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A Model of Communication And Survival

By Valerie Parks Brown

LAUGHTER

When one speaks of *laughter*, one must be sure that its meaning is clear; for it is usually thought of or defined as an explosive sound, triggered by something highly amusing or comical. Although this is true in most instances, laughter can be indicative of many emotions having nothing at all to do with merriment.

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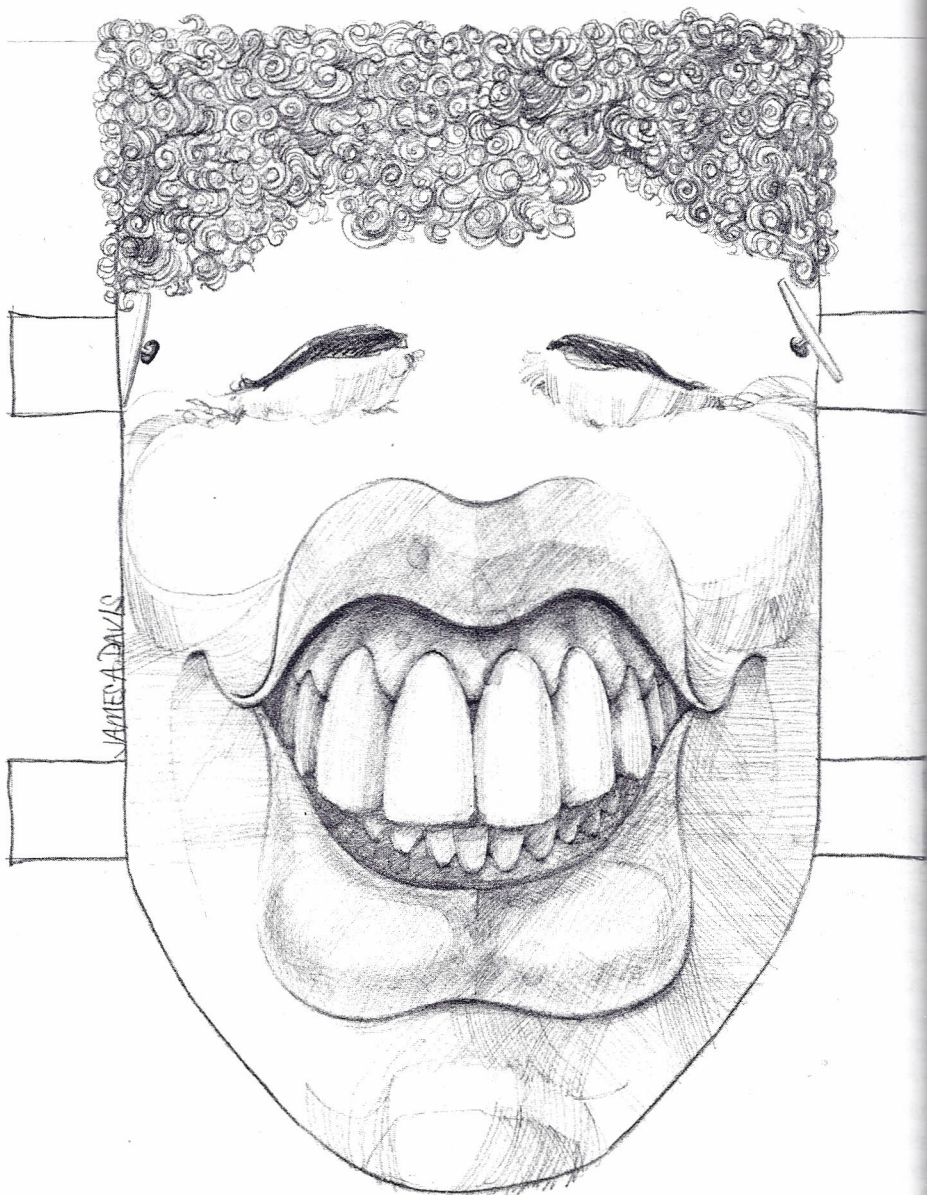
More than any other group, Black people in America have managed to manipulate laughter to communicate profound emotion and to survive. Laughter, with its boundless limits of meaning, can contain malice, hatred, scorn, derision, fear, satire. Which one of these it represents—at any given time—depends upon the situation to which the individual is reacting.

As Black people in America struggled to survive the agony of slavery—in the fields on the plantations in the South, in the slave cabins, in the “big house”—they learned to conceal their true feelings and their keen intelligence with the shield of broad grins, tinkling giggles, and boisterous laughter, all meant to lull “massa” into believing that they were contented and happy with their lot. They knew that they would be treated well as long as they played the role of plantation “jesters”—making fools of themselves in order to keep their hopes alive—that some day all this would end and their kith and kin would be together again.

Slavery, however, was not the only experience through which Black Americans developed their expertise with laughter; it was the first and the strongest of influences.

I recall stories recounted by my paternal grandmother on her use of God-inspired laughter when, as a slave, she was being beaten by her master. The harder he struck her, the more she laughed, infuriating and shaming him at the same time. At the height of the brutal lashing, he suddenly stopped, looked at her strangely, his expression a mixture of disbelief, fear, and awe, then walked away with her derisive laughter ringing in his ears. I used to ask grandmother to tell me this story over and over again; it filled my childish heart with a fierce hatred of and scorn for the white man and with inexpressible admiration, pride and love for this amazing woman who refused to cry.

