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# Responding to Critical Moments with Humor, Recognition, and Hope

*John Forester*

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*Having “a sense of humor” when negotiations get tough has very little to do with being funny. Enacting rather than claiming, performing rather than arguing, mediators’ humor reveals multiple meanings and uncertainties, multiple perspectives and their limits, and parties’ needs while generating opportunities to learn. Humor can go wrong, and mediators stress a sine qua non: it must be respectful, never used at the expense of a negotiating party. At critical moments in negotiations, humor can be an important tool, if improvised with regard to tone, timing, affect, and respect. Mediators use humor to deconstruct and reconstruct parties’ presumptions of mediators’ authority; to recognize vulnerability, create moments of intimacy, and suggest possible community; to acknowledge painful histories and enable difficult conversations; to provide safety, release, and new collaborative openings. Mediators’ use of humor can signal possibility and hope and, not least of all, level power to encourage autonomy and build capacity — thus creating deliberative space and encouraging deliberative practice as well.*

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**T**his essay explores the importance of “having a sense of humor,” a deceptively simple response that mediators, planners, and other “third-parties” can

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bring to bear at dicey times in the face of difficult conflicts. In particular, we examine how these responses can address those critical moments in negotiations when the conversation between parties threatens to fall apart, to escalate or degenerate, or to turn toward such mutual suspicion or recrimination that all hope of mutual agreement appears lost (Wheeler 2001, 2002).

As we shall see, “having a sense of humor” involves the ability to show another person several angles of vision all at once. But it does that — and often very much more — without being heavy-handed, even in situations of great stress, pain, or anger. At critical moments in negotiations, having a sense of humor has very little to do with being funny, but very much to do with responding to others with understanding and imagination. This capacity calls not for expert knowledge, nor for substantive ideas or concepts, but for practically responsive and critically improvised performance — though we rarely understand the true complexity of such practical action (Forester 1999; Nussbaum 1990; Schutz 1970; Wheeler 2003).

In challenging situations of negotiation and conflict, having a sense of humor requires the ability to respond to others “on-line,” in the moment, being sensitive to others’ experiences while recognizing a group’s larger sense of hope and danger, frustration and possibility. Having a sense of humor, as I wish to explore it here, has almost nothing to do with canned, pre-packaged jokes and everything to do with perceptive and imaginative responses in the heat and flow of work: with words that reframe and change worlds, with perspectives that allow us to look at a situation in new and different ways, seeing what’s right in front of us as we have never seen it before — and perhaps laughing with some relief as we do (Wittgenstein 1950).

In some cases to be sure, using humor in a meeting might backfire. Laura Bachle recalls being told by her mediation trainers never to use humor in her mediating practice. Apparently, the trainers worried that the harm possibly done by novice mediators would far outweigh the benefits they might achieve (personal correspondence 2003). One or more parties might feel left out or, worse still, singled out, or perplexed, wondering if they had understood what had been said or what it had really meant. Having noted these dangers and risks, we would do well to appreciate the promise of an imaginative, practically responsive sense of humor. The analysis that follows begins to assess that promise (Cobb 2003).

An experienced mediator, Susan Podziba suggested that her sense of humor made a difference at critical moments in the flow of negotiations, moments at which she sought to transform real uncertainty and difficulty into new opportunity. “I’ve been in meetings where things have gotten to an incredibly tense moment — and a well-delivered, humorous statement was like a wave that cleansed the room of the tension and delivered a fresh, tension-free space to continue discussions,” she said.

In the following sections we explore practical examples provided by community planners, mediators, and facilitators in their accounts of the

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challenges of work in “participatory” — and thus conflict-ridden — settings. We explore critical moments in negotiations through the experiences and accounts of third-parties — who, of course, have critical moments of their own to navigate. These examples will provide us with windows onto the world of practice, and they will help us to explore what’s involved when a sense of humor can shift the course of a conversation, change expectations and relationships, and even turn suspicion and pain toward hope and action.

## **Exposing Our Imperfect Expectations and Our Need to Learn**

Consider a land-use planner’s handling of a developer’s team who treat him with suspicion and wariness. A senior planner with substantial experience, Nathan Edelson, tells us of his efforts to put others at ease: “[Using] humor [can] make it possible to talk to each other, [but] it depends on what it is. If it’s disrespectful, then it doesn’t work — but if it’s something about the absurdity of the situation that we’re in, or if it’s something where one person has said something that you would have expected from the other side, [that can help].”

