Discussed: hope, Castro, college students, satire, Billy Collins, rural humor versus city humor, Hunter S. Thompson, honesty, Victorian propriety, a better world

Why We Aren't Funny: The Case for Adventist Gonzo Journalism

By Winona Wendth

When Rafael A. Penalver, Jr., the president of Key West's San Carlos Institute, addressed a gathering of professional and avocational humor writers last January, he thanked members of the audience for their bravery, as well as for their craft. Having lived in Cuba in the late 1950s, he knew firsthand the tremendous influence humor can have on political life, and the tremendous consequences politics can have on the humorist.

He noted that the first periodical to bite the Cuban dust under Castro was not the standard press, nor was it an academic or religious journal. The first periodical to be denounced, confiscated, and destroyed was *Zig-Zag*, the successful satirical publication in Havana.

Later *Dédéto*—a relatively "safe" humor magazine founded in 1968, about the time many Seventh-day Adventist college "underground" newsletters were circulating on campuses—was confiscated in 1987 and temporarily removed from the magazine stands for breaking the unwritten rule of publishing a caricature of Castro, in this case, a drawing by Cuban cartoonist Ajubel.

Even though the cartoon had breezed by the censors all the way up to the top, the very, very top pulled it. Clearly, Castro had no sense of humor—at least not when it came to himself. No distance, we might be tempted to say—a weak political ego, maybe.

So why doesn't Castro have a sense of humor, when, for example, even Don Rumsfeld does? America's secretary of defense didn't try to pull Hart Seely's *Pieces of Intelligence: The Existential Poetry of Donald H. Rumsfeld*, off the shelves at Barnes and Noble bookstore, for example, or garble "The Late Night with David Letterman." Jon Stewart has yet to be blocked from the airwaves. *The Onion* is easily found on counters at Starbucks and on the Web.

The Onion is available at theonion.com.

Why is it, then, that even the most

tendentious politicians in the United States can tolerate humor and satire when Fidel Castro, apparently, cannot? On the other side, how could he get away with shutting down those pesky periodicals—just because he can't laugh at himself?

Well, to begin, Castro is an attorney—so we can expect only so much: he enjoys puns and cartoons of political opponents, I understand, and that's about it. "But seriously, folks," the problem, here, is money—not so much the lack of it, although, generally speaking, poverty and satire go hand-in-hand only among the educated, as the way in which it's distributed.

Communism in Cuba is a closed economic system that circulates money among various bureaus and services of the government, which owns everything. In America, very few draw their paychecks directly from Rumsfeld or, even George W. Bush—the IRS notwithstanding. Almost everyone in Cuba is—or has close relatives—on the government payroll.

Frightened or dependent people are rarely funny and typically do not have the time or energy to make the effort to, as Oscar Levant remarked, hop out of bed, brush their teeth, and sharpen their tongues on their way out to sell plantains to their cousins. One false rhetorical move, and there go the plantains, off to the nearest *oficial del policia.*

What does this have to do with the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Well, look around—you don't see very many funny people in here. Punsters, yes. And, of course, the inveterate tellers of recycled Baptist or professional jokes. But the funniest Adventists tend to be the college students who still have permission from the dean of students to publish the annual April Fool's issue in the campus newspaper, probably the most carefully monitored issue of the year.

The students are always protected—they pay tuition for that protection these days, and when enrollment is down, they're more or less in the driver's seat. But it's different for those on the college payroll: one false move and here come the conference officials; worse yet, there go the donors. Neither of these constituencies is known to have a well-honed sense of humor. Add reactionary college administrators, and life can become positively grim.

No distance, we might be tempted to say—weak political egos, maybe. "Irony," says novelist Blanche McCrary Boyd, "comes when you can stand back far enough to see yourself and still get the joke." For most of us, too much is at stake; we can't get outside of ourselves; we don't get the joke. No false moves.

Why is a comic false move more damning than others? People in power know that you can't muster logic against the comic; all you can do is complain. You can't call facts into play against notions that are neither logical nor factual. There is no defense against humor. Even the most fatuous and pubescent humor cannot be stood up to—the best you can do is roll your eyes heavenward and hope it goes away. And in the case of satire, your eyes don't roll: your vision snaps into focus and you are forced to look at things you really didn't want to see.

You suspect that others will see them, too. A regime that argues itself into existence and supports itself not through sensibility but only sense is in big trouble when people start to get clever—the only response is to stop them, altogether. And in Cuba, for example, the best way to do this is to cut off—or threaten to cut off—their supply of plantains.

So the people are afraid, but the Cuban government is afraid of the people. Woody Allen could handle this as family drama and make us smirk—but Cuba, propaganda notwithstanding, is not one big family. And neither are we—not really.

The point? Economics develop sociology, which, in turn, creates a culture. Yes, I know whom this sounds like—a nineteenth-century thinker with only a so-so sense of humor. This brings us to another point: The nineteenth century, the cradle of the Church, was not a very funny time. "Irony is the humorist's job," says Gary Trudeau. But the Romantics were generally not inclined toward humor or irony.

In a recent address to writers and poets, U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins pointed out that Wordsworth almost permanently reoriented poetry—"the Romantic tradition substituted landscape for sex and humor." This was good fortune for us—we could forget about both and spend our energies hiking in the woods. We were caught up in nineteenth-century selves in the broadest cultural sense. We repressed what made the eighteenth-century wits witty and refocused our attentions on keeping our bodies, minds, and politics healthy, chaste, and contained.

Also, rural and urban humor are not the same: "Live From New York!..." prepares us for an entirely different experience from "...brought to you from Minnesota Public Radio." Urban humor is time-sensitive, sharp, riddled

with put-downs—it's quick and relatively easy. Rural humor just sort of lopes along, pulling everyone in, and embarrassing almost anyone in its way; it takes a while—and a lot of narrative sensitivity and talent to do it right.

