

# ~ From One Inquiring Mind to Another ~

"Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly; devils fall because of their gravity." G.K Chesterton #9 October 15, 2011

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## GROWING UP WITH HUMOR

My Uncle Joe was probably the most colorful brother in their large Italian family of six boys and two girls. He always tried to find something funny to say, be it a joke or a story, and his face morphed with expression.

One of my favorite experiences with my uncle, which I told at his memorial service, happened when we were going out to dinner at Heidi's House of Pies in San Mateo. A homeless guy approached us asking for some spare change. Without a thought, Joe reached in his pocket, and then stopped, pointed his finger at the guy, and said, "There's one thing I want to know about you: are you are Republican or a Democrat?" To his credit, the beggar, without missing a beat, smiled and said, "Do I look like a Republican?!" We all had a good laugh, as Joe used his quick thinking humor and wit to make the guy feel better about the situation.

Maybe it was growing up in poverty in the Depression and/or living through WWII, but all my uncles were very compassionate and generous people, and a sense of humor was a part of their lives. Laughing was sure better than crying. And, as Italians, they had their share of both.



Joe Celotti in his 20's

## WINNING OVER SR. ANTHONY

Like most kids, I was pretty shy around adults. So when Sister Mary Anthony asked me to try to unstick the window in our fourth grade classroom, I surprised us both when I asked if she happened to have a large screw driver on her; we both laughed and for a moment saw each other as equals sharing a unique moment of the ridiculous.

## ECCE HOMO: SEEING THE MAN BEHIND THE ROMAN COLLAR

The most memorable joke in high school came from Fr. Pierre Calegari.

We were studying Napoleon, and "Cal" won many of us over by telling us semi-risque story about a discussion three immigrant Italians (with limited English) were having about Napoleon and Josephine's inability to have a child. One said she was *inconceivable*, but the other disagreed and said the word was "she was *unbearable*." The third said claimed they both had it wrong; she was *impregnable*. When the laughter subsided one of my classmates said she was *insurmountable*.

I never forgot that clever and appropriate joke, and the fact that this young priest who worked us hard also trusted us with a little bit of adult humor. In doing so, he became real.

## ON STAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

My experiences growing up served me well in my own classroom when I started teaching a self-contained sixth grade class in 1970. Teaching 7-8 subjects, and reading all the texts so the kids wouldn't have to, had me working as hard as when I was in college. But I made it personal, peppering my talks and activities with humor and personal stories to keep the kids interested. Those four years were very challenging and fun, and from what I hear, the kids loved it.



Four years later I moved up to the (then) Junior High, and that had me really going. It was hard to remember what jokes and/or stories I told period to period. Below are a few of my favorite quips about math.

**5 out of 4 people don't understand fractions.** (and)

**There are three types of people in this world: those who can count, and those who cannot.**

These non-sequiturs helped liven up the class, and I related so many personal experiences that I finally created a little booklet of them called *Stories I Never Told My Mother about growing up in Belmont in the 50's and 60's*. It was written as an example of

how I wanted my English and Journalism students to write, and [it's still online](#). Humor and personal stories to illustrate a point helped keep class interesting, made my lessons credible, and provided an atmosphere of fun and adventure.

For me, education was and is about understanding, enlightenment, awe, and excitement. One of the most influential books I ever read was George Leonard's *Education and Ecstasy*. I have followed that premise my whole life through, and humor was a big part of that equation.

## SURVIVAL BY WORK AND BY WIT

Humor can give one options. When a student referred to me as "dude," I took off on a mock tirade, telling him to show his teacher a little more respect: "It's not *dude*, (pause)... it's *Mr. Dude*." Laughter, situation diffused, and point made by both the element of surprise and a little self-deprecating humor.

Having a sense of humor, even about myself at times, allows me to see the absurdity of taking myself too seriously. For me a sense of humor is born out of humility, compassion, and creativity. It gives me another option to the fight or flight syndrome, allowing myself and others to rise above the situation. Transcendence!

## THE MISUSE OF HUMOR: AN ETHICAL PROBLEM OR FAUX PAS?

Humor can try disguise a multitude of sins trying to masquerade as "anything goes because it's supposed to be funny." A general rule might be: the more public the setting, the more filtered the material. This is especially true in dealing with children. Yet there is still room for one's personality to emerge if such an interaction is age and subject appropriate.

Our family's favorite comedic movie is *Young Frankenstein*. Feel free to [post a comment](#) or drop me an email about your favorite comedy, video, joke, etc. Grace itself may be just having a sense of humor--amazing. May the Farce be with you. **-Joe**