

On Being Seriously Funny: What We Can Learn About Humor From Ann Ulanov

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I. INTRODUCTION

The paeans we sing about Ann Ulanov on the occasion of her retirement after forty-seven years of teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York are both plentiful and deserving. Those of us whose lives have been altered for the better, in big and small ways, by her writing, teaching, lecturing, and mentoring can easily testify to her extraordinary gift of being able to lucidly convey how the realities of the human psyche and the inner workings of the Divine Spirit interface with one another. Over the course of retirement celebration, portrait unveiling, and honorary festschrift, we laud her for the myriad contributions she has made on this front to the psychotherapeutic, religious, and academic communities of which she has been a part throughout her distinguished career. In the midst of such praise, we also readily find ourselves extolling her virtues of deep wisdom, sharp intellect, penetrative insight, and close attentiveness to even the smallest of details, which demonstrate her passionate love affair with life and soulful engagement with the wider world around her. As psychoanalyst, scholar, and teacher, she has long served, and continues to serve, as a guiding light for many who look to her in the hopes of finding and cultivating an inner light that is all their own.

Anyone familiar with Ann Ulanov is also intimately aware of her keen and consistent interest in advocating for the inclusion of that which gets left out, intentional or otherwise, of our psychological and spiritual awareness: emotions we do not wish to feel, idiosyncrasies we are quick to jettison, parts of our life that simply go un-lived. Inspired by her abiding summons to address the neglected and forgotten pieces of ourselves, I would like to call our attention in this article to an aspect of Ulanov, herself, I fear will go underappreciated, if not altogether ignored, during this time of jubilant tribute to her. I am speaking here of her sense of humor.¹

Ann Ulanov is a funny person. She is able to appreciate and articulate a comic perspective on life—whenever and wherever she finds it—with a decisive air of refinement and sensitivity. Though never malicious in her intent, her humor

1 Humor, on the one hand, is a visceral experience, and we tend to know what we mean when we refer either to humor itself or someone having a “sense of humor.” On the other hand, the subject of humor can be extremely complex and eludes crystallization the more we attempt to define it. For the purposes of this essay, humor will be understood as the perception or engendering of something that strikes us as funny, amusing, or mirthful and serves as an umbrella term for other related phenomena such as, but not limited to, comedy, satire, jesting, joking, ridicule, and irony.

simply flows out of her, freely and unobtrusively, through witty observation, comic insight, and contagious laughter. Rather than holding back, we usually see her stepping forward to greet the comic potential in our dreams, our psychological symptoms, and in our relationship with the Divine. Such an openness to the way in which humor operates within psyche and spirit provides a refreshing perspective for those of us who follow in her footsteps as psychotherapists, ministers, and scholars. These vocational arenas, of course, consistently place us right at the heart of human suffering. When it comes to the role and place of humor in our work, the example set forth by Ulanov is such that we are able to see that the serious and sometimes grave nature of our work need not preclude moments of mirth, laughter, and humor. In fact, humor itself may very well need to be taken more seriously as a fundamental and constitutive aspect of who we are as human persons in relation to ourselves, others, and God. And Ulanov points us in this direction, reminding us that life is funny—seriously funny.

II. PERSONAL

If we turn to Ulanov's writings, we will find, quite simply, that humor and laughter are qualities of human life that stand out as important to her. She takes notice, for instance, of the comical dimension of a patient's dream, the funny dynamic of another's personality, and humorous exchange occurring between herself and other individuals. Rather than allowing these moments, experiences, and character traits to pass unnoticed—for it seems they quite easily could be since humor and laughter are such common, everyday occurrences—Ulanov rightly gives the comic its due. She finds it, notices it, lives it, creates it, includes it, participates in it, and, fortunately, writes about it.