Black people's involvement in wars, where somehow Black soldiers always



fighting was fiercest and the casualties the highest, contributed to their laughter of the ironic essence. With emancipation, Blacks were forced to laugh to conceal their desperation at having no place to go, having no source of income, of being FREE without real FREEDOM.

No one knows better than Black people the heart-breaking laughter of frustration. Add to their involvement in wars, the struggles after emancipation, the more recent social upheaval, boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins (where they were often spat upon, kicked, shot and jailed), family situations and political ideologies, and one can readily see that the laughter of these situations was laced with aggression, tension, hatred, fear, and other undesirable emotions which human beings can inspire in one another. Thinly veiled, symbolic communication, with equally unhumorous significance were, and still are, very common in the laughter of Black people where racial matters are concerned.

The frequency of disguised laughter in Blacks goes back to the fundamental nature of slavery, where communication between slaves was scrutinized both carefully and constantly—after all, there were attempts by desperate and lonely slaves to find freedom and family. It is therefore logical for the *descendants of slaves today* to find in laughter an outlet for their protests and reactions to serious subjects.

Born of necessity and under the stimulus of adversity, Blacks' laughter has had a marvelous survival value. Due to changes over the years, the laughter of Black people (who defied the Southern whites with veiled barbs, whose cynicism and stark fear of whites were disguised in peals of "darky-happy" sounds, and whose frustration and desperation found welcome release in jokes about the ridiculousness of Jim Crow or the variegated nuances of racial prejudice) has gone through *qualitative* changes, indicative of and responsive to social climate. Some of the laughter is, and has always been, of the amused variety—a reaction to jokes, especially those in which Blacks could laugh at the absurdity of certain aspects of race relations. Those stories in which the white man, always the adversary, appears ludicrous or suffers the inferior mental status to which Blacks are usually relegated, really entertain Black people and arouse a type of derisive laughter which communicates their awareness of their own intelligence and of the white man's stupidity, which, when recognized, explains *why Blacks have survived*. Even these laughter-provoking jokes often con-

tain a certain element of the ever-present racial conflict which, after the guffaws have died down, make the Black person say: "That's the *white* man for you all right!!! The ----s!!!" Were not some of the laughter of Blacks the kind which gives them a feeling of superiority, they could not survive in the white world's "boorishness" and retain their mental equilibrium.

If one wonders about the ability of Blacks to laugh, even in the face of great adversity, one must become aware also of their flexible and spiritual nature, their concept of group or family identity which truly sets them apart from other races. Their religious fervor, the special resonance and tones of their voice, the relaxed fluidity of their graceful gait, the uniqueness of their nutritional specialties and preferences—all seem to contribute to the vigor of their communication and to the certainty of their survival.

It is not easy at all to *explain* laughter. As I dwell more and more on the meaning and power of laughter as a means of communication and survival of Blacks, I find myself becoming increasingly more intrigued by the word *laughter* and by its *philosophical definition*. Many years ago, I read *Critique of Judgment*, by Immanuel Kant, in which he gave a very interesting discussion and definition of laughter:

"In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. This transformation, which is certainly not enjoyable to the understanding, yet indirectly gives it very active enjoyment for a moment. Therefore, its cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body and the reflex effect of this upon the mind; not, indeed, through the representation being objectively an object of gratification, as in the case of a man who gets the news of a great commercial success (for how could a delusive expectation gratify?), but simply through it as a mere play of representations bringing about an equilibrium of the vital powers in the body."

Kant quoted Voltaire as having said that heaven had given us two things to counter-balance the many miseries of life—*hope* and *sleep*. He stated that Voltaire "could have added *laughter*, if the means of exciting it in reasonable men were only as easily attainable and the requisite wit or originality of humor were not so rare, as the talent is common of imagining things which *break one's head*, as mystic dream-

ers do, or which *break one's neck*, as your genius does, or which *break one's heart*, as sentimental writers (and even moralists of the same kidney) do."

One joke of the type that made Blacks laugh with relish, because they gained temporary advantage over "the enemy" is the one below which represents the reversal of master-slave roles. The supposedly "dumb darky" makes a fool of the "smart white master!"

Pompey, how do I look?

O, massa, mighty.

What do you mean "mighty," Pompey?

Why, massa, you look noble.

What do you mean by "noble"?

Why, sar, you just look like one lion.

Why, Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?

I see one down in yonder field the other day, massa.

Pompey, you foolish fellow, that was a jackass.

Was it, massa? Well, you look just like him.

Zora Neal Hurston, in *Mules and Men*, brings to the lips of today's young Blacks and yesterday's Negroes the same quiet, soft, almost inaudible, but completely understanding and appreciative, heart-warming *laughter* which has been, and always will be, a *Model of Black Communication and Survival*:

"Under-privileged people are shy, reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see, we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, 'Get out of here'. We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. The theory behind our tactics:

The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing, but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my mind and sing my song." □