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Lift Up Your Hearts: humour and despair in later life

Heather Thomson PhD

SUMMARY. According to Erikson, the homework of later life is integrity versus despair. The work of integrity is difficult, especially when faced with loss and grief, with the pain, suffering and anxiety that often accompany later life. However, it is also the case that humour accompanies the ageing process, and that elderly people laugh at all things associated with ageing right through to death. This paper explores the relationship between humour and despair in the task of integrity. It does so from the work of Kierkegaard, who argued that despair is a sign that we are spiritual beings. Humour comes from our responses to despair – either as giving in too easily and not attempting integrity at all, or as a wilful defiance and denial of this task. Ageing humour is used to illustrate Kierkegaard’s argument. Humour is then shown to function in various ways. It raises our sights when we too easily retreat into our perishing bodies. It earths us when we attempt to get too spiritual, and it gives us a glimpse of the larger framework of God’s future out of which we are invited to live, and to “lift up our hearts”.

KEYWORDS. Humour, ageing, later life, spirituality, despair, theology, laughter, God.

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As I have turned my theological interests to the area of ageing and spirituality over the past few years, I have brought with me my interest in humour. When you have an eye or an ear for humour it is surprising where you find it – and it definitely accompanies those who age. I have been studying humour for some time now, and enjoy the insights it gives. I like humour’s creativity and its attitude, its ability to transcend a situation, and its sheer fun, and for what it says about the human spirit. We are the only animals who laugh, and to me, humour is like dancing or like jazz – which other animals can’t do either. It rides above a situation, plays on top of things, brings us down to earth when we try to be angels, and takes us out of being caught in the ordinary with our heads down. At its best, humour is inspirational and challenging and energetic and life giving – in short it is a spiritual exercise.

When I began to work with Elizabeth MacKinlay in researching ageing and spirituality, I came to realise that Elizabeth shares an interest in humour also, derived from her studies and interviews with elderly people. So it seemed good the Holy Spirit and to us to plan this conference around the theme of humour and despair in later life.

In Erikson’s stages of human development he names the final stage as integrity versus despair (Erikson *et al* 1986). Integrity is the challenge of later life. When faced with illness and pain, loss of powers and functions, loss of friends and relatives, can we nevertheless retain integrity around a certain trust and faith in life, in God? Or will we lose that basic trust and hope, and fall into despair?

Despair is not the same as depression or sadness, or feeling down. It is all right to feel sad, depressed or grief-stricken over losses encountered in later life, in fact it is good and healthy to do so. But these are usually temporary - a stage to go through. Despair is a more pervasive attitude to a situation, or to life in general. It is not so much about a particular loss or grief. It is totalising. It is a lack of faith and hope that things could ever be any better. It is a total loss of hope, and as such, is a matter not just of feelings but of the spirit.

My interest in humour comes in part from despair, particularly a study of despair by the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (1941). He argues that the fact that human beings fall into despair is a sign that we are spiritual beings. And the way we respond to despair is the source of humour. So in my mind, if we can better understand despair and humour, this might serve us in the process of integrity in later life.

Susan McFadden helpfully addressed despair from a psychological point of view. Here we are adding to that by looking at despair as a matter of spirit. Kierkegaard says that human life is a balancing act. This is well illustrated by a cartoon of a tightrope walker by an Australian cartoonist, Michael Leunig (1974). Here we see a little man on a unicycle balancing on a rope high above the earth. One end of the rope is tied to a cloud, the other is held up by a bird. It is a delightful picture, a picture of the impossible yet he is achieving the balance with the help of a balancing beam, and feeling pretty good about it.

Although we are finite earth creatures, this cartoon depicts our infinite hopes and desires. We belong both to the temporal and the eternal. We are part of the world of necessity – including the laws of physics and chemistry and gravity and time – and part of the world of possibility. We have the ability to transcend the immediate moment, and to create new possibilities that have not existed before. Human beings are this strange and incongruous mix of finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, bound and free (Kierkegaard 1941).

However, being human is a balancing act in which we don't always succeed. Leunig's cartoon has more to it. When you look on the next page you see a little man face down in the grass. Beside him is a bent unicycle and a broken balancing beam. The tightrope walker has fallen to the ground. One tends to smile at the first cartoon, but laugh at the second, when he comes a cropper. Kierkegaard sees humour in not getting our balancing act right. That is what makes us laughable.

