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ORIGINAL PAPER

Humor as Wisdom for Reframing Life

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Abstract Human beings inevitably experience anxiety but attempt to avoid facing it through various forms of self-deception. This avoidance can lead to pathological symptoms. Young and middle-aged adults may be especially susceptible to suffering from anxiety because they are often single-mindedly pursuing means of achieving security. For these and others who fail to embrace life with warm enthusiasm, humor can serve to alleviate stress. This article views humor as a characteristic disposition of older adults—their humor signifying a sense of integrity and wisdom that often accompanies the aging process. Humor binds together feelings of despair and joy and contributes to a faithful reframing of faith and life. This article proposes that individuals acquire humor by perceiving the world as if on a journey to an exotic new place, seeing with new eyes even the most mundane of everyday objects and events. This capacity to perceive beauty in the ordinary world reflects a wisdom of older adults potentially available even to the young.

Keywords Humor · Donald Capps · Reframing · Life as journey

Introduction: *Pensées* for the Generation Pursuing Stability

A fundamental limitation consigns human beings to a state of ontological anxiety. Individuals who find themselves embodied in a specific time and place cannot fully control the circumstances of their lives. An inevitable accumulation of experiences outside of one's own complete control leads to anxiety. In this sense, anxiety could be thought of as an essential disposition of being human. Still, individuals press on in their attempts to avoid facing their anxiety. Rather than stopping to ponder their obsession with stability, they regard this pursuit as a central purpose of life and endeavor to foster civilizations that offer

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the appearance of conferring greater stability. People—and civilizations—strive to make life safer and easier. But the promise of happiness and security is vain and fleeting. This is evident today in a widespread sense that even as civilization has "progressed," anxiety abounds.[1] Despite apparent personal and societal achievements, individuals continue to experience deep despair. Pursuit of whatever might afford us a more certain sense of stability remains elusive.

The psychological search for security mirrors human instincts for survival. Though entrenched and intense, these twin desires and pursuits are, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, largely unconscious. In this sense, it is possible to say that civilization, embraced by individuals to protect their survival, paradoxically promotes further existential anxiety and contributes to the formation of trauma (Freud 1961, pp. 77–82). However, necessary, civilization, Freud asserted, is nonetheless inevitably pathological. This makes it nearly impossible for even "civilized" persons to extend great hospitality to others (Derrida 2004, pp. 18–19).

I wish to suggest here that the most unstable and anxious periods in the human life cycle occur when such survival strategies are most vigorously pursued. Let me explain. The obsessive pursuit of stability in the attempt to remove existential anxiety aligns with other preconscious defense mechanisms such as sublimation, justification, projection, denial, and displacement (Freud 2003c). Defense mechanisms are means by which individuals attempt to maintain psychological and emotional homeostasis in the struggle for life (Freud 2003a). Defense mechanisms are effected by the ego and are therefore potentially, though not usually discernibly, conscious. This is particularly the case for young adults and middle-aged persons who remain largely unaware of the pathological levels of anxiety underlying their active pursuits of stability and survival (Freud 2003b).

Though productive adults may not consciously perceive just how much their striving for security serves to defend against a deeper anxiety, this often unconscious anxiety is frequently expressed through somatic symptoms (Freud 2003e). Anxious individuals cannot seem to put their finger on the source of their disease. Unlike phobias—fears that have a conscious specific target—the target of one's anxiety remains unclear (Freud 2003d). As young and middle-aged adults work hard to create for themselves and others a stable or "civilized" life, this season becomes for them, for this reason, a period of increased anxiety.

