

EXPLORING HUMOR



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Since I can remember, I have loved humor. Back in the early days of TV, I loved Sid Caesar, Art Carney, Carol Burnett and her crew and the first Ellen show. As I got older and started to read a lot, I sucked up Woody Allen, Erma Bombeck and Dave Barry. I asked my parents if they were sure I wasn't Jewish because I so loved Jewish humor. Now, today, when I need a lift I go on You Tube and watch Billy Crystal's openings for the Academy Awards and some of the old Dick Cavett monologues. Recently I have discovered the talented Irish humorist, Dylan Moran.

All this is to say, I aspire to write humor. The more I write, the more I don't know about it. Unfortunately, I can't just take a class. Humor is something you either have or you don't. I can osmose from the greats but in the end, it's up to whatever ability I've been given.

My first essay, "It's My Birthday, I'll Laugh If I Want To...", is a tribute to the humor essayists I have admired over the years who laughed me through tough times. "How to search out your family tree, or then I discovered I was married to myself" is an experiment in writing about a topic I knew absolutely nothing about, but I found humor in the quest. "Talk to Yourself – It's Good for You" is about something I know all about. I do it all the time.

How to search out your family tree, or then I discovered I was married to myself

Long before computers and online facilities existed, searching out the family tree was, for many of us, a fairly simple activity. Genealogy was a social affair, a family get-together where tales were told. Family connections were passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition: “Yea, that old coot was a piece a’ work, all right. Married a distant cousin of the Vanderbilts, but they threw him out for lifting the fine sherry from the liquor cabinet at night.”

We relied on stories of our parents and grandparents, seldom questioning the information. Then the genealogy chart was born. Tracing one’s family history became more “hands on” with searching through endless paper documents, visiting homesteads, and rubbing headstones with charcoal and an old sheet. Results were compiled in charts.

My ancestors could sit down around a nice fire, sip cognac, and decide to plot out their family tree by memory. Their memories were less than perfect but it made family feel like family. My kin have a just such a simple chart produced as Georgia relatives met with Michigan relatives over that glass of cognac back in the nineteen forties. That was the beginning of a tree with broken branches, if not completely erroneous generational data.

In the last decades, genealogy has become big computer business. Folks can now spend weeks, months, even years searching online genealogical records to piece together a picture of their heritage. In these days of micro-chips and Internet, people who find it difficult to remember their own names are thrown into a world of downloads, GEDS, websites, and “tiny tofels” – a convention I have yet to figure out.

For the uninitiated, a run-through of these high-tech sites yields more information than the average chronicler needs or wants to have in a lifetime. Confusion may result and anything from a distorted to a downright false family tree is produced.

For example, in the Terms of Relationship list accompanied by the Glossary of Terms on your standard genealogy reference site, there are supposed clues to your familial relationships over time. One list defines terms of relationship used in the genealogy chart. Another list compares meanings of words “back then” as opposed to “now”. Together, they could spell trouble for the novice genealogist.

Because of past definitions of relationships, uneducated genealogists might poke into centuries of family history and come up with a scrambled mess. In early times, what we call a cousin could be a nephew, and a nephew could be a grandson. In early wills, a nephew could be either a female or male grandchild. (Give that one to the women's movement.)

Imagine the potential for erroneous allocation of bequeathed property. Prior to the 1800's, for example, a male personage could be called a "senior" or a "junior" depending on what order the men in the family had passed away. One moment a man could be a thumb-sucking junior, demanding pabulum, but if his father passed away, he suddenly became a "senior," perhaps expected to run the family business.

To further confuse the genealogist, there could be a "now" wife and a "then" wife. (This did not refer to the barbaric practice of men today throwing over their lifetime mates for much younger women.). Actually, it referred to who got the loot. Whichever wife ("then" or "now") was mentioned in the will was the lucky one. One wonders what happened if both were mentioned? Mayhem?

Then there's the "alias." If you were an illegitimate child back then, you went by your father's and your mother's name, i.e. Jenny Smith alias Jones. Even if you were legitimately born, you may have to join your father's name to your step-father's name,

In the Glossary of Terms, we have other interesting definitions. When plotting one's history, it must be remembered that an "ascendant" comes before you, while a "descendant" comes after you. Sounds easy? It gets harder. An ancestor is a direct-line relative. A collateral is someone with the same stock but a different line (perhaps the folks you don't invite to the family reunion?). An ancestor can be b = born or d = dead. He can have a given name, first name, surname or no name.

More on the women. If a descendent is a she, she can become an "UX" which stands for wife, which is a potential put-down. Who wants to be called an "UX?" Widows became "relicts" or "relicks." Another questionable term.

A woman who gave birth out of wedlock, a woman abandoned, or a woman who left her husband was called a "grass widow." According to Anatoly Liberman, etymologist, such a

woman was “said to be ‘out at grass’; and when her behavior was such that her next-door neighbors could no longer bear it, a besom, mop, or broom was put outside the front door, and reared against the house wall.”

