessive, hysterical or depressive women aged 21 to 49 years. The women showed a marked

preference for interventions deemed to be nonhumorous.

In 1971 Lawrence Kubie, a respected psychiatrist, published an article describing the harmful consequences which could arise from the inappropriate use of humor by a psychotherapist. His arguments were so persuasive that he is frequently cited by the many authors who write about their own use of humor as a counselling tool. He believed that the humor which psychotherapists generate might entertain the therapist and endanger the therapy. He wrote that the client might be distracted by the humor, or encouraged to minimize the seriousness of the problem, rather than working it through.

There seemed to be no literature describing incidents where a therapist admitted to having tried, but failed to make therapeutic progress using humorous interventions. There were only the judgments of others that the humor used was either not funny, or not effective. I wondered if every one of Yorukuglu's clients had an informative joke to tell, or if he was recording one or two instances out of a lifetime of humor-free therapy.

It seemed to me that O'Connell and Ellis saw themselves in the role of stand-up comic, bringing

laughter to their clients as they employed humor as a means of exposing destructive behaviors to the light of scrutiny. I did not think my supervisors, bent on teaching me how to listen to clients and join them in their current emotional space, would be impressed by a display of my best stand-up comedy. Besides, even though I love humor, I forget jokes so quickly that I rarely get to share them. I could not imagine looking through my joke file during a psychotherapy session. As for writing songs, well, I doubted that any client of mine would be willing to stand before a bathroom mirror and sing something of my creation, however clearly it might convey my message.

I turned back to the case studies. They were interesting, but each referred to a single incident. The authors apparently hoped that I would be able to generalize from their cases to mine. Try as I might, I could not recall a single client who resembled a person in those cases. I enjoyed reading the literature on humor as a device in therapy, but that was where it ended. In fact, it seemed to me that the entire text of what I had absorbed could be found in a single abstract, summarizing a literature review published by Dimmer, Carroll and Wyatt (1992).

> Uses of humor in psychotherapy include alleviating anxiety and tension, encouraging insight, increasing motivation, and creating an atmosphere of closeness and equality between therapist and client. Humor should not be used to avoid uncomfortable feelings by patients or therapists, to defend against accepting the importance of patients' illness, or to mask therapists' hostilities toward the patient. Humorous interventions can be applied constructively if therapists do not use humor to serve their own interests to the disadvantage of the patient. (Page 795)

One promising lead came from Waleed Salameh (1987). He wrote of humor as an interactive process between client and psychotherapist. He observed, wisely, I thought, that a therapist who wanted to use humor in therapy must have a well developed sense of humor. As his contribution to the professional development of humorous therapists, he offered what he calls Humor Immersion Training (Salameh, 1986). Salameh described his workshops as follows:

> The training focuses on expanding the clinician's skills in using humor effectively in psychotherapy, and includes the following five facets: (a) a rationale for using humor, (b) therapist traits that help optimize the effective use of humor, (c) creative uses of absurdity, (d) Humor Immersion Training, and (e) ethical considerations. (Page 157)

Sadly, limited as I was to reading Salameh's writing, unable to meet Salameh personally, I found little which had not already been offered to me by

other authors. As might be expected, he maintained that those therapists who were most sensitive to the needs and feelings of their clients would be most effective in using therapeutic humor.

But Salameh (1987) made one suggestion I did not find in any other writing. He suggested that, before employing humor with a client, the therapist should interview the client, find out how the client felt about humor, how the client used humor.

Within a few days of this reading, a distressed client opened up for me the perfect opportunity to act like Waleed Salameh. She sat in my office, wringing her hands, telling me about the success and failure of all the counselling techniques she had been exposed to over the years.

"I use a lot of humor," she said. "It really helps."

"How do you use humor?" I asked, my heart pounding with anticipation.

"Oh I just laugh at the things that go wrong," she said, and then went on to tell me, without a breath of levity, that her son had been expelled from school, her seventeen-year-old daughter had brought home the new baby after a fight with her boyfriend and she had had

an argument at work on her first day back after a three-month stress leave. There ended our discussion of humor. Where was Salameh when I needed him?

Announcing the Arrival of a Possibly Humorous Therapist

I decided to put humor on the shelf and learn some other psychotherapy skills. Quite predictably, humor, feeling neglected, became a little more aggressive.

When I entered the Master's program in counselling, I pictured myself sitting down with adults, exploring avenues to solve adult problems. But fate, guided by the supervisors who assigned clients to student therapists, sent adults to others and children to me.

One day I found myself slogging aimlessly in the playroom with a nine-year-old, miniature adult. We weren't playing. As far as I could tell, we weren't really doing anything that a dozen other adults weren't already doing with this child. He was telling me his troubles and I was nodding sympathetically.

School mates were picking on him. The problem had been reported to the authorities. Instead of punishing the bullies, the authorities suggested counselling for

the victim. The victim and I established a comfortable, adult-style relationship. We conferred earnestly from our respective positions on our chairs in the playroom. The toys, lacking a role in our interaction, sat with humor, on the shelf.

"There is nothing I can do," he declared. "They steal my books. They put gum on the bottom of my shoes. When I report it to the teachers, they just give them a detention and that doesn't do anything. If I try to ignore them, they just keep it up and do meaner things."

I was truly baffled by the whole situation. He had learned all the lessons about avoiding trouble: walk away, ignore it, tell someone. All those lessons had failed him. He could not imagine himself fighting back. He could not imagine himself making friends or playing with such despicable characters.

The playroom has a one-way mirror behind which counselling colleagues and supervisors sometimes sit while they observe the work of student therapists. They offer you advice if you ask them for it. I definitely needed help, but on this day, the space behind the mirror was empty. I could not bring myself to throw up my hands in defeat and send the client home

with his parents. Somehow, I had to fill up another half hour in that playroom.

I had read somewhere that a perplexed therapist might open new doors in brick walls if she got up from her chair and paced the floor. I was definitely perplexed. But under most circumstances, pacing would have been out of the question for me. I am a blind person, and when blind people get up, people they hardly know respond by jumping up and offering to help. This was one convention of adult behavior my nine-year-old had yet to acquire. I got up, and he asked me why I was pacing. I told him I was thinking. He allowed me to pace a bit. But he soon became helpful.

"You're going to step on a teddy bear," he warned. Apparently not all the toys were on the shelf after all.

His helpfulness annoyed me. It was an old habit of mine--feeling annoyed when people disregard the matter at hand and start taking care of me unnecessarily. When I picked up the bear I felt like throwing it at him and then--I did throw it.

"You missed," he said helpfully.

Purposeful, now, I went to the shelf for another bear and threw it. "You still missed," he cried. But

I did not miss with the next one. There were a lot of soft toys in the play room, bean bags, old hats, foam balls. I threw them all at him while he sat on his chair, giving me directions about aiming at certain parts of his body. I asked him to snap his fingers so I could hit his hand, to click his tongue so I could aim for his nose. When my supply of ammunition was exhausted, I asked him to move to a different chair so I could throw the same toys again.

"How long are we going to do this?" he asked, bored after moving to a third chair.

"I don't know," I said. "Right now I can't think of anything else I can do about your problems, so I might as well keep on with my target practice."

While the animals flew, I returned to my former, therapist-type behavior. I complimented him on his extraordinary ability to be kind--to never throw anything at a defenceless blind person, no matter how unreasonable she was being. I asked him to tell me again the stories about the people who picked on him and how considerate of their feelings he had been.

[illegible] an amazingly long time, but finally, he caug[illegible] and threw it back at me. He got me on the f[illegible] Tasting the first sweet flavour of

victory, he kept on trying. I was really no match for him once he got warmed up.

This incident changed the nature of our relationship. Liberated from our bondage in the roles of "good counsellor" and "good child" we could look at his problems in a different light. Each of us could and did expect to be surprised by the actions of the other. I had been playing the role of expert, playing it badly because I could not seem to find a workable solution for his problems. He had been playing the role of victim, waiting impatiently for one more incompetent expert to solve his problem.

In our toy-tossing sequence we had learned new roles. He was now the victor, one who might be expected to rise up from the depths of oppression to vanquish a tormentor.

But what role had I now assumed? As a student in counselling psychology I was required to be the expert. Could I be a successful expert and a loser at the same time?

I was now playing a role both comfortable and familiar because I often play it in every day life. I was a reasonably competent person learning how to be a therapist. Just as one might expect, I was having a

problem other reasonably competent people learning to be therapists might have: I could not seem to establish a working relationship with my client. I was trying to solve the problem by proving to myself and my client that I was competent. Then something familiar got in the way. Because I could not see, I began tripping over toys. How could I maintain the image of competent therapist if my client felt sorry for me because I was falling over toys?

The answer was simple. I could not. That is how it came to pass that I temporarily forgot to be a competent therapist, and concentrated my efforts on deflecting the sympathy of my client. Now deflecting sympathy is something I do often. I do it in two ways. I either demonstrate myself to be competent and, therefore, not in need of sympathy, or I turn the cause of the sympathy into a joke. That is the process in which I engaged with my young client. I became the clown--throwing stuffed toys. By and by I remembered to be a therapist, coaching him in the rules of my recently-invented game. The client and I were both very pleased with the way things turned out.

At that time, I was unaware that the most difficult task remained before me, the task of

explaining my unconventional actions to myself, my supervisors and the boy's parents.

To myself I said: "I used humor in therapy today! I knew I would eventually figure out how to use therapeutic humour." To my supervisors I said: "I felt I could not help this boy address his habitual relationship patterns without establishing some kind of working rapport." To his parents I said: "He must learn not to take himself so seriously. If he learns how to play with others, they will be less likely to bully him."

Thinking it over later it struck me that humor in psychotherapy came to me just the way it comes to me in every day life--not when I want it to; not when I plan it; but at those moments when I am most distressed. It also occurred to me that I might have something in common with those authors who write about the effectiveness of therapeutic humor. When I first read their work, I was operating under the assumption that they had intended to teach me how to use therapeutic humor. Now another possibility opened up. Perhaps these authors, like me, had acquired the habit of turning their personal distress into humor. Perhaps they could not resist the personal forces which

compelled them to use humor in therapy. Perhaps they wrote articles to explain their own behavior to themselves, to justify it in the professional community and not, as I had assumed, to teach others how to employ their methods. I now know, beyond any doubt, that I will use humor in therapy. I don't know how I will use it. I probably won't plan to use it--at least, not for a few years. In the meantime, I will study it.

The Birth of a Study

The focus of my studies has shifted since the days when I combed the literature looking for the latest in humorous techniques. I am not much interested by the question of when it is appropriate to use humor. I am even less interested in identifying, categorizing and cataloguing humorous strategies. What interests me now is the nature of the relationship between humor and distress.

If there is one thing I can count on as I embark on a career in psychotherapy, it is that the people who come to see me will be experiencing distress. If there is another thing I can count on, it is that I will be distressed as I look for ways to make them feel better.

So where will humor fit in? Right now I don't know.

What I do know is that some people seem to gravitate toward humor when they feel distress. I am one of these. When I look around me at parties, in the staff room, at family gatherings, I notice that there are others. They don't simply laugh at their troubles, they do other things. But what?

In this writing, I shall share some of the highlights of, what was for me, a voyage of discovery, as I began to investigate a topic which I will probably be investigating far into the future. The voyage took me into the hearts and minds of people who are experts on the relationship between humor and distress. I am one of the experts. The others came to me willingly as soon as they heard about my interest. Like me, they acknowledged their expert status, knew that when they felt distress, they generated humor.

Together we explored the eggs of distress, the process of gestation and the humor chicks which each person hatched. We laughed at our own jokes, wondered why we saw humor where others saw something else, and speculated on the life history which made us the people we are today. We reached back into our childhood to connect with the people who taught us to employ humor

and the rules they gave us for using it.

As I close this chapter, my thoughts return to June, my first research participant, a friend distressed by my annual September sadness. She might have given me a birthday gift, surprised me with a normal cake, called me before breakfast to extend greetings. Any of these would have provided temporary relief for both of us. With one over-sized party centred around an outlandish cake, she generated such an excess of laughter that it bubbles up every September, and I always think twice before I whine about September and my birthday. But when I asked June how she employs humor in situations which trouble her, she cried.

CHAPTER TWO

TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This is a qualitative study, founded on principles established by experienced researchers. But for me, the process of learning how to conduct it, and ensuring that the findings had credibility was a major undertaking.