To illustrate, let me highlight several ways Ulanov regards humor in general. First, she is adept at either noticing what is humorous *about* others or locating the presence of humor *in* others. Speaking of intellectual luminaries, like Freud, for instance, Ulanov refers to his desire to supplant religion with his psychoanalytic theory as something he carries out “with unconscious humor,” which “fulfills his own Oedipal theory.”² Or take Marie-Louise von Franz, the famed Jungian analyst, who, like all of us at one time or another, finds her own ego self to be the butt of many a joke at the hand of her unconscious life. Ulanov tells us that von Franz “narrates with humor” her struggles of trying to understand the communi-

2 Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Religion and the Unconscious* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 44. In brief, the “Oedipal theory” is where the young son feels rivalry with the father in regards to the mother's love and attention and wishes to destroy the father in order to gain sole possession of the mother for himself. The Ulanovs see a similar dynamic at play in Freud's desire to replace religion (the father) with his theory of the psyche (the son). Though Freud was particularly fond of humor and wanted to consciously understand its role in psychological life, what is amusing to them here is that he demonstrates, unconsciously, his own Oedipal theory through his goal for his own psychoanalytic theory.

cative efforts of the endless images presented to her by the mysterious depths of her own psyche.³ And with theologian Paul Tillich, Ulanov describes him as a man who possessed a “love of life” and that his “high good humor” was indicative of his “serene largeness of being.”⁴ Moreover, Ulanov speaks of her own mother as having had an appreciation for humor. “My mother,” she writes, “in her nurse persona, was a matter-of-fact, sensate, down-to-earth person with a witty sense of humor.”⁵ And the couple from Yugoslavia, the cook and houseman whom Ulanov identifies as her “Slavic parents,” were also humor and laughter prone. Of her, Ulanov states she had a “big laugh,” and was “durable and tough,” while he “liked to sing, and joke, and work hard.”⁶ Though Ulanov does not look much further to determine with any detail the significance of humor in these lives, the initial point here is that she has an eye for it. She tends to include it as a positive observation of others instead of viewing it as an anomaly to be left aside or rendered non-important.

Ulanov is more keen on recognizing humor, as well as naming it, feeling it, and expressing it through her laughter, in her clinical work as a Jungian analyst. Again, examples abound in her writings: a couple with whom she worked where a wife’s “gentle, humorous teasing” of her husband caused him finally to laugh and see his own issues more clearly;⁷ an introverted woman who would burst into “bawdy humor” resulting from the unconscious and underdeveloped extroverted side of her personality;⁸ the suffering of her patient, Nancy, who battled cancer “with humor” by wearing her t-shirts with the imprinted words “This ain’t no wienie roast!” written in large letters on the front of them;⁹ another woman patient who “amazed” Ulanov because she continued in “cheerfulness and humor” without denying her “grief at her lost health”;¹⁰ the woman whom she was “fond of” for having “a fine sense of humor,” displayed in the woman’s periodic jaunt to Bloomingdale’s to sit at the make-up counter and “try on” new faces in search of her “true face”;¹¹ and a man who believed that he was unable to achieve enlightenment in his Zen practice like everyone else, he told Ulanov “with humor,” until a dream finally

3 Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Transforming Sexuality: The Archetypal World of Anima and Animus* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), 120.

4 Ann Ulanov, “The Anxiety of Being” in *Religion and the Spiritual in Carl Jung* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1999), 165.

5 Ann Ulanov, *Attacked By Poison Ivy: A Psychological Understanding* (York Beach, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, Inc., 2001), 67.

6 *Ibid.*, 69.

7 Ulanov and Ulanov, *Transforming Sexuality*, 95.

8 *Ibid.*, 132.

9 Ann Ulanov, *The Wizard’s Gate: Picturing Consciousness* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1994), 66.

10 Ann Ulanov, *Spiritual Aspects of Clinical Work* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 2004), 190.

11 Ann Ulanov, *The Wisdom of the Psyche* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 2000), 60–61.

“poked him” into a more reasonable approach to his meditation.¹² These encounters, and others like them, are littered all throughout the Ulanovian corpus. Again, Ulanov creates space, not only in her own mind but in the professional setting of being a psychoanalyst, for the appearance and expression of humor.

