



# The Humor of Mormon Seriousness

## A Celestial Balancing Act

By Richard H. Cracroft

Four or five years ago, while I was still in the throes of stake presidenting, I attended a stake-wide Relief Society visiting teachers meeting. Before I was to speak, the stake Relief Society president decided to call on the high council advisor to the Relief Society to greet the sisters. He was a vigorous outdoorsman, unaccustomed to public speaking, and he agonized through the remarks, rendered in his best Relief Societese. Soaring to his conclusion, he paid the sisterhood the ultimate priesthood compliment: "Above all," he oozed, "I wish to commend you sweet sisters for your hours and hours of passionate service." There was a sudden and obvious stir in the congregation, accompanied by turned heads, half-smiles, raised eyebrows, and laugh-hiding throat clearing. The high councilor sat down, oblivious to his mistake, but the Relief Society president turned to me and said, "Do we have to report our hours spent on *that*?" "Of course," I replied, "and not only do I want the hours reported, I want them increased dramatically—I want this to be the most passionately served stake in the Church!"

The situation, and the responses of the sisters in the chapel that evening, responses which ranged from shock to joy to total lack of awareness, combine to underscore the challenge facing those who attempt to fathom the complexity of what makes Latter-day Saints laugh when they do laugh at what they laugh at. Many of these, from Bert Wilson and Leonard Arrington down to me, have, in their probings, suggested that humor is serious business and that Mormon humor, because the Church is true and serious, must likewise be true and serious. I can't think of anything more damaging to humor

than such labels, especially if such labeling is merely to enable those of us who desire to enjoy a forbidden belly-laugh and the blessings of the Church to justify our chuckles. Fortunately, we enjoy the company of a number of estimables who seek "serious laughter." It was Hans Christian Anderson who wrote, "He who takes the serious only seriously and the humorous only humorously has understood everything only very poorly." And Mark Twain, who hated to be thought of as a buffoon, wrote, "Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever." Thus Hans and Mark and Leonard and Bert and I (I like that company!) are fully in accord.

The whole matter of Mormon humor is problematic, and I have thought about it at length—which means, for me, as much as two or three minutes at a sitting. The question of whether and where and whither Mormon humor is, for some, oxymoronic—like "funny stake president," "underworked bishop," or "exciting high priest group leader." But this is not enough for committed students of Mormon humor. Of them it is required not only to defend, in all earnestness and with straight face, the seriousness of humor and its inverse, the humor of seriousness, but they must also defend as intellectually profound the impious examination of Three Nephite stories, accounts of angelic intervention, dirty jokes about my bishop and your missionary companion, and J. Golden Kimball's swearing—all without jeopardizing any Church positions they may hold.

This raises a more sober problem: For some there can be no genuine Mormon humor because the gospel is not a laughing matter. The Doctrine and Covenants admonishes us to "solemnity of heart" (D&C 84:61) and remind us to conduct our lives "not with much laughter, for this is sin." (D&C 59:15; 88:69). Life, like the gospel, is, then, a serious enterprise; we know that "this life is the time to prepare to meet our God"; in these parentheses between eternities we must pack rich experiences, deep faith, and enough good works to launch us with sufficient power to reach the feet of the Father. Likewise Christ's mission is no laughing matter, and there is no record that he laughed or, for that matter, smiled—although most of us find it difficult to picture him otherwise.

It is not difficult to imagine, then, why Christ's modern-day disciples, such as President Harold B. Lee, would chasten a general conference congregation for laughing at the humorous remarks of one of the brethren; nor is it difficult to appreciate why Elder Mark E. Petersen would enjoin the Church in a *Church News* editorial to avoid humor of any kind in the sacrament meetings of the Church.

Humor is temporal, of the earth, an earthly ordinance, and as such it is at odds with things spiritual, of the eternities. A sense of humor is defined as the ability to discover, identify, and appreciate the ludicrous and the incongruous in situations, in others, in oneself, and in the universe. If one seeks for the incongruities and coddles the ludicrous in life, he becomes more and more aware of the very real gap between the ideal and the real in people, situations, and the universe and may well begin to exaggerate, distort, caricature, and undercut others and thus judge unrighteously. That's a danger.