Any use of humor must be respectful: it neither makes fun of others nor dismisses their concerns or makes light of what they take to be serious matters. Disrespect will make the work of talking to each other more, rather than less, difficult. While this much is not surprising, it helps us to understand that humor need not be dismissive or disrespectful in high-stakes situations.

Consider Nathan’s two examples of the kind of humor that can help and what they have in common. Both pointing out “the absurdity of the situation” and what someone has said “that you would have expected from the other side” lie beyond the frame of the parties’ reasonable, considered, well-informed judgments. They are surprising; they are unexpected; they are out of our control. They’re in our face. But moreover, they give us pause. They ask us to step back and to think again, to relax our absolute certainty about what’s going on. Paradoxically, both of Nathan’s examples suggest instances that show us we don’t know everything we need to know. We recognize that we were caught unaware, and we come to realize that we need to learn (Cavell 1969; Forester 1999).

Together in this absurd situation, we have been surprised together and we all have something to learn. Humor can give us the gift, even if momentarily, of recognizing that something connects us as adversaries in the room. We now see something that we mutually share: a need to learn to understand the situation in which we actually find ourselves interdependently connected. That gift of humor can contribute in a small but perhaps still important way to creating a “we” of nevertheless distrusting and skeptical parties who now need to talk to one another to reframe what they see and to learn more than they now know (Lynch 1998; Putnam 2003).

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## Recognizing Vulnerability and Building Community

Humor can connect us, and laughter can express not just release but also mutual acknowledgment: “Yes, we thought we fully understood the situation, but clearly there are crazy things happening here that we cannot fully control, or anticipate. Who knows what this unpredictable governor is going to throw in our lap this time?”

Humor provides us with lessons of surprise of several crucial kinds (Forester forthcoming). Even our grudging laughter at the out-of-control absurdity of the situation enables each party to see that it is not just that he or she individually faces this unpredictable situation with contingencies and pressures that he or she can’t control, but that all of us, as disputing parties, face a situation that none of us can fully control or anticipate. So, we acknowledge that we are all vulnerable. We are all at risk. Suddenly, a sense of humor has helped each of us to see that we, as adversaries, share concerns — even such interests as getting better information — that we had not seen clearly before (Kolb and Williams 2003).

Second, when humor makes it possible for us to laugh together, we hear and so recognize not only conceptually but intimately — even pre-performatively, pre-reflectively — that even though we distrust each other, we do share something. Yes, the situation is absurd in part because we can’t predict what the city council or the governor will do. Or, yes, Jones just said what we expected her greatest critic to say — and in hearing one another’s laughter at this surprise, we recognize not just our own fallible personal expectations, but our fallibility together, and we begin to suspect that we each realize this.

Third, as we apprehend that we as individuals are not quite as omniscient as we thought, we see that our shared, spontaneous laughter can humble us together. We appreciate that we’re both laughing at the absurd situation we share — and so, all of a sudden, even as adversarial parties, we may be closer together than we were, seeing now that we are more alike in our limits — and even needs — than we thought.<sup>1</sup>

So in situations of suspicion, complexity, and heavy expectations, Nathan teaches us that having a sense of humor can be respectful and instructive, and transformative. Being able to laugh together as we recognize some absurdity of our situation, we find it now more possible to “talk to each other.” We discover shared dependency and vulnerability, shared fallibility and lack of control, and mutual recognition of our limits: we’re both, after all, laughing (Dundes 1987; Freud 1960; Schön 1983; Schön and Rein 1994).

## Challenging Presumptions of Power and Powerlessness

Consider how a sense of humor can challenge political expectations. Normajean McLaren, a community-planning consultant with extensive experience involving issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural conflicts, explains:

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For example, in a development situation (where people are often hiding things they want) you have people come in, and they're feeling very strongly that you're there as part of the bureaucracy and there are all of these hoops that they have to jump through. So you're [about to sit] down at the table, and they're already good and grumpy because they've been through this fifteen times, and you're the sixteenth person they have had to talk to.

Everybody's looking at you impatiently, and someone says, "Well, where are you going to sit?" And you might say, "Well, according to the bylaws, subsection such and such, I actually have to sit right here!" which makes it as stupid as it really is. You're not making fun of them — you're really making fun of exactly what you're doing, which immediately says, "I don't take myself this seriously."