I myself diligently applied many of these terms in the search for my own roots. Unfortunately, due to my inability to intelligently use the many terms and definitions, or to sort them out, I had two uncles married to each other. Three cousins turned out to be nephews and a niece really should have been a cousin. I had ‘then” wives where “now” wives should have been. And vice versa.

In it all, several beloved family members became bigamists or illegitimate. Not that we did not have our scoundrels in our family tree. I could have followed my father’s lead and left out all unwed mothers and illegitimate children but that would have been cheating. The point was, it became difficult to tell who was in sin and who wasn’t.

Most appalling of all, I had rendered Phillippe, the patriarch of them all (né 1732) an illegitimate child whose father had died and left him a senior with his stepfather’s name. As a result, an upstanding citizen became disreputable. In other cases, I had thrown whole generations into absolute scandal.

Talk to Yourself – It's Good for You!

I talk to myself. All the time. Every day. I simply cannot think silently. I have tried to stop by following the advice in stop talking to yourself articles. No dice.

I read an article recently called “How to Stop Talking to Yourself” on WikiHow.com. The first question posed was, “Is that you speaking or is it some other voice?”

“No, you idiot, it's my crazy Aunt Harriet, back from the dead!”

The second question was, “Do you annoy your fellow human beings?”

“Well, of course. But what has that got to do with me talking to myself?”

Truth is, I have had comments about my chattering on and on in my own voice. A lady I worked with once said, “I keep thinking you are talking to me. It's distracting.” Another told me at my retirement party she looked forward to not ever again hearing the low hum from the adjoining office.

But now let's get serious. There are benefits to talking to yourself. I want you self-talkers out there to be aware of the following perks, put forth by the “experts.” You can't go wrong with the “experts” you know. (I may have taken some license with a few of these.)

Ten Perks of Self-Talk

1. You can get the loving attention you may not get from busy and distracted loved ones. Looking in the mirror, you can say out loud as affirmation, “Honey, you look so wonderful today. So bright. So beautiful.”
2. You can connect with a higher intelligence – to yourself and to your dog, you can say, “Let's leave these morons behind, and create our own space travel.”
3. You can debate out loud and you will always win.

You One: “Well, I think Britney Spears is highly overrated.”

You Two: “On the contrary, I believe you need to look at her as a product of current cultural trends.”

You One: “Hogwash.”

You One and You Two: “I win.”

4. You can find lost things faster by repeating the lost item out loud. (Research has proven this.)

“Key, keys, keys.” “Diaphragm, Diaphragm. Diaphragm.”

5. You may find speaking out loud will help your memory in other vital situations.

“What’s my name? Where do I live? Where have I left my child? (Who knows?)”

6. You can discuss your stress, thus alleviating it.

“Now let’s calm down, darlin’. No need to attack your neighbor just

because his dog poops on your sidewalk. Think loving thoughts. Bless your neighbor.

(Put down that ax, right now, I tell you!)

7. You can count your blessings. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

8. If you’re single and don’t want to be, you can visualize and speak a solution out loud.

“Today, I will imagine myself on a tropical island holding a Piña Colada, staring at the waves, and there appears a rich plantation owner saying he can’t live without me at his side. And he must have me redecorate his million-dollar hideaway on the beach.”

After much thought out loud: “No, better yet, I imagine myself all alone in a million-dollar beach house, warding off unfaithful plantation owners with a club. (The Pina Colada stays.)”

9. You can prioritize aloud, stay on track, and get organized.

Let's see. Today, I take a shower, get dressed, walk the dog, go to the market, write a blog post.

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(Repetition is essential if you're over 50.)

10. You can promise yourself anything. Speaking aloud affirms your dreams.

"No, no, not Arpege. I deserve more. I will win the lottery. All I need is \$500,000 for the condo in Florida, travel money for Spain or Montevideo, 15 pairs of cute shoes, and a lifetime income so I never, ever, have to sit in a cubicle again.

Dear Reader:

I appreciate your interest in my mini-book on humor. And thank you for signing up for future updates on the upcoming books. New essays and blog posts will also be available on my website in the weeks and months to come at www.writethatthang.com

Thank you.

Descriptions of Upcoming Books:

Memories A La Carte: 75 Years of Living and Survival - Available November 2017

Memories of a child growing up, a teeny bopper, an adult seeking love, a woman educated, seeking jobs, marrying, divorcing, living as a single mother and a step mother (remember Cinderella?), seeking her dream and finally finding a place for herself.

A Wedding in Spain: A Mother's Journey -Available April 2018

Who wouldn't be nervous to attend her first daughter's wedding when all the cards are stacked against her? A second daughter keeps her "at arm's length." An ex-husband will be along as will his two daughters who left her home in a bit of a huff. She needs a makeover of mind, soul and wardrobe, and she will travel broad alone for the first time in forty years. The groom's family speaks not a word of English, and she's afraid of flying. Nevertheless, surprises await her in sunny Andalusia.

Aging - What is That? Taking on the Boomers, Gen X's, Gen Y's, and Millennials - Available September 2018

Exploration of what it's like to be older than dirt. Comparisons to lifestyles and cultures of Boomers, Gen X's, Gen Y's, and Millennials: Mental and physical health, relationships, wishes and dreams, and planning one's end.