But what might be some means, then, by which to assist young and middle-aged adults in confronting and coping with their anxieties? Capps (2016), in his book *Humor Us: An Appeal for the Gospel of Relaxation*, claims that humor is among the most helpful of instruments in alleviating anxiety and reducing stress (p. 13). Drawing on the research of numerous scholars, Capps (2005, pp. 103–112) further insists that a deep correlation exists between religion and humor; however, much these realms are ordinarily seen as estranged bedfellows. For example, along with Earl F. Palmer, who claimed that Jesus was a great humorist, Capps points to the humor, wit, and satire in Jesus' figures of speech. Capps asserts that Jesus' original hearers experienced his humor as expressions of truth, revealing himself as "the way, the truth, and the life" to many who were hurting specifically by means of life-giving humor (Capps 2016, pp. 85–86). I agree. Though it may function somewhat along the lines of a placebo, I suggest that the use of humor nonetheless serves as a potent remedy and source of relief for those confronting feelings of deep anxiety. By extension, I would like to propose that humor also at times demonstrates wisdom, an

[1] https://data.oecd.org/healthstat/suicide-rates.htm.

attribute often perceived as intrinsic to the process of aging and to the character of older adults. The wisdom of older adults, that is to say, is often expressed through humor.

Humor as Integral Wisdom

In Erikson's (1994) life cycle theory, he asserts that an emerging sense of integrity may counter tendencies toward despair in later life (see also Capps 2002, pp. 29–30). He presents six broad signs or expressions of wisdom that often manifest in older adults, including: (1) a keen wit, accumulated knowledge, and maturing judgment; (2) the maintaining and conveying of the integrity of experience; (3) vigor of mind combined with responsible renunciation of self; (4) making provision for the coming generation while serving as a living example of one who experiences the essential integrity of one's heritage and past; (5) a sense of transcending petty disgusts or despair in one's infirmity or helplessness; and (6) possessing a few things that confirm one's contribution to the goodness of life (Erikson 1964, pp. 133–134). Given these traits of wisdom among older adults, Erikson asserts that expressions of humor in particular factor in them as key (Erikson 1997, pp. 118–119).

In his book *Laughter Ever After: Ministry of Good Humor*, Capps (2008) also emphasizes the importance of humor among older adults in the face of illness, hopelessness, and death (pp. 88–110). According to James (1999), experiences of aging and dying are deeply personal and therefore inevitably private affairs. This increases the force of their terror, for these experienced cannot be shared with others (p. 297). But humor, Capps (2008) argues, makes these experiences of terror and despair more tolerable, if not fully shareable, and enhances possibilities for one's gaining wisdom and integrity in confronting them (p. 100). Capps likewise maintains that straight talk about historical and other facts is a characteristic of older adults that often comes across as humorous; "telling it like it is" leads to the alleviation of stress, a characteristic Capps sees in the humor of the aging (pp. 107–110). In this way, he considered the developmental periods of youth and midlife as a time of anxiety, a time to weep, whereas the period of older adulthood became for him a time to laugh (Eccles. 3:4). He writes: "If I had stumbled upon a humorous epitaph on one of the gravestones, this would have reinforced my belief that the day will come when God will wipe every tear from our eyes (Rev. 21:3)—except, of course, our tears of laughter" (Capps 2008, p. 110).

Older adulthood is often thought of as the darkest and most unstable time of life. I see it, however, as the "post-anxiety" stage because, ironically, it is precisely the period when the experience of death is faced most realistically and directly, as simply a matter of fact. Of course, the thought of death continues to produce anxiety and fearfulness, for, as James noted, the experience of one's own death cannot be fully shared with another. But paradoxically, confronting the reality of death can also open moments of Καιρός that free a person from narcissistic strivings for survival (Rilke 2006, pp. 39–40). In this regard, I like to think of the season of older adulthood as the most stable period of life, in part because older adults know how to integrate tensions between opposing psychosocial forces.

