

The Cost of Ridicule

by Bill Herbst

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This week's post is about a harmful social phenomenon that has always been with us and probably always will be, but has reached extraordinary proportions in this era's toxic social environment — the polluted and poisonous ocean of interaction in which we all swim. I'm referring to the tendency to mock, belittle, ridicule, and insult anyone who holds an opinion contrary to ours.

As with so much of what I see going on in the world, there's nothing new about this practice. Insulting other people for their beliefs and opinions wasn't invented yesterday. It has a long and savage history in all the many categories of human interactions — intimate, familial, and social, in both person-to-person and group-to-group contexts.

It's often said that all comedy has its roots in pain, suffering, and cruelty. I don't know if that's universally true, but it's obviously relevant quite often. [This commentary is not, however, about the Will Smith fiasco at the Oscars.]

To be the "butt" of a joke is to be shown up as a fool, yet somehow that makes us laugh. The issue here is laughing *at* versus laughing *with*. A good joke causes us to laugh at someone. A great joke also does that, but with the added subtext of laughing with. The universal and loving element of comedy lies in recognition of the ironic fact that we are all fools. Over a lifetime, everyone could be the butt of 10,000 jokes. That's how often we are all silly puddings. There's nothing wrong with the idea that we are all fair game to be made fun of. Any of us could qualify as the subject of a roast. Laughter is essential to human beings, and laughing at ourselves is ground zero in the effort to counter narcissism and arrogance with humility.

Too often, though, that's not what goes on in the world today. Instead, we see ridicule used as an expression of disdain and even hatred. I'm not a fan of the notion that speech is violence. I do, however, recognize that words can be cruel and have hurtful impact. Sadly, using our words cruelly, with the intent of harming another, if only in reputation, has become pandemic in the culture.

This is not an appeal for "polite discourse," which is frequently used to mask or hide potentially aggressive emotions. I like the authenticity of raucous and relatively spontaneous interactions. Wrestling and faux warfare are part of

animal play for most mammals and primates. They are essential to our health. What's required to make that harmless, however, is that each contestant in the game feel assured about the other's benign intent.

Time and again, though, I see people going after others with whom they disagree (usually people they've never met) in ways that are intended to harm. I'm not referring to the crude or blunt cases where ridicule and sarcasm are obviously demeaning, such as the flame wars on Twitter. No, I'm talking about people who are presumably attempting to engage in a thoughtful and serious discussion about some subject in conflict. This includes comments by one person about something read, seen, or heard, but it also includes purported "journalism," which claims to be objective but rarely is.

Even in "news reports," I notice all too often a disparaging tone toward those on the side that opposes the narrative. The ridicule may be subtle or covert, but it's there nonetheless. The subtext seems to be: "*How can anyone believe such nonsense?*" The people I'm talking about seem to be absolutely certain that they are right to believe what they do and that those who disagree are wrong — not merely incorrect or misinformed, but deranged, crazy, and sometimes even evil. The "truth" in these weaponized accounts is dogmatic, presented as black-and-white, clear as a bell, and not nuanced at all. The assumption seems to be that there's no possibility of any alternative.

This is yet another in the apparently endless variations of the Us-versus-Them dynamic that is not only essential to understanding moral psychology, but is also the most salient feature of the amygdala in assessing threats. In other words, it's both intellectual *and* primal — an abstraction of the philosophical mind, but also a function of raw emotion, where survival requires domination. Ultimately, such domination boils down to "Do what I say or I will kill you."

The modern world has devolved into psychological homicide. No, it's not literal murder (although a great deal of that goes on, too).

So, Bill, what's the problem? If you're not talking about actual murder, why have you got such a hard-on about ridicule that you want to write this commentary? Are you playing guru, presuming to tell us that mocking people is spiritually bad, something that Jesus wouldn't do?

No. The reason I'm writing is in the title. This post is practical, not spiritual. I'm concerned about the COST of ridicule to the person doing it. Well sure, from where I sit, all forms of domination are low-level games not worth playing, but beyond that, there's a very pragmatic reason not to engage in it.

If winning matters — if you really want to win — don't humiliate your enemies. Doing so serves only to harden their resolve against you. Even if you disagree vehemently with their beliefs or actions, you'd damn well better work to

understand your enemies' point of view. If you don't, you'll increase their power to oppose you.

Democrats and other so-called liberals made a huge mistake by treating Trump supporters as if they were cretins, almost sub-human (Hillary's "basket of deplorables"...). This dismissive attitude began during the 2016 Presidential campaign and went full bore during Trump's term in office. QAnon fueled that fire, which continues to burn, but Republicans are licking their lips waiting for the backdraft to carry them to victory in the 2022 midterms and then the 2024 Presidential election.

On the other side, Republicans who freak out at the mere mention of "socialism" and heap scorn on "the left" don't seem to realize that they could be nailing the lid on their own coffin. In politics, the people you scorn and make fun of will vote you out of office.

People who mock religious fundamentalism (Muslim, Christian, etc.) better be careful. If the faithful ever come to power (and they might...), they won't hesitate to lock up or even kill infidels. Conversely, people who ridicule "science" run the risk of major blowback.

Those who believe in or accept the mainstream COVID vaccine narratives make a serious error in accusing anyone who doesn't buy those stories of "selfishness" or "stupidity." Particularly with the COVID pandemic, no reasonable discussion or legitimate debate is possible, because even the most basic facts are in dispute.

When Jesus said, "Love your enemy," he wasn't kidding. If you want to win, that is the correct strategy. Understand why your opponents believe what they do, and forgive them if you can. Then organize your forces and defeat them.

To my way of thinking, we live in a world where everyone is misinformed about something, and some people are misinformed about damn near everything. Nobody has a copyright on the Truth. Humans lie their asses off about anything and everything. So yes, it's a worthwhile spiritual practice to turn your attention inward and make sure you're not being an asshole or a monster. I'm all for it. But that's not what this commentary is about.

In this world, revenge is real. People don't forget mistreatment. They continue to want payback and the satisfaction of getting even with someone who hurt them long after they've forgotten why. They may not always remember the exact particulars of whatever was said or done that belittled them, but they will always remember the feeling of humiliation. Dissing others as cruel mockery sets us up to suffer at some point the vengeance of those we scorned. Beyond being a lousy way to live, engaging in ridicule reduces our chances of long-term success.