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The Definition of Enlightenment - Lighten up: My Use of Humor in Social Work Education and Practice

by Rich Furman

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Abstract

In this narrative, I discuss how humor has become a central "tool" of my practice as a social work educator and social worker. I describe how I use humor as a conscious means of achieving student learning. In a very real sense, calling humor a tool is a misnomer as it is a central feature of my personality. Each of us possesses certain personality characteristics that, if nurtured and cherished, can become powerful allies in the processes of teaching and helping.

Introduction

When friends, colleagues, clients or students seem to be taking life far too seriously, I tell them I have discovered the meaning of enlightenment. Curious, they ask me what it is. To get them out of themselves for a moment and to create a little mystery, the proper condition for learning, I tease them a bit. I question whether they are ready to receive such wisdom, for which I had to study many years before receiving. By this point, they know that I am putting them on, yet they know that I am not. This is the power of humor: there is infinite truth implied. They persist: tell me what you know. Come on Rich, give it up. Fine, I reply, but under one condition. You must practice this truth at least once a day. Always, they agree. Alright then, I proclaim as if uttering the most important words that I would ever offer, the definition of enlightenment is to lighten up.

In a recent article I explore the curative aspects of humor, and discuss its uses in human service practice and education (Furman, 2001). In this narrative, I explore the central role that humor has played in my personal and professional life, and in my roles as a social worker and social work educator. I will include different examples from my practice as a social worker in clinical settings and classroom vignettes.

Humor is a central tool in my practice and pedagogical bag of tricks. In some ways, to refer to humor as a tool is inaccurate. Humor is probably the most central component of my personality. Without the ability to make others laugh, to find humor in situations where others would not find it, I would be a wholly different person. Humor is key to my self-identity. I am known as a clown, a jokester, a funny guy. Students seem disappointed if I am having a dour day, one in which I am not in the mood to joke and play. These days are rare.

Humor growing up

My father was a funny guy. He was funny much of the time, anyhow. Sometimes, his humor was downright embarrassing. He was not the kind to tell jokes. He was neither sarcastic nor biting. Instead, he was silly and often "corny." In this regard he possessed no shame. He was unabashed; he felt no shame or self-consciousness. I think he developed this style of humor in response to growing up with a brutal, overly-serious father and a domineering, over-protective mother. That which he was not allowed to be as a child, he made up for as an adult. While I don't believe he ever consciously decided that he would provide his children with the humor and playfulness he lacked as a child, he certainly created in his eldest son a very wide and prominent silly streak.

My father had the courage to see the humor in events that would upset others. He still tells a story about an incident that occurred when I was six-months-old. Apparently, I had been sick for a few days. Dad decided to hold me up over his head and make cooing sounds to me. He repeatedly assured me, you won't get sick on daddy, you won't get sick on daddy. Sure enough, at the exact moment when he turned his head, I threw up into his open mouth. To him, this was the funniest thing that ever happened. His ability to laugh during moments such as these taught me a path to humility through humor.

Since I was a child, humor has been a fundamental aspect of who I am. Making people laugh was a large part of my identity. Other children would befriend me because I had a natural ability to make others laugh. I became the class clown. Like many class clowns, I did not understand why my levity was sometimes not appreciated by some of my teachers. After several years of "socialization," I learned to distinguish between good and bad times to exhibit my sense of humor.

Humor in the classroom

Each teacher fights a battle against a powerful, invisible enemy. We are in perpetual battle against, boring, banal teachers of the past. It is daunting. Each of us, like Don Quixote, challenges demons we can hardly see. Yet, if you look closely enough, you can see the effects of "teachers-past" on the faces of many students. That frown in row three, the consequence of that third grade math teacher with the basset hound frown, armed with page after page of mimeographed handouts.

I start each new class the same way. When it is time to start, I write "Physics 654: Advanced Applications of Particle Physics" on the board. I tell the class that I hope they are in the right room. Since my reputation precedes me, most students know that I am kidding. A couple usually look confused, or even start to gather their things. I quickly follow up by asking: "or is this SW341 Social Work Practice with Small Groups." There is always laughter.

I love to start a class with laughter. Laughter communicates so much to students. It demonstrates my humanity and wiliness to be real. It lets them know that they can relax. It tells them that perhaps this experience will not be what they most fear: boring, dry, and unhappy.

Here is another example. It is the second semester of a year long practice class. This is important, since the degree to which one can use humor depends entirely on the level of trust between participants. If students feel that I like them, and know that I am on their "team," then I can joke

with them without any worries. In fact, I tell students that I will only joke with those I like., that I won't kid around with those I am not fond of. Having said this, I make sure to kid with everyone at least once.

