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## 04. Mongo Give Good E-Mail

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## 04. Mongo Give Good E-Mail

### Abstract

The first time I met Richard C. Richards (whom I later learned was also known as Mongo) we were at the 2013 LPS conference on the west coast of Florida. He was wearing a T-shirt that said something about having attended his own funeral, so I figured that he, like me, had a penchant for gallows humor. Later, during an author-meets-critics session focusing on his at-the-time-new book (A Philosopher Looks at The Sense of Humor), I was as eager to learn more about his work as I was delighted by the friendly banter between him and the other attendees. Although this was the first time I had been to this conference or met members of the society, it was immediately clear that this was a man who was both loved and respected. So, because I was determined to get a piece of him myself, I bought his book, read it, then reached out to him via email. Thus began one of my most cherished online relationships. Actually, that's an easy hurdle to clear as I don't, as a rule, have online relationships and consider the term itself a bit oxymoronic. No, we didn't become "FaceSpace" friends or start "sexting" one another—in fact, I suspect that he would be as uninterested as I am in such 21st century distractions. Of course, I can only speak for myself, but I hope it will suffice to say that I avoid social media as much as I do angry fire ants or artisanal pizza, and not necessarily in that order. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Richard C. Richards, Mongo, Philosopher Looks at the sense of humor

### Disciplines

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## **Mongo Give Good E-Mail**

Camille Atkinson

The first time I met Richard C. Richards (whom I later learned was also known as Mongo) we were at the 2013 LPS conference on the west coast of Florida. He was wearing a T-shirt that said something about having attended his own funeral, so I figured that he, like me, had a penchant for gallows humor. Later, during an author-meets-critics session focusing on his at-the-time-new book (*A Philosopher Looks at The Sense of Humor*), I was as eager to learn more about his work as I was delighted by the friendly banter between him and the other attendees. Although this was the first time I had been to this conference or met members of the society, it was immediately clear that this was a man who was both loved and respected. So, because I was determined to get a piece of him myself, I bought his book, read it, then reached out to him via email. Thus began one of my most cherished online relationships. Actually, that's an easy hurdle to clear as I don't, as a rule, have online relationships and consider the term itself a bit oxymoronic. No, we didn't become "FaceSpace" friends or start "sexting" one another—in fact, I suspect that he would be as uninterested as I am in such 21st century distractions. Of course, I can only speak for myself, but I hope it will suffice to say that I avoid social

media as much as I do angry fire ants or artisanal pizza, and not necessarily in that order.

Because I enjoyed him and our exchanges so much, I kept finding excuses to keep the conversation going. I also wanted to pay tribute to his work somehow—or, at least, the one book of his that I'd thoroughly read and carefully annotated—because I found it fun, funny, and important. So, with his permission, I wrote an online review. What follows are some excerpts from longer dialogues using our pseudonyms—"Mongo" and "Daughter of One-Lung-Low" or, for brevity's sake, "DOOLL." I'm not sure how he became Mongo but suspect it had something to do with the Mel Brooks film, "Blazing Saddles." As for my moniker, Mongo gets credit for coining it after I'd shared the silly, self-deprecating joke my Chinese-Russian father told his doctor when informed that he and his lungs were working at less than 75% capacity—specifically, he asked her to refer to him by his "Chinese name of One-Lung-Low."

I hope this provides enough context to appreciate the following exchange and, no, I haven't bothered to clean-up any grammar, spelling, punctuation, and so forth. Moreover, it most certainly will not be in APA, MLA, CIA, LSD, or any other proper academic style and format.

Me: Hi "Mongo"!

Mongo: Hi, Daughter of One Lung Low.

I'll cut into your email and make some comments at the end if I haven't covered it all.

First off, your review of the book is a delight. You have indeed captured my thinking, emphasizing some points better than I did. Thanks you. And your own reactions are clear and cogent. I am delighted to have such a fine reviewer.

DOOLL: OK, my turn to cut in...It's kinda like dancing, huh?!

Mongo: Certainly not a sword fight.

DOOLL: Oh good! I was hoping I didn't blow it somehow—it was fun for me, but I'd hate to have disappointed you.

The [job] interview process of the last, ugh! TWO years has been horribly frustrating—I seem to be suffering from something analogous to the "always a bridesmaid, never a bride" type problem. However, this year seems more promising so keep your fingers, toes, etc. crossed for me!

Mongo: Even my eyes will be crossed.