But humor and its analogs—laughter, mirth, amusement, comic, jest, joke, and so on—are not just qualities to be noticed in others. For Ulanov, they are also living experiences. To be alive necessarily implicates the body, and our smirks, grins, chuckles, and guffaws all remind us of how the physicality of laughter is often—but not always—interwoven with the cognitive, intellectual, and relational aspects of humor.¹³ “Exploding laughter,” writes Ulanov, “raises our temperature and pulse, contracting our thoracic muscles, setting our vocal chords and lower jaw aquiver, expelling breath at so many miles per hour.”¹⁴ As a bodily sensation, this kind of “exploding” laughter usually lies beyond our control. It might betray us when we are struck by the comic ourselves even though outward circumstances do not deem such amusement “appropriate.” We cannot authentically create it ourselves, and, for better or worse, we experience it as breaking into our reality when we discover something to be particularly funny. Thus, Ulanov is not shy about telling us that she “bursts out laughing” at the “specificity of the psyche” when a male patient brings into analysis the dream image of a colorful and “fantastical” bird, a pheasant, addressing him from the other side of consciousness.¹⁵ Or again, that she found herself laughing one day when a female patient sits down and tells Ulanov that she ate a whole coffee cake when feeling particularly empty and worthless. “My astonishment showed on my face,” writes Ulanov of the episode, “and I burst out laughing.”¹⁶ Her patient’s reaction was one of shock, but then they both found themselves laughing together. Ulanov further states of the occurrence that “not until now had the humor of her wolfish eating capacity struck her.”¹⁷ As a last example, there is another gentleman patient, a sergeant and veteran of combat, who would turn into a “boy” in the presence of women. Ulanov makes note of his sense of humor, as well and how, in the course of their time together, they “erupted into laughing more than once.”¹⁸ The point is that such comic exchange and its resulting laughter illustrate that they occur naturally among us and that they serve as signal of one’s spontaneity, engagement, and indeed, aliveness.

12 Ann Ulanov, *The Functioning Transcendent: A Study in Analytical Psychology* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron, 1996), 4.

13 We must keep in mind here that humor and laughter are not the same thing. We are able to experience something as humorous without a laughing response. Likewise, we may laugh, sometimes uncontrollably, out of nervousness, fear, or some other physical buffoonery that has nothing at all to do with humor. Their relationship has long been the subject of intense scrutiny and theorizing. Nonetheless, it remains true that where one shows itself, the other is not far behind.

14 Ulanov, *Spiritual Aspects of Clinical Work*, 160.

15 Ulanov, *Spiritual Aspects of Clinical Work*, 113.

16 Ulanov, *The Functioning Transcendent*, 85.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 187.

In the writing about her professional work as a psychotherapist, we witness Ulanov providing humor the air it needs to breathe.

Of course, to be alive implies that one will, sooner or later, be met with suffering of some sort. Ulanov also makes plain what laughter can do for us during such times. She exhorts that “laughter is a balm even to great soreness and suffering.”¹⁹ As a balm, humor and laughter enable us to work with our blemishes, neuroses, and afflicting sicknesses with greater ease than perhaps we would be able to otherwise. Comic experience such as this does not necessarily remove these torments, but it does, as the image of “balm” suggests, interact with our suffering, making it more malleable, smoother, softer, and lessening in its unadulterated sting, if only a little.

Ulanov movingly recounts how this was the case for her during the illness and death of her husband, Barry. “We could feel ourselves pulled into an undertow,” she writes, reflecting on this time.²⁰ The hate all around them was palpable: toward the illness, toward each other, and toward themselves because of what the illness had made them out to be. Laughter, as Ulanov puts it, proved to be a “commodity” in “short supply.”²¹ However, to her great surprise, Ulanov admits that laughter began turning up, out of all the possible places, when she would give her husband his bath. And it was only because they gave themselves permission to hate each other, “all out,” that laughter started showing its face, interestingly enough, amidst (in addition to or because of?) their hate. The bath—what had previously served as an emblem of acrimony between them—gradually evolved into an occasion for play and fun. Admitting and uttering their hate to one another allowed it to “transform into a light, humorous energy,” which then, in turn, became the “fertilizer” for, in Ulanov’s own words, “the temenos we were building for this journey to the end.”²² Not only does humor and laughter come to our aid during adverse circumstances, but, as Ulanov’s example here makes clear, they provide some protective measure against coming undone entirely by our suffering as well. What, then, does humor do for us psychologically, according to Ulanov? What about spiritually? And how does it do it?

