

Comedy & The Humanities

By William Missouri Downs

The poet John Ashbery said: "I don't want to read something I already know or which is going to slide down easily: there has to be some crunch..." (The Writer's Almanac, July 28, 2014). Today we live in a dangerously crunch-free culture. Internet algorithms reflect ourselves back to ourselves while the partisan news divides us into like-minded tribes. The first thing to die in a crunch-less society is irony and with it goes all but the simplest comedy.

I have spent my life writing comedy and I've incorporated humor into my teaching. After over twenty years at the University, I know only two things to be true about education: One: PowerPoint is a sleep aid. Two: A mind that is free to laugh at the irony of life is momentarily open to the consideration of new possibilities. But things have changed. Today's irony free students, fearful of the slightest political transgression, censor their sense of humor.

The second to die is the humanities. They are dying for two reasons. One is economic the other has to do with crunch. Economist, philosopher, and historian Karl Polanyi wrote that fascism reduces people to the point where "only the economic life remains." (The New Yorker, May 14, 2018) Fascism does the same to universities. What good are the humanities if a university's purpose is merely to prepare students for their economic life and not to cultivate enlightened citizens with insights that transcend the moment? It does not matter if you are living paycheck-to-paycheck or on a yacht; if you are not living a life of the mind you are living at a subsistence level.

The second reason the humanities are dying is because of politics. Some say these new vocational universities must reflect the State's political values but these are just code words that mean professors should make things "slide down" crunch free. The humanities are not useful to political parties because they allow students to see plentiful possibilities, while political parties maintain power by forcing a narrow perspective on the populous.

Allan Bloom wrote, "The most successful tyranny is not the one that uses force to assure uniformity but the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities." (The Closing of the American Mind, Page 249) A society that loses its crunch becomes intolerant, easy to offend and inflexible.