

A Comic Vision
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Peter De Vries, the American comic novelist of the mid-20th Century, growing up in Chicago and calling upon his Dutch Reformed background and ultimately his young daughter's death to put things into perspective, writes of a Dr. Didisheim who, after giving a lecture on comedy, is greeted by a listener who hits him in the face with a recipe for custard pie. I have chosen my words carefully, as all good English majors must, by promising to focus on a "comic vision" of life, not a "comical vision." If it were "comical" it would have to be funny; a "comic" vision only has to be profound. So, the premise: comedy is more serious than tragedy, and more grace-full.

You may remember a very popular book written by Umberto Eco in 1980, The Name of the Rose. The climax of the plot comes when Jorge, the protective librarian of the monastery, stands in the middle of the flames that are consuming his great library clutching to his breast the only copy left in the world of Aristotle's second book. Jorge has confronted William, the monk sent to the Franciscan abbey to investigate the vexing murders of some of the brothers, with the conclusion, "And this book – considering comedy as a wondrous medicine, with its satire and mime, which would produce the purification of the passions through the enactment of defect, fault, and weakness – would induce false scholars to try to redeem the lofty with a diabolical reversal: through the acceptance of the base." And William has retorted, "You are the devil. The devil is not the prince of matter; the devil is the arrogance of the spirit, faith without a smile, truth that is never seized by doubt." And now Jorge, burning with the last existing copy of Aristotle's book in his grasp, is trying to save the Church from Aristotle's "diabolical reversal,"

that comedy is a wondrous medicine, and William calls him the devil for perpetuating faith without a smile. (p.475 ff)

Northrop Frye, the renowned Shakespearean scholar, writes, “To descend to the world of the dead is easy enough, but to reverse the movement and go back up again is difficult.” (The Myth of Deliverance, p.43) How do Shakespeare’s tragedies end? With the stage littered with corpses, mourners stepping over them as the curtain falls on “King Lear,” “as the human spirit sags with the weight of this sad time,” with the two dead lovers lying on the middle of the stage in “Romeo and Juliet,” with Richard still searching frantically for a horse at the end of “King Richard III.” That is the easy part, says Frye. The harder move is toward redemption, new life. And Shakespeare illustrates two ways of doing it: the move of disjunction and the move of conjunction.

The move of disjunction, turning the world upside down. In the epilogue of “All’s Well That Ends Well” the king accepts the ultimate reversal of roles: “The king’s a beggar, now the play is done.” The king becomes a beggar, the beggar a king; the child an adult, the adult a child; the man a woman, the woman a man; the fool a sage, the sage a fool. It is a comic ploy that turns the world upside down so that the truth becomes clear and a new way forward emerges. The play may have ended, but the drama continues.

And, the move of conjunction: at the conclusion of “As You Like It” there is a marriage, and Hymen enters to acknowledge that there is mirth in heaven “when earthly things made even atone together.” Reconciliation, reunion – think of all of the Shakespearean plays that end with a party or a wedding in which everyone is included, even the bitterest of enemies. And life goes on. As John Dominic Crossan, a 21st Century progressive theologian puts it, “Tragedy is

swallowed up eventually in comedy. The sting belongs to tragedy, but the victory to comedy.” (Raid on the Articulate, p.21) In that sense, the Christian story that begins with a humble infant being identified as God incarnate, who is crucified, and then resurrected so that all might live peaceably together, is a comedy combining both the move of disjunction and the move of conjunction.

Soren Kierkegaard, that singularly unfunny Danish theologian of the 19th Century, insisted that embracing the comic view of life is the only entryway into an authentic religious life. In his Concluding Unscientific Postscript he writes that the trajectory of faith begins with all of us living an aesthetic life, an existence defined by our senses . . . what we feel, what we taste, what we see, what we hear, what we smell. “Eat, drink, and be merry” is a valid aesthetic philosophy, though, Kierkegaard observes, we tire of it. The irony is that as we focus simply on pleasure the less satisfying life becomes. So, we move on to the next stage, the ethical life in which we try to do everything that is right and good and true and selfless, except we all fall short of the ideal, and we see how ludicrous we sometimes appear. It is only when we sense the comic self-critique of trying unsuccessfully to live a perfectly ethical life that we are set free simply to embrace life with all of its contractions and its convergences. He calls this comic move a “leap of faith” necessary to becoming authentically religious, or simply genuinely human. A “leap of faith” is not an exclusively Christian move, of course. It can be part of every religious and philosophical tradition, but it is more than just trying harder to be a good person.

The story of Job in the Hebrew scripture is a wonderful example of the comic move of disjunction which includes two very different plots. The first two chapters and the last are written in prose. They tell a tale of God making a bet with the devil that Job will not break under

even the most extreme tests of his faithfulness. And we have some horrific challenges given to him, but he does not waver. Here we have Job, the patient one; it is a story of harmony.