Furthermore, if achieving emotional distance is essential to humor, one might need to achieve an emotional distance from the Church, the gospel, and one's fellowmen in order to be a humorist—and such distance is not conducive to commitment, and such lack of commitment is not conducive to eternal life. Also, humor can be a kind of personal rebellion, an act of individuation which enables an individual to break from a group and assert individuality through his or her humorous, distancing response to a situation or another person. In short, then, humor can be a threat to the idealism of the group, or the Church, a very worldly response to a very worldly world.

Humor is play, sometimes organized, sometime spontaneous; it is unpredictable; it is lawless. It can be dangerous to one's spiritual health. Perhaps it is for this reason that Twain wrote, "The secret source of humor is pathos; in heaven there is no humor." I hope he is wrong, that there will be humor in heaven, but celestial chuckles will probably be based in something other than pathos or incongruity, human foibles, or the gap between the ideal and the real. Perhaps humor and wit will flourish in the lesser degrees of glory, which is why, I suppose, Twain notes that the choice on the other side would be between "Heaven for climate or Hell for society."

Inherent in the assertion that there is a Mormon humor is the suggestion that our general lack of humor as a Church institution is a matter of concern. But think about it—what institution consciously fosters humor—except perhaps the Comedy Writers of America? Does your mind become calm when you are asked to identify and write a fifty-minute essay on Catholic humor or to probe Lutheran wit or Southern Baptism drollery? Ahah, you might respond, what about the Jews? I haven't heard much funny stuff rolling out of synagogues or at the Western Wall, and I can't really think of Malamud, or Singer, or Potok, or even Bellow (with the exception of his work, *Henderson the Rain King*) as humorists, though I admit that there is a Jewish *Weltanschauung* which suggests a comic way of dealing with apparently universal Jewish *Weltschmerz*. Even *Dialogue* and, to a lesser extent, *SUNSTONE*, take themselves very seriously and are, with infrequent exception, notably lacking in wit and/or humor. The LDS church, then, full of serious purpose as it is, is not so very different in this respect.

With all of that acknowledged, permit me to turn to my own beliefs about the blessings of humor. Humor is a great blessing, especially for Latter-day Saints. Recognizing the irony of the gap between his solemn and heartfelt profession of belief and the reality of his life, the lay member must shatter or flex, repent or rationalize. Most of us flex and rationalize, and the best means of doing both

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is to lessen the burden of guilt by laughing at ourselves instead of crying, by gently bringing our leaders (and our ideals) down from their pedestals.

Humor arises when lay members are more or less distanced from leadership and responsibility for the institution. Religious leaders are generally men who do not agonize noticeably about the gap between their professions of Christianity and their human realities. They live lives in which the gap is comfortably narrow or simply do not perceive that there is a gap. Thus the Reverend Sydney Smith, a witty and erudite clergyman, once explained why he never attained a bishopric in the Church of England while inferior men did by remarking, “I sink by my levity, while others rise by their gravity.”

Still, granting all of this solemnity and seriousness and danger, the Latter-day Saints have, undeniably, a body of unofficial humor, oral and written, which stands as tangible evidence that Latter-day Saints have not wholeheartedly heeded the admonitions of the Doctrine and Covenants to eschew laughter. I think that the Latter-day Saints, living in a world and struggling, more or less, not to be of that world, are recognizing how difficult it is to juxtapose Mormon ideals against worldly realities without flexing and suffering. Increasingly, our way to lessen the pain is, and will ever be, humor. Our Mormon jokes collect about those points on which we feel the greatest strain—the Word of Wisdom, the amount of money we are required to give to the building of the kingdom, the time spent by each of us and especially our lay leaders, in directing the work of the kingdom, and the austere and self-sacrificing life of the Mormon missionary. While it is said that we also make sexual jokes about our leaders, I must confess that the only jokes of this type I ever hear I learn from Bert Wilson—and I promptly forget them as I can’t repeat them in high council meetings or at stake conferences. I really do not know, personally, of much sexual jokelore about sexual improprieties of Mormon leaders—about returned missionaries and BYU coeds, yes, but not about bishops or Relief Society presidents, and never about General Authorities. Perhaps I have been too long in a sheltered environment—and I am not talking about the University of Utah.