Over and over again I explained what I was trying to accomplish. I explained it to friends, to family members, to counselling supervisors, and professors. Each time I explained it, it became a little clearer to me. But the people who held me most accountable for the work I undertook were my research participants. The conversation which follows was not recorded verbatim, but I believe it accurately represents the inquiries made by a prospective participant during the recruitment stage.

A Conversation Describing the Study

Kelly sits across the table from me. We are having lunch at a fast food restaurant. "What is your thesis going to be about?" he asks, as if on cue.

"Humor," I say, "the relationship between humor and distress. Want to be one of my subjects?"

It feels a little bit naughty, a little bit unprofessional to be recruiting research participants over lunch. I did not intend to ask Kelly today, only to warm him to the idea. But he gave me the perfect opening and I could not restrain myself.

I am slightly hesitant about recruiting friends for this project. What if something I write offends them? What if the research permanently impairs our friendship?

On the other hand, I want to interview some people I know fairly well. If I interview only strangers, I won't have a context in which to frame the things they tell me. I'll know what they choose to tell me, but I won't have a sense of how they act in real life---when they aren't being studied.

I am really hoping Kelly will agree to participate. I am very drawn to Kelly. He makes me laugh, but I imagine that he sometimes generates humor when others would either leave the room or engage in an argument. His response to my request for a study participant is one which I might have predicted.

"What kind of humor are you studying, anyway?" he

chuckles. "Deadly dull humor that comes from people who can't think of anything serious to say?"

"No," I laugh. "That would be boring. I want to study the humor that people use in situations that trouble them."

"And what kind of humor is that," he asks slyly. "Do you have a definition of humor? Maybe you'd better show me what kind of humor you're studying before I agree to participate."

"I don't see how I can," I say. "No book I have read so far has given a definition that suits my study. Steve Allen, the comedian writes: 'Many of the great minds of history have brought their concentration to bear on the mystery and power of humor and to date their conclusions are so contradictory and ephemeral that they cannot possibly be classified as scientific' (Allen, 1974; P. 176). I'm willing to go with that. If all the great minds of history can't define humor, why should I think that I could do it?"

"But there is black humor, and cartoon humor and puns," he protests. "You surely are not planning to study all of those."

"No, I'm not," I say, trying to sound confident. "There is a body of literature which refers to a

quality which interests me. Authors such as Mangham, McGrath, Reid and Stewart (1994) refer to that characteristic as resiliency. They define it in terms of competence and coping in the face of adversity or risk. They don't write about humor specifically, but I believe there are people who use humor as part of their own resiliency. I think I am one of these.

"The person who seems to have come the closest to defining the kind of humor I am studying is Viktor Frankl. He was a renowned psychiatrist who was interned in a Nazi concentration camp in the Second World War. He suffered horrible indignities, was separated forever from his wife. More than once his life was saved by a quirky twist of fate. He kept himself alive by working on manuscripts. When they were destroyed, he started over again on scraps of paper. He wrote that he would never have survived without his sense of humor. He said: 'The attempt to develop a sense of humor, and to see things in a humorous light, is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living' (Frankl, 1962; P. 43)."

Kelly is thoughtful. Then he says: "But don't you have to have a definite idea about what humor is before you can study it? Won't you have to attach a humor

detector to my arm and measure something on it while you are studying me? How would you know if it's really humor I'm using or if it's something else?"

"This is qualitative research," I explain. "If we were doing quantitative research, then we might have to agree on a definition of humor and then try to measure it in some way. But in real life we don't measure humor on any scale. If people laugh, we call it humor.

"There is a large body of literature describing different theories of humor. One of the most comprehensive summaries I have encountered was compiled by Niki Wosnack (1990), a student who went through the Master's program in counselling psychology a few years ahead of me. She identified five basic types of humor theories. Do you want to hear about them?"

"Might as well," says Kelly.

"Wosnack says that the early philosophers concentrated their attention on superiority theories of humor. They wrote that humor gives pleasure because we are able to see ourselves as better than, or triumphant over others."

"Sounds good to me," says Kelly. "Go on."

"Then there are incongruity theories. They are my favourites. They hold that humor pleases when it

contains an element of surprise or when it suddenly helps us complete a full understanding. Some theorists believe that a 'safe' environment must be established before the incongruity and its resolution can be viewed as humorous."

"That makes sense," says Kelly.

"Moving on, we come to tension release and relief theories. These theories say that humor allows us to distance ourselves from unpleasant emotive stimuli."

"Emotive Stimuli?"

"Feelings. You know, better funny than sad. Now, There are also physiological theories of humor. Some researchers say that laughter changes the physiological state of our bodies, affecting muscles, hormones, nervous system and brain. There are people who believe that laughter can actually improve physical health."

"That's four," says Kelly. "You said there were five groups of theories."

"Yes. The final group comes from the psychoanalytic tradition in psychiatry and psychology. These theories say that humor is a sophisticated defense mechanism. It substitutes for the effects which would be generated by direct response to aggressive or sexual drives. Humor, as a release, is

socially acceptable."

"That covers a lot of territory," says Kelly. "But it sounds to me as if none of the theories really explain why humor is funny. Do we know why humor is funny?"

"I don't think so. The most comprehensive explanation I have found comes from Raskin (1985). He says that humor occurs when people perceive overlapping scripts. So if I say you are ugly, when you know you are handsome, then my comment seems funny to you."

"And if I think I'm ugly?" says Kelly.

"Then you probably wouldn't laugh if I say you are ugly. But we are getting off track here.

"You wanted to know what kind of humor I will be studying. Reading about the different types of humor I found myself unable to choose one type which would most interest me. A person in distress might use any of them. I like to think that humor is like a feather whose slightest motion tickles our insides. Depending on where we are when we feel that tickling, we giggle; we laugh uproariously; we suppress the tiniest of smiles. We memorize the moment when the tickle came and recreate it for others, just so we can feel it again. I read in a book on humor authored by Goldstein

and McGhee (1972) that humor can be found in every culture in the world. If they are right, then possibly every human on earth wants to feel that tickle. So researchers keep asking: What makes that feather move? and, Why does it move one way for some and, another way for others?"

"Haven't they found the answer yet?" Kelly teases.

"I guess not. There are dozens of articles published in the psychological literature every year. The sociological literature has articles too, and a lot of work is being done in the area of humor and physical health.

"But in my case, it's a personal study, a study to educate me. Maybe it will help me be a better counsellor. Right now I don't know."

"Other counsellors have certainly studied humor. Freud was so interested in humor that, in 1905, he devoted an entire book to its consideration (Freud, 1963). He wrote that it provides socially acceptable release mechanism for psychic tension. This idea seems obvious to anyone who has felt better after a hearty laugh, but other psychoanalytic theorists later extended Freud's idea and postulated that humor can act as a drive-reduction mechanism. To test this theory,

researchers tried to quantify the intensity of sexual or aggressive drives in individuals, then to measure changes through the application of humor. The humor they presented was in the form of cartoons of varying degrees of funniness. In order to decide how funny the cartoons actually were, they consulted a panel of judges. In 1974 Levine published a book of studies by researchers who were trying to test humor's capacity as a drive reduction mechanism."

"Did they prove anything?"

"I think not. The findings seemed to be very contradictory. There was some difficulty in defining terms and interpreting the results.

"In the late 1980's, researchers began to assess the degree and manner in which humour is used as a coping mechanism. These studies used methods which were not as numerically based as the cartoon response studies, or some of the medical studies which measured humor in terms of the intensity of galvanic skin responses. If the research participants said they used humor, then the researchers believed them. They also accepted the opinions of observers. There was less emphasis on standardizing humor through response to stimuli deemed to be humorous."

"What subjects did those researchers study?"

"Warner (1991) analyzed narratives describing student nurses' experiences in a mental hospital and found that the students used humor as a means of coping with on-the-job stress.

"Anderson and Arnoult (1989), in a retrospective study of 159 college students found coping humor to be associated positively with physical and psychological health.

"Bizi, Keinan & Beit-Hallahmi (1988) measured humor in Israeli soldier trainees by means of self report and peer rating scales. They found that those perceived by others to be humorous were also perceived by others to cope well in stressful situations.

"Overholser (1992) described the development of a questionnaire--Coping Humor Scale--to measure the degree to which people report using humor as a coping mechanism. Using this measure to differentiate among undergraduate college students, he found humor to be associated with lower loneliness and higher self-esteem. He also found that the intensity of the relationship was influenced by the degree to which subjects reported using humor as a coping mechanism.

"I considered the possibility of using a humor

measurement scale in my study. But, when all was said and done, I had not set out to compare individuals to each other. Nor was I intending to interview a large number of subjects. I just want to know what happens inside the minds and hearts of individual people when they transform distress into humor."

"And you think you can find out by asking them?" Kelly wonders. "Will a university accept that as research and give you a degree?"

He is teasing, I think. I am flustered. Surely after all these years of knowing and trusting each other, he surely should have some faith in my judgment. But maybe not.

I believe this is research, important research. It is just as important as research which standardizes the terms and reports the results in numbers. It is the research I want to do. I can hardly wait to ask people how they use humor in situations which trouble them and learn from the stories they tell me. Maybe some day, when I have heard so many stories that they all sound the same, I will use what I have learned to develop a questionnaire where people can tick off statements that most closely describe how they use humor in situations which trouble them. But right now

I think I need to talk to people about their experience. I would need to do this even if the university insisted that I develop questionnaires and report numbers.

So why am I feeling defensive over Kelly's harmless joke? The truth is that Kelly has touched a very tender nerve, hit upon a secret suspicion which kept me away from graduate school for years. If it is credible, supportable academic research, I told myself, I probably won't like it. I could hardly believe my good fortune when I finally took the graduate school plunge and found that people were studying other people and writing research papers devoid of charts or graphs.

But I don't share this with Kelly. Instead, I launch into an academic defence of qualitative research and a description of my research plan.

"Qualitative research is becoming more and more common," I say. "Narratives describing the conscious experience of people who have encountered a particular phenomenon can legitimately be used as data for qualitative research (Osborne, 1990; Berg, 1989; Polkinghorn, 1983; Georgi, 1975).

I will be looking for the similarities and differences among the people I am interviewing. I will

be trying to understand what humor and distress means to them, not trying to clearly define the terms and see if they fit the mould. The objective of this study is to document the conscious experience of people who deliberately create humor--for themselves or others--in situations which trouble them, and to reflect on that experience from a psychological perspective. I am planning to interview six people. If I don't get enough information, or if the findings are so contradictory that I cannot understand them, I may interview more.

"The vehicle of data collection will be the open-ended interview employing techniques of encouragement described by Becker (1986). I will be asking very general questions and letting the participants respond in their own way. Hopefully, if I am listening to them, interested in what they have to say, they will open up and talk about what humor and distress means to them.

"The proposed schedule targets data collection and analysis early in 1994 with a full report in the form of a thesis. Does that sound like real research to you?"

"I don't know," he says. "You're the student, not

me. Am I the first participant, then?"

"No. I have already interviewed another friend of mine. I did a small pilot study a few months ago to see if I could make it work. She was my only research participant."

"And how did that go?"

"Pretty well, I think. She told me stories about how she uses humor, but she also cried quite a bit."

"Cried! In an interview about humor?"

"Yes. You have to remember that the interview was also about distress."

"I don't think I'm prepared to cry for you. Maybe you shouldn't choose me. Why did you choose me, anyway?"

"Well, the people who know about this type of research say I should look for participants who can shed light on the phenomenon under investigation and readily join me in a discussion which will lead us to a shared understanding of their experience (Osborne, 1990; Berg, 1989; Shapiro, 1986; Becker, 1986; Georgi, 1975). According to Georgi (1975) I should get the most useful information from articulate people who are willing to share their actual experience with the phenomenon. You are certainly articulate, and we like

to talk to each other, and I think, just from watching you in social situations, that you have experienced something about the relationship between humor and distress."

I squirm a little. I've been watching him. I don't like the way it sounded when I said it. I wonder if it makes him uncomfortable. If it does, he lets it pass.

He says: "So you've already studied one friend, and now you want to study me. Do you have four more friends you want to study?"

"No. After you I'm going to look for people I don't already know. I'm using the snowball sampling method (Berg, 1989) which means that I will talk about the study and ask people to recommend candidates to me. If you know any people who you think would be good candidates, I would like to hear about them."