III. PSYCHE

Humor can serve various functions, both positive and negative, in the life of the psyche. In addition to alluding to its presence in the clinical situation or locating it in the personality of another, Ulanov also makes direct statements in her writings about the psychological import of comic experience. As such, we not only have at our disposal the way she experiences humor in her own life and work, but we are also privy to what she then makes of these experiences in relation to the

19 Ulanov, “Being and Space” in *Religion and the Spiritual in Carl Jung*, 262.

20 Ulanov, *Spiritual Aspects of Clinical Work*, 427.

21 *Ibid.*, 428.

22 *Ibid.*, 427.

wider dynamics of psychological functioning. Throughout Ulanov's writings, we see her ascribe to humor certain salubrious benefits for psychological life, which assist in its expression, maturation, and vitality.

Critical to Ulanov's psychological understanding of humor is her firm belief in the capacity comic experience holds for maintaining, as well as restoring, balance to the psyche. Whether we have an upward and expansive ego and are in need of a dose of humility or we seek some counterbalance to the cumbersome thoughts and feelings familiar to a neurotic way of life, humor's particular talent is one of regulating proportionality, interjecting perspective, and fostering what Ulanov calls an "attitude of objectivity."²³ Jokes, jabs, and other forms of humorous expression have a way of expanding the myopic inclination of our own opinions, pain, suffering, or points of view. If we can laugh at something, find the humor in it, whatever that humor may be, then we will more likely be able to see above and beyond our own ego selves to include a perspective that can be described as a kind of "double vision." On this point, Ulanov writes that "we can relate to ourselves without total immersion in ourselves, standing back with a sense of humor while simultaneously living all that falls to our lot with passion, gusto, and intense involvement."²⁴ When it comes to our suffering, in particular, humor helps us "disidentify" with what ails us, meaning that we are always greater than the sum of our problems and our suffering does not define us indefinitely or in total.²⁵ Furthermore, and along similar lines, a comic attitude helps to keep us dislodged—but not necessarily disengaged (if we are mindful)—from such pain. It creates space for us, and, again, provides us with an opportunity to look at our suffering from another vantage point, allowing us to view it differently and with a certain involved detachment. "A sense of humor," Ulanov concludes, "restores a sense of proportion. It returns us to what really matters and gives us the courage to face our devils, whatever breed afflicts us."²⁶ Thus, humor is like oil in the engine of the psyche. It keeps the psyche fluid and permeable.

But Ulanov, following Freud, also sees humor as a protective mechanism utilized by the psyche against an actual or perceived threat. We might envision such a threat in a variety of ways with greater or lesser degrees of intensity. It could be the empty quotidian of daily life or experiencing a brush with physical death. It could be the prolonged suffering of ill health or being held captive to a sanctimonious environment. Whatever the circumstance, the accent here is on the preservative value of humor for psychological life. It keeps us from ultimately succumbing to these particular fates that ensnare us and enables what Ulanov calls "a triumphant invulnerability to the real."²⁷ She states: "In humor, the ego that usually must yield

23 Ann Ulanov, *The Unshuttered Heart: Opening Aliveness/Deadness in the Self* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 227.

24 Ulanov and Ulanov, *Religion and the Unconscious*, 232.

25 Ulanov, *Functioning Transcendent*, 104.

26 Ann and Barry Ulanov, *The Witch and the Clown: Two Archetypes of Human Sexuality* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron, 1987), 283.

27 *Ibid.*, 240.

to the pleasure drive, right to the limits of reality, can turn away the confinements that reality insists upon and enjoy to the full a triumphant invulnerability to the real, for which, momentarily at least, it pays no price in guilt.”²⁸ In other words, our humor and our laughter act as assertive weapons against defeat and regard for whatever consequence may result on the other side of our humor remains negligible. No guilt. No suffering. No punishment. We “burst into laughter,” Ulanov states, disregarding and/or overcoming the constraints our reality has placed upon us, if only temporarily.²⁹