Notice the pains Normajean takes to stress that the humor must be respectful to all parties. Her humor is directed toward herself, but it is not about her personally, it is about her officially as "the planner" or "the bureaucrat" they're expecting to meet or encounter, who, they worry, will soon make them jump through more costly hoops. Normajean acknowledges their uneasy anticipation of her political role. She tries not just to have a sense of humor but to share it. In part, she wants to say, "Relax! Lighten up!" But she can only do that if she shows them that she will go first. Instead of demanding something from them, she will make the first offer: she will "lighten up" first and so make it easier, safer, and less risky for them to follow suit.

Normajean's use of humor actually begins with respect: she acknowledges, in effect, that she knows that "they're already good and grumpy because they've been through this fifteen times" — but she conveys even more than that: recognition. She acknowledges that they are all together in a situation deeply entangled in political and legal structures, with all the accompanying mandates, regulations, and bylaws. She acknowledges that they all have to take those mandates and regulations into account, but she recognizes their limits and the ways they can be taken to absurd limits. Her example of having to "sit right here" announces that she has no intention of subjecting them to such a rule-mongering use of her authority. In a few words, she both acknowledges the importance of the development and planning regulations, and recognizes their indeterminacy and their openness to interpretation. She wants to be taken seriously — she's there indeed in an official and authoritative capacity as a planner with an important role in the development process — but at the same time she wants everyone to be able to talk about the important issues at hand, so she also wants them to know, "I don't take myself [too] seriously."

The political work her humor does here conveys several perspectives all at once. Her use of humor recognizes power and authority, and its playfulness creates a space for conversation and negotiation that might enable the parties to craft innovative outcomes not already prescribed and

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predetermined by “the bureaucracy.”<sup>2</sup> As we shall now see, other practitioners share Normajeau’s views.

## **One of the Greatest Jobs in the World: Being Phil Donohue, Bob Barker, and Jerry Springer**

Another regional planner, David Boyd, stressed how his sense of humor allowed him, in quite adversarial and contentious meetings, to present the complexities of his own role and to suggest a way of moving forward that would be respectful rather than vindictive, open rather than rigidly proscribed, light rather than morose and somber — all at once. “I use humor quite consistently throughout my work,” David said. “Sometimes it’s sort of wry, sometimes it’s sarcastic, sometimes it’s just dumb. For instance, I facilitated a series of town hall meetings — often on very controversial subjects, such as planning or inter-municipal collaboration. The panelists were often adversaries, and the audience occasionally was downright hostile.

“I always started the evening with an introduction to the series, and then would say, ‘I have one of the greatest jobs in the world — I get to be one part Phil Donohue, one part Bob Barker, and one part Jerry Springer.’ This usually got some sort of smart aleck response from a panelist or an audience member, ‘Hopefully there’ll be no chair throwing, and the place cracked up. Its purpose was twofold: to serve as an ‘icebreaker,’ but also to set a norm — to say, ‘It’s OK to dig in hard, to discuss and debate — but there will be some fun and entertainment to it as well.’ There wasn’t a facilitation or a mediation that went by that I didn’t do something similar . . .”

Like Normajeau, David takes an ironic and humorous view of his own power and authority as he refers to three very different television hosts to indicate the complexity and challenges of his official role. Like Phil Donohue, he will try to ask good questions and explore the parties’ points of view in front of a live audience; like Bob Barker he will moderate the parties’ turn-taking as they keep their eyes on the prize(s) and hope to take home the goods; and like Jerry Springer, he will not be surprised if the parties give vent to histories of broken promises and distrust, anger and fear, strong feelings and suspicions — and so he acknowledges all that even as he asks everyone present to “dig in hard, to discuss and debate,” but to have some fun doing it too.

Like Nathan and Normajeau above, David also stresses a careful, respectful use of humor: “I always poked fun at myself, and never at the participants.” He too recognizes and conveys powerfully in the moment the ambiguities of his role as an “authority figure.” Though to his audience his role may seem directive and prescriptive, his sense of humor nevertheless suggests both to us and to that audience how he really hopes to perform his duties — with seriousness and good humor — and thus how he hopes to work, to improvise practically and creatively in the scene at hand (Wheeler 2003). Notice here how different his practice would be if, instead,

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David announced his intentions to his audience, “I will try to improvise with seriousness and with humor” — a statement that, although true, might well be far less effective than his ironic and playful reference to the three talk show hosts.