The Bible encourages us to "be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:16–18). On the other hand, it also instructs us to "grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom" (James 4:9). These seemingly disparate injunctions paradoxically express a similar idea; both imply that neither laughing nor weeping ends in

themselves. Laughing and weeping, of course, are natural human emotions in response to various internal and external phenomena. The biblical writers, however, are suggesting that whole spectrum of human emotion is linked to one's faith in Jesus Christ. This, I think, is not intended to annihilate our embodied humanity but actually rather to preserve it. For while is true that emotions wax and wane according to life's permutations, the biblical writers urge the faithful to stand strong as an independent persons (*Der Einzelne*) before God (*Coram Deo*). This means both lamenting one's grief and embracing one's bliss in one's life in Jesus Christ. Life circumstances of sorrow or joy alone do not dictate our faithfulness. This is the unification of opposites that the Bible presses upon the faithful.

But how does this integration happen? To be sure, it happens through one's faith in God (Heb. 11). But I also think it happens as a result of aging. In Korea, the age of sixty is known as "Yi-Soon," which literally means "the ear is softened." At sixty, people have already experienced a great deal in life, and this multitude of experiences can make it easier to listen to all kinds of stories from all manner of persons. This openness stems not from indifference or identity diffusion but from a union of opposites, which makes being able to listen to even conflicting thoughts and ideas seem entirely natural. This capacity to hold in tension opposing ideas and emotional experiences is what I believe constitutes wisdom in older adulthood. The integration of laughing and weeping among older adults is a mystery of enlightenment drawing from connection to a transcendent God. This is why a struggle to achieve success or an attempt to escape from reality (by, for example, entertaining thoughts such as "Once I become healthy…" or "Once I get out of this situation…") seldom characterizes this stage of life. Older adults know that cold reality and anxiety are unavoidable. Consequently, they often come to feel more at home in the world and can show greater hospitality to others. They embrace this world and the present moment as the "home" in which they live.

Home ideally consists in the following three key elements: *safety*, *stability* (or *resilience*), and *significance* (Lee 2015a, pp. 252–55). These three elements constitute a world worth living in, for everyone regardless of age, sex, or status would be accepted in such a world. This is a realm where everything is *valuable* wherever one goes or whatever one does (Capps 2013, p. 120). The Christian expression for this world is the *kingdom of God*. Older adults seem to have an intrinsic sense of how to build up this kingdom, particularly in their capacity to show hospitality to others. Thus, the kingdom of God is not simply *out there* somewhere but is, rather, seen and lived *right here*. Living "the kingdom there" amid "the world here" involves garnering the courage to face suffocating actualities full of agony. As I have written elsewhere:

> This worldview is concerned with how we may experience "at-homeness" in the *unheimlich* world and make peace with the fact that it is our only habitation. For instance, to think of the world in terms of the metaphor *Heim* is quite meaningful to me as an alien in America because in this worldview I find hope, the assurance that my experiences of dealing with "homesickness" due to "alienation" or "foreignness" can be alleviated, precisely because I will feel "at home" by virtue of an aesthetic *Weltanschauung*. Therefore, in feeling "at-homeness," we experience no more discrimination and victimization. (Lee 2004, p. 289)

Humor as Reframing

Donald E. Capps often helped me to overcome the harsh reality of numerous difficulties. Our relationship as his doctoral student at Princeton Theological Seminary proved to be something of an inviting home to me, a place to thaw any emotional chill throughout my time of study. He taught me how to use humor amid the disappointments and worries of life and enlightened me as well on the place of humor in both theology and psychology. In particular, he taught me to reinterpret and reframe seemingly harsh and entrenched situations through humor. Once, when I was going through a particularly hard and worrisome time, Capps offered some perspective from the work of Julie K. Norem. He writes:

> Instead of viewing worry and anxiety as the same thing (despite what the dictionary says), we should instead think of worry as the opponent of anxiety, just as humor is. The difference is that the worrier does this by anticipating all the things that could possibly go wrong, while the humorist does this by minimizing the importance or significance of what may in fact go wrong (Capps 2008, p. 13).