But in the thirty-nine chapters in between that are written in poetry, we have anything but a patient Job. He rails against God, crying out that God is being unfair, punishing him for sins he has not committed, while all along his three “friends” quiz him to find out what horrible things he must have done to deserve his misfortune. Job argues with God, screams at God, and insists that God take it because God deserves it. If we are ever looking for inspiration to curse God, look to Job, and one tactic he uses is the comic move of disjunction, turning things upside down.

An example: there is a beautiful verse in Psalm 8 that has brought comfort to generations of the faithful. In antiquated language, “What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?” But in Job this sentiment is turned on its ear: “What is man, that thou dost make so much of him, and thou dost set thy mind upon him, dost visit him every morning, and test him every moment? How long wilt thou not look away from me, not let me alone till I swallow my spittle?” (Job 7:17-19)

What the psalmist celebrates as God’s attention lavished upon us, Job sees as God’s unwelcome scrutiny of every little thing, including swallowing our spit. Here Job betrays the false assumption that his three friends personify, the conventional wisdom that God rewards the worthy and punishes the unworthy. Job does not deserve his punishment, and he lets God know about it. And so, Job serves as a comic model for us when we experience life as being unfair.

To stay within the biblical text, I focus our attention on another dramatic comic move of disjunction, Mary’s song, “The Magnificat,” in the Gospel of Luke. We all have heard it sung beautifully just before Christmas, the twelve movements of Bach’s composition, the sopranos leading with, “My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has

looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” Mary, the young girl unexpectedly expectant, glorifies God’s mercy that will have generations calling her “blessed.”

That is the song we know. But think, who is singing this song? It is not the daughter of the king. It is not the daughter of the high priest of the temple. It is a nobody from the hinterlands who will bear a son who will do . . . what? She sings of the future in the past tense, because in God’s vision it already has been accomplished. “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away.”

This comic vision is no laughing matter for those who are proud, powerful, or rich. There is no salvation in pride, power, or wealth. Rather, it comes by serving all and seeing the presence of the divine in the least likely places.

This serves as a critique not only of the forces at work in our own culture, but also in our religious traditions, as flexible and as creative as we like to think we are. Turning things upside down is dangerous work. An historic moment of this occurs when Galileo turned the world right side up and was vilified for it; it took the Church 350 years to forgive Galileo for being right. It was all so easy when the earth was the center of the universe. It was all about us; the sun revolved around us, the moon rose and set over us, and everything in nature existed for our benefit and profit. And yet, there were celestial occurrences that did not conform to this self-referential model.

Galileo, peering through his telescope, wondered, “If we posited that the sun does not revolve around the earth but the earth around the sun, how would that change things?” Changes

things it did. By turning the universe the right way around our eyes were open to new truths. But the keepers of the old truths dragged Galileo into court, found him guilty of heresy, and forced him to recant. A comic move by Galileo that did not cause a lot of laughter, but by challenging assumptions and acknowledging contradictions, it revealed the truth and opened up the future to even more complex discoveries. The comic move of disjunction.

Now, the comic move of conjunction, of bringing things together. St. Augustine starts his Confessions with one of the greatest lines of reconciliation: speaking to God, “You made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.” I remember walking through a London underground station and looking up at the top rank of books at a magazine stand. And there among all of the public pornography was a copy of Confessions of St. Augustine. Pity the poor soul who buys it in hopes that it will get him through another lonely night.

For St. Augustine the central image of his spiritual autobiography is that of a journey, a journey back to God. He was the prodigal child, the one who wastes everything in dissolute living and then goes on the long journey home to be reunited with his loving parent, a vision of perfect happiness, he imagines. A journey from the aesthetic through the ironic to the ethical, making the leap of comic faith to the religious, remembering Kierkegaard describing it centuries later. And again, Crossan: “Tragedy is swallowed up eventually in comedy. The sting belongs to tragedy but the victory to comedy.”

I judge that there are at least four creation stories in the Christian Bible: Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, two accounts that are different, though not contradictory, as well as the first Chapter of the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word . . .”, and Proverbs 8, where God and Sophia, the feminine personification of wisdom, are co-creators, a concept that drives all

creationists crazy. Taking the first two chapters of Genesis to form a single comic move of conjunction: Genesis 1 tells of a very organized, orderly creation. We are given the ascending order of God's handiwork day by day until God creates human beings as the crowning achievement on the last day. We are the climax of creation, occupying a position in God's hierarchy just a little lower than the angels.

And then in Chapter 2 when it looks like we are going to get a genealogy of sorts, a second creation story intercedes where there is no hierarchy of creation, but rather the down to earth continuity among all creatures. Adam and Eve are formed just like the rest of the animals, out of the dust of the earth. There is nothing lofty here. The word "adam" means "ground," and Adam and Eve are very "earthy" in this version of how it all began.