The work of integrity is to see this incongruous mixture that we are as the potential through which we become a self before God, or as Kierkegaard says, a "spirit". For this is our calling. It is eternity's demand, or invitation, to us. If we *fail* in this integrity, fail to live within the limits and possibilities of being human, then we are, in his terms "infinitely comic" (1941, 154) - not so much funny, as ridiculous.

There are two sides to this failure to be integrated. On the one hand, we may fail to accept that we are earth-bound, finite, mortal creatures. Then we would live our lives in the clouds, trying to escape our lot. We would be disconnected from real, day-to-day life, and from our bodies, chasing our own heads. Michael Leunig (1974) has another cartoon that illustrates this, of a man chasing his own head with a butterfly net. He has allowed his head to get away from him, to be disconnected from his earth-bound body.

On the other hand, if we accept that we are of the earth, and are limited by time and gravity, yet fail to lift up our heads above the flux and see ourselves also as spirits, then

what makes us different from the sheep and the cattle? A Gary Larson cartoon shows this aspect of being human. He draws a flock of sheep all grazing with their heads down, except for one sheep who is standing up saying, "Hey. Listen to me. We don't have to be just sheep". Integrity means knowing our place *between* heaven and earth, not entirely with the other animals, and not entirely out of this world.

For Kierkegaard, when we fail to become ourselves, "spirits", conscious of being constituted by God, and of living before God, then we fall into despair (1941, 59-60). But for him, being aware of despair is not something that is depressing. On the contrary, he sees it as uplifting and inspiring, for it views each of us through the lens of eternity's demand on us, that we be spirit (1941, 155). Despair is a sign that we belong to eternity as well as to the earth.

When people fall into despair, which we all do from time to time, there are two common reactions to it, and these each relate to different ways of being comic, or ridiculous. One common reaction to despair is *weakness* or avoidance, not willing to even try being an integrated self. It would mean, in Leunig's second cartoon, remaining on the grass and never trying to tightrope walk again. In the face of difficulties, some people, he says, just swoon and lie down and play dead (1941, 186).

George Burns says this about growing old. When he was 93 he observed that many people as they approach old age, just give in, whereas he sees age as a state of mind, an attitude.

I see people that the minute they get to be 65, start rehearsing to be old. They start taking little steps, they practice grunting when they sit down...they drop food on themselves, they take little naps when you're talking to them, and by the time they get to be seventy, they've made it...they're now old (1984, 131).

George Burns made sure he kept company with younger people. He didn't think it was good when older people just hung around each other comparing gravy stains (1996, 291).

So, one reaction to despair is weakness, or giving in. The second reaction is *defiance*, a see-if-I-care attitude that confirms oneself where one is and defiantly refuses to change. Such a person is revolting against existence, as if his or her life was proof against the goodness of existence. Kierkegaard illustrates this with a story. Suppose a writer makes a typographical error on the page. The writer goes to erase the error, but the error comes to life. It says to the writer, "No, I will not be erased. I will stand as a witness against you, that you are a very poor writer" (1941, 207). This attitude is defiance in error, and some people live their lives that way. They do not want to change or to come to terms with bad experiences, but live their lives in their damaged form as a testimony that the powers that be must be bad.

Many people enter their later years of life with a lot of baggage. They are travelling heavily loaded, full of resentments and bitterness and anger, but they won't let go, because they want to live as a testimony that they have been hard done by. They want to prove that they are the victims of particular people or powers in their lives, who have treated them badly. The film, *Grumpy Old Men*, epitomises such characters.

The point is, to remain like this, for the rest of their lives is a form of defiance in error. It is a reaction to despair but a ridiculous reaction because it denies that they could and should

move on and make something of themselves. It denies eternity in the self. No matter what has happened in one's life, the question remains for each of us, how shall I live this part of my life well?

How we deal with despair is the question, and humour comes from the more ridiculous ways that we try to avoid, by weakness or defiance, our spiritual task of integrity. By turning our attention now to humour about ageing, we will see that humour can serve us in the process of integrity. It does so, I believe, in three ways:

1. Humour earths us when we think we are too important, or too sexy to be the finite, temporal, mortal creatures that we are. A lot of ageing humour is very earthy.
2. Humour laughs at the ridiculous ways in which we fail, by weakness or defiance, to become integrated selves. In this regard, Kierkegaard believes that we need a good doctrine of original sin to understand humour.
3. Humour takes us out of our finitude and mortality to see ourselves in a larger picture, where the joke is not on us, but for us. Christian theology holds to the resurrection as God's joke against finitude and death, and invites us to "lift up our hearts".

I will expand on each of these further in relation to ageing humour.