## **Acknowledging Painful History and Easing Conversation**

Normajean’s and David’s stories find echoes in an example given to us by Frank Blechman, a political consultant turned public policy mediator. Frank argues that the use of humor can be “a double-edged sword.” He tells us:

Seeing the irony, ridiculousness, or downright improbability of a situation keeps us humble. However, expressing that perception may not be appreciated (or may not be appreciated equally) by others present. Let me give you an example. I grew up in the South under segregation and went through a totally segregated educational system, through college. There is still a lot of garbage rattling around in my head.

When I am working with very diverse groups, I often introduce myself as “a short, fat, white guy.” This usually gets a laugh, but it also serves several facilitative purposes: it acknowledges the importance of identity, including race, and other physical classifications; it licenses others to talk about their identity and what that means to them; it legitimates different perspectives, “Mine may be silly, but it is still mine, and just because it is silly and mine — not correct and yours — doesn’t make it irrelevant or dismissible.”

When I add my history, it allows me to talk about how, out of ignorance not out of malice, I may offend. I actively request that people let me know if I have offended so that the offense can be corrected. I ask folks to give me the benefit of the doubt that I did not offend intentionally to disrespect or disempower [someone]. Having raised the issue proactively, I almost always get that benefit of the doubt, and it almost always helps the group interact more easily and honestly.

Frank’s self-parody as “a short, fat, white guy” brings several perspectives to bear at once. He acknowledges race as germane not just to felt identity but to a powerful way that he and those in the room can be seen by some or, as importantly, not seen by yet others. But his parody calls into question whether race, bulk of build, or height are really going to be germane to the issues at hand. Furthermore, his naming rather than hiding racial identity helps to make difficult and painful issues that face very diverse groups more discussable, by putting them on the table for the parties to engage rather than to avoid.

Frank does more: he shows others that he sees how he himself might be seen, and in so doing, he suggests that others also recognize that they

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can all see and be seen in several ways. In effect, he says: we will all bring multiple perspectives to bear here, and we need to consider all of our points of view.

Frank's quip about himself allows him to recognize that slights of identity can be subtle and unintentional, that parties may offend each other at times without knowing they have done so. He asks the group as a whole to collaborate, to help each other recognize and repair disrespect, and to work to build trust as they go on. That request, he said, "almost always helps the group interact more easily and honestly."

"Good humor in such meetings is almost always a balance between the serious and the ridiculous," Frank explained. "Once we have acknowledged that much of life can be both, then taking enjoyment is not seen as disrespect, and unmitigated seriousness is not mistaken for respect."

Having a responsive sense of humor in contentious settings means weaving together laughing matters and deeply serious ones. But Frank warns us too: we should not mistake "unmitigated seriousness" for respect, and a responsive sense of humor, in contrast, can be both respectful and enlightening at the same time.

Other practitioners corroborate and extend Frank's insights. Puanani Burgess, a mediator/facilitator who's done substantial work with native peoples, race, and cultural issues observed, "Humor and my ability to express it, without people thinking they are being made fun of, is really important. I think humor is a way of showing that you can see deeply.

"Humor is pretty serious stuff. Most of the stories that I tell have humor in them, and I use these stories to set up [the process] and to relate two important things to people: one, some of the principles by which [I will] facilitate; and two, my values, so they can relate to me and trust me . . . Humor and stories are the most critical parts of my practice. They allow people to go into deep water without being so scared."

Puanani stresses that in contentious situations, not just any use of humor will do. She suggests that our sense of humor can reveal much about who we are: what we're capable of seeing, how we're likely to treat people, elements of our style, our character and a bit of our values too. She claims that humor is a way of "showing that you can see deeply," beyond the superficial, beyond surface distractions to the more important matters below. Showing that expresses her willingness and ability to listen and to take people seriously. So, she says, when she has begun to build trust, her humorous stories allow people to risk taking on deep issues because they now feel safer than they had before.<sup>3</sup> Here again, we see the suggestion that a sense of humor might simultaneously be serious — recognizing the "deep water" and providing a sense of safety, trust, and reassurance — and light too. But how can this really work?

To explore these issues of building trust and safety, deliberately and deliberately exploring "deep water," we can consider in greater depth



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Normajean McLaren's reflections about the challenges of work in diverse community development and multicultural settings (Sandercock 2003).

### **Safety, Release, and New Collaborative Relationships**

Hoping to explore deliberative practices through further oral histories, I had asked Normajean about her practice involving First Nations peoples, Caucasian inhabitants, and recent Asian immigrants (Forester 2003). She'd mentioned that having a sense of humor was essential. "How so?" I wondered. So I asked, with a touch of mock skepticism, "What would you lose if you didn't use humor here? Would anybody care?"

