

Humor & Death

You've got to be kidding!

by Allen Klein

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ALL OF US ARE AWARE of the inevitability of life's final process, yet most of us have difficulty lightening up about it. We believe that death is "serious business" and therefore seldom see any place for humor in it. Humor, however, can:

- provide relief for our anxieties about death,
- help us cope with the death of others, and
- ease the stress that often surrounds grief.

Let us begin by looking at the first point: easing our death-related anxieties with humor. When we joke about death, we take the mystery out of it and begin to get the upper hand on our fears. As George Mikes has pointed out, "Laughing at death gives us triple pleasure: 1) the pleasure of the joke itself; 2) the malicious joy of laughing at death's expense; and 3) the pleasure of taming Death and fraternizing with him."

Woody Allen provides an example of fraternization with death in his short play entitled *Death Knocks*. Here Death is no longer the grim reaper we have heard so much about but instead an awkward bumbling entity. We first encounter it clumsily climbing through the bedroom window exclaiming, "Jesus Christ, I nearly broke my neck." Because Death is brought to the human level, it is able to be defeated. After Death loses a gin game, it hastily exits and almost falls down the stairs. The main character thus triumphantly proclaims that Death is "such a schlep."

Because the central character in this play did not recognize the power of Death, it had no power over him. By joking about our own death, we too can make it, or anything that oppresses us for that matter, less frightening.



Our culture emphasizes the *loss* of everything when we die and the *difference* between life and death. In many other cultures life and death are not classified as opposing forces but simply as aspects of existence. Because of this viewpoint, they have been able to view death in a lighter manner.

A good example of not viewing death as tragic can be seen in the cremation ceremonies of the Balinese people. Death for the Balinese is not the end but is seen as a new beginning for the soul. Therefore, when the body dies and releases the spirit, it is time for great celebration. The procession which precedes the actual burning of the body, for example, has been described as a small Rose Bowl Parade with an Irish wake thrown in for spice.

The Balinese are not the only ones who deal with death less seriously than others. Mexicans, for example, set aside a specific day each year to mock death, and the Irish hold uproarious wakes to ease their loss. The Tiwi in Africa have the role of "joking partner" to prevent the bereaved from excessive mourning. The following Zen tale provides a model for treating death with both wisdom and humor.

Ikkyu, the Zen master, was very clever as a boy. His teacher had a precious teacup, a rare antique. Ikkyu happened to break this cup and was greatly perplexed. Hearing the footsteps of his teacher, he held the pieces of the cup behind him. When the master appeared, Ikkyu asked: "Why do people have to die?"

"This is natural," explained the older man. "Everything has to die and has just so long to live."

Ikkyu, producing the shattered cup, added: "It was time for your cup to die."

Historical perspective, different cultures, and the arts provide us with a safe place from which to view how other people and other times laugh at death. It is, of course, easier to joke about something when it is not so close to home. But what of the more immediate death of those around us? How can humor help in a situation that most people label as tragic?

To begin with, I am not saying that laughter need be the main focus in the dying process. Expression of less joyous emotions are also important. Nor is laughter always appropriate. What I am saying is, first, that death, in and of itself, is neither sad nor funny, and, second, that we often forget how beneficial laughter can be at this time.



When someone is seriously ill, we frequently allow their illness to crowd out everything else. We tend to forget that they are more than just their disease. Perhaps unknowingly, we separate ourselves from them. We become "the well" and they become "the sick." A few chuckles between the terminally ill and another brings those involved to equal territory. It is as if we are saying, "If we can laugh together then I am no different from you." Shared laughter between the patient and someone else emphasizes that, "You are not dead yet; we still have something in common." One of the places to look for humor in a situation where someone is dying is in the ambiguities that surround this process. There is often an avalanche of mixed emotions here which can create a fertile ground for comic moments. Here is one example:

A hospice patient, who was very near death, refused to eat any more food. She said she wanted to die. The following day, she announced her intention to die again, and again the day passed without her demise. This went on for several days. Then one day she arose from her bed and joined the rest of her family at the breakfast table. The amazed family members wanted to know how come she was joining them for breakfast after so many days of not eating. The frail elderly lady turned and answered, "So who wants to die on an empty stomach?"

Incidents like the one above happen frequently around intense death-related situations. What is important is that we do not close our consciousness to them and exclude laughter because we think death must be solemn. In addition to remembering not to neglect the possibility of laughter in the dying process, we might also pay closer attention to the wishes of the deceased. Most of the terminally ill people I interviewed felt that they did not want their loved ones to be sad after they had passed on. They wanted them to recall the happier moments they had spent together and to party when they were no longer around. Humor can help everyone who is involved in a death bear the unbearable. For the survivor, humor can be a source of strength. For the professional caregiver, who encounters numerous deaths, humor can be a socially acceptable way of releasing frustration and helplessness. For the patient, humor can be a way of coping with failing body functions, unfamiliar medical procedures, and confused emotions. For all concerned, humor can be a way of communicating about a taboo subject. We can continue to see humor as a foreign element in dealing with death and dying, or we can start to take advantage of humor's important coping, bonding, stress relieving, and communication qualities. The choice is up to us.