1. Humour earths us

I have heard that inside every older person there is a younger person – wondering what the hell happened! Time continues on its relentless journey, and we are carried along with it whether we like it or not. Some ageing humour is about the ride of life, and it reminds us there is no getting off.

Jerry Seinfeld likens life to a ride:

Life is truly a ride. We're all strapped in and no one can stop it...As you make each passage from youth to adulthood to maturity, sometimes you put your hands up and scream, sometimes you just hang on to the bar in front of you...I think the most you can hope for at the end of life is that your hair's messed, you're out of breath, and you didn't throw up (1993, 153).

My father used another metaphor for the passage of time. Rather than a ride, he likened the life span to a day. Childhood was early morning, mid life was midday. You get the picture? So by the time he was turning 50 he was in the mid afternoon of his life, at 60, the later afternoon, at 70 he was in the early evening. We used to ask him, "Are you working on Daylight Saving Time, Dad, or Eastern Standard time? Because if you're on Eastern Standard Time, its not long before curtains". He would wander off mumbling *something* about bloody kids.

Regarding time, there is a lot of ageing humour that tries to mark the turning point from temporary youth to middle or old age. George Burns said, "you know you're getting old when you stoop to tie you shoe-laces and you ask yourself, what else can I do while I'm down here?" (*Oh My Aging Funny Bone*).

Others say they suddenly become appalled by the way that modern mirrors distort the reflection, or they are amazed when they hang something in the wardrobe for a while and it shrinks two sizes.

Apart from those moments of realisation that one has progressed into later life, there are specific themes that are treated with humour as a way of earthing us, reminding us of our decaying bodies, falling flesh, lower sex drives and looming death. As Bette Davis put it, “Old age ain’t no place for sissies” (*Oh My Aging Funny Bone*).

One book on ageing humour is called, *Falling Flesh Just Ahead: and other signs on the road towards midlife* (Potts 1998). Gravity takes its toll. And our bodies just wear out. I’ve seen a cartoon of a young man walking along the street with a T-shirt on saying, “I climbed Mount Everest”. Beside him is an old man walking along with a T-shirt saying, “I climbed out of bed”. George Burns, still performing in his 90s, said “I get a standing ovation just standing”. Bob Hope, when he was 80 played up the stereotype. “I don’t feel 80”, he said. “In fact I don’t feel *anything* until noon. And then its time for my nap” (Metcalf 1987, 181).

This sort of humour reminds us of our reduced capacities and powers in later life, and of our resultant lowering of expectations. I have an example of such humour from a dementia resident in an Aged care facilities, from the CAPS research project that I was involved with. During a weekly discussion group of dementia patients, the Diversional Therapist was summing up one day, and asked the residents, “What about now. Would you say that you are happy now?” One man thought for a while and said, “Well, I took a suppository this morning”. We began to laugh at this reduction of happiness to bodily functions. He knew exactly what he was saying, and smiling added, “Well, I needed it”. We laughed more, and his timing was perfect – he grinned broadly and said, “And it worked”.

Ageing humour gets very earthy when it deals with questions of continence and sex. And yet, awful as it is to experience loss of powers in these areas of life, we would probably all know jokes about them. It is part of the incongruity of being earth creatures, yet spiritual beings, made to the image and likeness of God. It just doesn’t seem to fit together sometimes, and what we often think of as the glory of being human gets reduced down to whether or not we can go to the toilet when we want to.

My father told me the following joke - he thought it was hilarious. Three men were discussing ageing in a nursing home. One said, “I have trouble peeing. I wake every morning at 7am and I stand at the toilet and I want to pee but I can’t. Nothing comes out”. The second man said, “I have trouble crapping. I wake at 8am and I feel that I want to go, but I can’t seem to do it. I take laxatives, I eat bran – nothing shifts me.” The third man says, “That’s nothing. I pee every morning at 7. No problem. Then I crap at 8, very day without fail.” “So what’s your problem?” asked the second man. “Well”, said the third, “I don’t wake up till 9”.

Does joking about bodily functions prepare us, perhaps, for when it is our turn, or is it a way of keeping it at a distance, something that is happening to others over there and not to me? It is probably both. The comic contrast is between the way a person used to be when they were young compared with when they are old. There is also a contrast between able-bodied people now and the present aged population, not quite in control of their powers.

It is a similar situation with humour about sex. This section could be entitled “the spirit is willing but the flesh is just too damn tired” (Stott 1994). George Burns, who lived to nearly 100, had a few things to say on this subject. He said in his later life, “I’m at that age when just putting my cigar in its holder is a thrill” (Metcalf 1987, 180). He is also reported to have said, “having sex at 90 is like trying to shoot pool with a rope”. And I think that’s pretty sad for all of us, don’t you?

