

High Spirits: THE TRANSFORMATIVE FUNCTIONS OF HUMOUR

by Brian Van der Horst

**'If you're not allowed to
laugh in heaven, I don't
want to go there.'**

— Martin Luther

The Challenge of Comedy

This article started when Alix Louisa von Uhde, one of the board members of the German Association of NLP, asked me if I had ever made an NLP technique of humour.

I answered: "All the time. Every technique in NLP can benefit from a little, or a lot of laughter." I went on to explain, that to my mind, it was obvious:

NLP is a meta-discipline. A discipline of disciplines. A meta-position to all traditional disciplines. The first meta position in history was probably a joke. A good laugh is communication that operates outside of time and space. Comedy forces you to suddenly contain two different, and often mutually exclusive ideas at once. The result is transformative. The punch line of a joke arrives and – wham! – you pop outside of everything you know to be logical, important, or real.

This is a better solution than being 'sensible'. If you use your common sense, holding two conflicting ideas at the same time usually produces strain, tension, stress, or anxiety and pain. Being skilled at humour makes good emotional sense. Laughter is a sublime resource state.

A moment of hilarity also fulfils all the conditions required for creating a compelling reference experience. This the task of NLP: creating experiences that will allow people to generate new beliefs and behaviours. Why not have fun at the same time?



I went on to give a presentation at the annual DVNLP Conference in Berlin last November addressing the value of non-sensical states, and the wisdom and physiology of a light-hearted emotional intelligence.

***"Are you serious,
Mr. Van der Horst?"***

Since then, a lot of people who know my work with the cognitive sciences, intercultural communication, and psychoneuro-immunology have asked me if I am kidding.

I never thought I'd find myself writing in defence of humour. The position itself, as Oscar Wilde used to say about sex is – "a bit ridiculous."

***But humour is a
serious business.***

I think my best work during this period have been those efforts in which my subjects thought I took them too lightly; my employers, too frivolously. Maybe it's all in my mind. Experiments have shown that the right brain, everybody's favourite hemisphere these days, perceives better through (visual) gloom and dimness than does the analytical, humourless left brain. Laughter, they say, occurs on the right side. Maybe that explains my penchant for silver linings.

Did you ever wonder why the Buddha is usually portrayed with a smile on his lips? Why all those gurus and swamis are always giggling? Or why the twin guardians of Zen temples are confusion and paradox? Maybe it's because, as Samuel Butler said, "A sense of humour keen enough to show a man his own absurdities will keep him from the commission or all sins, or nearly all, save those, that are worth committing."

Robin Williams does a routine on his album, *Reality – What a Concept!* in which he plays a fundamentalist preacher exhorting his congregation, except wherever a Bible-thumper would say "God", Williams substitutes the word "comedy".

It works. Miracles and mirth operate in the same medium.

Why use humour in NLP?

My interpretation of the inexorable appropriateness of levity in celestial, clinical and cognitive matters is that humour is the most enlightened form of human communication.

A good chuckle fulfills all the conditions required for classic satori, samadhi, and most garden varieties of transubstantiation. In the first place, humour is the only form of expression that operates outside time and space. We ordinarily go about our linear, idea-follows-opinion-follows-fact-follows-argument way of the world.

But a joke operates outside of this lockstep continuum. Like the sphere that visited the two-dimensional denizens of Flatland, humour lives in a domain outside, yet encompassing, our physical reality.

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What is the universe of laughter? It doesn't operate by the same rules as ours. For in the dimension of whimsy, two disparate objects can occupy the same space at the same time.

Did you ever notice that you can't think during the depths of a belly laugh?

Everybody has heard that the first step of enlightenment is lightening up – but humour is also a truly instantaneous communication as well. If you don't get it, there's not much use in trying to explain a joke. But if you do, it's yours forever.

The Essential Task of NLP

This kensho! quality of enlightenment is just what makes humour so appropriate for NLP. Let's take a look at what Leslie Cameron-Bandler (now Lebeau) first identified as the essential work of NLP: creating experiences in which people will change their beliefs and behaviors. Since there are a limited number of experiences among the billions in each person's life that actually make such a difference in their lives, she identified these key events as "Compelling Reference Experiences" (CRE).

These experiences, Leslie pointed out, have functional attributes:

The Characteristics of a Compelling Reference Experience

- 1 Implication with Self-Concept
- 2 The sub-modalities of the Eidetic.
- 3 Representational Systems and Modalities
- 4 External Reference
- 5 Mis-match with Previous Experience
- 6 The Unexpected
- 7 Patterning

Let's take these one at a time.

Implication with Self-Concept: To create a CRE, you have to offer someone an event that will be personally irresistible – if the subject is a man or a woman, different kinds of metaphors will speak more to the individual's identity, values, and lifestyle. A few relevant jokes will set up an NLP technique not only in creating rapport, but identification.

Humour dissolves all arguments. "An individual is as strong as his or her prejudice", notes Lawrence J. Peter, of *Peter Principle* fame: "Two things reduce prejudice—education and laughter."

The sub-modalities of the Eidetic: This is a piece of jargon that refers to unforgettable memories, or eidetics. We

tend to call this a "reality strategy" these days, but the concept is the same. If you want an NLP technique to work, it had better create a believability, or the reverse, a congruent doubt about limiting assumptions. A series of well-placed gags can draw a client's attention to the edges of the sensory spectrum they often ignore to their detriment.