DOOLL: In the meantime, I have a humor question for you and would like you to help me make sense of the following experience: I was in line at the grocery store today and noticed a huge, red mess on the floor nearby. I said, "Geez, that looks like a crime scene!" Of course, it wasn't but I wasn't sure what it was and, fortunately, the man who dropped it laughed and said, "Yeah, what a waste of a good Merlot, huh?" One of the cashiers laughed too but then quickly covered his mouth because all of the other folks within earshot were wearing expressions of disapproval. Now, I've been in Bend long enough not to care what folks think of me but I'm always wondering about differences in what counts as funny and/or humorous. So, you tell me, did my quip count as humor? If so, where was the incongruity? If not, would you say it was merely a case of "funny-ha-ha" that only two of us (plus my husband) laughed at??

Mongo: Damn. A real-life example to test a theory. So the theory is internally fairly consistent. Now it has to apply and explain? I suspect your reaction was humor. The inconsistency would be the different and clashing explanations of the liquid on the floor.

DOOLL: OK, so here's one more question I have regarding the incongruity condition for humor...Can there be different interpretations for what counts as incongruous? For example, I thought I was pointing out a different incongruity—namely, that it would be rather unexpected or surprising to find a "crime scene" at a supermarket check stand. Then again, depending on what markets one shops at...maybe not??

Mongo: Incongruity is a function of the mindset. How is that for obscurity? It is a function of what a person expects, what "fits" into that, and what doesn't. But the important part is the state of mind of the individual. Someone distracted or anxious will probably not be able to play with the incongruity she notices. Of course two people can see the same thing, and only one sees something that does not fit. One man's incongruity is another man's ordinary world.

DOOLL: I suspect that this might explain, at least partly, why my attempts at humor fail around here more often than not. Not only do many people seem unaware of the incongruous, much less how fun it can be to play with them, they don't even seem to notice inconsistencies. All I know is, teaching logic or critical thinking at COCC was WAY harder than I could ever have imagined. This is because a large

number of students failed to understand what a contradiction was, let alone care about it! This also explains why they cut my position, cancelled all philosophy classes for over a year and now offer only two per term.

Mongo: What a weird decision. I have always had an intrinsic suspicion of administrators. The merlot dropper may have been laughing from nervous energy, or maybe he too saw and appreciated the inconsistency. Same with the clerk. Sometimes you can't be sure of what other people are laughing at, and why, so you just use the WAG system (Wild-Assed Guess.) The inconsistency was not strong, the laughs were hard to interpret, and overall it is hard to tell for sure.

DOOLL: Yeah, that's the problem, isn't it?? Meaning, we can only see others' external behavior (laughter, pained expression, etc.), so it's virtually impossible to know the cause or causes of it. Even when it comes to understanding my own motives, I can't always tell or there's more than one explanation for why I did what I did. This is also the problem with psychological surveys that ask folks about their intentions, motives and so forth which is why I don't put much stock in them. The surveys which ask couples about sex and cheating really get me—

mainly because I think we humans are pretty good at lying, even to (or especially to) ourselves...

Mongo: I think it was Nietzsche who said: I will not lie, not even to myself. Pretty hard to keep that commitment.

In sum, we carried on like this for months, also sharing personal stories about our families, children or the lack thereof, etc. What I don't believe Mongo knew was how painful my life was at the time. Not only was I in a chaotic mess-of-a-marriage, I was living in rural Oregon.

When I told one of my urban-dwelling uncles that I'd landed there, he quipped, "Geez, you could have been kidnapped to a better place!" In other words, it was an unfamiliar place where I felt unusually alone and isolated—despite being married or, perhaps, because of it—and having never really dealt with the untimely deaths of my parents. I mention this only to underscore how grateful I am for Mongo's substantive and regular email attention. His wisdom and generosity suggested a sense of community, however abstract, and his unrelenting sense of humor provided a delicious relief from those moments of despair. On a more rational and practical level, the exchange of ideas gave me the intellectual stimulation that I would not have had otherwise, and his work inspired me to get some

research, writing, and publishing done. For that, I remain forever in his debt. So, if he ever needs a kidney, there's lien on one of mine with his name on it.

I will close this tribute with a quote from Carrie Fisher—another brilliantly funny person who, sadly, is no longer sharing jokes with or among the living. In an interview shortly before she shuffled-off those mortal coils, she defended her penchant for self-deprecating and irreverent humor. Saying something to the effect of, “It creates community when you share private, embarrassing things and can find other people who share those things.” This is exactly the kind of kinship I experienced in my Mongo-encounters. It's also why I remember Richard C. Richards so fondly and with such sheer delight. And, I will continue to do so for as long as I remain a part of this world. For all I know he may outlive me. If so, I hope he will recall me with equal fondness as more DOOLL than fool.