In fact, as I observe Mormon jokelore, and my evidence is anecdotal and not systematic, it seems to me that most of our humor is self-congratulatory and thus very acceptable. I am thinking of the joke told about what one gets on crossing Spencer W. Kimball with J. Golden Kimball—“Do It, Dammit,” which I heard from a pulpit; or the obverse of the story about the Second Coming, in which the Pope tells the Catholics that the Savior will appear in Salt Lake City—though there is some acceptable self-criticism in that hoary joke about the paramedics giving artificial resuscitation to three high priests before they finally found the man with the medical problem. These jokes circulate freely about the Church, but seldom get into a sacrament meeting where, despite Elder Petersen’s injunction, some jokes get told and retold until I pray that we will not have to hear once more of the pregnant music leader named Hope who is “smiling brightly before us and we know that deliverance is nigh,” or of speakers who K.I.S.S.—Keep It Simple, Stupid. If I hear these, I shall be “very ungrateful indeed if I do not rise to my feet,” regardless of my knee-fights, and recount how J. Golden said, “You can’t excommunicate me; I repent too damn fast.”

I suppose it is because I hope to hear no more jokes beginning “There was this Mormon bishop, a Jewish rabbi, and a Catholic priest” that I rejoiced in the freshness of many of the jokes told in the month following the revelation of 8 June 1978 regarding the priesthood and the blacks. My wife and I had been blessed, while attending the University of Utah, with a home teacher from Alabama, a dear man who nonetheless slipped great notches in our esteem every time he said—and he said it often—that he would leave the Church the day the blacks (he didn’t say *blacks*) received the priesthood. And he said it with the kind of confidence which irked us but with which we could not, in those days, argue too vigorously. On the day we learned about the revelation, I said to my wife, “I’m going to call Brother Racist in Salt Lake and say one word—‘Adios,’—and hang up.” It is that kind of triumph I felt in many of the jokes about the blacks and the priesthood—the kind of humor one sees in the turning-of-the-tables of the line, “Hello there, I’ve your new bishop”; or in Calvin Grondahl’s cartoon of a black Mormon bishop interviewing an uncomfortable white member who is saying, “Bishop, I never *really* thought that Martin Luther King was a communist.” I stand by my guns against Richard C. Poulsen, then, in asserting that the jokes which grew out of the revelation underscore that the revelation was a victory for all of us.

I would hope that jokelore would take a rumble seat to other forms of humor in the Church. At present, we have not had much humorous writing in the Church. Parley P. Pratt was a notable exception, with his wonderful and funny tract, “Dialogue between Joseph Smith and the Devil,” and several delightfully comic accounts in his autobiography. He was careful to balance that humor with accounts of devotion to the cause, but his humor stands, almost alone in his era, as an example, amidst hardship and persecution, of flexing instead of breaking. After that, with the exception of a few scattered poems by Thomas Lyon and Eliza R. Snow and the *Keep-apitchin’in* of Orson Pratt, we find little real humor—even in the novels of the so-called lost generation—until Paul Bailey and, more successfully, Samuel W. Taylor, whose *Heaven Knows Why* and *Family Kingdom* are delightful, though written by one who has obviously distanced himself somewhat from the Church. Carol Lynn Pearson has written some fine humor balanced by thoughtful seriousness in *The Order is Love*, a number of her poems, and in *The Busy Bishop’s Notebook*; Elouise Bell has a fine monthly column in *Network*; and Clifton Holt Jolley and Jerry Johnstone join their predecessor, Steve Hale, in writing fine but all-too-ephemeral humor columns for the *Deseret News*, along with Edward A. Geary’s quietly humorous accounts of growing up in Emery County.

