

Higher Power Humor™ and the Art of “Humor Intelligence”™ - Part 1: On Becoming a Motivational Humorist

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A series of Stress Doc essays addresses a leadership tool too often left out of the leadership toolbox: the capacity for purposeful, compassionate, and playful (and, yes, sometimes provocative) humor. Especially in a TNT - Time-Numbers-Technology- Driven, Distracted and Disruptive-World, there is tangible connection between humor as a stress and conflict-defusing educational and motivational tool and leadership effectiveness. And I think those who wish to be high-impact communicators, folks who want to: a) Break down status barriers, b) Inspire breaking out of comfort zones, c) Encourage people to discover and deliver their own authentic voice, while being d) Diverse community builders intuitively know that to maximize their impact, it’s wise to add “high octane humor” to passion, performance, and program. In fact, Daniel Goleman, the EQ pioneering promoter, noted that the most successful managers use humor three times more often than their less successful counterparts.

The first of a series lays the groundwork for the motivating power of psycho-humor, followed by a definition of humor, including “higher” humor functions and interdependent connections with laughing, learning, and leading. Early on, the essay introduces two new concepts: Humor Intelligence and Higher Power Humor. These two concepts will be further developed along with the contrast between humor and wit in subsequent writings. And, of course, this series will build a bridge from the conceptual to “hands on” higher power humor application. Each humor anecdote will become a template or humor roadmap for helping you explore and build your own “Motivational Humorist” pathway. But let’s commence with a fundamental question: is the capacity for humor more nature or nurture?

“Can i learn to be funnier?”

Years back, during a professional networking dinner, two familiar questions surfaced. A colleague who had attended my conference workshop wanted to know, “How did you develop an ability to use humor in your presentations?” And, “Were you always a comic or class clown?” An occasional public presenter herself, the implicit message was clear: “How can I use humor more effectively; can I learn to be funnier?”

Reasonable questions: while there is a funny bone, I don’t believe there is an all or none funny gene. (And as a youngster I lacked the needed confidence and brashness to be class clown; my out-rage-ous side was still repressed). Clearly, very few will approach the lampooning wit and absurdist mannerisms of Groucho Marx, the brilliantly manic antics of Robin Williams, the outrageous, self- and other-skewering, psychologically and cultural insightful portraits of Richard Pryor, or the subtly and sensually wicked, ego-deflating humor of Sarah Silverman. However, because of the often stressful, always on if not addictive pace of life, all who wish to purposefully employ humor and wit have real opportunity. As the pioneering comedic film genius, Charlie Chaplin, observed: *A paradoxical thing is that in making comedy, the tragic is precisely that which arouses the funny... We have to laugh due to our helplessness in the face of natural forces and (in order) not to go crazy.*

Designing bright humor crystals

And one of the world’s great humanitarians, the undaunted perceptual trail blazer, Helen Keller, beautifully captured, if you will, a “healing, if not higher humor” mission statement: *The world is so full of care and sorrow that it is a gracious debt we owe to one another to discover the bright crystals of delight in somber circumstances and irksome tasks.*

So how can individuals, whether or not formal leaders, as well as families and organizations discover and design those bright delightful crystals, embarking on what I will call a “higher power humor” quest? From a humorist’s perspective, “light” is definitely a multifaceted concept: light can illuminate psychic black clouds or penetrate seemingly closed viewpoints while lessening the weight of the world on minds and shoulders. For transforming darkness and heaviness into lightness and enlightenment, let me posit a twofold path:

- 1) The ability to conceptually embrace and practically apply “Emotional Intelligence” and
- 2) Then to springboard from the EQ platform into a potentially deeper (more soulful) and higher (more spiritual) world of engagement and elucidation. We are now entering that seriously silly, radiant realm of “Humor Intelligence” (HQ) and “Higher Power Humor”.

The ‘markers’ of good transitional care

However, before defining these new concepts, let me begin with a slight detour. Years back, I conceived of a creative-communication model, a 2 x 2 matrix, called “The Four ‘P’s of Passion Power”. The model design was sparked by a request for a program on “Delivering Dynamic Presentations” from an Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA). The question posed to myself: What do I try to bring to the presentational table? The answer: I like being “Cognitive” (using my head) and being “Affective” (speaking from the heart). I also ebb and flow between the serious (the model label is “Gravitas”, a good Washington DC term) and the humorous (or “Comedia” from the slapstick and silly to the wisely witty. E.g. my aspirational mantra: To be a wise man and a wise guy). The interaction of these four terms yield:

- “Cognitive-Gravitas” or Purposeful
- “Cognitive-Comedia” or Provocative
- “Affective-Gravitas” or Passionate
- “Affective-Comedia” or Playful

Ergo, Purposeful-Provocative-Passionate-Playful are the “Four ‘P’s of Passion Power”. Recently, I’ve added a fifth “P” - Philosophical - when you are able to integrate simultaneously and lyrically express the aforementioned, “Fab Four”. (The question posed to live audiences: Which of the four are your strengths, which your shadow side?).

The marriage of psycho-motivation and humor

The model clarifies why and how a holistic, “Multi-P” communicator or leader shares uncommon energy and humorous insights in various interpersonal and performance arenas. The “Multi-P Leader” brings effective and imaginative, scripted and spontaneous play to roles and relationships, projects and problem-solving. He or she also challenges the accepted wisdom of “There’s no “I” in team”. For such a leader there may be no “I” in team, but there are two “I”s in winning; and these “I”s can “C”. winning Teams blend “Individual Creativity” and “Interactive Community”. And “Higher Power Humor” helps these complements imaginatively play, set good boundaries, and synergize with each other.

