

Women's Laughing Perspective

Patricia Morgan © 2004

In 1992 John Gray's runaway best seller, ***Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus***, was published. You'd think that the question "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" would seldom get a quiet whimper. Surprisingly there are still those who yell "sexist!" if you describe those differences. There are exceptions to sex differences but certainly there is evidence of men, like Bob, and women, like Betty, have differing humour tendencies.

When it comes to humour, Betty tends to simmer on the back burner. Our culture traditionally has encouraged her to be a lady—to not laugh with her mouth open, guffaw or crack a witty word or join boy-sterously into banter. If Betty dared risk an outrageous act, Aunt Leona, who is committed to "nice," whispered, "Tut tut." Of course there are exceptions. However, often wisecracking women are too confrontational for the old boys. Who is the female equivalent to George Carlin or hostile swearing Richard Pryor? They have been more accepting of Phyllis Diller's self-deprecation, "I'm the only woman who can walk in Central Park at night...and reduce the crime rate." A 1976 University of Maryland Study concluded, "It seems reasonable to propose that attempting a witty remark is often an intrusive, disturbing and aggressive act, and within this culture, unacceptable for a female." Hopefully, we have mellowed in the last 28 years. Think of Roseanne Barr's demonstration of "having balls" as an example. The good and bad news is that, increasingly, women stand-up comics are as verbally shocking as their male counterparts. This really puts Aunt Leona's knickers in a knot.

In ***What Mona Lisa Knew: A Woman's Guide to Getting Ahead in Business by Lightning Up***, Dr. Barbara Mackoff warns Betty and the rest of us gals that if we constantly use self-deprecating humour similar to Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller, we can create an impression of incompetence. Instead she encourages women to play with sexist and conflict-triggering comments as if the speaker was intending to make a joke. One example Mackoff offers is if someone says, "Women belong home with their kids," a possible response is, "Say, THAT's a new one!"

It is still considered lady-like, by many, to politely laugh at male-delivered humour. Some assertive women will not laugh or will bravely say, "That's not funny." For example, "What is smaller than a peanut?" "A blonde's brain." If we don't laugh we may be asked, "Why? Can't you take a joke?" Some of the more brazen and aggressive Bettys have shot back, "What is smaller than a peanut?" "A man's brain." Dolly Parton provides a more moderate and self-deprecating position, "I'm not offended by all the dumb blonde jokes because I know I'm not dumb . . . and I also know I'm not blonde." Those committed to caring and healing humour avoid this humour war of targeting the other sex.

If some of the New Breed of Bettys are freely and meanly attacking Bob where is the norm? The debate continues. In ***They Used to Call Me Snow White But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor***, Regina Barreca writes that women seem to have what she calls a Humane Humour Rule. She observed that seldom do women make fun of what people cannot change--physical appearance, sex, sexual orientation or race. Humorist Liz Curtis Higgs said "Women love to laugh at themselves, but men seem to laugh at the other guy." A research study by J. B. Levine in the *Journal of Communication* reported that 63% of the humour used by women included self-disparaging comments, compared to only 12% by males. Note the gentler references to the opposite sex and the self-deprecation in the humour below:

Bob might say:

1. "Bachelors know more about women than married men; if they didn't, they'd be married too." Henry Louis Mencken
2. "Bachelors should be heavily taxed. It is not fair that some men should be happier than others." Oscar Wilde
3. "I don't think I'll get married again. I'll just find a woman I don't like and give her a house." Lewis Grizzard

Betty might say:

1. "The only time a woman really succeeds in changing a man is when he's a baby." Natalie Wood
2. "Sex when you're married is like going to a 7-Eleven. There's not as much variety, but at three in the morning, it's always there." Carol Leifer
3. "Men have higher body temperatures than women. If your heating goes out in winter, I recommend sleeping next to a man. Men are like portable heaters that snore." Rita Rudner

Nance Rosen, a syndicated radio talk show host and previous executive of Coca Cola Company, stated, "My experience is that for some male audiences, a woman really can't win over the crowd with humor . . . my experience proves that the best reason to use humor is to keep yourself laughing."

Although women's humorous voices may be either undervalued or considered inappropriate by Aunt Leona and the Bob's of the world, Betty and the rest of us are wise to treasure our own brand of it. After all, having our own style of humour is what saves us from unnecessary illness, relationship tension, insanity and becoming stale crusts of osteoporosis cronies. In the end both Bob and Betty need humour to celebrate, affirm their reality, survive and jive . . . sometimes with one another.

Patricia Morgan is a certified counsellor, speaker and author of *Love Her As She Is* and *She Said: A Tapestry of Women's Quotes*
She can be reached at 403-242-7796
or patricia@lightheartedconcepts.com or www.lightheartedconcepts.com