Normajean suggested that humor provided safety and connection and much more:

I couldn't survive [without] it. This work is too hard without humor. It's too bloody hard. Without our humor we have no salvation. Humor is such a connector. It's such a leveler, and it's such a release — because tension will build in a room when you're doing community development work and you're dealing directly with issues that are so much in people's faces.

It's important [of course] that you're not making fun of their issues — ever. But the tension gets so high that [humor]'s like a safety valve that you open up, and if it's at my expense for the first little while in the room, that's fine.

So it's a salvation and a release. It starts as a connector between me and [them] and then that says, "It's safe to be with me, because I won't hurt you. I'm not going to bring you out here, stand you up and say, 'Here's a victim of racism, and she's going to tell you her story and bleed all over you.' It's safe because I'm not putting myself above you as someone who can't be poked fun at." So [humor]'s a leveler and it's a release when the tension gets so high.

We should unravel several closely interwoven themes in this powerful passage. First, Normajean asks us to recognize that community development work very often involves histories of difficulty and pain. Second, she emphasizes the matter of respect. What humor ought not to do, she suggests, is convey disrespect or dismissiveness. Third, she argues that in practice, her use of humor is not about having a good time or being funny, but rather about creating a space for release and recognition, "a safety valve" that can enable work on hard issues to move ahead. Humor can engender a sense of "salvation" too, in the ability of parties together to survive and emerge connected after such difficult conversations.

Here again, we learn about the tone and politics of such humor through the reassurances it can provide. This facilitator hopes to say to a group wary of her power: "I'm not going to try to use my authority to bring you out in front of others here. I'm not going to use my power to objectify you and separate you from others and from me. I'm not going to talk about you

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without your consent, in ways that would humiliate you in front of others. We will, instead, work together . . .”<sup>4</sup>

When a planner works with community residents on issues of local access to services or jobs, for example, Normajean suggests that those residents will want very quickly to check out how that planner thinks about herself because that will very likely also suggest how she will think about and treat them as well. So the planner’s ability to joke about herself or what she has done signals a political openness to the group: a willingness not to be single-minded, not to be rigid or authoritarian. In so doing, she offers a gesture of her own vulnerability to the group, an expression of “I’m here with you” rather than “above you,” to provide a measure of release and safety for all those present.

We can appreciate now the political as well as psychological character of this sense of “release.” Normajean’s self-directed humor may suggest to the group that they need to worry a bit less than they have about this potential authority, about this facilitator who enters with an ambiguously authoritative and interventionist role. If she takes herself with a sense of humor, we may in effect feel perhaps we can be less anxious about her being self-righteous toward us.<sup>5</sup> Normajean speaks as well to a common theme touched upon by the planners and mediators whose reflections we have considered earlier: in tough and conflict-ridden situations, her sense of humor works to build new collaborative relationships based on mutual respect rather than humiliation, and humility rather than professional presumption or arrogance.

But how does a facilitator’s taking herself less seriously make practical action more possible? A sense of humor can do far more than put a “happy face” on a bad situation, and even more than simply reassuring others when they are wary, distrusting, or uncertain of what they are about to face.

## **Humor and Hope: Closing Down or Opening Up Possibilities**

We turn now to consider how a sense of humor can encourage not just recognition but a sense of community; not just momentary release but a sense of capacity; and not just safety but a glimpse of possibility. Recall, once again, that the practical point of humor here has nothing to do with telling “canned jokes” and even less to do with making fun of anyone.

Normajean helps us to see how “having a sense of humor” can provide a means, not to be dismissive but, instead, to recognize serious problems without being so very serious that we’re immobilized. Speaking of her work on community development issues, she continues: “[Having a sense of humor is] hugely important, and it’s a dance. It’s a dance, because we’re dealing with such heavy-duty painful subjects. You’re dealing with people who have been kicked out of restaurants or not served, who have been called ‘dirty squaw’ as they’re walking down the street. We’re dealing with

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pain — and that has to be dealt with seriously. I do not make light of that kind of stuff — I may tell a story that is about exactly that kind of thing — but on the other hand you've got to let it go, it's got to move . . . They can't stay there otherwise."

Normajean moves here from a general claim, that having a sense of humor in difficult situations is "hugely important," to a practical one: that dealing with "such heavy-duty painful subjects" calls for much more than using some pre-programmed response. So she says, in these cases, "It's a dance," implying that dealing with such painful situations requires her to be light not heavy-handed, flexible rather than rigid, and responsive and attentive in the moment rather than responding to them with some pre-programmed moves or facile clichés.

