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02. Humor and the Good Life

Abstract

I don't remember how it started, but somehow throughout my career at Cal Poly Pomona, Dick regularly asked me what colors I wanted. Then, a few days later, he would leave a bag of bearded iris rhizomes in our department office for me. Evidently, Dick was obsessed with breeding these plants, and his breeding program generated many "rejects," which he shared with his friends and colleagues. My garden was full of his beautiful rejects, and I soon learned to appreciate these plants, which I think was Dick's true aim.
[excerpt]

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Humor and the Good Life

Laurie Shrage

I don't remember how it started, but somehow throughout my career at Cal Poly Pomona, Dick regularly asked me what colors I wanted. Then, a few days later, he would leave a bag of bearded iris rhizomes in our department office for me. Evidently, Dick was obsessed with breeding these plants, and his breeding program generated many "rejects," which he shared with his friends and colleagues. My garden was full of his beautiful rejects, and I soon learned to appreciate these plants, which I think was Dick's true aim.

Before I arrived at Cal Poly, Dick launched a course on the Philosophy of Love and Sex. It was a popular course so, when I was hired, Dick asked if I would be interested in teaching some sections. I agreed, and over many years, Dick and I shared materials and ideas for this course. It's hard to imagine that Dick's course could be taught in today's climate. For example, he would invite a filmmaker who made "crush fetish" films to his class to discuss the ethical issues involved. The films were often disturbing to students, and thus students would struggle both to understand the point of view of the filmmaker and then to marshal all the moral theories they had absorbed to argue against the activities depicted in the films. Dick's classroom discussions

were lively, contentious, engaging, thought-provoking, entertaining, and memorable. Dick was admirably respectful to both his guest and to his students, and worked to ensure that many points of view would be heard and assessed. He showed his students how to have illuminating and productive conversations among people with widely divergent views. Occasionally a student might complain about the topics or materials Dick shared, but fortunately our department and university could be relied upon to defend the principle of academic freedom.

I similarly had a few student complaints when I included in my course (in the 1990s) such topics as same-sex marriage or BDSM. Today I am more cautious, as I have had students record without permission parts of my courses, and these recordings could easily be viewed out of context. Also, I am less confident today that universities will strongly defend a targeted faculty member's academic freedom, or protect faculty who are responsibly teaching highly controversial topics.

Dick's greatest contribution to our department was his cultivation of humor. He often pointed out the incongruities of our lofty pursuits at Cal Poly Pomona surrounded by fields of horses and, of course, horse shit. Cal Poly's campus was situated on an Arabian horse ranch donated by the Kellogg cereal family, and we also had an Ag school, with cows, chickens, and a swine unit. This was a great

place to appreciate the “paradoxical, the illogical, and in general the often surprising elements in human existence.” For example, when teaching about the scientific study of masturbation in my Philosophy of Love and Sex course, it was heartening to discover that corn flakes were actually invented and manufactured by the physician John Kellogg to suppress this supposedly awful vice. When Tony the Tiger mascots would show up at our various campus celebrations, these could be occasions to contemplate the hidden meaning and power of corn flakes.

Dick was especially attuned to the odd similarities and contrasts between the self-important, enterprising humans who inhabited the campus and the exploited, ruminating animals. His casual observations about the ranch/farm setting of our somewhat insane endeavor to lead the life of the mind served to sharpen our appreciation of incongruity. They also helped us reframe our obsessions—with annoying students or power-grabbing administrators—and ultimately cope with the unrelenting demands of the work place. I vaguely remember him wishing we all had more horse sense about our predicaments.

Although Dick began writing and publishing about humor after he retired from Cal Poly, I think some of his philosophical musings about humor wore off on me. I began including a section in my

Philosophy of Love and Sex course on why sex is often the subject of humor—is there something inherently funny about sex? I would bring in examples of sexual humor, and ask students to analyze these in terms of the various theories of humor, e.g., superiority, relief, incongruity, play, and so on. It turned out to be one of the most fun and engaging sections of the course—and my students probably needed some relief from our investigations of sexual assault, harassment, perversion, and so on. In my course on feminist philosophy, I started including a section on gender and humor: what makes a joke sexist, why are there so few women comedians (there are many more today), what is feminist humor, and why are feminists charged with being humorless? It was hard to find writings by philosophers on these topics, and yet these questions invite philosophical analysis.

I think Dick is right that appreciating humor is a form of aesthetic understanding. If this is so, then it would be good to expand our capacity for recognizing the incongruous and surprising elements around us. Perhaps, deepening such forms of appreciation should be included at all levels of instruction. When I read to my granddaughter, I've become more aware of how children's books contain many incongruities and surprises, and part of the joy of reading to children is to see if they recognize which incongruities are "real" (in some sense) and

which are not. We expose children to fantasy and fiction in order, we think, to expand their imaginations and creativity, but perhaps part of what we're doing is expanding their sense of humor. As Dick notes, this is different from the ability to laugh, and is more about the capacity to notice weird and unexpected relationships among things. Helping people develop their sense of humor is probably a good way to help them live a good life, so why don't philosophers do more of this?

Whenever I see a bearded iris, especially a dark purple one, I'm reminded of Dick. And then I my mind usually turns to crush films or why corn flakes are not just for breakfast...