"How would I know if they were good candidates?"

"You would start with a hunch--a feeling that this might be a person who uses humor in times of distress. Then I would talk to the person and ask if he or she would be willing to participate in an interview--approximately forty-five minutes long--starting with the question: "How do you employ humor in situations

which trouble you?" Any person who could not easily respond to the question would not be a good candidate."

"Have you found anyone yet who isn't a good candidate?"

"Yes, my friend Mary. We laugh whenever we are together. She loves cartoons, reads books which are catalogued in the humor section at the library. When I asked her the question: 'How do you employ humor in situations which trouble you?" she thought for a moment and said: 'I don't think I do use it. Sometimes I laugh later about things which have happened, but I can't say I actually employ humor when I'm troubled.'

"Mary was not selected as a research participant in my study of humor and distress. Do you think you could talk to me for forty-five minutes about how you use humor in situations which trouble you?"

"Humor in situations which trouble me? Oh, probably. What else would I have to do?"

"Think about the question before the interview, then come prepared to talk, to tell me stories about whatever comes to mind. If you decide you don't want to be in my thesis, you can opt out any time. If you choose a pseudonym and we change a few facts about your identity, most readers won't be able to identify you.

We'll tape record the conversation and I'll have to transcribe it into print later on. Then I will show you a copy of the interview transcript, talk with you about my thoughts and hear what you have to say. I may call and ask you questions as I get further into the research. You can call me if additional things come to mind. If we disagree about anything, you can correct me. Your corrections will be part of my data."

"But how can I correct an expert? Who's to say that I would know more about myself than you would know? You're supposed to be the scientist, aren't you?"

"In this type of study, the researcher is not necessarily the expert. Wertz (1986) and Georgi (1975) describe the researcher's role in qualitative research as participatory, as opposed to objective. In this study I will be investigating a phenomenon first observed through my personal experience. Having chosen an unstructured interview format, I will undoubtedly influence the data during the collection process. I will freely admit that and try to understand the role I am playing. Berg (1989) suggests that researchers make themselves aware of their own biases and predispositions by keeping a personal journal in which

they record feelings and observations about the research. Wertz (1984) suggests that researchers take on the role of participants in their own studies. I have been keeping a journal since beginning the pilot study which led to the development of the thesis proposal. Prior to interviewing any more participants, I will arrange to be interviewed by a student colleague who will follow the interview guidelines I will be using when I interview participants. Then I will transcribe my own interview and analyze it using the methods of analysis I intend to use in the study. The data generated by my self-disclosure will provide me and my evaluators with critical information about my role in the data-gathering process."

"What will your thesis look like, then?"

"It will be a descriptive study, using quotations from the interviews and combining them with my thoughts and observations. I will try to consider each participant as an individual, and then look at similarities among them. I hope I will discover themes, patterns and principles which I can expect to see again when I work with humorous people in future.

"Now, do you think you want to be in my thesis?"

"I'm not sure. I have never been in a book

before. But I suppose there has to be a first time for everything. I'll give it a try if you think you can stand a forty-five minute interview with me. What was that question you said you were going to ask me?"

"How do you employ humor in situations which trouble you?"

"Shall I tell you now?"

"No. Restrain yourself. Wait until the interview."

"I can hardly wait."

The Challenge of Understanding and Reporting The Data

It is one thing to gather interesting data, and another thing entirely to figure out what to do with it when you get it. After June and Kelly, I interviewed three people I knew only slightly, or not at all, Clara, Dylan and Penny. I finished up with Frank, a friend more recently acquired than Kelly and June.

I transcribed all the interviews from the tapes and read them over. It was not difficult to see tremendous differences among the participants. I wondered if they even belonged in the same study. I wondered if I should exclude some of them and look for

replacements. I wondered if I should simply interview more people to see which characteristics appeared most frequently. In the end, I decided to try writing the thesis based on the data obtained from these six participants, the data from my journal and the interview of me conducted by a fellow student.

I began analyzing the data using a method described by Giorgi and recommended by Osborne. Adherence to the method requires that important passages in each interview be selected and paraphrased. The paraphrases are then sorted into groups based on similarity of theme. The researcher looks for similar themes in among the participants and these themes become the central tenets of the research documentation.

When I analyzed June's interview using this method her data revealed these theme statements:

1. Confusion about how acceptable she is to self and others
2. Obligation to others
3. Humor is powerful
4. Humor is dangerous.

These themes were already in my mind when I interviewed Kelly. I listened for them as he talks. They were there, though they presented themselves in a different form. He definitely believes, for example, that humor is powerful, but uses that power for entirely different purposes, purposes which would be completely uncharacteristic of June.

Analysis of Kelly's interview revealed additional themes not found in June's. I added "hiding behind humor" and "humor is a weapon" to the list of themes I would be remembering as I interviewed Clara. After Clara's interview I added "humor is better than distress". The checklist of themes grew as I went.

The first time I tried to summarize all the data, I organized the writing around the themes. "Here are some examples of how people use the power of humor," I wrote. Then I listed the relevant experiences of my six participants.

The writing was flat, uninteresting and unenlightening even to me. Something was wrong. The interviews were interesting. The writing should have been interesting too.

My thesis supervisor offered help. "These interviews are rich with language," she said. "How can

you use the language of your participants to capture the wonder that you feel when you talk with them?"

I turned to the quotations selected to illustrate the themes. The expressive language was there, words like "revenge", phrases like: "I thought I would explode." I quoted these passages. Why did my analysis subdue their passion, extinguish their fire?

I followed the language trail back to the interview transcripts. I assigned codes to selected words and passages. When this was done, I had another comprehensive system of categories. I could pull together all the references to physical sensations, all the references to humor as a substitute for direct communication. But still I needed a satisfying format in which to present my observations, my learnings. I went back to the literature in search of a suitable writing style.

There is one author whose technical writing enthrals me. That writer is the hypnotist, psychologist and psychiatrist, Milton Erickson. When I turn to a collection of his writings (Erickson, 1967), his patients seem to leap off the page and into my heart. Perhaps that is because he makes no pretence of presenting them in an objective, analytical fashion.

He states his guiding therapeutic principles, but the people in his stories stand on their own. What brings them to life is that each has a special, personal relationship with Milton Erickson. He likes them, dislikes them, makes no apologies for his own reactions.

I thought about the six personal relationships I have formed in the process of collecting my data. These relationships became my new tools of analysis.

The themes from my first analysis point to major ideas about humor. When I think about the tenets which strike me as most important, most surprising, the participants settle themselves naturally into groups. There are Kelly and June who speak modestly about the humor they use, have difficulty remembering specific incidents in which they used it successfully, focus on the impact of their humor on others. There are Clara and Dylan whose humor stories tumble out endlessly and continue to tumble even after we have declared the interviews officially ended, who focus on humor as a personal habit for them. Then there is Penny who could join either group. Her stories tumble out like Clara's, though, like Kelly and June, she speaks frequently of the impact her humor has on others.

Penny stands on her own. And Frank? Frank shares qualities with each of them, yet is different from all of them. He uses humor as a key, unlocking doors to friendship, to acceptance by others.

It is my relationships with the participants, relationships which unfolded during the research, that keep the participants alive in my imagination. With the help of my progress notes, I recreated on paper my initial emotional responses to the material shared by the participants. My readers will meet the participants as I met them, biased by my previous relationships with them, enlightened by the phenomena I observed in the process of doing the research.

Searching for some way to consolidate the findings, I pulled together the codes I placed in the interview text. They allowed me to retrieve and assemble passages which share common elements. For each individual, there are characteristic sources of distress, expressions of humor, and rules which influence the relationship between them.

New curiosities emerged. I asked additional questions of my participants so that I might better understand the discoveries I made. It became important to ask about childhood influences which might have

shaped the humorous behaviors I am studying.

As I worked with the data I began to ask questions about myself. Before long there was more of myself in the writing than I had ever intended. I assigned myself full participant status and let my stories stand alongside those from the interviews I conducted.

By and by another learning opportunity presented itself. When I decided to include my emotional responses in the presentation of the data, I unwittingly abandoned my original promise not to judge the relative funniness of the humor described by my participants. Like the panels of judges who rated the funniness of cartoons for the quantitative humor studies, I judged them all.

Outsiders stepped in to help with the project. My sisters added a new dimension to the stories of childhood when they offered their view of the childhood I shared with them. My friend Mary read my work and compared her observations with mine.

My intent is to record all the findings in a context which invites readers to question, speculate and draw whatever they may from the study I undertook to satisfy my personal curiosity.

CHAPTER THREE

THEMES AND PERSPECTIVES ON HUMOR AND DISTRESS

Introduction

Each of the research participants has stories to tell when you ask them how they use humor in situations which trouble them. In among the content of the narratives are themes and ideas which characterize each person's approach to the integration of distress and humor.

The quoted passages do not appear in the same chronological order in the original interviews. I have filtered them through my own interpretive process and positioned them conveniently to illustrate the themes.

My personal stories appear in the final section of the chapter, but my impressions prevail throughout.

Humor is Powerful and Dangerous:

Perspectives from Kelly and June

Kelly:

> I think humor's neat in that you can say and do things--things you might not really be comfortable saying or doing in other ways-- and be clever in doing it too. It takes a bit of thinking to get that to work well. Timing is important. Humor and timing go together.

I am sitting at a boardroom table, talking with Kelly. I am apprehensive. Kelly is not behaving like the Kelly I know and love. I expected that he would tell me lots of stories about funny things he has said and done. I know he has these stories, or should have them. For years he has been entertaining me with his tales. Instead of telling me stories, Kelly is lecturing me about humor. He speaks not of the humor he uses, but of the humor he would like to use some day.

> I'll try to think of something that happened at work because I find it very stressful sometimes. This is something that hasn't happened but I'd like to do as humor.
>
> There's a situation where a bunch of people were shuffled around in their offices because new people were coming. One manager decided that his new staff people were going to have offices no matter what. An individual who was working in our area already has a space that was supposed to go to another person. He got kicked out of his office--even though he's only going to be there for a short while.
>
> I would have loved to--and I still would love to somehow get back to the individual--the individual who used the power plays to move people around--which I thought was inappropriate. What happened was, it ended up that this manager hired two people. One was a female and one was a male. There's one open office and there's one closed office. He decided who was going to go where. So he put the woman in the open office. He put the guy in the closed office.
>
> I'm waiting for an opportunity to say something

> when that manager is around. Like: "Oh, that's interesting. The woman got the open office and the man got the closed one." Somewhere along the line I want to be able to come up with a quick thing that really makes that individual feel uncomfortable and question decisions he made around playing power games.
>
> To me the obvious solution would have been to say: "Okay, these people are coming on board. Let's find them temporary space until somebody else leaves." There's no use displacing somebody for a short time. To me the obvious thing was you don't assign people offices. You get two people coming to work. One's male and one's female or they're both males or whatever. You say: "There's two offices here. I don't care who sits where. It's no big deal. You just decide among yourselves."
>
> That is where I would have liked--I still would like to use that in a humorous situation where I could basically put the person down. It's revenge!

Later, when I read the interview transcript, make time to soak it in, I see that justice and fairness are really important to Kelly. He wants the world to be a just place. He wants to be assured that people in authority are acting responsibly. When the world falls short of his high standards for fair play, he wants to take action. One of his most powerful working tools is humor.

> I don't put people down who I don't think deserve it, okay? I mean--we're talking about stressful situations here. I don't really get pleasure out of seeing people embarrassed. I feel really sorry for people who are put in situations that embarrass them. I feel sorry for people who get caught on camera, you know, in these goofy shows

> where they're doing something when they wouldn't want to get caught doing it. I find that is really inappropriate because that's taking advantage of people. But I figure if people have got it coming to them, let her rip.

The thing that bothers me most about what Kelly has said is that he seems to be focusing on the kind of humor I like least, the humor of superiority. I know Kelly to be the master of the trite turn of phrase, the innocent question which makes everyone laugh good-naturedly. Yet he is talking about revenge, about shifts in power. When I chose him as a subject, I wanted to hear about the good things, the funny things. I wanted to be able to write about them. I suppose I wanted to hear that Kelly laughs off his troubles.

Still, I should not have been surprised that things did not turn out as I had expected. After all, I had not anticipated tears when I sat down to talk with June. I always assumed she was pleased with the humor she spreads to the world. It turned out that, like Kelly, she worries about the appropriateness of her humor.