Few of us would argue that we have entirely shaken the bonds of Victorian propriety—in many aspects of our lives and work. Add to this the large percentage of religionists in our community—a grossly disproportionate percentage until very recently. And like those beautiful men and women who build and secure their identities on their public personae, it seems that religionists rarely laugh at themselves.

Furthermore, because we are, or have been until recently, a rural or suburban church we tend to believe that making fun of people is unkind. But few of us have the time or talent in most cases to tell those Lake Woebegone stories that work so well for Garrison Keillor or those tremendously long lead-ins that work for Molly Ivins. And however painful, ridicule is an important political weapon.

Ridiculing the helpless or weak is not funny, but when the powerful complain that their feelings are hurt, a humorist or satirist needs to consider that all we're waiting to hear is "You were right; I was wrong; I should apologize." When was the last time you heard that at a conference committee meeting or Wednesday night church business session?

Humor is a corrective, and as Rosenblatt says, "we should not capitulate too early." The powerful need provocation before they apologize; they need more than that before they correct the mistakes they are apologizing for.

So Adventism as a sociology rises out of a discourse—several discourses, perhaps—that simply may not be funny, or may not allow for easy humor, especially irony or satire. The economics of today and the culture of our great-grandparents may have foreclosed on any genuinely corrective humorous literature, and not many writers in the Church are willing to take the risks that come along with this kind of project.

Cartoonist Gary Trudeau takes "pea-shots" in his strip *Doonesbury*.

In distinction to lack of irony among a people who cannot—or do not—recognize legitimate places outside their own system at all, let alone as places from which to take what Gary Trudeau calls "pea-shots at passers by…in order to attract attention to folly," we do have a growing corpus of cynical humor—humor that incorporates what Charles

Scriven has called "hope for escape," at best—not Molly Ivins' "pessimism of the intellect [but] optimism of the will." Many of us have given up and just take pea shots at each other, with little hope for transforming the system that seems to generate so much folly.

Ironically, what is probably the deepest-set reason for why Adventists are not funny—not humorists—is that humor not only presupposes a shared sensibility, and is therefore somewhat undemocratic in its audience awareness, it also assumes the possibility of a better world. It assumes that pointing out folly will help remove, or at least relieve it. Cynicism, and the desperate "hope of escape" have no project; humor does. But what do we do when our theology tells us rather straightforwardly that the World is getting worse and worse, and that there is little we can do except evangelize or develop palliative social programs.

In a healthy society, humor is a public utility, says Roger Rosenblatt: it provokes, it attempts to correct, it holds out a promise for a better world—at the very least the world in which we immediately live. However, for many of us who remember the social revolutions of the 1960s and the hopes we had to engage our denominational parents in conversation that would eventually liberate theology from nineteenth-century tradition—or at least reconsider their relationship, there is little left *but* cynicism and the "hope for escape."

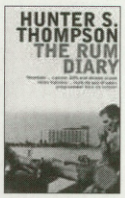
Like the plantain-sellers in Havana, we are fearful because too much is at stake—however, little we have can be lost in one or two overly clever turns of phrase. Eventually someone at the very top might get bent out of shape. We are told that someone's feelings could get hurt; we are told that what is genuinely corrective humor is ultimately going to be hurtful to the powerful.

We are told that direct and specific speech is incendiary. This is all true. But this is what someone needs to do today. Humor provides a deeply moral perspective; its prima facie cleverness often hides that from all but the most careful readers or listeners, but that's often what we want.

The effective and moral humorist believes in the possibility of something better, in the possibility that the right people, and right-thinking people, can help find something better. Humorists believe that they have a project, and that they have a community of friends and readers who "get it." Humorists are risk-takers who have the luxury of not having to worry about their objects' withholding their next paychecks; humorists know that discovering the truth may be more important that defending the facts, and that maybe the world can, in fact, get better.

In a sense, humorists are heretics.

One of America's best and most effective humorists died this winter. Tom Wolfe called Hunter S. Thompson "the century's greatest comic writer in the English language" (*Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 22, 2005). Incorrectly regarded as the man who coined the term *gonzo journalism*, Thompson was known for getting at the truth possibly before he collected all his facts; he was bulldoggish at grabbing his projects and not letting go until he had shaken every bit of truth out of them, throwing them on the ground and saying, "Here it is—look at what I brought you." Focus: grisly, maybe, but effective.



The late Hunter S. Thompson was known—incorrectly—for coining the phrase, *gonzo journalism.*

Louis Menand got it right when he said that Hunter's work "belonged to a time when journalists believed that fearlessness and humor and honesty could make a difference; and it's sad to be reminded that the time in which such a faith was possible has probably passed" (*The New Yorker*, Mar. 7, 2005).

One wonders if "the time in which such a faith was possible has probably passed" among those in the Church for whom conversation with and correction of those in power has not been successful, among those who still want to believe that fearlessness and humor and honesty can make a difference. Who need to laugh at some of this mess—and at them/ourselves.

What we need, here, is a little gonzo journalism. Not whiny exposés or eye-rolling inside jokes or cynical "Oh, wells," but bulldoggish get-at-the-truth-and-entertain-us-well writing. Writing that takes a risk, comes down on one side, names names, and keeps us laughing—even though it may make someone hyperventilate.

Just as "sunshine is the best disinfectant"—exposing and deactivating that nasty mold in the grout of institutional bureaucracy and governance—humor can be a very effective scrub brush. We might not actually be ready for real gonzo journalism, but it's time to think hard about learning how to stand far enough away to see ourselves—so we can start learning again how to get the joke.

Winona Wendth is the director of College Advancement at Kettering College of Medical Arts, in Kettering, Ohio.