

## The Gospel According to Groucho

*Doug Brendel*

Groucho Marx was one of the great comedians of the 20th century. Well, to me he was great.

He was known as a wisecracker. He's the one who said,

- "Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read."
- He told the Friars Club of Beverly Hills, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member."
- He told his friend, the writer S.J. Perelman, "From the moment I picked your book up until I laid it down I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend on reading it."
- "I was sitting in front of the cabin, smoking some meat. Yes. There wasn't a cigar store in the neighborhood."

By the time I was in grade school, in the 60's, Groucho's quiz show *You Bet Your Life* was already in reruns.

Before that, back in the 30's and 40's, Groucho and his brothers, the Marx Brothers, made 13 movies.

And one of their early movies, *Animal Crackers*, features one of Groucho's most famous jokes:

**"This morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas I don't know."**

To me, it's a pretty funny line.

But in a way, I think it's also a reflection of how we live.

An elephant doesn't belong in my pajamas.

But I'm forever finding elephants in my pajamas — people who are out of place, out of order, out of line.

You're the elephant in my pajamas if you're in my space.

Or you've violated my boundaries.

Or you've offended my sensibilities.

Or you've embarrassed me, or annoyed me.

Or if you've somehow contradicted my sense of how the world should be.

You've crossed me, disagreed with me.

You've insulted me. You've hurt me.

*You're an elephant in my pajamas, and you don't belong there.*

So what does Groucho do to the elephant? He shoots him.

What do I do when you get into my pajamas? I shoot you.

My culture teaches me to shoot you, to take you down, to call you out.

You cross me, I hit back.

If we disagree, I don't let it go. Boom!

I shoot you, I sneer at you, I snarl at you, I insult you.

And it doesn't have to happen face-to-face.

It can be on social media.

On Facebook, you have more ways to get into my pajamas than ever before.

In the past two decades, partisan television has taught us that it's okay to yell at each other, to put each other down, to be snide in expressing our opinions.

We say things online that we would never have the nerve to say 20 years ago.

The British comedian Danny Wallace wrote a book whose title is too vulgar for me to say out loud in church, but the subtitle is *The Surprising Truth About Why People Are So Rude*.

He says the latest research shows that the lack of eye contact on social media has inclined people to get ruder.

On top of which, he says, "Rudeness spreads like a cold. Even *witnessing* rudeness is enough for us to become infected, psychologically," and enough rudeness can lead to physical symptoms just like stress can.

He says, "Rudeness is almost like a neurotoxin, a poisonous substance that negatively affects our nervous system," affecting "the way we think, act, and feel," affecting "our executive functions."

Rudeness, he says, “has a direct relationship with our brain health.”

I’m preaching to myself today.

I mean, I realize that when someone contradicts me or I feel insulted or wronged, I flare.

My first impulse is to lash out.

But I’m not alone. The Psalmist David struggled with this verbal thing.

He was a word guy; he was a lyricist. He was quick with a pointed barb.

He asked God to help him.

In one of his songs, he said:

*Psalm 141:*

3 Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.

4 Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies.

He uses the term “delicacies” — because it can be delicious to run somebody down.

He’s saying, *God, I need help with this.*

And not just for the sake of the person I’m attacking.

*Proverbs 18:20,21*

From the fruit of his mouth a man’s stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied. The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

My words don’t just leave my mouth and go away.

My words affect me. I eat what I say.

But this “Gospel According to Groucho” that I’m bringing you today isn’t just about what my mommy used to call *talking nice*.

There are other ways to kill an elephant in your pajamas.

You know, I can be nice as pie — TO YOUR *FACE*.

But when I'm out of earshot, I can get off a better elephant shot.  
 I switch from *You're an idiot* to *Yeah, he's an idiot*.  
 It's easier to talk *about* you than talk *to* you.  
 It doesn't take as much courage to talk *about* you.

And it's also not just words. When I have this shoot-the-elephant impulse, it affects my decision-making, my relationship management.

If we're in a situation where you offend me, I may not even let you know I'm offended.

But we have a natural revenge impulse.

You did me dirty, so I want to do you dirty.

Does "revenge" seem like too strong a word? I don't know.

When the chance comes for me to recommend someone for some good opportunity — even though you'd be perfect for it — I recommend the other person.

I'm holding that grudge. I may rationalize and tell myself it's not a grudge, but whatever you call it, there was an elephant in my pajamas, and I've targeted the elephant. *Boom*.