We must beware, however. As much as we may commend humor for being able to defend us against external and internal foes, it can backfire on us if we are not careful. The danger is that our humor can serve as an act of deflection rather than preservation, even though both uses are defensive in nature. As Ulanov tells us, we can “turn serious questions aside with a joke” and “divert even [ourselves] with humor, simulating connection to emotion, sometimes achieving it for [others] even if not for [one]self.”³⁰ In this way, humor acts as a shield. But one that fends off and redirects attention away from what we do not wish to face, whether in relation to others or ourselves, rather than enabling us to carry on amidst a threatening circumstance. We call upon humor, for example, to overcompensate for some perceived shortcoming in us—our body or body image, personality trait, or an attitude or belief about life. Through humor, we can convince others to like us even if we do not like ourselves. Because humorous experiences tend to be so pleasurable, their deceptive quality can be easily missed in that they easily detract from relationship, circumstance, and greater self knowledge. This is the semblance of connection Ulanov mentions above. Yes, humor is one of the best means available for our being able to connect with others. At the same time, if humor is overused through constant joking, quipping, jabbing, or jesting, we just may need to pause and inquire into why we wish to overly saturate the air with the comic. Is there a fear of nothing at the bottom? An emptiness, of sorts, that would otherwise come to the fore if the air were to settle long enough to see? Ulanov suggests as much. This deflective use of humor “freezes” us, she says, and makes “an ego-identity out of an artifact.”³¹ Put differently, such use of humor becomes crystallized into a persona—a face to the world with little, if anything, underneath. As such, through humor, we are “letting the surfaces do the work of the missing interior reality.”³² We defend against things like feeling, emotion, relationship, growth and development, and, in a sense, all that accounts for an optimal life. Though funny in tone and comic in speech, the world nonetheless remains flat and one dimensional.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid. Elsewhere, Ulanov makes a similar point, contending that humor ushers in for us a “pleasing ease in the midst of tribulation.” See Ulanov, *Unshuttered Heart*, 227.

30 Ulanov and Ulanov, *Witch and the Clown*, 202.

31 Ibid., 209.

32 Ibid.

Indeed, if everything is funny, then it could be said that nothing is funny. Here, we only know how to laugh through our tears.

If, finally, our humor is not solely wrapped up in deflective posturing, then perhaps we will find ourselves more open to its capacity for increasing our own self awareness. For example, what kinds of things bring out the laughter in us? What do we find funny? Where have we laughed “accidentally” or “inappropriately”? Does the asinine underlie our comic sensibilities? Crass humor? Bawdy jokes? More intellectual or sophisticated humor? One way Ulanov frames these kinds of questions is in terms of our shadow material. When we find ourselves laughing, we are often alerted to what we keep hidden from consciousness—our potential for goofs and buffoonery, aggressive tendencies like wanting to hurl insults at another, or even other feelings we do not wish to feel. All of this gets stuffed down beneath our awareness in order that we may put our best face forward to the world. Viewed from this psychological context, when we are amused by a comment, action, or situation, we find it funny because we have distanced ourselves from such behavior, or, more pointedly, at the *possibility* of such behavior. “That would never happen to me,” we think to ourselves when falls on the street. “I would never say that to someone else,” we confess with full confidence. But we laugh, nonetheless, when we see someone slip on the ice or at the person on the receiving end of an insult. Why? Because we recognize in others what we have split off from our conscious awareness, which is the basic premise of the concept of the shadow. We see in another what we cannot see in ourselves, and this makes it easier to laugh at what we do not like in ourselves because we have put it onto, or into, another.

To make her point, Ulanov appeals to the world of television—a most appropriate place to see this phenomenon at work. She cites two examples: *All In the Family* from the 1970’s and *Roseanne* from the late 1980’s to the mid 1990’s. In *All In the Family*, the show centers around the blue-collar, conservative, and politically incorrect family man, Archie Bunker, played by the actor, Carroll O’Conner. With *Roseanne*, the television sitcom chronicles the life of Roseanne Conner, also a blue-collar worker, wife, and mother. Both characters are loudmouths. Both have an in-your-face honesty about them: they tell us exactly what they think without regard for propriety or decency. Both hurl insults toward their family members. Both show little interest for hiding their flaws. And, of course, both programs were wildly successful in their day, and they both continue to rank highly in the history of television while also occupying space in the American cultural psyche. As Ulanov observes, they both have “made millions out of exposing shadow material in a humorous way,” and resting in her assurance that “the authors of these shows did not read depth psychology!”³³ This is not “esoteric theory,” she states, “but fact.”³⁴