Together these two stories form a comic move of conjunction in which the first one emphasizes the harmony between humans and the creator, the second between humans and the rest of creation. Our heads are in the clouds but our feet are made of clay. We can dream dreams and imagine wondrous things, but our lives require the basic mundane things: food, shelter, clothing, rest, and companionship. This same conflation is represented in the gospel claim that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," "logos" and "sarx" becoming one in the midst of our daily lives.

Fifty years ago Peter De Vries was able to use this comic move of conjunction to poke fun at those of us of the progressive persuasion in a comical story in his novel, Mackerel Plaza. The Rev. Mackerel is the pastor of the First Liberal Church, Avalon, Connecticut. It is the first split-level church in America, with five rooms and two baths downstairs and a huge all-purpose room upstairs which can be divided into different-sized components by sliding doors. There is a small worship area at one end. The pulpit, as Mackerel describes it, "consists of a slab of marble

set on four legs of four delicately different fruitwoods, to symbolize the four gospels, and their failure to harmonize. Behind it dangles a large multicolored mobile, its interdenominational parts swaying, as one might fancy, in perpetual reminder of the Pauline stricture against those ‘blown by every wind of doctrine.’” What is the sermon of which Rev. Mackerel is most proud? He once preached, “It is the final proof of God’s omnipotence that God need not exist in order to save us.” That led to an immediate pay hike and invitations to more dinners than he could possibly eat. The comic move of conjunction taken to a comedic level.

So, where does all of this leave us? It leaves us right here, right now, together searching for a vision of life that makes sense. When we speak to one another, now in monologue but soon in dialogue and conversation, we are prone toward the comic move of disjunction when we offer differing perspectives and insights and toward the comic move of conjunction when we find agreement.

When we eat together we engage in an act of conjunction, sharing food gathered from a common table. A table set in our midst often is a symbol of reconciliation. The fact that we choose different food and drink in different portions and combinations reminds us of our own particularities.

When we see the injustices in the world around us, we move with comic disjunction to point to the contradictions, the inequalities, and the illusions that make life uncivil, and in some cases, impossible. The disjunctive move is a means for us to act on behalf of the poor, the widow and orphan, and the stranger in our midst, to tell the emperor who has no clothes on that things are not acceptable as they now are.

And at the same time, we move with comic conjunction to suffer along with those who suffer. It is a move toward harmony for us to live with insistence that “there by the grace of God go also I, and all of us.” One of the great comic insights is that we are all in this together. Conrad Hyers, once a professor at Gustavus Adolphus, puts it this way: “It is the comedian who moves within the dustiness and density of the real world, unafraid to get hands dirty and feet muddy, without anxiety over losing face or tarnishing some polished image.”

Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer-Prize winning author of Gilead, as well as Home, Lila, and Housekeeping, wrote her doctoral dissertation on Shakespeare. She writes in her book of essays, The Givenness of Things, that as a student she wondered about “the elaborate concluding acts of so many of the later plays, thoroughgoing reconciliations, sometimes among a great many characters.” Was Shakespeare just playing to the sentiments of the audience of his day? Today, Robinson observes, to play to the prejudices of a modern audience would require concluding plays with “mayhem of some kind, a shootout or an act of war, merciless and mindless retaliation for unforgivable crimes.”

The “gratuitous pardon” that the playwright uses in even some of his most strenuous plays . . . Robinson notes “Cymbeline,” “Antony and Cleopatra,” “Measure for Measure,” “The Winter’s Tale,” and “The Tempest” . . . “all end with elaborate scenes of reconciliation that all of them are designed from the first act to bring about. That is to say, reconciliation is their subject. If this is conventional in comedy, it is odd in plays as grave as these are. And what happens in these scenes is no sorting out of grievances, no putting things right. Justice as that word is normally understood has no part in them. They are about forgiveness that is unmerited,

unexpected, unmasked, unconditional. In other words, they are about grace.” (p.38,39) The comic is grace-full.

These plays are not religious, she says, but the great acts of grace at the end of many of them, especially portrayed in the restoration of lost loved ones, have “the aura and immutability of the sacred.” (p.48) She concludes, with my interpolations added, that our extreme vulnerability (made clear by the comic move of disjunction) and our sacred dignity (revealed by the comic move of conjunction) “are the basis of a profound ethical” (and I would upgrade that to “religious,” to be consistent with Kierkegaard), obligation to weigh our actions in the scales of grace, not by our corrupted notions of justice and retribution.” (p.272)

For the final word we turn back to Conrad Hyers, “The world in the reign of the comic spirit grows young again.” And in this rejuvenation the comic vision rescues us from the tragic and offers us a resurrection of sorts.