> Well, there's no question that it comes out before--long before I've thought of the consequences. In fact, it has its own energy. I'm sure that at times it has leapt right out of my mouth before I can do anything about it. I do find though--well, it's my personal experience that I'm not hurting people with my humor.

> You see, my brother uses humor and it is brutal. And my sister uses humor and it is outrageous. I'm not convinced that I'm that different from them, but I don't think that I'm the same. So my fear is that I might offend people with something I've said but I think that by far and wide it just comes out of my mouth. My mind is very quick.

So these are the common threads that appear when June and Kelly tell you how they employ humor in situations which trouble them. They don't deny that they employ humor, but they won't brag about it either. They have difficulty remembering specific situations in which they employed humor. They want to assure themselves that they are being fair, compassionate. Each of them knows that the humor they use can have a definite effect on other people.

And this is where the similarity between Kelly and June ends, right at the point where the worrying stops and the humor begins. Kelly's humor is other-directed.

> I will ridicule religion in general by saying something about situations in the world that are caused by religious tensions and I'll say that both sides are wrong. I always try to balance things out. So if I say something bad about the Jewish situation, I'll try to say something bad about the Arab situation. I think you can say those types of things in a humorous way and still get your point across. I feel better for that because in my little way it's sort of saying: "This is what I believe." I try to do it in a humorous way and sometimes it's not funny.

In contrast, the humor stories which June relates

display a self-directed sort of humor. This is part of a story about how June would use humor to put others at ease at a party.

> I think that when I use it I tend to be self-deprecating so that I'm not hurting them. Like I wouldn't say: "Those are certainly the most ridiculous pants I've ever seen you wearing." That would never fall into what I would call humor or outrage. That would just be rude. I would say something that would be self-deprecating so it's something that I could live with which would make people relax to the point where they could almost go SPLAT!

Just as the theme of fairness and justice runs through Kelly's conversation like a binding thread, the thread that binds June's stories is her propensity to identify with the feelings experienced by others.

> I'm a person who receives far more than I send. I'm often aware of the feelings in the room. In other words, I'm aware that you're happy and someone else is wishing he were somewhere else. I do receive them and I receive them all. I'm out there trying to figure out what's going on--rather than what's going on inside me.

When I sift through the stories of Kelly and June, I see that each of them displays a kind of habitual humor. Kelly's is the humor of social comment. June's is the humor of self-deprecation. Both Kelly and June tell stories about how their habitual humor led to an unexpected result. Kelly says:

> Josephine and I were doing a sales brochure. We had all these addresses and names we had to put

> in. One of them was going to a Catholic parish but Dave didn't give us the full name. So while we were waiting for the information we just put in Father O'Mally's Cathedral and Bingo Parlour.
>
> But then the people in head office wanted to see a draft of what this thing was going to look like before the big chief would sign the covering letter. Well we completely forgot that this was in there and it got sent up to head office and I get this phone call from Dave who realized it had gone down there with this in it. Now I thought, this is funny, but we're all going to lose our jobs. I mean the intent wasn't to ridicule the Catholic church or anything like that. It was a filler.

June says:

> Jack needs a baby-sitter but he doesn't have a car because Betty's got the car. So my mind's drifting off because he's wondering if I can drive my daughter. And I thought, Oh brother, that's the last thing I need. But what came to my mind was: "Well, you'll probably never get a baby-sitter if you're leaving it up to me to find your place.

But, as June found out, her self-deprecating humor seemed like serious, believable stuff to Jack. While June managed to hide from Jack the fact that she did not wish to deliver his baby-sitter, she left him with the false impression that she is not good at finding city addresses. After all was said and done, she had to endure being given a set of detailed instructions by Jack so that she would not inconvenience him by getting lost bringing the sitter to his house.

For both Kelly and June, humor comes with a

certain degree of danger. In Kelly's case, there is the danger that his humor might be interpreted as direct social comment rather than as humor.

> Ev[illegible] crowd you can go in and you can say [illegible] - ou know really tacky and tasteless things a[illegible] somewhere along the line explain yourself so that people realize that wasn't really offensive. I guess you can always pull back the things that you've said. You can always hide under the skirt of humor. I suppose, if it didn't work, you could say: "That was a joke."

And here is the danger which humor presents to June: that while she is being sensitive to the feelings of others, protecting them by devaluing herself, she may go too far and forget to listen to the inner voices which offer her self-esteem and dignity.

Humor is powerful. It can put strangers at ease, it can temporarily disable other powerful people.

Humor is dangerous. The humor you use can be turned back on you. People may not understand your humor, may be hurt by it.

Humor is powerful. Humor is dangerous. Be careful how you use it. Retract it if you notice that it is getting out of hand. These are the tenets in the stories told by Kelly and June.

Humor is Better Than Distress:

Perspectives from Clara and Dylan

Clara:

> I think that if there could be more humor in the office at all times there would be less burn out among the consultants. I believe that it's such a relief to have a good laugh. A good laugh is worth a thousand cries, I think. You could release so much tension if you could just laugh.
>
> So few people have really good belly laughs about things any more. Like when we were kids we would role around the carpet giggling about something. I look at adults and I think adults don't do that. They're always worried about feeling silly.

When Clara speaks about humor as an important element in dealing with distress, her whole being radiates with conviction. We met for the first time just a few moments ago. We are in her basement. Her husband is renovating. Her teen-age children move busily about. How does she employ humor in situations which trouble her? Just ask her.

> There are lots of different personalities in the office, one in particular who's really prim and proper. I really can do some things with him that I don't think other girls would try. He's the one who I typed a report for. He was dictating quite quickly I thought. I had trouble keeping up. So I did the report in the proper form and then (it's wonderful with Wordperfect!) I asked it to take out all the periods and all the spaces. I gave him this report which was just one long word. I think it made two fewer pages in the report than there would have been.
>
> But then he does have a sick sense of humor too

> because he dictated the next tape at this rate. And I thought, if you don't speed [illegible] soon ... It was really worse listening to that than when he was speaking quickly. He rather paid me back for that one.

I could listen to Clara's stories all night. She thinks humor is the greatest thing, sends well-received messages to superiors by using it, cannot understand how other people can live with less.

> One time in church I thought I was going to explode. It was my son's confirmation and this lady went up for Communion and--this isn't funny but it is--she fell. She tumbled down the steps. She fell and people ran to pick her up and I was really startled for her and really upset. But her wig rolled off and rolled down the aisle of the church. They had to scurry and put it back on and no one--I looked around and saw that no one was laughing!
>
> Now how can they not laugh? It was really hard for me not to see the humor of that. That's the thing I remember most about my son's Confirmation. If she had just fallen I wouldn't have thought anything of it. But to have your wig fall off and roll down the aisle?
>
> After church I said--when we were all here for lunch: "Didn't anyone find that funny?" And they thought I was sick, like what do you mean funny? Well, it was! It was hilarious!

No wonder I can listen to Clara for as long as she will talk. In her I have found what I expected to find when I talked with June and Kelly, someone who will announce and demonstrate that humor can soothe almost any pain. If Clara were a therapist, she would

probably write articles in the professional journals about the healing power of humor in therapy. It is not so much that Clara plans to be humorous, though certainly she does plan it at times. More to the point is the fact that her humor is irrepressible. It would be more trouble to shut it out than to let it shine. She says:

> One time one of my Guide leaders had just bought a brand new flashlight that I borrowed to go to the bathroom and while I was in there I thought wouldn't it be funny if that flashlight dropped down the hole? So I told her it did drop down the hole.
>
> She was so angry with me. She had walked ten blocks to buy that flashlight. But I tried to convince her that it was kind of like the fridge at home. When you lift up the lid, the light comes on. It was wonderful. You could see what was down there.
>
> I finally had to give her her flashlight back because she was getting kind of angry. She wanted to go to bed or something.

With Clara, it is almost as if humor might be a natural body function like breathing, or processing sugar. It seems to be that way for Dylan as well.

It takes a little while for Dylan to get started, but once he gets going, you can see how committed he is to humor as an essential life process.

Dylan:

From years back, even in high school I can

> remember being the class clown. I probably have been accused of acting stupid but I always had a wit and would say something and respond to what was going on. I think in a class context I often find myself being able to respond and say something other people are thinking. I think I'm able to--in times when people are frustrated with the instructor--make a humorous comment and get a point across in a way that isn't seen to be offensive. I think it's developed into a method of communication.

A method of communication, with others, with oneself. Ask Dylan and he can tell you how it feels when stress turns into humor.

> Stress feels like a big burden that's on your shoulders and as you walk you're getting lower and lower to the ground as the weight seems to bear down on you. But the bubbling feeling is sort of like some force that's inside of you, that just gushes up and says this is enough. We have to have some laughter. Let's put this down and allow this other part of me to come out and invigorate me. Turn that story around. Enough of this! I think that's what I feel. Enough of this! Then the stress goes down and I know there's another way to look at the situation.
>
> I've got this weird thing that happens to me. My father was always a loud sneezer. I don't know what it is--it's not a gift I'm sure but a curse maybe. But we sneeze very loudly. Like in church sometimes I sneeze so loud that sometimes the person who's up there seems to stop and make a comment. And sometimes if I sneeze people will come up to me after and say "Yes, I saw you in church" or "I heard you in class."
>
> Yesterday in class I was facing the door and I sneezed so loud that it echoed down the hallway and people were looking at me and shaking their heads. It's completely unplanned and it just becomes funny.

If I spent much time with Clara and Dylan I might start to believe that it would be easy to use humor as a therapeutic device. I could imagine how the process would unfold. They would tell me their troubles. Very shortly afterwards, possibly even before they had finished the first sad story, they would already have seen the potential for humor.

I see now how it would be tempting to try to measure humor in terms of galvanic skin responses. You could hook up electrodes to Clara and Dylan, to Kelly and June. Then you could ask them to talk about humor the way they talked about it in conversations with me. Clara would speak of thinking she might explode, or having a good belly laugh. Dylan would talk of joy, pure joy and uncontrollable laughter. Kelly and June would speak of the need to lighten things up. Then you could measure the intensity of, of what? Of happiness? Of satisfaction with self? Of funniness in the stories they tell?

Is it possible that Clara and Dylan have fewer troubles than Kelly and June? That they simply don't feel as much sadness or frustration?

Dylan speaks of a time which must surely have been sad:

I remember a special time when my parents were killed in a car accident and we had gathered as a family. Taking care of funeral arrangements and before the funeral itself was a very difficult time. We were sitting around planning and talking, again sitting around the table having supper after a few days of hard hard work. We had family from all over the country gathered.

We were sitting around there my sisters and my brothers and a knock came at the door. Just at that time we were in a state of uproarious laughter, laughing like crazy over a certain event when this lady came to the door. She was broken up and tears were streaming down her face because our parents were killed and she had brought us some food.

We were laughing uncontrollably in the background, laughing not at her but in a state of uncontrollable laughter. I haven't talked to her since but I wonder what was going through her mind at that time just hearing our laughter.

Clara tells about an occasion when she must surely have been embarrassed:

I had two disabled girls in my Guide company. They both had cerebral palsy. They were in electric wheelchairs but one was a terror on hers. I used to have to unplug it so she wouldn't run over people's fingers. She was really a character.

We worked for weeks on enrolment for them so they could be enroled as Guides. The big night we were there and everybody's all there and spruced up in their finest and on their best behavior of course. Even I'm good those nights.

And she comes up--we bring her up and she looks at me and says: "What am I doing here Mrs. Jones?" Well of course we said: "You're here to be enroled.

But I think that was her humor. She knew what we

> were doing. She was quite aware of what we were doing. But she kind of thought that would be funny to get up there and make everybody think we hadn't done any work. She was verbal--that's one thing she had going for her. She used that in front of all the big wigs. She was a real character all right.

Humor instead of grieving. Humor instead of humiliation. In all that is said by Clara and Dylan there seems to run a single theme: humor is better than distress. Clara articulates it clearly in this story.