I have heard success stories too – jokes bragging about what was achieved by someone who others might have thought were “past it”. But lets move on. As well as the ageing body as the subject of much humour, there is also the ageing mind. Humour is found in real-life situations when grandma or grandpa puts their shoes away in the fridge, or they get themselves dressed with their underpants on their head. I know of families who do their best to treat such family members well and with respect in these circumstances, but when they are out of hearing, the rest of the family laugh until the tears roll down. It is the comic (and tragic) clash between this person as they are now, and as they were in the past, when they had their full mind. It is also a comic clash is between this family member’s behaviour, and that which is considered normal in present society.

I recently saw a joke about the ageing mind.

Three sisters lived together, aged 92, 94 and 96. One night the 96yr old runs a bath. She puts her foot in and pauses. She yells down the stairs, “Was I getting in or out of the bath?”

The 94yr old yells back, “I don’t know, I’ll come up and see”. She starts up the stairs and pauses. “Was I going up the stairs or down?”

The 92 yr old is sitting at the kitchen table having tea listening to her sisters. She shakes her head and says, “I sure hope I never get that forgetful”. She knocks on wood for good measure. Then she yells “I’ll come and help both of you as soon as I see who’s at the door” (*Oh My Aging Funny Bone*).

Another way that humour keeps us grounded is to remind us of death and the afterlife, and that whether we like it or not, we will not find integrity until we come to terms with our own death. Some humour just makes light of the whole thing. I have heard, for example, that for three days after death, hair and fingernails continue to grow, but phone calls taper off (Metcalf 1987, 69). I have also seen a tombstone at Narooma on the NSW south Coast that says, “See, I told you I was sick”.

Some humour is about trying to deny death. Woody Allen is good at expressing fear of death. He said that he doesn’t mind dying, he just doesn’t want to be there when it happens. He also said that he doesn’t believe in an afterlife, although he is bringing a change of underwear. Whatever our response to thinking about death, the question remains whether we, or it, will have the last laugh. Christian theology has a position on this, but we will get to that in a minute.

This section has looked at the way humour functions to keep us earth-bound when we think we can escape our lot in some way. It will not let us pretend to be angels, or to forget that we have bodies that wear out and disappoint us in one way or another, and will

eventually die. That is what we have to come to terms with as one aspect of our spiritual task of ageing.

2. Humour laughs at our weakness and defiance in response to aging

The second way in which humour can help us discern the spiritual tasks of ageing is by showing how ridiculous it is to avoid the questions at all. Some people tend to lie down and play dead in the face of old age, or defiantly pretend that it is not happening. Nancy Astor said “I refuse to admit that I am more than 52, even if that makes my sons illegitimate” (Metcalf 1987, 12).

Perhaps this area of humour is best summarised in a quote by Catherine Aird. “If you can’t be a good example, then you’ll just have to be a horrible warning” (*Psycho Proverb Zone*). This is where grumpy old men come into their own – as a warning to the rest of us not to go down that track. They waste so much time trying to get back at the other person, or settling old scores, that they don’t get on with living and enjoying what they do have.

One way in which people become a horrible warning is through plastic surgery, a topic already alluded to by previous speakers. Humour latches on to the ridiculousness of such measures. I heard of a woman, for example, who had so many bottom-lifts that she ended up with a head-rest. George Burns has a whole chapter in one of his books on cosmetic surgery, and marvels about what can be done, to so many parts of the body, inside and out, to replace or hide the effects of ageing. Then he says,

I went out the other night with an attractive girl who told me she was 20. Later I found out I was dancing with a 70-year-old man. I’m not well. I should have guessed when she told me her name was Irving (Burns 1984, 120).

This is an example of defiance in error – defiantly trying to stay young – and the comedians show how ludicrous it is.

Those who try to deny getting older often take up with the younger generation. This in itself is not a bad thing, but I am thinking of Groucho Marx, who I am led to believe was a bit of a grouch in his later life, and preferred the company of younger women. He said, “A man’s only as old as the woman he feels” (Metcalf 1987, 181). It is a clever and witty remark, but it is also a denial of aging.

