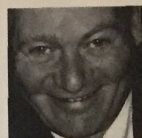


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# IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE JOKE

Why cheerfulness is next to godliness.



JOHN LLOYD

**THERE'S A MYSTERIOUS PASSAGE IN THE BIBLE, THAT GOES** like this: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." This passage has the unmistakable ring of truth, which is curious, because it also appears to be meaningless gibberish. At first sight, that is. The word "Word" in this context is translated from the Greek *logos*, which means "word," of course, but in the particular sense of "that which expresses the inner thought." So we can retranslate the sentence as, "In

the beginning was the Thought and the Thought was with God and the Thought was God." Now this is getting interesting, because in all the great Eastern religions, consciousness is considered the ground of being, preceding the clumsy and annoying business of matter.

*Logos* can be understood, more generally, to mean "speech" or "conversation." So another translation is, "In the beginning was Speech..." This is consistent with Genesis, wherein the first thing that happens is God says "Let there be light." In this reading, speech is more ancient than the laws of physics, which, again, may not be very scientific (at least not yet) but is quite interesting.

Now when *logos* passes into Latin, it takes on yet another meaning, one that, for all I know, preserves a long-lost original Greek usage that didn't make it into Liddell & Scott's dictionary. And that meaning is "joke": "In the beginning was the Joke and the Joke was with God and the Joke was God." And you know, ever since I found that translation I've been a lot more cheerful.

If you look at the universe as a tremendously complex, very amusing practical joke it suddenly starts to make sense. It also offers a hopeful suggestion as to how to behave. If life is neither a meaningless gene machine nor a cruel and vicious vale of tears but a damn good gag, the only logical solution is to laugh—which is convenient,

because that's what I do for a living.

Good jokes, like good spiritual scriptures, must contain a hidden truth. Take this line from the American comedienne Phyllis Diller, which perfectly expresses society's paradoxical attitude toward education: "We spend the first 12 months of our children's lives teaching them to walk and talk, and the next 12 years telling them to sit down and shut up." Or, as Benjamin Franklin put it, "We are all born ignorant, but one must work hard to become stupid."

The best jokes are also wise. Wisdom is different from intelligence because an intelligent person can be seriously bad—and throughout history, many of the brightest people have been seriously bad—but you cannot be wise without being good. Even the bleakest jokes contain a suggestion that the way things are isn't the way they should be, and that you really ought to do something about that, as in this quip by 20th-century poet W.H. Auden: "We are here on Earth to do good to others. What the others are here for, I don't know." Wisdom isn't only on the side of the angels; it's also timeless.

In my opinion, there are only two questions worth asking: *Why are we here?* and *What shall we do about it?* It took me a long

time to come to this conclusion—more than 40 years, in fact. I came across what was to me at the time a most baffling assertion by Buddha: "In the search for truth, there are certain questions that are not important. *Of what material is the universe constructed? Is the universe eternal? Are there limits or not to the universe? What is the ideal form of organization for human society?* If a man were to postpone his search for enlightenment until such questions were solved, he would die before he found the path."

This has the unnerving hallmark of a previously unperceived truth and, equally important, it has the sense of the world turned upside down, just like jokes. Jokes are surprise-generators; they force you to look at the world in a different way.

So what are we here for? Your modern neo-Darwinist is perfectly certain—for no reason. That just doesn't cut it for me. I mean, it may be true, but it doesn't help me get through Thursday. I prefer this take by the composer Aaron Copland (simply replace the word "music" with the word "life"): "The whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, 'Is there a meaning to music?' My answer would be, 'Yes.' And 'Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?' My answer to that would be, 'No.'"

I don't know the meaning of things any more than Copland knew the meaning of music. But it's certainly a lot of fun speculating about it. Jokes and laughter enrich and stimulate the journey. This line by Oliver Edwards, quoted in James Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, sums it up: "I have tried too, in my time, to be a philosopher, but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in."

**JOHN LLOYD** is the British television producer behind the historical sitcom *Blackadder* and the satirical puppet show *Spitting Image*. With John Mitchinson, he's the author of *If Ignorance Is Bliss, Why Aren't There More Happy People?*, out from Harmony in August.

# LAUGHTER AND LEARNING

The upside of looking on the lighter side of life.



JOS HOUBEN

**FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, I'VE BEEN TRAVELING THE GLOBE** with a show called "The Art Of Laughter," a mock lecture in which I analyze the basic principles of silent comedy. I try to make people laugh using my body rather than my words. At a certain point in the show, I demonstrate tripping. Some people laugh at the trip itself. More people laugh when I play with my reaction, looking back over my shoulder at the spot where I stumbled. But without fail, everyone explodes into laughter when I add a

third movement: I trip, look over my shoulder, then furtively look around to see if anyone has noticed my misfortune. At that moment, the whole audience is in agreement. They recognize and accept a truth about themselves, something they somehow already knew and also freshly discovered in that moment. Through laughter, people acknowledge together that they're not alone.

Many serious thinkers have been busy with the supposedly not-serious phenomena of humor and laughter in their attempts to understand the human condition. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein stated that a valid philosophical work could be written on any subject that would consist entirely of jokes. Wittgenstein knew, as comedians do, that humor is a way to understand not only ourselves but the world.

I, for example, am the proud father of a 4-month-old boy. It strikes me how adults who meet him actively solicit this smile. It's as if we seek confirmation that we're unconditionally loved. We want the fact that we're here to be acknowledged, not just by a person but by humanity. An infant's smile is the universe's seal of approval. "Being" goes with "laughing" from the start.

My son's learning is also deeply connected to laughter. I observe him as he alternates between quiet fascination and chuckles whenever he's paying attention to something. What makes sense, what's accepted,



produces a smile; anything else is immediately rejected. He moans and cries not just when he's uncomfortable or in need, but when he's bored.

At every age, learning and development happen through play and fun. Where there's no amusement, learning is stifled. Numerous religious and spiritual teachings use humorous tales and anecdotes to initiate and enlighten. During a workshop I attended, participants related the instances and conditions during which they learned something quickly and easily. Without exception, people said they were on holiday, in love or otherwise having a great time. In other words,

they were doing something that made them smile. This is why children learn so quickly. They engage with the world through curiosity and play. They learn to walk and talk without having to take an exam.

For me, laughter is also connected to understanding, insight and awareness. The word "wit" is related to the word "knowledge." As we focus our attention on something, we go quiet. Then we smile or laugh as we come out of our trance, as we become aware that something has changed.

We build patterns of thought and behavior to make sense of the world. But we can also get stuck in them. We enjoy freeing ourselves from their grip, which is why nonsense and absurdity are fun. We constantly want to liberate ourselves from old, known patterns and clear the decks for new insights. Laughter blows the dust from our eyes. We all need gravity but dream of flying and scream with laughter on roller coaster rides. We understand gravity's laws better when we play around with them.

Like a hypnotist or magician, a comedic performer skillfully manipulates the audience. To do this, you must understand the audience's understanding. One of the most common reactions I get after my show isn't how funny it is, but how touching. The audience laughs most when they recognize themselves. Nothing has changed, but they're reconciled with themselves and with the world. Making people laugh is connecting them with their humanity. In laughter, we grow. When we stop laughing, we're in trouble.

**JOS HOUBEN** is a theater director, performer and teacher at the Jacques Lecoq International Theater School in Paris.



WATCH VIDEOS OF JOS HOUBEN'S SHOW: [ODEMAGAZINE.COM/JOSHOUBEN](http://ODEMAGAZINE.COM/JOSHOUBEN)