> One of the girls asked me to return a box after she sent me a set of files. Now, being as ignorant as I am I thought I should just not send the empty box back.
>
> In the box I glued two jokes one of which said: "the sexual harassment at this desk will not be reported. It will be graded." And I thought that was quite funny myself.
>
> But what happened was somebody at the loading dock opened this box, was insulted by the fact that this joke was in the bottom of the box, and reported it to his boss, who took it to my coordinator who took it to my office manager who took it to my supervisor and boy, did I get raked over the coals. I had to write a letter of apology to the Personnel Manager for doing this.
>
> I was upset, I was just in tears and I came home and told my husband. He said: "You've got to be kidding!" He thought it was hilarious. He had a good belly laugh. He said "In two or three days you will think this is hilarious." He was right.

Humor is better than distress. Humor is a habit, something which will definitely come to you if you wait

long enough. These are themes I recognize from my own life. Perhaps that is why I feel such kinship with Clara and Dylan. Dylan says:

> I call up the church to have it put in the bulletin that we have a new baby and they ask about the weight. So I say "Oh, I don't know, put in fourteen pounds." I didn't think anybody'd ever read that dumb thing anyway.
>
> Next thing people are coming up to my wife expressing sympathy about how hard it was for her. She's shaking her head. I had only doubled the number. It was seven pounds. People would come up and say: "Oh, he doesn't look like fourteen pounds."
>
> I remember once I worked in a place that in certain contexts people would not accept humor. If I were to use humor up in front of people a couple of elements would give me feedback right to my face. Where I am now it's different and I hear people saying: "Just be yourself."

Humor is better than distress. Why take a situation seriously if there is another alternative? It is far easier to use humor than to resist the temptation to use it. Humor is a habit, a method of communication. These are the tenets in the stories of Clara and Dylan.

We Will Survive by Laughing Together

Perspectives from Penny

As I listen to Penny's stories, I am aware that she is similar to, yet different from all the other

subjects in my study. But then, I should have expected that. I targeted her after seeing her in some special circumstances.

I interviewed Kelly and June because they are my friends, and I am often amused by the things they say. I also know, from hours of conversation, that they both take life, and their responsibilities in life, very seriously. Both Clara and Dylan were recommended to me by others when I spoke about the purpose of my research and the type of participants I was seeking. The people who suggested them said: "This is somebody who uses a lot of humor."

I met Penny at the funeral of a good friend. She was showing a group of strangers some pictures of herself lying next to our dying friend on Hallowe'en. She was wearing a pig's costume and a sign that said: "Nursing Pigs.". I did not see her again, but I knew her humor had been appreciated by my friend's wife. Eighteen months later, when I called to ask if she might be interested in helping with my study, she agreed without hesitation. When I got to her house, she had her coffee pot perking, and her stories all ready.

I work in health care. A lot of the patients find

out really soon that I use my sense of humor in my work. I find that very frequently people can laugh a bit. If I can find that key I can use that to work for them and to work for me.

I just had a man recently who was 53 years old with a brain aneurism. When he came to us he wasn't in very good shape. He couldn't speak. He was paralysed on one side much like a stroke. He looked terrible. His face was all pulled down on the one side and he was very conscious of that. He was just the saddest looking person I've ever seen.

Over the course of time and him getting adjusted to the hospital and knowing we were there to help him I found out that he had quite a sense of humor.

He was incontinent one morning and I helped him get onto the bed and get washed up and everything and it was really embarrassing for him and he told me that. He said "I'm just so embarrassed."

I said "Well, I hear what you're saying but I also need you to know that this just isn't a big deal for me." Well, wearing rubber gloves and trying to wash him up, my rubber gloves pulled his pubic hair. Then he used this against me when his mother was there.

I'm telling her, "You know your son's just terrible and he's always bugging me and he's always being such a smart alec."

She said "Well, you know, he's the only son I've got." She'd lost two other sons and her husband is dead. She said, "You know, I just have to love him the way he is."

So then he set me up. He's got her full support and then he says: "Mom, she pulled my pubic hair this morning. She plucked me like a chicken."

We'll survive by laughing together. A disabled son, a disappointed mother, a health care worker who

cannot cure either of them.

Penny's humor speaks softly of self-deprecation. It also speaks to the redistribution of power. In this she resembles Kelly and June. But somehow, when the humor is out, she seems to feel better than they do.

> By wisecracking with him I was respecting the fact that he had his faculties. Then that would give him the opportunity to know that he could come back at me with another smart answer. It was a way of making us equal somehow.
>
> I'm letting him know that I'm open to fun and horsing around and then if he's responsive then I know that he's somebody I can use my humor with--which also helps me get through the day.

Penny's stories, like Clara's, tumble out pell-mell. It seems there would be no end to them if you kept her talking. Every incident she recounts rings with the dictum: If you can't change it, share it with someone else and laugh at it. The more outrageous the laughter, the better off everyone will be. Take, for example, this story about the action she took when she could not get cooperation from the men in her house.

> I wanted to tell you about my bathroom. Having boys, they pee all over the place--on the curtain and on the floor and on the bathtub.
>
> About two years ago I was just fed up with this urine all over the place. So I figured I had to do something to cope with this situation which wasn't going to change a lot.
>
> After years of asking them if they could just

> clean up when they make a mess, I said: "I'm going to get you guys back for being pigs. I'm going to find wall paper with pigs on it."
>
> That wasn't easy. Finally one shop had some pigs on a border. It was an inspirational wall paper, if you can imagine that. On the border there were two little kids with a cow and a horse in a farm setting. There were two little pigs. And guess what it says! It says: Bless the beasts and the children. So I bought it and the wall paper's very nice with a pink stripe and a floral pattern and this border.
>
> Now I have pigs on the wall. I have a chamber pot in there with a big pink pig in it. I have all kinds of pig ornaments. And that's how I can get back at my kids for being pigs.

"I can get back at my kids." Sounds like revenge.

Revenge! We find it in Kelly's dreams about teaching the office manager a lesson. We find it in Clara's one-word report, presented to a man who dictated too quickly. It is perfectly acceptable to get revenge, if you make it funny.

Revisiting my conversations with Kelly, I note that he said he would like to be a political cartoonist, or just a cartoonist. "I would deal with situations that way."

Penny is a cartoonist. Her pages are the bathroom walls, and other places too. One last story from Penny illustrates her flair for cartooning.

> I decided to go ahead with a hysterectomy and a bladder and bowel repair. And of course, being a

nurse, you always know the things that could go wrong and might go wrong.

Then with all the stress around my own job and wondering if I was going to have a job and seeing how nurses weren't able to do all that they wanted to do and needed to do in a day for patients, I was concerned about whether there was going to be anybody to look after me. And I thought, "Gee, I've devoted a very large part of my life to caring for other people and I wonder if there's going to be anybody to care for me."

So in the process of pre-admission, which I'm not really all that familiar with, I had to go into the hospital and they'd take my blood pressure and weigh me and take a physical and a medical and tell me all the things I had to do to prepare for the operation. They told me that I had to shave my own pubic hair.

I said, "Oh yeah, right on. How am I going to do that?" The nurse said, "Very carefully." Well the thought had never entered my mind that I was going to have to do something like that for myself. I was quite prepared to let somebody else do it in the hospital.

I kind of used that as the focus to be silly around. Nurses have a very nutty sense of humor because of the things we get to do for people. I thought: well, I can't believe this.

This nurse went into detail to tell me how to do it. I thought: I can't believe that this is what nursing has come to.

I went to work and I was telling all the girls that I just can't believe that nursing has just gone down hill so bad and of course they are all laughing and many of them didn't know that this is the kind of up and coming things that are happening. So I decided I would fix these people who were involved, including the doctor.

I talked about the plan for weeks and weeks before I had the surgery. I decided to put a sticker on

> that shaved pubic hair. I really wanted it to say something. I had advice from friends and some of it wasn't very good, or at least it went beyond the limits of my sense of humor.
>
> I looked in store after store and I just couldn't find a sticker that said what I wanted to say. I ended up at a stationery store and I bought a big sticker and a little kitten sticker and I wrote on it: "Bald is beautiful."

Faced with circumstances she cannot change, Penny looks for someone to laugh with. It could be her colleagues, her patients, her children, the staff in the operating theatre. She can even enjoy a shared joke knowing she will be under anaesthetic when the prank is discovered. If you can't change it, find someone to share it with and laugh at it. We can survive if we laugh together. These are the tenets which run through Penny's stories.

Humor is a Key Which Opens Locked Doors:

Perspectives from Frank

> I use humor so frequently that I think I use it in both troubling and non-troubling situations. I think if I were to single out any particular instance--there were a number of times during my counselling. It's not that I was feeling uncomfortable with the kind of material that was coming up from the clients as much as I felt they were feeling uncomfortable with it and I almost had to put on the brakes for them.
>
> In a sense just lighten the situation and, without diminishing the importance of what they were

> saying, allow them to sit back for a moment and take a breather.

Frank is telling me how he uses humor in therapy.

> My client had brought up material which was particularly troubling in terms of the death of his young son. He was talking about how one of his co-workers had made a joke--or a statement which the co-worker had assumed was a joke. They had done five operations on his son and the co-worker said they were using his son as a guinea pig.
>
> And I said at that point: "You probably felt like doing some experimentation on him to see what the stress factor was in a jaw breaking."

Frank is speaking to me in technical terms--one counsellor to another. I did not ask him to do this. I approached him to participate in my study based on my observation that he often joked in class about things which bothered me--papers almost due, concepts too difficult to understand, guest speakers who seemed to be preaching at us without taking the time to find out anything about what we already knew.

But Frank has chosen to tell me how he uses humor in counselling. Listening to him is a little bit like listening to my tapes.

Because I cannot see well enough to read printed material, and there is such a shortage of braille, the technical writings about humor in therapy have been read on tape for me by someone else. Frank's words are

spontaneous, lacking the organization that would undoubtedly characterize them if he took the time to organize them on paper. But his explanations of how and when he uses humor have a familiar ring. He could probably write a journal article if he gave the matter a little more thought.

I ask Frank how he decides when it is time to use humor and he says:

> I think it's something that's more visceral than cerebral. I get a sense of the stomach churning and so on. I get a sense--probably the same physiological response that a rat gets when it's trapped in a corner. There just doesn't seem to be anything else to do at that point.
>
> The mood itself, I think, is almost one of panic if I were to try and put any sort of label on it. It's a situation where I'm panicked and I'm looking for alternatives--something to do in order to alleviate that visceral sort of sense that things are not going along smoothly at this point.

Panic, trapped in a corner, doesn't seem to be anything else to do. What do you do when the door is locked and you cannot get out? You look for a key. For Frank, the key is humor.

Frank is my peer, but, to my knowledge, he has not been studying the use of humor in therapy. I doubt that he has read the professional literature.

Up to this point, I have been thinking of all

those authors as experts, leaders who, based on their vast experience, know all the cues. They know what kind of humor to use, and when it is appropriate to use it. They are working from a well-developed list of reasons why humor is a valid therapeutic device. They have a table of rules which tells them when humor is harmful, and when it is helpful.

Though I have probably said, or read it dozens of times, this is the first occasion on which I feel the full impact of the truth--that humor in therapy, humor anywhere, is like an interpersonal chemical reaction. There seems little point in making scientific observations about the reaction unless you understand what chemicals went into the mix.

Talking with Frank, I hear clearly that his cue to use humor in counselling comes from within him--that visceral feeling he gets when the tension is too high. Frank and I explore the tension and how it acts on him in other situations.

> Once in a class I was really pressed to present a critique of an article. I had prepared well enough but as I saw it, my presentation didn't really have any bang. Everyone else had done all these beautiful overheads with flow charts and diagrams. I thought: "I don't have anything!"
>
> So I sat down and drew a maze with no exit and then put the three very basic and actually

> pointless conclusions to which these researchers had arrived through their experiment and I used this as my overhead for the presentation. I said: "After the fifth reading of this article I have not come to any clearer understanding of the point that they were making."
>
> Probably I was most gratified not by the acceptance of my analysis of this article but by the guffaw laughter that my presentation brought and the fact that I left the teacher in tears.

My ears perk up in surprise when Frank tells me this story. I was a member of the class which witnessed this incident, but had long forgotten it by the time I approached Frank to ask if he would participate in my study. As he tells the story, I recall the day, remember that I was not particularly amused at the time. In fact, I was [illegible] resentful, hoping this bit of trickery would [illegible] him a better mark than my long hours of suffering over a serious presentation was going to earn me. I suspect it never occurred to me that Frank was feeling inept at the front of the class, that his presentation was the culmination of many hours spent suffering over the assignment. I thought he was simply showing off, playing the role of stand-up comedian.