Humour may also be the only form of social intercourse which accurately represents the way the human mind works. Neuro-physiologist Karl Pribram, among others, has found that our brains store memories holographically – in matrixes or wholes rather than in linear chains. The contextually enfolding nature of humour is also much more in order with modern theories of physical reality – from Einsteinian field theory to quantum mechanics than are the analytical deliberations of logic.

Representational Systems and Modalities: Everybody pays attention to different rep systems, and 'away-from' or 'towards' motivation. Jokes can spruce up a technique, and various provocations in the style of Frank Farrelly can set up the dynamics of change: "A man can eat filet mignon every night, and even then he'll begin to wonder what a good juicy hamburger would taste like", versus, "I don't care where my husband gets his appetite, as long as he eats at home."

External Reference: Leslie observed that practically all definitive learning experiences are a function of interacting with the outside world, or another person. With a client, a joke can serve as the external reference, thus deflecting unwanted transference and dependency.

Humour can be the Grail sought in so many civilized quests. Norman Cousins attested to the efficacy of comedy in curing maladies. He told the story – reprinted in seventeen medical journals of how he cured himself of a deadly cellular disease by hooting at Marx Brothers movies and gulping C's. The sunshine vitamin.

Mis-match with Previous Experience: CRE's represent a change, a difference that makes the difference. This requires the change in generalisations that reveals the 'news of difference'. One of the more elegant ways to produce this shift in filters is with humour.

Comedy forces you to suddenly deal with dissimilar, mutually exclusive, or multiple stacked realities at once. Then – dancing on the blade of paradox, you don't quite know where you are. You are forced to jump – levels or universes. You don't know where you've been; but you know you've been there because you are laughing.

A good joke turns people away from previous experience, and toward the future. As George Burns used to say, "I'm very interested in the future; I intend to spend the rest of my life there."

The Unexpected: The experiences which change you definitively are the punchlines of life. They have the quality of surprise, or a new re-organization of previous learnings. The charisma of the Bandler, Grinder or Robbins often comes from stage-craft, and the delight of sudden disclosure. John Paul Getty's secret for success: "Rise early. Work hard. Discover oil."

7 Patterning: CRE's are installed through variations of intensity, frequency, duration, interval and repetition. Each of us has his or her own pattern of acquiring knowledge.

So there you have it: Plato's dream of unfettered ideals, Kant's *a priori* plane of pure existence, Whitehead's mutable truths, Gregory Bateson's "pattern that connects", – humour fits all the descriptions of entraining wisdom.

Look around you to where you have engendered belief or adamant opinion: Music, theatre, art are all imbued with currents of irony, satire and parody these days.

Consider that pattern which connects us all:

Orgasm is intrinsically funny.

And of course, the Greeks knew all about it. Tragedy – pathos – was high in their pantheon of excellence. Comedy was higher. Highest of all was tragi-comedy – bathos – where they had their audiences laughing and crying at the same time, lifting them to Olympian heights outside and above the mere drama of life.

That quality of drama and humour together can make all the difference between an NLP technique that is mechanistic and lifeless and a structured experience that generates empathy, compassion, and a deep resonating acceptance of the crazy uncertainties of living like a human being.

It must be acknowledged that here we are also talking about the most dangerous form of human interchange. Social convention is notoriously inhospitable to humour.

No human institution can survive the denial or laughter, and few evil agencies can withstand a full-blown burlesque. The ones that can, or even encourage high spirits, almost always emerge from the scrutiny of wit with a good heart-keeping seal of approval. It's the acid test of humanism: "Men and women", said Frank Colby, "will confess to treason, murder,

arson, false teeth or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humour?"

Freud proposed that humour was sublimated aggression. I think he missed the point: it may be what makes our species unique. Our very ability to transcend aggression. On the other hand, historically, humorists are condemned or censored not because they are funny, but because they tell the truth.

This fact makes me worry about some of the relentless positive thinking espoused by some of NLPundits who characterize ribaldry and jest as subversive, suppressive, and undermining. We should remember that much of the New Psychology movement of the last half of 20th century arose from the Free Speech protests of the '60s. At the time, people like Lenny Bruce were being busted for using words that were equivalent to 'eat', 'breathe', 'walk', and other joyful bodily functions. If we are now advised to stifle our wit, wonder, and satire because giving voice to such concepts tends to shape our psychological reality, and may not be 'politically correct', isn't this just a deeper, more insidious form of repression?

Be warned: there are enough drugs and techniques available these days to ensure that we don't even think such thoughts.

While I agree with H. G. Wells that cynicism and its variants are merely humour in ill health, I'd like to give you an example of the value of even the most razor-toothed satire.

I used to get ruffled under my pinfeathers when people used to make fun of NLP. There have been so many parodies and clownish mis-translations and doubtful applications of this, my life's work.

You know, all those 'How to make a man/woman fall in love with you and buy your pyramidal marketing scheme while we hypnotize you to walk on fire while accessing ABSOLUTE DOMINATION OF THE UNIVERSE!!!' books, videos and seminars.

Embarrassing, yes?

But last week I was talking with an editor of a prestigious American men's magazine notorious for doing 'kill' pieces on the human potential movement. He said that ever since the combination of Anthony Robbins visiting Clinton, John Gray becoming the house shrink for the Oprah show, Andrew Weil and Depak Chopra flooding the booklists, and the whole co-dependence/12-step market washing over the media, the movement has been satired-out. The new psychol-

ogy/alternative medicine spectrum no longer seems worth attacking; everyone's heard how silly it can sound. "Now", he said, "we want to take a serious look at what actually works in this area – and write about that."

I think this is true for much of the media today. People are even ready to take a serious look at what is truly valuable in the broad spectrum of NLP experimentation. And humour paved the way.

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