Imagine, it's a few minutes before class is about to start. Everyone is there, expect for one or two students. I tell the class, I see you are all here, but I am going to wait to the hour for Edgar. Edgar is always late. The class laughs. Within a few minutes, Edgar walks in. He is on time. I start to applaud, as does the entire class. Edgar laughs harder than anyone does. In humor, he was both teased about his persistent tardiness, and validated for being on time.

I work hard at making sure that certain students don't get hurt or feel offended by my use of humor. It is important to assess a student's relationship to humor before I engage him or her personally and directly. At first, I make sure that the subject of my joke is someone I know can handle it: myself. Self-effacing humor serves several purposes. First, it models not taking oneself overly seriously. Sometimes faculty become so enamored of the perceived importance of our role that we can become intimidating and inaccessible to students. Humor directed at the self helps students see our foibles and weaknesses. It models for them that perfection is not required, nor even possible. They are allowed to be themselves, warts and all. It also shows them that they do not have to be "perfect" to be good social workers. Perfect social workers are like perfect parents: they become ineffective in their inapproachability and are ultimately resented.

Further, it also demonstrates that we can work to overcome our limitations and weaknesses. Perhaps two of my greatest shortcomings (although I am certain that if you asked my family, friends or students, they could come up with a more exhaustive list) are my handwriting and spelling. I explain to my classes that I had a doctor's appointment the day we learned handwriting in school, and that I have had a hard time catching up. Alternatively, I explain that I pursued a doctoral education since only a doctor could have writing as bad as mine. Since my writing is nearly illegible, I try to write on the board as little as possible.

This also presents challenges for students when they try to read my comments on their work. I tell them that if they can actually decipher all my "hieroglyphics" I will raise their grade just for the demonstration of such dogged persistence. I also let them know that if they forgive my handwriting, I will forgive at least one error in each of their assignments.

Research is no laughing matter

Research is a course that the majority of social work students either fear or believe that they will greatly dislike. Perhaps dread is too strong a word, but it certainly is the least favorite social work course for many practitioners-to-be. This past semester I taught research for the first time. I also was anxious, dwelling on the prospect of teaching a course that was experienced in such a negative manner. That it turned out to be my favorite teaching experience to date was in large part due to my conscious and relentless use of humor. I took every opportunity I could to make fun of myself, the textbook, the research processes, even students' own fears and anxieties.

On the first day of class, I wrote on the board: SW 600: Introduction to Social Work Research-A.K.A, Rich's torture chamber. This humorous exaggeration helped students put their fears into

perspective. It let students know that I understood their fears. Humor is a great way of expressing empathy. Also, infusing humor into lectures and class discussions helps make the experience more entertaining. I find that if I can keep students entertained, I have a chance to teach them in spite of their lack of interest in certain aspects of the material.

Humor in social work practice

Humor can break down defense mechanisms. It can turn the Berlin Wall into a more manageable, reasonable, chain linked gate. Something said in a humorous tone can be infinitely easier to hear and remember than something said with gravity. At the same time, a humorous statement with a touch of bite can be as impactful, as it is palatable. When someone exhibits behavior that you would prefer that they change, the goal is simply change. Too often, confrontive techniques are used that create shame. Shame merely creates resistance and recalcitrance; I prefer to offer a little humor. While some argue that sarcasm is not humorous, used in the context of a trusting relationship, a touch of sarcasm can bring movement to a static situation. Sarcasm helps point out contradictions, it hold paradoxes in front of us and gently prods us to face them. I remember seeing a cartoon years ago. In it a guru and his disciple were sitting on a mountaintop.

The caption read: "You must grown in accordance of your inner directives, goofball." What an impact. A touch of bite, a loving challenge with some teeth for the struggling student.

The ability to put things into perspective is critical to one's mental health. One of the most valuable things that I learned from training in Rational Emotive Therapy was that being unwilling to take life or oneself too seriously can go a long way in preventing and overcoming emotional disturbance. Too often people view small hassles that occur as evidence of life's horror, and of their own inadequacy.

A case study: Humor for perspective

Humor helps put the pains of life into perspective. Humor also helps us cope with life's more challenging problems. One client that I worked with began to see humor as her best defense against the pain of her panic disorder. Pat was a fifty-six-year-old woman with a forty-year history of panic attacks. For many years, she had several daily episodes. At the time that she presented for therapy, she was on leave from her job due to the severity of her attacks. She was feeling depressed due to the disabling nature of her disorder, and often had a hard time getting herself out of bed in the morning. She had been in therapy previously, and was currently taking medication for her condition.

