

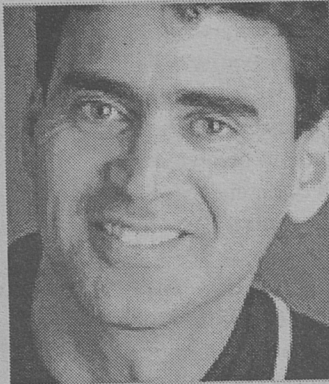
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Slouching Towards Gomorraah: To Laugh or Not to Laugh



**michael
alvear**

What do you do when your sense of humor smacks up against your sense of humanity?

My friend "Bill" never says anything racist but he comes damn close. I don't want to encourage him but I can't stop laughing long enough to tell him to stop. It's hard to muster up moral indignation when you're gasping for air.

Like the last story he told. He said when he was growing up his aunt once heard strange noises on top of the house. "She calls me up," he said, "and yells 'Call the cops, there's niggers on the roof!'" I asked him how his aunt knew the robbers were black and he

laugh at racist stories."

Silence.

"What does that say about the rest of the world?"

More silence.

I was expecting an intellectual argument about racism and political correctness. I was expecting anger maybe, but not this. Not this, this ... sadness.

I felt terrible; I had hurt a good friend.

"Would you have laughed," he asked, "if I were in the room?" No, I admitted. I probably wouldn't have.

"You're an enigma," he later said to me. "I don't understand how you can have such jagged views about race."

I know there are lots of

"BULLSHIT."

It's Greg interrupting me. "Comedians don't hide," he said. "The fact that their jokes are so unabashedly public insulates them from charges of racism. But your friend, he hides. You know how I know?"

"How?" I asked.

"Because you haven't told me who he is."

Shit, I thought. He's right. And I won't tell him, either, because he knows him.

Greg is right in so many ways and yet I just can't abide by the consequence of regulating speech that might be offensive to some people.

Silence or glorification should not be the only acceptable speech the majority can make about a minority.

Context and intent have to be taken into consideration when you're deciding whether something's racist or homophobic. Otherwise, you end up like those insufferably sanctimonious schoolmarm at GLAAD.

Last week they took time off from the real battle against homophobia to censure an Atlanta disc jockey for joking that the new gay cable network should put on a sitcom called "Leave it, it's Beaver."

That's a homophobic remark worthy of censure? Please. These hand wringing, humorless gay activists have way too much time on their hands.

Yes, taking context and intent into consideration might give some racists and homophobes a new way to display their prejudices. By pretending their intention wasn't bigoted — that it was just a joke — they can spout off hateful things with impunity.

But I still think that's better than the alternative: The prohibition of laughing at the truly funny. Does being committed to civil rights require us to give up our sense of humor?

Greg just shook his head sadly as we settled into a restaurant. He opened the menu and said, "You've let your friend sell you his racist shit through laughter. Every time you laugh you prove to him it's acceptable to say racist things as long as they're 'funny.'"

"And just for that," he said, "I'm having the steak and you're paying for it." ▼

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It's hard to muster up moral indignation when you're gasping for air.

said, "What robbers? It was a broken weather vane banging against the roof during a wind-storm. She just assumed she was getting robbed and that it was black people doing the robbing."

It's easy to censure his aunt, who was clearly bigoted. But is Bill's recounting the story racist? He tells it with a certain amount of glee.

And what about my laughter at hearing it? Does that make me racist?

I told Greg, a close African-American friend, about it. Did he think the recounting of the story was bigoted?

I don't think I've ever seen such a sad look on his face.

"You know what really depresses me?" he asked. "That you're one of the good guys, you really are. And yet you still

people — Greg among them — who think whenever a member of the majority makes fun of a minority it's inherently prejudicial.

But is it?

I don't think it's always homophobic when straight people make fun of gay people and I don't think it's always racist when white people make fun of African-Americans.

Robin Williams and Eddie Murphy are living examples of that. Whenever Robin Williams makes fun of gay people he is genuinely funny, without being divisive or hateful. We have been the target of some of his funniest work.

Eddie Murphy makes fun of gay people too, and yet there is an unmistakable stench of homophobia to his humor. He's mean and he drips cruelty when he talks about us.



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