Normajean stresses too that in these same situations she's "dealing with pain — and that has to be dealt with seriously." But then she moves to action: the need to go on, not to ignore or dismiss the pain but to act upon it. So she tells us of the need for distance, "But on the other hand, you've got to let it go, it's got to move . . . They can't stay there otherwise."

She argues that we need limits to our own seriousness even — or especially — in the face of pain, precisely because we will often want, and try, not just to recognize another's hurt and distress, and not just to treat others as victims, but to do more. "What's the risk of being too serious?" Normajean said. "If you're too serious dealing with these subjects — and I've been in groups that have done it — it's literally a cycle down, like a reverse tornado or something. The 'seriousness' cycles the room down. It gets heavier, and heavier, and heavier — and I don't believe that hope is built on heaviness."

Hope, she suggests, can be held hostage to a seriousness and heaviness that substitutes earnestness and even commiseration for the encouragement of action and change (Sclavi 1994). She explains:

I don't believe that when I'm at my most, "Oh my God, this is terrible . . . This is awful" that I'm thinking at the same time, "Oh goody! I can go out and change this." Personally, I don't work that way. Change is possible when somebody says to me, "If we can make it here, in this little bubble, then we can take this piece of it with us out there."

I ask them, "You don't have to change the world — can you do that little piece?"

"Yeah, I can do that little bit."

"I thought so."

But in order for me to feel that way, I have to have a sense that it is manageable — which doesn't come from cycling heavier and heavier and heavier and heavier, because then it's a mass, it all becomes a lump. It's all the racism in the world. It's every war we're ever going to fight. It's the Israelis and the Palestinians. It's all the armaments; it's everything all at once. I've been in groups where we've gone through [all] that.

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Here we can begin to see the connection between humor and hope, between not taking oneself too seriously and suggesting, instead, that we together might act. We cannot act on everything at once — on all the racism in the world, on all the poverty — but we can move to act on particular pieces. Perhaps we can do that little bit only if we can imagine for ourselves what we can do — and that might well require planners and facilitators to lighten up too, not to mistake “unmitigated seriousness” for respect. A sense of imagination and humor opens up avenues for improvisation and change.

## **Leveling Power to Encourage and Build Power**

Normajeau suggests that her sense of humor helps to empower others just as it undercuts the presumptions of her own power:

So using humor sometimes says, “I don’t take myself so seriously.” That’s a big part of it. That shows up in various ways [in the community development context]. If I come there as the enlightened teacher with the serious answer, I’m telling them two things: A.) “You don’t know what you’re doing,” and B.) “I do, and I’ve come here to tell you.” When I do that, I don’t make their actions possible.

With these observations, Normajeau reveals how her sense of humor may enable her to unravel and then reconstruct her audience’s political expectations of her role and their own possible empowerment. By taking herself less seriously than the outside expert she could otherwise claim to be, she is able to convey that she and the assembled community residents should take everyone present more seriously. She recognizes how her claims to power can disempower those residents with whom she wishes to work.

“Part of what the humor does is pull me out of the power . . . out of the power place of saying, ‘I’m the one that knows and I’m bringing you the wisdom from the mountain.’ Part of it is saying things just like that: ‘Guess what? I didn’t bring the wisdom from the mountain. You all got the wisdom from the mountain in this room, and our whole week is going to be just figuring out how wise you are. If you didn’t come in wise, you’ll be leaving wise — isn’t that good news?’ ”

Normajeau uses her humor about others’ expectations or worries about her own role to credit them and to suggest a new vision for them: with your experience of other outsiders, you’re right to worry — but you’ve got all the wisdom from the mountain in this room, and coming, together, to understand what that can mean is our mission. She doesn’t claim ignorance — but she suggests a collaborative role instead of an authoritarian one:

So when instead I make fun of myself, for example, and become a player in the room, I enter into the room as another person.

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I enter into [the] community, and first of all I'm saying to them, "Thank you for letting me come into the circle with you."

Normajean suggests powerfully how those in facilitating or planning roles, even those in the "helping professions," can disempower or alternatively empower those with whom they work. She has told us, "When I come there as the enlightened teacher with the serious answer . . . I don't make their actions possible." Experience showed her that had she approached her role without humor, she could well have disempowered rather than empowered the group of concerned citizens:

In the first years that I worked as a community developer and facilitator, I came in and showed them all these brilliant and wonderful things that I'd done and could do. I did it so well that when I left, they were all convinced that they couldn't do it. Now, they did want me back again, which is good as a consultant. But that's not the point.