Why do these characters, and so many others like them, make us laugh? Why are they so beloved despite the fact that they do not portray humanity in the best light? Ulanov helps us understand this by way of the clown figure. Here, we can imagine Archie Bunker and Roseanne Conner as modern versions of this age-

33 Ulanov, *Spiritual Aspects of Clinical Work*, 271.

34 Ibid.

old archetype. In one respect, as aforementioned above, the clown is able to carry all of the shadow parts of ourselves that we put on to him or her. Like a magnet of attracting opposites, our own shadow life quickly links with what we know to be the clown's conscious identity: running into walls, mishaps with gadgets, disruptive of the ordinary. A strange attraction develops between us and the clown, one of endearing acceptance on our part. Ulanov contends,

The clown figure enacts acceptance of the human lot in [its] comedy—all of it, its absurdity, its grotesqueness, its suffering, its tragedy. His acceptance does not strike a gloomy pose. His acceptance is open-hearted;
his feeling warm. He is glad to be here in the midst of life.³⁵

It is a complicated dynamic. On the surface, we may find Archie Bunker and Roseanne Conner to be offensive and crude. But, nonetheless, we continue to watch them with enjoyment because we locate this sense of “acceptance” in them. We get the feeling that if we were to walk into their house, we could let ourselves go unrestrained, unhindered. They act as a mirror for us, reflecting what we cannot consciously see of ourselves.³⁶ And that remains the allure. Our personal shadow material is not necessarily theirs, it should be emphasized. We each have our own sense of “badness” that we believe should be relegated to the shadowlands of our psyche. Yet, when we encounter characters like Archie Bunker and Roseanne Conner, finding them amusing and laughing at their antics and flaws, we are confronted with a question: what does our laughing at them express—reveal—about the connectedness or disconnectedness from the state or condition of our own psychological life?

IV. SPIRIT

Humor, of course, does not limit itself, either in its academic analysis or in its lived experience, to the confines of the psyche. We can be just as curious about the role humor has to play in the life of the spirit, in religious faith, and in notions of the Divine Itself. That a life in relationship with God can be thought of as encompassing funny or comedic dynamics is not always at the forefront of whatever we might imagine the spiritual life to be. We understand religious faith as something serious. Comedy is not. God is solemn and holy. Humor is to remain outside the boundaries of the sacred. But why is this? Why such a split between spiritual life and laughter, holiness from humor? Why do we anthropomorphize God with human traits but somehow conveniently leave out a vision of God as having a sense of humor? And why so little reflection on such a fundamental feature of human

³⁵ Ulanov and Ulanov, *The Witch and the Clown*, 285.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

life and its potential for religious faith? In considering such kinds of questions, Ulanov, again, is helpful in pointing a way forward here.

Her predilection for locating the humorous in other personalities is no different when it comes to esteemed religious and spiritual figures of Christianity, the faith tradition Ulanov considers home as an Episcopalian. She alludes to figures such as the Apostle Paul, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, Albert Schweitzer, Simone Weil, and Mother Teresa as examples of the “great cloud of witnesses” who all demonstrate, in one way or another, a particular playfulness in their relationship with God and the world around them. Through their experience, says Ulanov, we find “the Lord’s gracious humor reflected there.”³⁷ Why is this? Because humor can serve as a signal of maturity in faith. More often than not, it is the mark of a certain steadfastness of belief and spiritual pliability rather than expressions of mere unbelief, blatant disrespect, or outright irreverence toward matters of religious significance.

These spiritual paragons, then, are not prone to give themselves over entirely to what Ulanov refers to as a “macabre sense of humor” when life does not pan out, when the depth of human imperfection is realized, or when God seems especially, or even totally, absent.³⁸ It is true, she remarks, that during such times, we may find ourselves more prone to be “satisfied with the old jokes about the way God treats his friends,” and, by way of example, follows this with a wisecrack of her own: “Look what he did for his son!”³⁹ But what these giants of faith show, particularly for those of us who come after, is that while they may be wont to make such quips—think of Augustine’s famed “make me chaste, but not yet,” for one—they do not seek this “macabre” space, and the humor arising out of it, as a means of permanent resolution. Their faith is not altogether abandoned to a state of spiritual pessimism amidst the entanglements of a life lived in devotion to a spiritual path.

