

## **THERAPY BY CHANGING YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR: From cynicism to silliness**

A family doctor referred a couple to me for marital counselling. They were both locked in a death spiral of blame, projection, defensiveness, contempt, and utter disgust for the other that had begun many years earlier. It is often cited in the marriage therapy literature that the typical couple does not come in for marital counselling until they have been dysfunctional for the previous six years. To their credit, this couple did not engage in physical violence, but the verbal wounds they inflicted on each other were far worse, with sarcasm and sneering cynicism dripping from their pursed lips in our first two assessment sessions. Both expressed a need to end their 12-year marriage; they only attended therapy to prove to their respective families-of-origin that reconciliation was hopeless, that they had given marital therapy a chance at repair. I told them that their collective mental set precluded that possibility, but that at least they could agree on their hopelessness, if nothing else. Thankfully, there were no children involved. Also mercifully, they were both somewhat successful in their respective careers, in which they buried their lives and their identities, him as an accountant, her as a school teacher. We agreed to end the consultation at that point, with the couple headed full speed for divorce.

About a year later, the now ex-wife contacted me requesting individual therapy. Although she had disliked the previous marital sessions, she liked my spirit of fairness, respect, and optimism with which I had conducted them. So I agreed to see her as a client. She began the first session with a monologue of bitterness, cynicism, and vitriol about life, injustice, suffering, entitlement, and general rage at the world and her lot in negotiating through its injustices. After patiently listening to this spew of invective for 20 minutes, I stopped her and told her to end this verbal abuse. She was shocked at my label of her behavior. I pointed out that, for her to rant and for me to merely listen passively, was for me to condone her verbal abuse of our relationship. Furthermore, therapy would not accomplish anything if this pattern became our standard format of communication. Then she said, "but if I don't tell you how I'm thinking, how can you possibly help me? This is the way I talk to myself all the time. I can't stand it!"

I again told her that this room was for psychotherapy, not verbal abuse. (At that point I was mentally returning to the script of an ancient Monty Python sketch, called *The Argument Clinic*, in which a patron of the clinic accidentally goes in the wrong door and is harangued by the counsellor verbally abusing him rather than beginning an argument.) I told her to remain silent unless a positive or at least neutral thought entered her mind. Another 10-15 minutes of silence ensued, then she broke the emptiness by saying how sorry and sad she was that her mind was so negative and entrenched in hostility towards life. This statement of sadness was our first point of engagement on a new course of therapy. I had remembered from our marital sessions that she had at least one redeeming feature: she was highly intelligent and pointed in her use of sarcasm and cynical wit to encapsulate hopeless situations in vicious black humour. I intrigued her with the possibility of utilizing that strength in a therapeutic collaboration around changing her personality by changing her sense of humour from cynicism to levity and frivolity. She at first recoiled from this proposition, but was intrigued by my attribution of the strength but misuse of her sense of humour. I asked her to consider this proposal over the next two weeks. She returned for her appointment, agreed with the premises of our therapeutic contract, and we began our work.

We met once every two weeks for about eight months. You might think that our work involved watching humorous DVDs of comedy films and sketches, and analysing why and how they could be funny, thus indirectly transforming the prevalent attitudes, perceptions, and conceptions of my client. That would have been enormous fun for me, and little work. Unfortunately, I work in private practice, and charging my client more than \$100/hr to laugh is not ethical, even if potentially therapeutic. No, this therapy was far more mundane. Each session, my client had to present to me her worst encountered situations in the previous two weeks. She would first describe them from her usual perspective, dark glasses. Then I would ask her to reframe each incident from an alternative perspective.

This viewpoint is represented in the story about two children and their Christmas presents. One was perpetually pessimistic and negative. Her name was Char. Her twin sister, Lena, always saw things positively. Their differences became so widely extreme that their parents decided one Christmas to rig the presents they bought them in a more biased way, in an attempt to balance their outlook on life. On Christmas morning, they watched as Charlene unwrapped her presents. In typical fashion, Char was critical of the colors, sizes, and shapes of the toys and clothing gifts. Nothing satisfied her, and she was grumpy. Her parents then watched Lena open her two presents, both large bags of horse manure. To their amazement, Lena started throwing the clumps up into the air giggling merrily. They asked her, "How can you be so happy and joyful?" She said, "With all this manure, there must be a pony nearby somewhere!" I call this attitude "looking for the pony," and it prevails in a lot of my therapeutic outlook. Others call it "making lemonade when all life gives you is lemons." You know what I mean. Well I would insist that my client could not leave the description of a negative vignette until she had come up with at least a neutral reframe. For her it was a work of mental gymnastics, and these mental muscles were indeed out of shape. After my allowances for awkward and effortful silences, she would come up with some favourable and occasionally brilliant captions. Some of them even used my philosophy of life, that "irony is the driving force of the universe."

Gradually her humour conveyed a self-reflexive sense, incorporating some acceptance and even compassion and kindness, toward herself and other actors and forces in our great cosmic dance. Eventually, she even began to giggle in her appraisal of truly ridiculous and absurd situations she encountered. She even at times became child-like and silly, repeating little children's jokes like "How do you catch a unique bunny? You 'neek up on it! How do you catch a tame bunny? Tame way! You 'neek up on it!" You need to be in the mind of a child to appreciate this whimsy and fanciful humour. By the time her humour had evolved, there were far fewer situations that required reframing. In fact, her professional and personal life had by now become happier and more joyful. So we agreed this therapy had come to its proper conclusion.

In our final, 18<sup>th</sup> session, we mutually rejoiced in our therapeutic collaboration, which had become an increasing pleasure over the months. In her token of affection for the help, my graduate client gave me a lovely book, called "Today I will Honor my Inner Martyr: Affirmations for cynics" by Sarah Wells and Anne Thornhill (Prima Publishing, 1998). This hilarious small book features mantras that sometimes seem to be the main underlying schemas for some people's lives. Some examples are:

- Today I will provoke a loved one's anger just to assure myself that I still have an effect on him or her (p.13).
- Today I will remind myself that my friends and family are just waiting for me to fail (p.20).
- Although everyone pretends not to realize it, they know I am superior to them (p.28).
- Today I celebrate my ability to verbally support others while mentally judging them (p.38).
- Today I will cultivate a relationship with an especially needy person so that I can fulfill my need to be needed (p.48).
- The best years of my life are over. They weren't exactly good years, but nonetheless, they are over (p.52).

So that was my client's graduation present to her therapist. As we laughed together at these mantras of cynical humour, we affirmed that it was not our intention to eradicate all forms of vicious humour of superiority, but merely to indicate other ways of framing situations in humorous form that featured self-reflection, irony, and even whimsical silliness. Thus ended one of the most interesting therapies I have done in my career.