

Joan Rivers and Humor

Written by Terry Smith

"It's always something cruel that laughter drowns," *Roy Orbison song, The Comedian.*

With the death of Joan Rivers, I thought I would jot down a few thoughts about her and about humor in general. She always made me laugh, I always looked forward to seeing her on whatever talk show she might be appearing. Watching the recent tributes on network TV I learned she also released a number of albums, wrote many books, had entrepreneurial successes, gave generously to charities in time and money, and was just an overall unstoppable force.

Rivers said a laugh is a little vacation for us. I like to think of a laugh as a moment of joy. Laughing makes us feel better, especially when we're laughing together and not at somebody. We often laugh when we're surprised by a turn in the joke. Even when someone surprises us with a statement that may be hurtful to others, our reflex might be to laugh at the cleverness but a more sensitive person can override that with consideration of the person being ridiculed, especially if the victim is present. In his interview in *Sataristas!*, by Paul Provenza, Robert Klein came to realize much of what passes for humor, including skits on SNL, is just cruel and gratuitous, lacking of wit and elegance.

Rivers' body of work, her repertoire of humor, included much more than insult comedy, but that was one of her specialties. Though maybe not as much of an insult-comedian as Don Rickles, she nevertheless was an example of taking her job to the limit. But just because she said what a lot of us are thinking doesn't necessarily mean this is a reason to emulate her frankness. It takes courage sometimes to be honest, to say what you believe when it goes against what others close to you believe. In humor and in insults there is an element of truth. Yet, sometimes expressing it crosses the border from being courageous into being foolhardy and cruel. Most of us put a filter between what we're thinking and what we say about other people not because we're timid, but for good reason, out of respect for their better qualities.

Other Notes:

Self-deprecating humor - Some extol the virtue of self-deprecating humor as if it gives the comedian a free pass. But sometimes it allows the listener to feel the pleasure of being cruel without having to take the risk of saying it themselves; by laughing at your own shortness, baldness, race, you're still ridiculing others who are 'ugly', short, etc.

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Sarcasm - If everyone's laughing it must not be bad, so why do you feel terrible? Because the sarcasm is directed at you, it's being enjoyed at your expense. This often starts out as common give and take of tolerable high school-type elbowing and 'kidding' but then escalates into demeaning intimidation and finally reaches the level of bullying. I'm sure the teens who put urine in the ice bucket in Bay Village are laughing diabolically, finding the cruelty funny, at the expense of the autistic child, his family, and entire community.

The Truth Hurts, search for truth - Since many times there is an element in truth in insult humor, we recognize that and think that it's then OK to laugh because it's 'true'. Politicians who are corrupt should be exposed, and humor is often used creditably to shed light on political deceptions. But the 'truth' of someone's personal features, say, often resulting from misfortunes or forces beyond their control, is not always pleasant and this kind of truth doesn't have to be mentioned. Having a filter is similar to having positive things to say as opposed to negative. We can choose one over the other depending on what element of truth we care to focus on.

Class clown - Humor often distracts, destroys the positive people are doing. If we constantly play the class clown, in class or in meetings at work, it's distracting; playing for the attention as opposed to respecting the teacher, our classmates and associates.

They can take it - How big, how famous, how old, how rich, how accomplished does one have to be so that they now can take an insult?