What they also possess, according to Ulanov, is “a kind of biblical sense of humor.”⁴⁰ By this, she has in mind that we, as human beings, are both accepted and chosen as God’s creation to be “central channel’s for God’s grace.”⁴¹ This does not, however, require that we perpetually remain in a state of perfection, much less achieving it in the first place, in order to live a faithful spiritual existence or partake in the body of Christ. What it does involve is the recognition “that we would not choose ourselves if we were not already chosen” and that “we must choose ourselves not once, but again and again...”⁴² In other words, the Apostle Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” does not prevent him from cultivating “the mind of Christ” as the central reality out of which he lives. Augustine’s infamous “restlessness” does

37 Ulanov and Ulanov, *Religion and the Unconscious*, 38.

38 Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta: John Know Press, 1982), 94.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 95.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

not preclude him from a life of faith, but only propels him forward in a continual search for it. Mother Teresa's palpable feeling of separation from God the last part of her life did not deter her fanatic dedication to ministering to the "poorest of the poor." Despite their personal dilemmas, they devoted to their spiritual visions. And in this way, they are not so different from us. These holy dynamos show us the way in terms of what it means to choose ourselves "not once, but again and again," as Ulanov states, since a life of faith does not mean an absence of quandary or fallibility but carrying on in faith in spite of them. Thus, humor is the grace that allows each of us to "choose" ourselves in the same way that God has already chosen, and continues to choose, us.⁴³

In more specific terms of the actual contours of a living spirituality, one place humor crops up for Ulanov is in prayer. Prayer, as a form of "primary speech," consists of both words and images, spoken and unspoken, that we offer to God. It is an aspect of spirituality that opens the door for humor to flourish in faith life. "We laugh in our prayer," she writes, when we "come close enough in our lightness of spirit to see and enjoy the playful aspect of the divine."⁴⁴ There are images, persons, situations, feelings, thoughts, activities that make their way into our prayer life and make us laugh. We find humor in what appears to be nothing more than a great big Divine joke. Laughter itself serves as a cardinal indication of spirit, and as a form of prayer, she comments, "this praying reaches beneath or above words."⁴⁵ Are we able to laugh with God? Joke with God? Find the humor in a green lizard, for example, making its way down the aisle during an alter call? Sensing the comic in the most unlikeliest of persons who come to our minds during a time of prayer and later encountering this person when we go out on the street? Is there something more authentic in the "raucous laughter," of which Ulanov speaks, than in all the sanctifying words we could possibly muster, whether uttered to hundreds of others or only to ourselves?⁴⁶

Ulanov, following Erasmus in *The Praise of Folly*, also advocates for an empathetic act on our part consisting of trying to imagine what it must be like for God to be on the other end of our prayers, hymns, and petitions we send in God's direction. Indeed, it is God who laughs at our most serious portrayal of God's own character or who surely pines for something risible in addition to everything somber we ceaselessly lay at God's doorstep. On this point, Ulanov states: "God must long for a funny story...instead of still another lugubrious hymn or turgid meditation, still another solemn promise, still another tortured, pompous confession in which even our sins are matters of pride."⁴⁷ There is nothing more deadly to a life lived in the Spirit than a faith without buoyancy, joy, and laughter. "Do we *enjoy* talking to

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 46.

45 Ann Ulanov, *Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Psychic Reality* (Louisville: John Knox, 2005), 56. See also Ulanov, *Spiritual Aspects of Clinical Work*, 264, for "raucous laughter" as a sign of both "life" and "spirit."

46 Ibid.

47 Ulanov and Ulanov, *Primary Speech*, 46.

God [emphasis added]?” Ulanov dares to ask.⁴⁸ Or do we interact with God or pray to God in a state of boredom ourselves, completely oblivious to the fact that what “bores us must surely tax even an infinite presence?”⁴⁹ Hence, when Jesus Christ tells his followers and other listeners in the “Sermon on the Mount” that “you will know them by their fruits,” we very well may want to remember to include laughter, humor, and joy among the fruit—both for God’s sake and for ours.⁵⁰

The more significant and profound impact of humor on our faith lives should not be lost to us, however. The domain of the comic is always more intricate and substantial than simply the experience of feeling good after the telling or hearing of a clever joke. Humor’s benevolent spiritual capacity lies in its ability to crack open and relieve a rigid religious stance, bring together in peace the most unlikely of individuals, or usher in a revelatory experience of grace. What we find to be humorous often is the result of a counter reality to the familiar one we know—an incongruence—and as such, we are given a new perspective, a different vantage point, another way of looking at the world and our place in it. There is more to life, we realize, than our small ego-centered lives, finding ourselves rearranged. We are taken out of ourselves and opened to something new in the aftermath of being baptized in the comic Spirit.