Some of the most effective humor of our times is being produced by Calvin Grondahl and Orson Scott Card. Card manages a delightful portrait of Heber C. Kimball in his recent and important novel, *A Woman of Destiny*; and in *Saintspeak*, the Mormon answer to Ambrose Beirce's *Devil's Dictionary*, ranges from spiritually moving definitions (as "father's blessing") to more caustic definitions (as "home teaching" "Relief Societese," and "humanist," to name a few). Grondahl, in a similar vein but in a different genre, moves the Latter-day Saint reader to institutional pride on one page, and follows it on the next with satire on Mormon institutions and sacred cows. He depicts, for example, a cool preppie nuzzling a wondrously endowed coed, who is purring to him, "Does your patriarchal blessing really say that you'll marry a sexy wildcat?" Or two Mormon elders bicycle past a scantily clad bathing beauty as the senior companion cries out to the boggle-eyed junior, "Sing a hymn, elder, sing a hymn." And in another a meek Mormon, obviously on the carpet before a scowling boss, hears the words, "No success in the home can compensate for losing the Megacorporation account." My favorite, penned for the *BYU Universe*, is of a young man, dazed and bleeding, arising from a pile of stones which have obviously been thrown at him, saying to the approaching BYU policemen, "All I said was, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.'" Grondahl's cartoons and Card's definitions, with their undercutting jabs at smugness, self-righteousness, hypocrisy, officiousness, and overconcern about nonessentials go further than any other Mormon humor I am aware of in testing the necessity of emotional distance from the subject. I find myself variously amused and disturbed by the cartoons, and I have not been surprised when visitors browsing through our copies have guffawed at and been repelled by various cartoons and definitions.

"Yes, Mormon humor is a serious matter. Twain said it well when he insisted that humor was like the screw on the opera glass, "it helps us to adjust our focus." Humor is therapeutic; it can be a safety valve, particularly in a tight and demanding society which is directed by a strong hierarchy of leaders who say we should beware of humor. Humor in the Church, if it is kept in balance with a vibrant faith, can assist Church members to live in better harmony with themselves and their ideals, and, by enabling us to flex, grow, and assert ourselves without threatening our standing in the Church, can help us to deal with our leaders and doctrines without shattering or breaking. Humor thereby enables us to lessen the tension and the incongruity between ourselves and the high and demanding standards of our faith and the Church which houses our faith.

I watched this process at work on a brother high priest and his high priest group a few years ago. Because of a healthy sense of humor, the late Raymond Taylor, brother to Sam and also a bit of a rebel, could sit unthreatened in his high priest group in the Provo Ninth Ward and tell, without fearing my presence as a stake leader, how the Lord had blessed him. "Damn it, brethren," he said that morning, "the Lord is watching over us." He cleared his throat. "I was called out last Wednesday evening and told the Allen building was burning down," he continued, "that the adjacent building where I have my office would probably go up in flames, and that I ought to get down there. I ran down, but they wouldn't let me in. I told them that all of my life's work was in that office, that I had to go get it, but they wouldn't let me in. So I went across the street to the Four Winds Cafe, ordered a cup of coffee, and sat there and drank coffee and prayed like hell." Then obviously moved, head bowed, he added, "and damned if the Lord didn't hear my prayers, brethren, and spare the building." The juxtaposition of this humble witness and the obvious violation of language and Word of Wisdom standards may have made the stake president blink, but not one of the high priests batted an eye. Chuckling approval, they promptly launched a discussion of how the Lord moves to bless his children.

Such situational humor (Ray was very aware that he was being a funny iconoclast) was healthy for Ray, instructive for the stake president, and relaxing (or at least harmless) for the other brethren. And such is, I believe, the heart of Mormon humor—the twinkle-eyed response to life which is just as valid in such cases as a sober and basic black response to life. Despite our desire for the ideal, the real will ever be with us—especially as long as we have earthy boys preparing to become spiritual missionaries. In 1978 Bert Wilson sent me a copy of a note from a Utah State University student. The note speaks for itself, though I will soften its impact by changing one word: "I think I should receive at least a 'D' because I am going on a mission for the LDS church. An 'incomplete' wouldn't do any good because I won't be here for the next two years, and a 'F' will look bloody hell on my G.P.A. and report card."

As long as such incongruities exist—and they always will—as long as Saints continue to be sinners who keep on trying, as long as we live and thus make gaffes and goofs, humor will be a necessary restorative and corrective and blessing. Mark Twain was right when he wrote, "Humor is the great thing, the saving thing at last. The minute it crops up all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments slip away, and a sunny spirit takes their place." I hope it is so; I hope, among the Latter-day Saints, it will be ever and increasingly so—until we stop getting Urim on our Thummims or until we are all translated correctly, whichever comes first!

**Humor in the Church, if kept in balance, can help us live in better harmony with ourselves and our ideals.**