Thus, instead of telling me to relax, he encouraged me, rather, to be even more concerned (Capps 2016, pp. 26–30). He made me laugh with his unique wit. Such laughter lightened my burden at times of great emotional intensity. Capps's humor gave me strength specifically when I was working on my doctoral dissertation, which consisted of five chapters. Whenever I finished a chapter, Capps and I celebrated by sharing a meal at a nice restaurant in Princeton. Because of how much we enjoyed these times together, he joked that it would be nice if my dissertation consisted of ten chapters!

Or another memory: One day when I was checking my mailbox in the seminary's mailroom and appearing physically distraught about my dissertation progress, I ran into Capps. He gently touched my shoulder and told me that *everyone* who comes into the mailroom experiences such darkness. Why? Because, he pointed out, all who entered the mailroom, located in the seminary's administration building directly beneath the office of the president, were channeling the deep underpinnings of the president's unconscious. Who but Capps could think like this? As I left the mailroom and walked toward the library, I had a good laugh, the dark cloud of my anxiety having lifted.

As the last student to write a doctoral dissertation under Capps's guidance prior to his retirement, our humorous conversations reminded me of the "talking cure" experienced by Yonam Chiwon Park, a significant historical figure in the literature of the ancient Korean Joseon Dynasty, through his conversation with an old man named Min-Ong. Park, who was an aristocrat, suffered from depression at the age of 17. In his affliction, he met the elderly Min, a man of low social standing.

> "What are you coming down with?" Min asked him. "Do you have a headache?"
>
> "No, I do not," Park replied.
>
> "Do you have a stomachache then?"
>
> "No, I do not."
>
> "Then you should be fine," Min said.
>
> "I have an illness which prevents me from eating well and sleeping at night," Park told him.

On hearing this, the elderly man straightened up and praised Park, saying, “I am afraid that you come from an impoverished background. Fortunately, the fact that you dislike eating will eventually help you achieve wealth (for you will not have to buy much food). If you have difficulties in sleeping, you will live twice the life of others, since you can utilize the night hours also. As things stand, you will have a great fortune and double your lifespan. That means you already possess two blessings—wealth and longevity—out of the Five Blessings” (Kho 2011, pp. 93–95).

The “talking cure” was how Freud’s patient, Anna O., described the process of psychoanalytic treatment (Kim 2010, pp. 265–270). Of course, not every client in psychotherapy experiences this kind of “cure.” But often, talking with a skilled and caring counselor helps the suffering person draw closer to the heart of the problem, arousing an emotional response and catharsis (*Abreaktion*). Anna O called this process “chimney sweeping.” “Once the cause [of the emotional distress] ceases, so also do the symptoms (*cessante causa cessat effectus*)” (Breuer and Freud 2003, p. 15).

In the case of Park, not only did he experience the cessation of his symptoms through Min’s use of humor; he also came to understand and, in his later teachings, to assert that one can learn much from others regardless of their social rank. The elderly Min, after all, was a man of low social status. In the aftermath of their encounter, Park went on to show respect for the Qing Dynasty, which the people of Park’s Joseon Dynasty previously disdained, and to lead a political party, Bukhakpa, which insisted on learning from the Qing Dynasty. Park came to reject his own high social standing in order to meet and interact with people from divergent social classes.

As in the conversation between Min and Park, Capps’s humor and wisdom made a big difference in my life. Put differently, his artistic *weltanschauung* illumined my own aesthetic *weltanschauung*. His humor taught me what his frequent references to *reframing* really entailed:

> Jokes portray human resourcefulness. This, in my view, is why these jokes have relevance to human problem solving, as they make a case for using our imaginations—a combination of thought and emotion—in order to come up with creative alternatives that otherwise might not occur to us when we are struggling with a difficulty or problem. And don’t forget: When Freud needed a good reframing, he turned to jokes. (Capps 2005, p. 166)

Humor, for Capps, prevents us from insisting that the world must function in tidy or systematic ways; instead, by means of reframing, it lets us see the world from a completely different angle, as would an artist.