Come to think of it, Frank is a stand-up comedian, and he likes it that way. This is what he shares with Clara, Dylan and Penny, the unabashed love of

performing for an admiring audience.

> I certainly never feel better than when I've just elicited a good belly laugh from one or a group of people. The stronger the laughter the better I feel. I think I'm a frustrated comic.
>
> At times it can be very taxing, though. A conversation will be going on and at one level I'm paying close attention. But at another level I have this parallel script branching out and running in my head.
>
> If I let something slip out, then the attention comes to me and moves away from the real discussion. I have to guard against that but I'm not always successful.

I can look at Frank through either of two lenses. I can see him as the lively comic, making the most of adversity and allowing outsiders to enjoy a laugh in the process. On the other hand, there might be times when the humor-producing, attention-loving Frank would benefit from a more direct expression of the feelings he habitually shows in humor.

Sometimes when Frank talks, he reminds me a little of June. I recall June's story about how she joked that she would get lost looking for an address rather than ever telling a man directly that she did not feel like driving her daughter over to baby-sit his children. Here is the story Frank tells about how he avoided the obligation to make a good impression on an important person.

> When I met the company president for the first time we were just walking down the hall and my buddy pointed him out to me. Then he said: "Oh, hello."
>
> I said: 'Oh, this is the guy you're not supposed to swear in front of." And we kept on walking. Since that time the president has remembered who I am.

Suppose Frank makes a bad impression on the president! Suppose the professor is unwilling to accept Frank's analysis of a journal article! Suppose the tension in the therapy room gets so high that it blows out the walls!

Frank wants respect, good marks, successful therapy for his clients. For him, the straight, direct corridor is not always the best route to get him where he wants to be. Humor is the key which unlocks the doors to other corridors which, he hopes, will lead to his destination. These are the tenets which run through the stories Frank tells.

Humor is a Spotlight Which You Can Direct

Perspectives from Me and My Sisters

Early in this book I wrote metaphorically about taking an unsolvable problem, an egg of distress, to a counsellor. In that egg, the egg I thought I knew, she found possibilities. Here is my story about the

problem.

I had a son whose behaviour I could neither understand, nor control. He threw shoes at my head while I sat on the toilet. He refused to go to afternoon kindergarten, refused to stay home. No matter how hard I tried to avoid it, we had an argument every day at lunch time. Then we would walk angrily to school.

The confrontations grew steadily more intense until one day, he lay down in the school parking lot, grasped my ankles, and refused to let go. I begged him to let go. He would not. I bribed him to let go. He would not. I entreated him to talk to me. He would not. I wanted to kick hard but I could not. It wasn't his grip that restrained me as much as the fact that people were watching us, teachers, parents, elementary pupils. I would gladly have kicked this child in the face, kicked him hard, just to pay him back for throwing shoes at my head, just to make him let me go. What kind of mother must I be?

The counsellor I saw did not attempt to make me confront any of these feelings. She did not seek a direct admission of my shame and despair. Somewhere in my story she saw a video of an average-sized woman,

hog-tied physically and mentally in a busy parking lot by a determined child who whispered in some foreign language "I want to talk to you before you leave me here." Once the scene had been relegated to video status, taken out of the context of real life, we were free to try out different endings to the story. What kind of fool would stand tall while trying to hear a child whispering on the ground? What kind of uncaring mother would kick a child who was trying to communicate with her? Well, if I wasn't a fool, and I wasn't uncaring, why did I not simply lie down beside him in the parking lot and hear whatever he had to say?

It was all so simple when we thought about it that way. To the onlookers I would be a creative mother, a lie-down comic. I couldn't tell what I would be in my son's eyes unless I actually tried it out. That gave me something to try. It's hard to feel despair when there is still one more thing to try.

In a movie, my son might have whispered something important, something essential, something to change our relationship forever when I lay down beside him on the pavement. But this is real life and he did nothing of the kind. He simply jumped up and ran into the school. Never again did he throw a shoe at my head or hold on

to my ankles in a public place.

Undoubtedly some readers of this story will say that I should have confronted the ugliness of my situation, that I sacrificed the opportunity to work on the underlying problems in favour of the quick and the humorous solution. I think about this often, for certainly the problems of communicating clearly with my son have not gone away in the six years which have elapsed since the last ankle-holding incident. But what I found on that day in the counsellor's office was a ray of hope, hope that my child might reach adulthood without bearing the imprint of my shoe on his face. I could not hope for success with a more direct approach to communication. But I could build my hope on a foundation of humor, because humor seems to work for me.

This is what I think my counsellor did. She looked for a ray of hope, and found that my problems are often ameliorated by humor. Then she took hold of that little ray of hope, that ray of humor, and shone it like a spotlight on every part of the terrible egg until finally it focused on a certain area where humor could grow. She brought that part of the egg to life.

When I planned this study, I asked a fellow student to read my proposal, follow my rules, and interview using the format she imagined I would be using for interviews with my research participants. For the first thirty seconds, it felt a little superficial, a little uncomfortable, as if I might be rigging the results, knowing what I was looking for. Then I forgot completely about what we were trying to accomplish as I began telling her my stories. We went on and on, chatting and laughing. After half an hour of so, she paused, then asked thoughtfully: "You have told me quite a few stories here. What do you think is the same about all of them?"

I was momentarily taken aback. I had chosen a variety of stories, from different periods and different settings. I had chosen them in response to the question of my own creation: How do you employ humor in situations which trouble you? Did they all have some sort of common thread?

It turned out that, whether by chance or by design, without a single exception, all the stories had one common element. I used humor when I felt inept or incompetent.

This is a cue I share with Frank, who chooses to

declare himself incompetent in a humorous way rather than allow others the opportunity to speculate that he might not have fully understood the meaning of an article in a professional journal. I use humor either to change a situation, or change others' perception of a situation where I might be viewed as incompetent. Instead of allowing others to see the whole stage, focusing their attention where they would choose to focus it, I shine humor, like a spotlight, on the area where I want it to shine. Those who watch are drawn to the light. I think they often forget completely about the rest of the stage.

The issue of changing others' perception is an important one for me. To be a blind person is to be watched by others, admired by others, judged by others, pitied by others. I will be walking down the street tapping my white cane on a beautiful sunny day. A stranger will come alongside me and say: "You're doing just fine." Most days I simply say: "Thanks."

But when things don't go well, you can count on me to survive the situation somehow, then tell the story as soon as possible in a way which will make others laugh. Their laughter comforts me, reassures me. Here is the story of one such incident.

> It was forty below and my husband was out of town. I had to get all three kids (preschoolers) off to the baby-sitter next door and then catch a 7:00 A.M. bus to work.
>
> I dressed all three children, sent the older two out ahead of me, and took the littlest by the hand. As we walked out the door, he pulled back and cried: "No!". Ignoring his protests, I pulled harder, dragging him down our sidewalk, up the sidewalk next door and into the baby-sitter's door.
>
> Then I picked him up to stop his crying. I put my arm out to stop his boots from touching my skirt, but there were no boots. I had dragged my stocking-footed, protesting child out on a snowy sidewalk in forty below weather. I was so horrified. Tears were coming.
>
> But the baby-sitter said: "You'll miss your bus. He's all right. See, he's stopped crying already. You leave him and I'll take care of him. Don't forget to bring his boots when you pick him up."
>
> I huddled miserably on the bus, overwhelmed by guilt, shame and self-doubt. But by the time I got to work, I knew what I would do. I told the story to the first person who said: "Good morning, Wendy. How are you?"
>
> In the telling, the story assumed dramatic proportions. I became the ultimate monster mother, forcing a terrible-two-year-old out on a polar hike in his socks.

That story has always been a great hit at parties. Sometimes I hear people telling it to others. The facts don't change. How others perceive the situation is a product of the language you use when you tell the story, the parts of the story on which you choose to place the emphasis.

Sometimes, when you shine the spotlight, the facts do change. The actors, aware that the light is showing them in a particular pose, find themselves drawn to an altered position. Here is a story illustrating the direct change approach. Humor actually alters the outcome.

> I grew up in the country and I never swam in a swimming pool until I was twelve. It was my first year at a boarding school for the blind in Vancouver. There was a pool there and most of the kids my age were good swimmers. I couldn't swim.
>
> The bottom of the pool sloped. It was a little like playing on a hill. Some friends and I were chasing each other, bobbing up and down. All of a sudden I couldn't reach the bottom. I remember the panic, the flailing, the feeling of having no breath, only water. Then I was safe. Walter's arms were fishing me out.
>
> The supervisors in the pool that night were Walter and Ruth. Both of them were German immigrants who lived in residence with the students. They were severe, always ready to lecture. When I was safely on the deck. A crowd gathered round. The lecture was about to begin. Walter was winding himself up.
>
> "Vhat happened?" he demanded.
>
> The question was only a formality. It was obvious to everyone what had happened. I was too clumsy to learn to swim, and too stupid to stay in the shallow end. I would rather have drowned than lie on that deck and be lectured in front of my friends.
>
> "I took a tour of the pool," I said, "but I got lost and couldn't find the top or the bottom."
>
> People laughed. Even Walter laughed. "You vere

almost drowned," he grumbled. Then he sent us back into the pool. Humor saved the day.

The spotlight shone on the joke instead of my foolishness. Even Walter could not resist its beckoning. This is the earliest humor story in my conscious memory. I was using humor long before I started studying it.

I have two sisters. People say they look like me, sound like me. When I tell them that I am studying the relationship between humor and distress they are enthusiastic. They think I am writing about them. They express confidence that I must have already learned a lot by studying them. Actually, I had not been studying them, but when I think about it, either of them might have been selected as candidates for my study.

On the surface, the humor they use in troubling situations bears a marked resemblance to mine. They mull over troubling incidents, turn them into good stories, tell the stories, and defy people not to laugh. People always laugh, well, usually, anyhow. If you can somehow manage to laugh at something once, you can keep on laughing at it. In the stories we tell I hear the echoes of messages from Clara, Dylan and

Penny. No matter how bad a situation appears to be, no matter how embarrassing or perplexing, once you've laughed at it once, you've beaten it down. You might almost have been fired, be the victim of uncontrollable sneezing attacks, be terrified of surgery performed by overworked staff, have an alcoholic husband, have no husband at all, or a child who throws shoes at your head. But you'll be able to stand it, if you can laugh at it once and then get someone else to laugh at it along with you.

My sisters and I get together on special occasions, Christmas, Thanksgiving. Our parents, spouses and children drift in and out of the living room where we sit, talking and laughing about our troubles. We would rather not think of ourselves as middle aged. Then our daughters pass by en route to the family room. "There's the three baggy sisters," one of them chimes.

At first we are stunned. It doesn't sink in that they might be referring to us. We think they're talking about the television. But they are quick to disillusion us.

Now we call ourselves the three baggy sisters. We introduce ourselves that way to strangers who meet us

all at the same time.

One of us is suddenly and unexpectedly widowed. She hasn't held a paid job in eighteen years. She has five children to raise alone. She is blind. The air in her house is oppressed by the competing scents of myriad flowers. The doorbell is hoarse from announcing the arrival of tearful friends and neighbours. So why then, on this saddest of all days, are the three baggy sisters sequestered in the kitchen, planning a giant blow-out sale at which we would offer to the community the uncountable trays of lasagna and baked goods which the townspeople have sent? Where is the spotlight? Not on our grief. Not on the uncertain future. It is in the kitchen--the incredibly laden kitchen, where three sisters with no appetite stand laughing together.

Why would I dwell on the uncomfortable picture of myself as an eye-catcher with a white cane when I can divert attention to those peculiar people who would spontaneously approach a stranger with the unsolicited information that she is doing fine? Why would I appear on stage as the incompetent mother when I can appear as the outrageous mother, the monster mother, the mother with her sensitive ear to the ground? Why would I allow Walter to lecture a silly girl on the deck if I

thought he would shrug and send a funny girl back into the water?

Humor is a spotlight which you can direct. I like to take charge of that spotlight and shine it where it feels most comfortable. I don't want to be pitied or admired simply because I am blind. I don't want to be lectured. I don't want others judging my competence as a mother. People will focus where I want them to focus if I use humor. These are the tenets which run through the stories I tell.