In the past four years, at the end of these long training sessions that I do, the group goes around and says what changed, what's been the most powerful experience for them. In the old days they'd say, "Normajean, you are the most incredible facilitator, I've never met anyone like you. You are just — I can't even imagine doing what you're doing."

And that was the kicker line, "I can't imagine myself doing what you're doing." I just failed. I may have felt grand, but I just failed.

Now what I hear is different, and I'll tell you exactly what came out of Prince George, the community I'm going back to this week. At the end of it we went around the circle, and they said, "This is the most powerful group of people. I can't believe we're together. This is amazing! Oh, Normajean, you were great too." That is success.

This striking reflection about power and empowerment teaches us about far more than this practitioner's own evolving strategies and measures of success. Her sense of humor, she has suggested, plays an important part in leveling roles and providing safety, encouraging conversation and enabling discovery, building confidence and power which provides hope for the future.

## **Politics, Surprise, and Sources of Change**

Humor works to flatten hierarchies between outside experts and less-esteemed community members — and to connect people and build relationships. Normajean's humor responds to political presumptions of experts' power and community perceptions of powerlessness and challenges and counteracts them. Her sense of humor also offers collaboration: she's here not to bring word from on high but to explore together what's

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possible to do. Her humor does not just express, but it also enacts, a new politically practical collaboration. Her sense of humor opens up a deliberative space in which to consider the “what to do” question. Opening that question for real discussion moves significantly away from community members’ dependency upon experts and toward community members’ deliberative abilities to formulate their own actions (Forrester 1999).

As Normajeau put it, “[When I can say with a sense of humor that I don’t take myself so seriously, it conveys] that things are possible — that possibility comes through the whole band of human interaction. It comes through the pain, it comes through the laughter, it comes through our tears, it comes through grieving together, and it comes through eating together. It comes through dancing. Through that whole band of human interaction we find solution, we find possibility. We find soul-mates, we find teachers.”

All that is possible, Normajeau suggests, only if we can maintain a certain breadth of vision. “[But] when we take [just] one [heavy] piece out [to work on], we don’t function very well. [We say essentially,] ‘We’re only going to look at the pain and nobody’s allowed to talk about anything but pain here this afternoon. I’m sorry, that’s all we’re dealing with, so if you didn’t come with your pain, you get to come and we’ll give you some: you’ll hear my pain, and then you’ll feel so shitty by the end of the day that I can assure you, you’ll be in pain then!’” she said with a laugh.

These passages present as moving and lucid criticism of narrow professionalized roles as we are likely to find. We see here what we might call *the commiserative fallacy*: attending so much to pain and suffering and victim-hood that the possibilities for change are ignored or not considered at all (Sclavi 1994).

We learn instead here that possibilities of change come in many forms: through the sharing of pain and the sharing of laughter together; through the solidarity and support we might feel in crying together; through the strength we develop in witnessing, appreciating, and grieving for our losses together; through the relationships and civic friendships we develop in sharing meals together; or through the beauty and rhythm we can share in dancing together. In all these ways, we may begin to discern the subtle but practical relationships that connect humor, recognition, and hope.

For our own part, we should not lose the point behind the poetry of Normajeau’s language. In messy and conflict-ridden community development settings, professionals bring their own blinders, and they may not see how community members can learn and come to act together in many and varied ways. Through both pain and joy, through music and meals, community members, and the outside professionals who assist them, can discuss their problems and work together to find “solutions.”

In exploring issues together, deliberating together rather than depending on outside advice alone, we may not only find solutions to immediate problems but discover and formulate other “possibilities” as well. In probing

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issues and concerns together, we may discover relationships that have depth as well as utility; we may find “soul-mates” as well as solutions. In considering new ways to approach the challenges we face, having a sense of humor and the responsive imagination it implies may help us to recognize more clearly what we do not know, what we need to know, and what we need to learn, so we may come to find teachers too.

### **Prescriptive Lessons, Advice, and a Few Hypotheses**

If you don't have a sense of humor in practice, then you're more likely to reinforce others' prior suspicions and expectations of your role as an outsider, and consequently you will find it more difficult to:

- build trust;
- connect collaboratively with parties, looking together at shared problems;
- improvise within shared norms or guidelines;
- resist passivity, dependency, or passive-aggressive behavior;
- encourage autonomy and creativity if undermined by prior expectations of your expert-authoritative role.