Quite suitably, then, Ulanov describes our having an experience of “something so funny” that we are able to call it a “complete miracle.”⁵¹ “We are all shaken up,” she says, “into a new order by the laughter that seizes us.”⁵² This kind of humor, this painful laughter, we know, we cannot manufacture with any kind of authenticity. We try to synthetically create, or recreate, a similar experience through the efforts of situation comedies on television with canned laughter in case we forget to express our amusement or regaling our group with a comical tale that happened to us only to find that it falls completely flat. But more than this, we cannot fabricate particular virtues of the spiritual life, like gratitude, magnanimousness, and openness, that follow on the heels of this kind of encounter with the comic. Whether through other people, circumstance, or God, when genuine humor and laughter touches us, we are seldom able to forget it. Something new, however large or small, is created, altered, changed. Along with the spiritual masters of ages past, genuine comic experience can move us into a deeper and sustaining spiritual reality. And as Ulanov maintains, such growth and steadiness in the spiritual life will only be hampered, if not completely desolate, without it.⁵³

48 Ibid., 47.

49 Ibid.

50 See Matthew 7:16.

51 Ulanov and Ulanov, *Primary Speech*, 101.

52 Ibid.

53 Ulanov and Ulanov, *Religion and the Unconscious*, 213.

V. CODA

What, finally, can we take from Ann Ulanov's consistent nudging and perennial dance with humor and laughter throughout her written body of work? What value does it hold for those of us who are in the psychotherapeutic, ministerial, and/or academic professions? What does it mean to be "seriously funny?" To bring this essay to a close, I would like to briefly suggest some nuggets of wisdom—perhaps better conceived of as a series of questions—we may glean from Ulanov's own curiosity about laughter and the inclusion of the humorous within the purview of her thinking.

First, the topic of humor should be valued in and of itself for serious intellectual consideration as well as appreciating it wherever we find it in the world. Though we all have varying aptitudes and abilities for humor and its appreciation, there can be little doubt that it constitutes a fundamental feature of both human and divine life, particularly if we hold to the belief that human beings are created in the image of God. Thus, it cannot be merely dismissed as fluff or nonsensical. If we are consistently dealing with serious subjects such as psychopathology and healing or sin, suffering, and salvation, then it can be difficult to configure how humor should fit into such work if we do not make a conscious effort to understand. *Is our perspective wide and open enough to recognize, appreciate, and value humor when we encounter it or it encounters us?*

Second, we cannot be neglectful or dismissive of the intent lying behind humor and laughter and/or the message(s) trying to be conveyed with its use or appearance. As we have seen, using humor serves as an act of communication, both good and bad. Laughter brings together the closest of friends in a tighter bond or shatter through the walls of avowed enemies. The comic can be used as a defense, a way of coping with anxiety, or as a weapon. On a deeper level, it has marks of a spiritual perspective of its own that propels us to transcendently rise above whatever trying circumstance we face in front of us. *Once we have widened our humorous scope, so to speak, are we then able to consider the varied, vast, and depth of its meaning with conscious sensitivity to its aims, purposes, and effects?*

Third, and lastly, humor and laughter bring balance and perspective to our work. If we take ourselves too seriously, humor will find a way to crack open such a lofty sense of self importance. If we find ourselves working too much, overstepping the limits of what we are able to do in our therapeutic, ministry, and teaching responsibilities, humor and laughter can usher in a sense of relief and sustenance. The comic and all of its forms can either act as a floatation device when we need it or as a weight when we least expect it. *Are we alert to the perspective that humor has brought us when we consider the impact of its presence?*

Ann Ulanov, as a person and in her work, is known, and will continue to be known for many wonderful and celebratory things. My hope is that her own humor and the questions she encourages the rest of us to ask about it in our own lives, will always stand among them.