Summary

Humor is a spotlight which you can direct. Humor is a key which opens locked doors. Shared humor helps everyone. Humor is better than distress. Humor is powerful. Humor is dangerous. Interesting ideas from humor experts.

CHAPTER FOUR

ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMOR AND DISTRESS

Introduction

Seven research participants who habitually employ humor. Seven perspectives on the sequence of events by which the eggs of distress hatch chicks of humor. Seven people who tell stories, similar to, yet different from one another.

New questions develop as I organize and make observations about the data. Some will be suggested for further research at the close of this chapter. But before we get there, let us examine the process by which distress transforms itself into humor, and that process may have been influenced by past experience. How did we get to be the way we are Why do we use humor when others would not? What accounts for the similarities and differences among us?

In some of the interviews there are stories of childhood. Is that where it all begins?

Before I try to pull everything together, to make some sense of what I have learned from the participants, to speculate on what might be learned in future studies, I turn my attention to childhood.

Humor in the Developing Person

Can it be that the propensity to employ humor is hereditary, or that we were taught by our parents to search for humor when trouble was brewing?

The literature tells us that we have not yet uncovered the truth about how humor appreciation gets started. Paul McGhee (1979), a psychologist who has devoted his career to the study of humor development in children, has found that differences in humor appreciation can be measured in children as young as three years old. In a retrospective study, William Fry found that professional comedians developed their humor skills early in life, claiming to have learned from parents or grandparents. They also remembered high levels of family stress during childhood (Fry & Allen, 1975). This led Fry to speculate that humor helped these children cope in situations of family break-up and parental alcoholism. When they expressed their humor, people around them reinforced them by laughing, thus encouraging further humor development.

Reporting on experience with children in the therapeutic milieu, authors including Schimel (1993) and Yorukuglu (1993) have shared case studies describing their attempts to develop children's humor

skills. They believe that humor can provide a healthy emotional outlet to distressed children. Martin (1989) writes that children with a sense of humor may be better prepared than other children to cope with future life stress. Studies of children and adolescents in hospital care have shown that appropriate use of humor by health care workers and parents can reduce stress reactions and increase pain tolerance (Blount, Corbin & Sturges, 1989; Smith, 1986).

My sisters tell me that our sense of humor has made it possible for us to cope under circumstances which might have daunted others. But when I ask them if they think we learned as children to be humorous in troubled times, they hesitate. They cannot remember our parents teaching us to make humor out of distress.

The latest humor project for the three baggy sisters is the development of the program which will entertain the celebrating guests at our parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary party. Together we compose the lines of songs and skits--humorous tributes to a shared life coloured in shades of turmoil and triumph.

They wanted a son. It took them four tries to get one. This undisputed fact has caused its share of

bitterness over the years, but now it is transformed into a song and story of epic proportions to be delivered to a smiling audience and a pair of proud parents by the three baggy sisters and their little brother.

The writing of the songs and stories sends us back twenty-five years into old familiar territory. At that time, twenty-fifth wedding anniversary celebrations were a common occurrence among the friends of my parents. In the tiny farming community where we lived, everyone knew everyone. None of us can remember how it started, but after we had written a program item for one anniversary, we had to do it for everyone--everyone our mother said we had to do it for. She helped us.

Together we wove undisputed facts, scraps of neighbourhood gossip and figments of our imagination into a tapestry of humor, designed to amuse the honoured couple and their friends. As we wove, we brainstormed ideas and our mother evaluated them, making the final decision on which ones could stay, and which must go. She taught us the rules we must follow.

You could say something unflattering, but only if it wasn't absolutely true. You could say something true and sad, but only if you could make it seem funny.

Something made up could be slightly more unflattering than something that was true. You could say things that were mildly shocking, but you had to stay very near the boundary of moral community standards. For example, you could imply that a couple had children because their house was cold, or because they bought a new bed. But you could not say that they were already expecting a baby when they got married. Perhaps our mother taught us more about humor than we realized.

I turn to my research participants to find out about their childhood experiences in learning about humor.

Kelly does not even refer to childhood. This is characteristic of Kelly. In all the years I have known him, listened to his stories, I have never once heard him refer to that part of his life.

June tells the story which explains, at least in part, the tears she sheds as we talk about humor. She speaks of "radiating energy", of humor being light "a light that starts in me and seems to come out in others." One moment we are talking about popcorn popping--how the exhilaration feels in her arms, how the joy seems to come out all over her. The next moment we are talking about physical pain.

> When I was a kid, (trembling voice, on the verge of tears) I was rewarded for my humor, like I got attention when I was funny. Now I hate to think about doing this for attention. I would rather be spontaneous like I do best. And so when I was told, or shown in some way that it was too much in a particular situation then I had to bury it inside (crying a little). There was always pain. (still crying). I think the pain was so big when the message was: "June, you're too big for this room."
>
> So I'd have to keep it inside. Humor is probably--well, I don't know (recovering completely from the tears). It's hard for me to know if humor is natural to me and the way I'm supposed to be or whether it's a way to be.

I recall how June told me about the humor her brother uses, and the humor her sister uses, and how she compares herself and tries to be less hurtful, less outrageous. I ask where she learned to be humorous. Did she watch some person and try to imitate? She does not think so. She can't recall seeing the trait in her brother until he was grown. She thinks perhaps it started with her--as her most effective means of communicating. Then her younger sister picked it up.

Somewhere in June's past, she has learned to produce prodigious humor, then to monitor it for signs of danger and reproach. I can see that it would probably do a counsellor no good to launch immediately into an exercise of having June laugh at her troubles.

If I could give a gift to June, a gift to repay

her for all the joy she has brought to me over the years, I would bring her into the fold of the baggy sisters, and give her the security and uncensored freedom of our outrageous, naughty humor.

When I turn to Clara, my jolly Clara, who imagines flashlights shining up from the outhouse depths and secures revenge by typing reports without spaces between the words, she tells me that she is the black sheep of her immediate family. "Everyone says I'm just like my aunt, my father's older sister," she says. "I think that when you are a kid, you admire someone, and you think you'd like to be like them. I always wanted to be like her."

No wonder Clara is so anxious to tell lively humor stories! She hears herself in the image of someone she admires.

I recall the day when I asked one sister her opinion about how we learned to use humor. She said: "I don't know. We didn't learn from our parents, I don't think. But Rosemary always laughed at the things that went wrong. And Joyce did too. So we had aunts on both sides of the family that behaved when we were kids the way we behave now." What she says has the ring of truth. I wonder why I never thought of it.

Feeling certain we are onto something, I ask my other sister where she thinks we learned to use humor. She does not think we learned to use it as children. She thinks we learned it in adulthood. But then she says: "Really, in our house, it was either laugh or yell. There was nothing in between."

It must be difficult to defend the conclusion of studies investigating the childhood origins of humor. Even the baggy sisters do not see eye to eye about how we got to be the way we are.

Back in my research notes I turn to Dylan, the man who prides himself on being able to say in a humorous way what everyone else in the class is thinking. He tells me what he remembers about growing up humorous.

> We as a family would use humor often as a stress relief and as a way of communicating. We would talk through our humor. One of the family rules in our house was that we wouldn't talk about issues that cause discomfort or conflict.
>
> We'd sit around the dinner table--our family, four boys, two girls--sit around the table Sunday at lunch and that would be the designated time to just have a good good laugh about whatever events had come up. And it seemed that even as the events were more stressful we would be telling jokes and laughing.
>
> Company would come over and they would remark about how we would be telling jokes and laughing and we'd communicate through that. We'd talk through our jokes if we had something to get off our chest. So I think that somehow it worked for

the benefit of us to be able to do that.

I ask him who made the family rules about communicating through humor. He is not sure. He doesn't think the parents made them, doesn't recall his parents being humorous. He thinks the children invented the humor and used it as a means of communication because that was "the avenue which opened up for us." He can't remember modelling his own humor after an aunt or an uncle. But his brothers are older, and he thinks he learned it from them.

Of all the people I talked with, Penny is the only one who claims to have learned humor skills by imitating the behavior of a parent. When I first met Penny, I guessed that she was probably a very humorous person who took that humor and applied it as an adult in the health care setting where she worked. But as she talked, it became clear that humor and illness were closely connected in her childhood.

> My father died when I was sixteen. He was very sick from the time when I was ten and I was sixteen when he died. My dad was a real character and he was lots of fun. He liked to tell us jokes and make us laugh.
>
> I found out very early in his illness and that's only looking back now--I didn't realize at the time what I was doing. But it was important to laugh. My dad was so down at times but then I would want to make him laugh so he could be happy

and we could have some fun. So we did lots of laughing and my brother tells me that he can remember me making my dad laugh so hard that he could hardly stand up. He walked with a cane. He had three strokes before he died.

That's how I kind of got through six years of worrying about my dad dying every day of my life. I think that's how he got through worrying about his own inability to cope with the family, you know. After he was really sick sometimes we just had to--or I just had to tease him or say something to him that would make him laugh.

Even on the day he died if anybody had walked into our living room they would have thought we were nuts. We were just kind of punchy. Dad had died that morning and it was really painful and we were trying to find some way to cope, not only for ourselves but for our mother we were trying hard to be strong.

That evening, dealing with the reality of his death earlier in the day had been enough. I can still remember sitting on the floor and talking about Dad and laughing and laughing and being silly and hysterical. And yet, we felt okay. We didn't really think we were being disrespectful.

Frank is the classic case, the one who clearly knows that he learned to be humorous while trying to cope with isolation and rejection in childhood.

I grew up in a troubled home. My mother was a long term alcoholic who separated from my father when I was about three years old. She had a succession of different boyfriends who were all pretty much of the same habit.

Our house was in a fairly constant state of turmoil and my older brothers and sisters paired up against the conditions under which we lived. But I was left as the solitary little one and so humor served a number of purposes then. Just to match the absurdity of the life circumstances that

I lived with and also to mask them.

Most of the kids that I grew up with had a married mother and father and had what I consider to be a normal life going on while behind the doors of my home was this incredible chaotic fun house--very strange environment. I think that when questions of family interaction--say--going on family picnics came up I would deflect the discomfort that I felt by employing humor with a snide remark or a quick comeback or something. Things like--a kid would say: "My dad's a tough guy" and I would say: "All your dads put together aren't as tough as my mother." That's kind of a general example.

I think that was one function that humor served and that's how I learned it. A second circumstance that I think led to my development of an absurd sense of humor also stemmed from the fact that my brothers and sisters paired off and my mother was intoxicated most of the time. It meant that I was left on my own to make friends.

You have to have something to offer the group--to offer in friendship especially when you're talking little kids. We were not particularly rich so I didn't have a lot of marbles or a lot of toys I could share. But I could make people laugh so that was my way of fitting in and having a circle of friends who valued me for something. Kids being a fairly superficial lot--the fact that you're basically a good human being doesn't necessarily hold you in a good stead.

How do we learn to be humorous? None of us knows for sure, but we speculate. We learn from our parents. We imitate our aunts. We copy our siblings. We pick it up spontaneously and teach it to our siblings. We learn it in desperation. We learn to restrain it. We learn to use more of it. We practice it in delight.

We don't know exactly how we learned it. Nor do

we know precisely what motivates us to use it. What we do know is that we use humor when we are distressed. This is the tenet which binds our stories together.

When Distress Becomes Humor

What kinds of distress do people describe when you ask them how they use humor in situations which trouble them?

June is distressed by the feelings of others. She wants them to be happy, to relax. She doesn't want to hurt anyone. Kelly is distressed by unfairness and injustice. Clara and Dylan are distressed by the absence of humor. They miss it when it is not present. Penny is distressed when she finds herself unable to cure ills or change situations by acting in a direct manner. Frank and I are distressed when we look at ourselves and see signs of incompetence.

These, of course, are over-simplifications. They are narrow. Each of the individuals named here is distressed by many different things.

How do we use humor in situations which trouble us? Each individual's humorous response in a time of distress is governed by a set of operating principles. Those principles may have grown from seeds planted in

childhood.

What type of humor do distressed people generate? In her summary of the literature addressing the questions: What is humor? and Why is humor funny? Wosnack organizes the ideas into five groups. The groups are: Superiority, incongruity, tension release, physiological and psychoanalytic. The idea groups have no clear boundaries. There is a great deal of overlap. F : they provide a framework in which to consider the similarities among the participants in this study.