At times ageing is associated positively with wisdom. But sometimes ageing comes along all by itself. Instead of wisdom we see unresolved anger and resentment. A number of comedy sketches of older people portray them as cunning and manipulative, under the guise of the little old helpless lady or man. The Australian comedy called “Mother and Son” showed the aged mother this way. It was hilarious to watch her outwit her poor, unsuspecting middle-aged son who cared for her, but you wouldn’t wish her on anyone. This is the comedy that comes from the wilful refusal to become an integrated, responsible self. We laugh because we know it to be a ridiculous way to live, especially for people who are way past having grown up in a chronological sense, and who, you would think, may have learned by now to do better.

Humour functions here to laugh at those who take the bitter and twisted road into old age, or the weak or defiant, for it intuits the comic clash between their path and the one they should be on, the path towards integrity and living one's life well before God.

3. Humour points us to freedom and possibility

The third way in which humour helps us on the road to integrity is to remind us of possibilities and freedoms that we may have forgotten while being so caught up in daily life and perhaps suffering. While the first kind of humour earthed us, this humour lifts up our minds and our hearts. It tells us, we don't have to be just sheep.

Noel Coward has a nice little verse that illustrates this.

We talked about growing old gracefully
And Elsie who's seventy-four
Said, 'A, it's a question of being sincere,
And B, if you're supple you've nothing to fear'.
Then she swung upside down on a glass chandelier,
I couldn't have liked it more (Metcalf 1987, 180).

This type of humour delights in the freedoms and possibilities that we do have, limited as they may be. It is not backward looking and regretful, but forward-looking and hopeful.

I have a photograph of myself on my mantle-piece from the time we were first married. We lived at Bronte Beach in Sydney, and I was walking back from the beach with a towel over my shoulder, wearing what my husband refers to as a rather fetching one-piece swimming costume. I look at this photo nostalgically as the woman I used to be. Recently I was telling a friend and colleague about this, regretting the signs of ageing that I would not fit into my fetching one-piece these days, and he exercised the ministry of admonition. He told me off. A Christian point of view, he said, is not backward looking, but forward looking. Instead of thinking about the woman I used to be, I should be spending my time and energy on the woman I am becoming. I should be living for, and out of, the future.

I put this view to the conference committee, and suggested that we have T-shirts made saying, "The woman (or man) I am becoming" across the front. We all thought it was a good idea, but we ran out of time and energy to do it. Nevertheless, we have now passed on the idea, and you can have one made yourself if you wish. It is quite a different perspective on life.

Ultimately, this third kind of humour relies on a basic trust and faith that the world is not a joke against us but is a divine joke, which is for us. It relies on faith in God, whose "greatest stunt of all" was the resurrection, where life won out over death, possibility over tragic necessity (Echardt 1995, 134-5). In the light of this, we can let go clinging to the perishable things of the world, and lighten our load. We are free to laugh at all things human, all pretensions to glory and power, and are free not to take anything human ultimately seriously.

Clowning fits into this type of humour. Clowns don't take anything too seriously. They wear funny clothes, making us wonder about the clothes we wear and how we invest them sometimes with too much importance and prestige. They do seemingly impossible tricks,

like Leunig's tightrope walker. And clowns play. Play and humour are what Peter Berger calls intimations of transcendence – that ultimately the victory has been won, all will be well, and we need not get ourselves caught in the deadly serious.

Although we cannot minimise the real loss, tragedy and suffering experienced in later life, we can hold also to a hopefulness that what happens in this perishable world does not have the final word. One theologian put it this way.

We never did ask to be born. Neither do we ask to be subjected to Death, the final insult and final evil *vis-à-vis* Life... To many persons, here is grievous cause for pessimism... Yet to others, the door stays open, if only barely ajar, to a salvation wrought by God (Echardt 1995, 134-5).

In thinking about humour and despair in later life, we have seen how humour can serve us in the spiritual tasks of ageing. Humour reminds us of our animal nature, and that even though we may be a little less than God, we have to live with physical weaknesses, embarrassments, inconveniences, and rude interruptions, with ageing and death. On the other hand, humour lifts up our sights if we settle for being just sheep, and gives us a glimpse of possibilities that do exist, and that call us ever forward. And humour plays a part in getting us back on the tightrope when we fall off, so that we might again try to integrate the call of earth and the call of heaven upon us.

In Christian terms, humour helps us to love both our relation to earth and to heaven, for it knows the folly of trying to deny one or the other. And humour testifies to the creativity and possibilities of being human, in such a way that it is itself a sign of our relation to God. Just as despair is a sign that we are spiritual beings, so is humour.

So, lift up your hearts. Live out of the future, and keep the door open, if only barely ajar, to the salvation wrought by God.

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Oh My Aging Funny Bone

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