At one point, for instance, Capps reframed the meaning of individualism by challenging authors such as Bellah et al. (1985) and Lasch (1991), who thought of individualism as an expression of egoism or narcissism. Capps instead argues to the contrary that egoism or narcissism results from the *diminishing* influence of individualism in American institutional life (Capps 1992, pp. 97–109). To him, individualism constitutes individuality and an attempt to preserve the unique gifts and energies of individuals (Lee 2009, pp. 493–94).

I consider such artistic reframings to be expressions of wisdom. Wisdom as enlightenment, furthermore, leads to integrity and the capacity to discover the noble and grand in moments of everyday life. This kind of integrity reframes the human desire for “more” within us and assists in our facing this desire with greater wisdom and contentment. McCullough (2004, pp. 22–23), in *The Consolations of Imperfection*, claims that self-contentment can be differentiated from satisfaction. While satisfaction is a momentary pleasure that derives from achieving something one has longed to accomplish, self-

contentment, by contrast, is a psychological serenity or tranquility that occurs even if what was wanted has not been achieved. This is the type of psychological tranquility and stability that the Apostle Paul demanded from his spiritual son Timothy: “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (1Timothy 6:6–8). How does one find this integrity or self-contentment in the face of seemingly insatiable desire? Freud suggested that it comes through humor. As Capps (2005, p. 9) observes, “Humor, for Freud, has much to do with temperament and mood, so we often use the phrase ‘good humor’ to refer to persons who remain cheerful or upbeat even when things are going against them or when they have good reason to be down in the dumps.” The wisdom and integrity fashioned by humor lead us question much in life we would otherwise take for granted. Notice, for example, the humor in Socrates’ catechetical pedagogy (Park 2013, p. 163):

> A teacher, who saw a student dashing somewhere, questioned him: “Why are you in such a hurry?”
>
> “Because I am late for class,” the student replied.
>
> “You’re late for class? What are you going to do once you get there?”
>
> “I’ll have to study!”
>
> “For what?” asked the teacher.
>
> “To get a great job.”
>
> “For what?”
>
> “To succeed in life.”
>
> “Then, what?” queried the teacher.
>
> “I will be able to have a great family.”
>
> “For what?”
>
> “To live a great life.”
>
> “And then?”
>
> “I’ll be happy.”
>
> “For what?”
>
> “To live a happy life before I die.”
>
> “Oh,” said the teacher, “so you mean you’re running to prepare to die?”

A Proposal for How to Be Humorous

Wiseman (2003, pp. 50–52), a psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire, placed newspaper ads to recruit two groups of research subjects, one consisting of those who considered themselves happy and another of persons who thought of themselves as unhappy. Approximately 400 people from diverse backgrounds applied. Wiseman conducted an experiment in which he gave them a newspaper and asked them to count the

number of pictures in it. After only a few seconds, the happy group replied that there were 43 pictures. The unhappy group, on the other hand, took 2 min on average to answer. What accounted for this difference in response time? On the second and third pages of the newspaper was a message in large type that read "Stop counting—There are 43 photographs in this newspaper." While subjects in the happy group tended to quickly detect the message, the unhappy subjects tended to focus intently instead only on the pictures. Happy people, Wiseman concluded, allow themselves to be distracted while problem solving. The ability to be distracted appears here, more than does a goal- or achievement-orientation, to enhance enjoyment in life. The happy subjects allowed themselves to be distracted, to *observe*, to look around them and see beyond the immediate goal.

Such an approach to life is, to me, like being on a trip and open to noticing the unexpected. As I wrote elsewhere concerning Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan:

> Without this kind of [openness of] heart as travelers, we cannot recognize those who are half-dead and in crisis (Lk. 10:25–37). We cannot even see Christ standing right before us. Jesus thus encourages the lawyer to live a less driven life or, more accurately, without greedy desire, in order to be able to see what he truly needs to find. Self-contentment is thus a life lived like a traveler who is taking a walk. While on a stroll, if we pay attention to what is around us we may become blessed by our surroundings. Self-contentment allows us to feel and understand the true meaning of whatever comes our way on the journey (Lee 2015b, p. 722).