The notion of superiority figures prominently in the vignettes which came to Kelly's mind when I asked him how he uses humor in situations which trouble him. He speaks of humor as powerful, the tool which offers any person the opportunity to trade rungs on the ladder of superiority. But some element of superiority can be found in the data gathering from every partic ant. When I lay beside my son in the school parking lot, part of me was saying to the on-lookers: "Aha! This is going to solve my problem, and I'll bet you would never have done it!"

Incongruity surfaces repeatedly in the stories told by Frank and June. They can state the outrageous, the improbable. June can make the shy people at a

party "go splat!" Frank can brag about his tough mother, declare himself totally baffled yet still compete for grades with others who have taken a serious approach to understanding and reviewing a professional journal article. But then, there is something incongruous about a proper church lady separating publicly from her wig, or a pink nursing pig lying next to a dying friend.

Tension release is a major motivating factor for Frank, Clara, Dylan and Penny. They feel the tension and they reach for a tension extinguisher filled with humor. They joke with therapy clients, hang inspirational wallpaper, tell jokes while making funeral arrangements, decide to laugh instead of succumbing to shame when they are almost fired.

The research participants can identify with the physiological pay-offs of using humor, even if they are unable to make definitive statements about changes in blood pressure, or the release of certain hormones. They describe energy coming out like popcorn, burdens lifting, interior explosions, mounting visceral pressure.

And what about the psychoanalytic theories of humor, the notions based on Freud's belief that humor

serves as a defense mechanism, a socially acceptable vehicle for the expression of socially unacceptable sexual and aggressive impulses? Perhaps it can be argued that any person who is consciously aware of employing humor in troubling situations is setting up a defense against something. People use their own individual standards when they decide whether humor is inappropriately used as a substitute for feelings such as anger, sadness, disappointment, social discomfort or embarrassment.

The research participants are conscious that when they sit upon the eggs of distress, they hatch humor chicks and deploy them for a variety of purposes. Kelly will use humor to make a point, to draw attention to an injustice. June likes to use humor as a vehicle to put others at ease. Dylan hatches humor in order to communicate serious feelings. Penny makes people laugh when they are hurting, or when they hurt her. Frank uses it to impress others and win friends. Clara employs humor as an indirect means of communication, and sometimes simply to generate tension-releasing laughter in herself and in others.

As the humor chicks hatch, and tentatively test their tiny tickling feathers, a complex system of rules

and principles determines the manner of their appearance and the nature of their actions. June's family taught her to monitor her tickling and stop as soon as she suspects that it may be bringing more than her fair share of attention. Frank learned to tickle more in order to get more attention. My humor habit was reinforced by its own success in throwing other people off guard, drawing them into my preferred view of the world. Clara's aunt modelled for her the image of the laughing, entertaining, tickling adult she aspires to be. Penny learned well the lesson taught by her father--that creating the tickle and sharing it with others is preferable to languishing in pain. Kelly learned to value humor for its safety, its retractability. He learned to use it because it is easier to retract a humorous statement than a serious one.

For each person, the rules and principles, often lurking far from conscious awareness, determine the type of humor which can be employed, and the situations into which it is permitted entrance. Individuals shelter their own private eggs of distress, apply their personal gestational rules and hatch the chicks which fly most successfully for them. The humor chicks

tickle. Therein lies their similarity and their uniqueness.

Questions for Further Research

I read again the stories told to me by the research participants. I review the themes which run through the stories, the various kinds of distress, forms of humor and the rules that intervene in the transition. My heart fills with wonder.

How amazing it is that we are able to communicate with each other through humor when we have such different ideas about what is funny, and what kind of humor is acceptable. How surprising that we use so little humor in our daily communication, when data gathered from only seven people reveals themes which repeat themselves over and over again. How interesting it would be to further explore the ideas which emerge from the data of this tiny study.

Past explorers began with philosophical ramblings about humor, then moved towards standardization of terms and concepts. In the experimental tradition of natural science, some tried to investigate humor through the microscope of cause and effect. Current exploration trends steer away from standardization and

causality, moving toward single case studies and analysis of self-report data. Would-be explorers can gaze out over a broad vista of possibilities.

The View Through Emotional Response

The idea of using emotional response as the starting point for humor investigations is not new by any means. Without an emotional response, there can be no shared humor. The case studies describing humor in therapy generally pass by the therapist's emotional response without casting a sidelong glance. Those who write so eloquently about the success of therapeutic humor might supplement their case studies with more writing about themselves. What are the personality characteristics of the clients who make them laugh? Under what circumstances do they find it necessary to kill their own impulse to utilize humor? What mistakes do they make when they try to utilize therapeutic humor? These are questions which, if answered, might make their writing more useful to therapists who aspire to follow their professional example.

Investigation of Themes

The personal themes which revealed themselves and

appeared again in other interviews provide fertile ground for investigative seeds. Humor can damage me. Humor can damage others. Humor is an effective weapon. Humor is better than distress. Humor can win acceptance of ideas and complaints. Shared humor heals like salve on a wound. Humor can soothe the pain of confronting incompetence. Humor unlocks the door to possibilities. Humor can focus the attention of others.

Keeping in mind the fact that no single theme emerged in every interview, these themes might be investigated in many ways. Perhaps they can be viewed as cues to therapists, sources around which to build an investigation of humor failures. How widespread, for example, is the belief that humor is better than distress? Do most people believe it, or only a few? Do therapists believe it? Do therapy clients?

How many people believe that they have the humor skills to make others uncomfortable without angering them? How many think this is an acceptable goal? what other personal characteristics would we expect to find in people who believe this is an acceptable goal?

Investigating Individual Differences

The research participants in this study inadvertently led me to an examination of the rules and principles they use when making unconscious decisions about the appropriateness of humor. The existence of such rules opens up an array of questions.

Are there many people who choose a humor model and pattern their behavior after the behavior of that person? Can we teach others to seek out compatible humor models? Are there times when humor models can be harmful?

Can therapists successfully use therapeutic humor if the humor they use violates the personal humor principles of a client? Can these principles be questioned or changed through the use of humor?

Further Investigation of the Relationship Between Humor and Distress

As I begin to share ideas from my study, people come forward, wanting to relate their personal stories. This no longer surprises me. After all, my own sisters came forward when they heard about the work I was doing. These unbidden research participants will undoubtedly show me additional themes and teach me more about my personal emotional response to humor.

There are other questions which could be asked in an exploration of humor and distress. Some which come to my mind are: What prompts you not to use humor? How has humor enriched your life? How has humor affected your relationships with others? How has your sense of humor made trouble for you?

This is not to say that my study has exhausted the use of its own question. I would read with enthusiasm the writing of other investigators who chose to conduct a study based on the question: How do you employ humor in situations which trouble you? Surely they would find new themes, more personal rules, additional perspectives on the relationship between humor and distress.

EPILOGUE

Friends and colleagues have read drafts of my thesis. One of these readers is Mary. She has read articles about humor, observing that humor seems to lose its funniness when you study it. In the early stages she disqualified herself as a research participant based on her statement that she does not believe she employs humor in situations which trouble her. She adopts a supportive, encouraging stance. She likes the literary flow of the writing, is convinced by my defense of the decision to use qualitative research methods. She praises my confession of personal biases. She agrees with my observation that therapists who publish articles describing their use of humor are probably trying to justify their humor habit to themselves and their peers.

Somewhere on the rough copy I gave her she has noted that I treat Kelly and June a little differently from the others because I know them better. She just wonders, though, if they treat me differently because they know me better. Maybe Kelly and June talk more about distress, and less about humor because they know and trust me. Perhaps Clara, Dylan and Penny would be less flamboyant in their storytelling if they knew they

could trust me to listen compassionately to their troubles. Perhaps the apparent differences among them are exaggerated by the degree to which they trust me. I have to agree with her on that one.

Now Mary has a question. "Back in the days when you were studying therapeutic humor, what were you hoping to use the humor for?"

I am surprised by the question. She seems to have forgotten the literature I reviewed in the chapter on humor and progress. Machovec wrote that humor could be applied to psychotherapy to achieve treatment goals, make confronting reality less painful and diagnostically test insight and treatment progress. Dimmer, Carroll and Wyatt, summarizing the literature on therapeutic humor wrote that uses of humor in psychotherapy include alleviating anxiety and tension, encouraging insight, increasing motivation, and creating an atmosphere of closeness and equality between therapist and client.

I tell Mary that I wanted to employ therapeutic humor for any of these purposes. Humor is something I have, something I use. If I could employ it in any fashion and call it therapeutic, that would be good enough for me.

But Mary is disappointed in me. She has high expectations, likes to think I take a studied, professional approach to clients who seek therapy from me. "I wonder if you would want to highlight some of the negative consequences of using humor," she muses.

I try to draw her out on this one, to find out what negative consequences I have failed to note. She says: "I didn't like to see Kelly and June in the same section. I didn't think they were the same at all. June is much more generous and compassionate." Based on all that Kelly said about humor and revenge, she doesn't want him in June's section.

And another thing. She doesn't like Clara, can't imagine what kind of person would laugh at an old lady whose wig rolls away when she falls down in church. "You talk about rules. One of my rules for humor is that it's got to show compassion or it isn't humor. Maybe Clara and Kelly should be in the same chapter."

Now my temperature is rising. Mary has chosen favourites among my participants. She has divided them into camps of good and not-so-good. Suddenly it has become a matter of loyalty and my loyalties at this moment lie with my research participants. I have succeeded in bringing them to life on paper, but, for

some reason, Mary's emotional response is different from mine.

I try to change her response, to defend my own response, by providing additional facts. "You just don't know Kelly and Clara," I say. "Why, Kelly welcomes new people into the office by doing helpful, considerate things for them. And Clara, well I don't know Clara very well. But I can tell you this. When I was a kid and somebody skinned their knee, I always wanted to laugh. Once I remember a teacher screaming at me: 'Wipe that smile off your face or I'll slap it off!' I learned not to smile, but I still feel like laughing when somebody gets hurt. I bite on the insides of my cheeks and dig my nails into my palms. I don't know why I want to laugh in a crisis, but I usually do. I don't think it has anything to do with compassion. I know in my bones that Clara is a compassionate person."

And here, right at the point where friends disagree on what is humor and what is not, and then decide that the friendship is more important than the disagreement, is the fork in the road where therapists get lost when they try to utilize humor in the therapy room. A therapist may think she is using humor, and

the client may think the therapist is being disrespectful, speaking without compassion. A client may think he is using humor, then find his humor interpreted by the therapist as defensiveness, or a lack of willingness to work on the real problem. If the match between the client and the therapist is a good one, and there is sufficient mutual trust to make room for a little mis-spent humor, then humor employed by client or therapist might well generate some therapeutic progress.

I try to imagine myself sitting in the therapy room across from each of my research participants. How would we work together to employ therapeutic humor? Would I even try to use it?

I doubt that I would be able to employ therapeutic humor with either Kelly or June--at least, not at first. I see them often, know that they frequently use humor. But I don't think I yet understand how I could use their humor to help them in troubling situations. I don't know if they would appreciate my humor if I laughed at their troubling situations.

With Frank I would want to use therapeutic humor, because he sees his sense of humor as one of his greatest strengths. However, I suspect I might strive

to reduce Frank's tendency to use humor. It would not be because humor does not work for Frank, but because I do not always share Frank's opinion that humor would work better than other approaches to the troubling situations he describes.

With Clara, Dylan or Penny, I doubt that I would be able to resist the temptation to use humor in the therapy room. They would want me to use humor. Like me, they hold the basic belief that humor is better than distress. In my opinion, they use it skillfully in situations where I would want to use it.

To this complicated picture, let us add one more perspective. I, Wendy, the person with a long-established humor habit, will automatically generate humor when I am distressed. It is likely that I will often be distressed as I work with clients in the therapy room. Sometimes my spontaneous humor will help to achieve treatment goals. This happened when I tossed stuffed toys at my young client in the play room. Sometimes it will not be received as humor. When this happens, I may not even recognize it as failed humor, but may see the interaction as resulting from some deficiency in the client.

As long as schools [illegible]elling and

psychotherapy continue to admit students who come from a tradition where humor is used in troubling situations, the issue of how and when to use humor in therapy will likely stay on the professional agenda. The ultimate decision will be made in the therapy room, where client and therapist bring their histories, their values, their personalities and their individual senses of humor together in the hope of making therapeutic progress.

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