From my vantage point, a Four “P” Leader who can purposefully, provocatively, and passionately play is a “Motivational Humorist”. And if you add a psychological bent, then this person is approaching my trademarked label; he or she is becoming a “Psychohumorist”™. (Naturally, I let the audience decide where the emphasis on that word should go). Consider these Psychohumorist exemplars: the title of my first book, *Practice Safe Stress*. Or my digital age mantra: Save the Analog Whales! And, as many of you know, I’m pioneering the field of psychologically humorous rap music and, as a therapist, calling it, of course, Shrink Rap™ Productions. As for being self-referential, you know the old saw: Vanity thy name is Gorkin!).

Definition and characteristics of humor

Here’s a dictionary definition of humor. *Humor (is) the recognition and expression of the incongruities and peculiarities in a situation or conduct.* A gift for humor, especially for professionally intentional and appropriate humor, not only reveals a capacity for key aspects of “Emotional Intelligence; it suggests another category of “intelligence”. I will call this “cognitive-affective-communicative-interactive” ability to employ playful and purposeful humor and wit, “Humor Intelligence” (HQ). Characteristics of HQ include, an ability to:

- a) Appreciate and walk that often fine line between the comic and tragic, between hopeful and hurtful, and still ingeniously capture and engage with life’s “slings and arrows” and absurdities; upon hearing some self-proclaimed visionary righteously rant and rail, I might say: *Remember, there’s often a fine line between vision and hallucination. And to soften the blow: Believe me I’ve tripped over that line myself many times.*
- b) Understand a range of social-emotional characteristics - from the vulnerable to the vainglorious; when a fellow 12-stepper (a friend I knew I could tweak), began pronouncing in a somewhat prideful manner his triple-diagnosis - *depression, sexual addiction, and OCD* - I couldn’t help myself: *This man is multi-talented; he has surely self-actualized!*
- c) Exaggerate (or underplay) “reality” or the “obvious”; purposefully use and confuse the literal and the metaphorical; as a T-shirt (*displaying an image of a woman pulling out her hair*) for an ex-girl-friend who frequently bemoaned her untamed and unruly locks. The shirt boldly proclaimed: *How can I control my life if I can’t control my hair?*
- d) View events from multiple (often silly and surprising) perspectives, especially conveying the emotional side of life - from melancholy to mania - not only by laugh lines but through all manner of nonverbal expression; I’ll cover this in greater detail, but when I expose my Shrink Rapper personae to audiences, putting on my Blues Brothers hat, black sunglasses, and prance around the room banging on a black tambourine, “singing” my clever lyrics, the audience’s mouths are agape, in shock... then the smart phones come out; their response invariably turns to applause and laughter: *Who is this rhythmically challenged, whip-smart white guy?*
- e) Poke (mostly) gentle fun at others’ self-defeating or self-serving behavior, or behavior that leaves me feeling a bit deflated; living in N’Awlins, a woman for whom I had romantic inclinations, broke the bad news, at least for me: “Mark, I’ve decided I’m into women; no longer dating men”. Shortly thereafter, on her 30th birthday, I found the perfect card: Now that you are 30, just remember... *There’s more to life than wine, women, and song!* We both laughed heartily, easing my pain.
- f) To laugh at our own flaws and foibles; during my Stress Workshops, an exercise gets small groups to list their “Three ‘B’” - Brain-Body-Behavior - stress smoke signals. If someone mentions loss of hair, (being challenged in the follicle realm), I pounce: “Hey, I resemble that remark”. And then continue: “You all should have more respect for my hair. It was recently listed as a World Wildlife Fund ‘Endangered Species’”.

Four “H” functions of higher power humor

The purposeful and playful, creative yet thoughtful and discriminating exercise of “Humor Intelligence”, along with the capacity to laugh and learn from our flaws and foibles, as we explore and engage with HQ, lays the groundwork for “Higher Power Humor”. Consider these four higher power functions:

1. **Hostility-disarming:** This can occur by deflating an aggressor’s pride or weaponry, by creating emotional distance between the aggressor and target, or by building up the target’s esteem and confidence; the target is now less reactive to an antagonist’s provocation.
2. **Healing:** First and foremost, this humor function helps an individual clean both physical and, especially, psychological wounds with tears of laughter and self-acceptance; one begins to let go of a sense of false or reactive pride and resentment; with renewed energy, confidence, and positivity you begin to more easily poke fun at your own embarrassing mistakes and missteps.
3. **Harnessing:** This humor helps recover and discover new-found energy; depending on the social-psychological context, the hearty laughter release of endorphins and dopamine may both calm or arouse an individual or a group; such laughter, especially when shared, fuels new acceptance, motivation, and vision, supporting and challenging engagement, liberation, and risk-taking; two quotes come to mind:
 - a) The psychiatrist, Dr. Ernst Kris, observed: *What was once feared and is now mastered is laughed at.*
 - b) The Stress Doc’s inversion: *What was once feared and is now laughed at is no longer a master!*
4. **Harmonizing:** This function helps break down social and psychological status barriers, rigid assumptions, and prejudices between individuals; it also opens up channels of communication and cooperation within and between groups; a humor that fosters group healing enables both individuals and the group as a whole to bring out their best music; harmonizing humor up lifts communities!

And the best “higher power” humorists artfully blend verbal and nonverbal gesture, all manner of vocal and facial expression, (along with costumery), in their playful yet purposeful, passionate and provocative communication and problem-solving performance. In addition, humor travels well: from face face-to-face, small- or large-group presentation to webinars and podcasts. The Stress Doc’s motto: *Have Stress? Will Travel: A Smart Mouth for Hire!*

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