Is living this way, as if on a journey and open to discovering whatever we may find along the way, truly possible in actual practice? Some would call this a romanticized vision. But as Friedrich Novalis (in Lee 2009) insists, it is a necessary romanticization: "To romanticize the world is to make us aware of the magic, mystery, and wonder of the world; it is to educate the senses to see the ordinary as extraordinary, the familiar as strange, the mundane as sacred, the finite as infinite" (p. 123). Those living as if on a trip walk slowly take their time, scan the horizon, take a deep breath, and observe their surroundings closely. They discover what they couldn't have seen before and realize its significance. Yes, this may be a romanticized notion. But yes, it is nonetheless important. A poem entitled "One Little Potted Chrysanthemum," by Korean poet Jeong (1999, p. 75), captures this sense:

> A truck is carrying a little chrysanthemum in a pot.
>
> No.
>
> It is escorting it.
>
> A truck is escorting a little chrysanthemum in a pot.
>
> The truck is pretty.
>
> So is the driver.

Here, a shabby old truck is reframed as beautiful because it "escorts," not merely carries, a potted chrysanthemum. The plant, though small and seemingly insignificant, bestows great beauty on its surroundings. It lends its beauty to the battered truck and its unattractive driver. In the poet's eyes, a world is born where nothing is ugly.

> Incisive observers use every kind of sensory information. A great insight is only given to those who have the capability to discern the "sublimity of the mundane,"

> that is, to see the exceedingly startling, yet significant, beauty inherent in all objects. (Root-Berstein 2007, pp. 69–70)

I consider the developmental stage of older adulthood to be the period of life when it becomes possible for one's eyes at last to *see*, to *observe*, to *notice* the beauty all around. For older adults, the visible present merges with faint memories of a stylized past, weaving together many stories and experiences of their lives. It becomes possible for them to discern sublimity in the mundane, to live as if a traveler. The Korean poet Hong (2012), who lived to the age of 95, spoke of the aesthetics of pain in her last anthology: "Pain, thanks to you I survived until now!" (p. 157). Her humor reveals itself in a reframing and integration of the purpose of pain. She finds a kind of profound beauty in pain, seeing not just a particular form of distress in the here and now but rather an amalgamation of many important stories of her life that derived from seasons of distress. She laughs at, and with, her pain. Humor like hers emerges from the capacity to be distracted, to live as if on a journey, to romanticize what one observes all around. Or, as Capps (2016) puts it, "Humor is an ally of truth" (p. 86). Even as *vincit omnia veritas* ("truth conquers all things"), humor empowers us to live in this world as our home (*heim*), for humor is wisdom. I would therefore assert that even young persons can possess the wisdom of an older adult if they travel through life keenly observing the beauty all around.

Born on January 30, 1939, in Omaha, Nebraska, Donald Capps grew up in the Swedish branch of the American Lutheran Church. His mother was Swedish, a daughter of Swedish immigrants. His father was of English, Welsh, French, and Irish background and had a long heritage in the American Universalist Church, which teaches that all persons are destined for heaven. In this regard, one of Capps's most vivid childhood memories was that of his paternal grandfather consoling the young Donald around his concerns about going to hell. His grandfather assured the boy that everyone goes to the "Happy Hunting Ground," a Native American description of paradise (Lee 2009, p. 492). While the words of Capps's grandfather may be theologically controversial, they managed to deflate through humor the boy Donald's anxieties. They led him to view his life, despite its worries, as a beautiful journey to an indescribably happy destination. Humor helped Capps transform even the most *unheimlich* (un-home-like) of conditions of this world into a warm and life-giving *heimlich* (home-like) dwelling. So too will humor allow us to enjoy the blessings of creativity at home, with Capps, in our present and future "Happy Hunting Ground." It is more than fitting that Capps's (2016) last book, published after his death, is entitled *Humor Us*.

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