If you don't show that you have a sense of humor in practice, you're more likely to get stuck when (1) negative comments about outsiders begin to escalate; (2) acknowledgment of pain and hurt threatens to become a “sink” evoking more of the same; and (3) parties express pessimism about taking action.

Having a sense of humor in practice will make others more likely to see that you: appreciate multiple perspectives at any given time; recognize that rules and guidelines are ambiguous and can be “played” differently; will encourage a space for fresh exploration and discussion; and can be given the benefit of the doubt when you err.

### **Conclusion**

We have explored the practical and political use of humor in situations full of inequality and distrust, complexity and bureaucratic entanglements, racism and histories of humiliation. We have considered the commentaries of mediators and planners, and we can use their suggestions as entry points to generate hypotheses about the use of humor at critical moments in the flow of meetings. Throughout this analysis, we have considered humor not as telling jokes but as undercutting disabling expectations, reframing political relations, and so unexpectedly providing multiple points of vision on topics or even relationships at hand.

Humor works deliberately but indirectly, intentionally but nonargumentatively. What is actually said matters, but often to convey recognition

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of complexity and the legitimacy of multiple perspectives. So the obvious ridiculousness of a statement like, “Well, according to the bylaws, I’m supposed to sit right here,” conveys far more than any descriptive truth of the matter. This responsive and ironic humor that we have been considering has been both funny and serious at once, a source of relief and a source of insight, a source of recognition, revelation, and hope.

The sensitive use of humor, as these planners and mediators have suggested, can do substantial work: acknowledging others, defusing expectations and providing relief, signaling one’s depth of understanding, observing the ambiguity of obligations, noting the unpredictability of broader contexts, displaying personal style and character, acknowledging pain and enabling response, empowering others and encouraging collaboration, and noting a multiplicity of perspectives that might be apt and practical in the moment. We have a great deal here to explore.

### NOTES

I offer a special thanks for comments and suggestions to Laura Bachle, Frank Blechman, David Boyd, Puanani Burgess, Bayard Catron, Sara Cobb, Marion Cox, Nathan Edelson, David Kahane, Anne Kilgore, David Laws, Ray Lorenzo, Owen Lynch, Normajean McLaren, Susan Podziba, Bill Potapchuk, Linda Putnam, Nancy Rogers, Tore Sager, Marianella Sclavi, Gus Stuart, Huw Thomas, Michael Wheeler, Christopher Winship, and members of the Critical Moments Research Group of the Harvard Program on Negotiation.

1. Because shared, unexpected, spontaneous laughter often reveals genuine and strategically uncalculated responses to a shared situation, laughing together produces equally unexpected moments of intimacy — that can be vital to building future relationships. Thanks to Anne Kilgore for this observation and to Ray Lorenzo for offering an apt quote from Victor Borge: “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” Ray continued: “That’s it: the use of humor and laughter (as our Zen masters teach us) brings people closer . . . physically and conceptually (mediates different opinions)” (Personal correspondence July 2, 2003). (Cf. Dundes 1987).

2. Bayard Catron suggests that the playfulness enacted in such humor can “break the tension and open the situation to new possibilities by announcing that a real person has shown up rather than a role-player” (Personal correspondence October 14, 2003).

3. Cf. Wittgenstein’s remarks connecting humor and depth, for example, via <http://www.hku.hk/philodep/courses/lg/phil206018.html> (Cavell 1969; Wittgenstein 1950).

4. We might understand such uses of humor — not joking, not canned, but culturally responsive, politically interactive, emotionally sensitive, mutually attuned — to enact potentially transformative, participatory rituals (Forester 1999) through which parties both learn about the world and change themselves, their minds and their relationships. Thanks to Christopher Winship for suggesting connections between the humor’s “loosening up” of focus and frames and the revised spaces of liminality.

5. The sensitive use of humor may address the uncertainties and threatening anxieties of openings captured so well by Michael Wheeler (2002, 2004) in this issue of the *Negotiation Journal*: “Openings thus may be especially critical as moments when anticipation meets reality. Ideally, our worst fears are not confirmed. We discover that the people that we encounter are not the wolves and alligators that we fantasized, so we can put our anxieties aside and get to work. Things may not be so clear in other cases, however. Our ongoing uncertainty about other people’s motives and trustworthiness may deepen our initial fears.”



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