I write a humor column at Outsidah.com, and from time to time, I release a collection of columns as a paperback book, just for laughs.

And we usually throw a party to launch the new book.

Over the years we're thrown these parties in various locations around Ipswich — you know, restaurants or businesses of various kinds. And maybe it brings some attention to the business. Good publicity.

But it seems no matter which location I choose for the party, there's someone in town who declines to attend because they have an ongoing feud with the person who owns that business.

*Oh Doug, anyplace but THERE!*

They refuse to associate with that person in any way.

What is this? You don't want to accidentally participate in something that might possibly be good for that business?

Of course, I didn't figure I'd be preaching *this* part to myself. I don't have this problem. This is infantile, right?

But there's a certain restaurant in Ipswich. The owner did something that

offended me deeply. I won't go in that restaurant.

And it's not just a matter of not eating there. You mention that restaurant, and I'm quick to tell you what the owner did that offended me.

In fact, there's another restaurant in Ipswich, something happened there I didn't like. I won't go into that restaurant either.

And if the name of that restaurant comes up in conversation, I'll be quick to tell you that story too.

Just by coincidence, those two restaurants are side by side.

So you see what's happening, don't you?

I'm developing a zone of exclusion in downtown Ipswich.

If I keep getting offended, and boycotting restaurants, this zone of exclusion will put the whole downtown area off-limits to me.

Someday I'll drop dead on Central Street, my cheeks hollow, all skin and bones, and the coroner will shrug his shoulders and say, "He died of malnutrition! There was just no place he could eat!"

But what is really happening here?

It's not just a matter of never eating in a certain place again, giving up a certain menu.

It's also a matter of giving up the possibility of anything good happening to me there.

Giving up the potential for anything good to come from my relationship with that business owner.

I've walked away from the suggestion box — I can't possibly have any influence in that person's life, nor can they in mine.

I've cut off that possibility.

I let a conflict in one department of that relationship poison all the departments of that relationship.

But what's the alternative, when someone attacks me? Just let somebody run me down?

Let somebody attack me on Facebook for the opinion I expressed, and not fight back?

Is that what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 5:39, when he talked about "turning the other cheek"?

Is this what Paul was talking about in Ephesians 5:2, when he said, "walk

in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us”?

We just have to be nice? All the time? To people who are mean? Be nice to people who are wrong? Be nice to people who are idiots? I’ll die.

No. There is more to this. There is a better way to live, a better way than lashing out, but also a better way than just striving to be nice.

There’s actually a clue, I think, in Groucho’s joke.

Talking about that annoying elephant in his pajamas, he says, “How he got in my pajamas *I don’t know*.”

This is the key detail of his confession: *He doesn’t know* how or why the elephant got into his PJs.

When you annoy me or cross me or hurt me, the question I never seem to ask, the question that never seems to cross my mind, is the question of *How and why did you get to this place?*

- What brought you to hold this opinion?
- What’s the backstory?
- What in your life or your circumstances led you to this point of view, or to this style of communication?
- Hey, that troubles me. What do you mean?
- Hey, that hurts me. What’s going on that made you say that?
- Hey! Ouch! Why are you beating up on me like that? Why are you doing this?

The person who hurts me didn’t just spring up from the bowels of hell fully formed.

The person who hurts me has traveled a road to get here.

If I get smacked by somebody, my best response isn’t to smack back.

My best response is to ask questions. To enter into dialogue. Calmly. Patiently. With a spirit of Christ-like forbearance.

The apostle Paul advises us in Philippians 2:4, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

What are your interests? What’s behind your point of view? I can’t look out for your interests if I don’t understand your interests.

Groucho shot the elephant and *then realized* he didn’t know how the

elephant got into those PJs.

If I shoot the person who hurt me, the damage is done.

The relationship is damaged.

My capacity for reflecting God's love into my world — and receiving something of value from a relationship with that person — has been sorely diminished.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

No, the elephant didn't belong in Groucho's pajamas.

No, that person had no business hurting me.

But that uncomfortable encounter is an opportunity for me to be like Jesus.

An opportunity for me to love like Jesus loved.

And the world will be a better place.

We who claim to be Christ-followers have got to take the lead on this.

Paul said to the Colossian Christians (Colossians 3:12-15):

“...As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts....”

Amen.

*(Next Sunday: The Parable of the Cheetos!)*