During the first session, it became clear to me that, while Pat's panic disorder was a painful and debilitating condition, she was truly exacerbating her suffering by taking it and herself far too seriously. One of the important things to consider in using humor in practice is that clients must never feel made fun of or belittled. To prevent this, I presented Pat with my theory concerning her problem before I injected any humor into the session. I asked her if part of the problem was that she had developed such a dour attitude in response to the panic disorder, and that perhaps she was not able to put it into perspective. Pat resonated with this. She explained that when she

had been coping well with her condition she was able to poke fun at herself as a way of relieving stress. She noted that humor had helped her decrease the severity of her attacks. I asked Pat to share with me some of her humorous insights about her condition. Pat told me a story of a time when she had a panic attack at work, and had to lock herself in the bathroom. Apparently, several other employees needed to use the bathroom in response to eating some bad food. Pat played along with them, naming her need to use the bathroom "the burrito blues." Now at work, when she needs to lock herself in the bathroom for a while to deal with her panic, she tells others that she is going to swear off burritos any day. Through humor, she reframed the experience for herself as something tolerable. As she told me these stories, she began to feel somewhat lighter, somewhat relieved. Pat intuitively understood the healing power of humor. At the end of our first session, I gave her a "prescription" on a pad of paper that read: Laugh at least three times a day at your panic disorder. In time, Pat began to systematically utilize humor as a way of keeping her condition in perspective. Her panic began to decrease through therapy, and joy returned to her life. By the time she had left treatment, although she still had panic attacks, she was able to keep them in perspective, thus lowering their intensity and duration. She learned to use humor as a means of giving her life and her suffering meaning, and became happier and more fulfilled.

A case study: Humor as a challenge

Vinny was a fireman who was referred for therapy by his station chief to help him with his aggressive impulses and anxiety. Like many men from traditional ethnic communities, he was highly ashamed about having to come for therapy. He believed that a "real man" should be able to handle his problems on his own, and that having to come to therapy was a sign of personal failure. In the months leading to his beginning treatment, he had gotten into several physical altercations with other drivers whom he perceived as cutting him off, or who behaved "inappropriately" to him on the road. His relationship with his ex-wife had also deteriorated drastically. While he was visiting his daughter, his ex-wife and he got into an argument. He pushed her, and she called the police. He was temporarily restrained from having contact with either his ex-wife or his daughter. This further heightened his experience of shame, as he was now cut off from the daughter whom he loved "more than life itself." During our first session, it became apparent that Vinny would appreciate the use of humor. He made several jokes and freely teased me about looking too normal to be a psychotherapist. Each day he came in, he would say, " Richy, ya got to help me, I am going nuts." I asked him if he could take me with him, that it sounded like a fun place to go. This became our ritual, at which he laughed each time. After his laugher, he was able to settle down to the task of therapy. Joking with Vinny was one of the most effective ways of normalizing the therapeutic process. By engaging in playful humor and teasing, he was able to see his time with me as helpful discussions with a "friend." A friend he could share with, explore his weaknesses with, and from whom he would be willing to take advice and suggestions.

Humor was also a very effective tool in helping Vinny challenge the irrational beliefs that led to both his anxiety and his aggression. For example, it became clear that Vinny got into physical confrontations with other drivers due to several beliefs that I challenged through humor. First, those who cut him off were directly challenging his manhood. I helped Vinny put this into perspective through humorous exaggerations. Second, he believed that those who cut him off deserved to be punished. When Vinny shared with me his belief that these disrespectful drivers

needed to be punished, I told him that I agreed. That in fact, I so whole-heartedly agreed with him that I would quit my job and help him on his quest. I told him that I now would have a new mission in life, to help Vinny form a posse to heal mankind through eradicating such vermin. I got up from my chair, and told him I was done with my life as a therapist, that he would be my leader, and I would follow him on our sacred quest. Vinny laughed so hard that another therapist down the hall had to knock on the door and ask me to "calm him down." When he became able to speak again, he smiled ear to ear and declared, "Man, some of my thinking is totally whacked. No wonder I am so messed up."

Conclusion

Each of us possesses certain personality characteristics that, if nurtured and cherished, can become powerful allies in the processes of teaching and helping. For some of us, this personality characteristic is humor. For others, using humor is something that does not come naturally. However, even those who do not see themselves as being funny have moments when they can utilize humor in their practice or teaching. By the very willingness to be open to injecting humor into practice and classroom situations, social workers and educators can unleash the capacity for humor and healing within others.

In closing, I would like to say that writing this article has helped me feel more comfortable with my conscious use of humor. By reflecting back upon various practices and teaching situations, I can see how important humor has been to my effectiveness as a social worker and social work educator. Not only have I integrated it as an essential part of my teaching, but it has also helped me to cope with challenges that I encounter in the classroom.

References

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