

**"NO FOOLIN'
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In 1939 a movie came out called THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME. As I recall, the movie opened with the Hunchback being carried through the streets of Paris on a wooden float of sorts. People along the way were shouting and carrying on. I couldn't tell what their mood was but it seemed ugly. Naturally I assumed that mischief was afoot, but I was mistaken. The Hunchback appeared to crouch rather than to stand or sit on the float. His body was crooked and his face was crooked. Even his mouth was crooked and I couldn't understand the sounds that were coming out of his mouth. He seemed happy, was even smiling a crooked smile, and on his head was a crown. What we were seeing on the screen was a procession proclaiming Quasimodo, the hunchback, King of Fools. It was a medieval celebration of April Fools' Day. I was 12 or 13 at the time and I found the whole scene revolting.

I have never been crazy about April Fool's Day. I'm not smart enough to think up clever tricks to play on people....and I am much too polite to play on anyone even if I could think them up. I don't like being made a fool of, and I am embarrassed when others are made to look foolish. And yet.....here it is April Fools' Day and here I am, in danger of making a real fool of myself..

In researching the web to learn more about the origin of April Fools Day I encountered lots of confusion. The celebration undoubtedly relates to celebrations of the vernal equinox and the arrival of spring. And this makes sense. Who doesn't want to cheer for light and lively April after the gloom and darkness of March?!

But many believe that the switch in the 1500's to the Gregorian calendar created the April Fools' holiday by changing New Year's Day to January 1st.

Under the Julian calendar, April 1st had been New Years Day. With communications being what they were in those days, lots of people did not get the message and continued to celebrate the New Year on April 1st. Wiser heads made fun of them and played tricks on them and the practice spread.

Now I am going to read to you directly from the computer another version of how the holiday got started.

" This was provided by Joseph Boskin, a professor of history at Boston University. He explained that the practice began when a group of court jesters and fools told the Roman Emperor that they could do a better job of running the empire. Constantine, amused, allowed a jester named Kugel to be king for one day. Kugel passed an edict calling for absurdity on that day, and the custom became an annual event.

"In a way, explained Prof. Boskin, 'it was a very serious day. In those times fools were really wise men. It was the role of jesters to put things in perspective with humor.'"

This explanation was brought to the public's attention in an Associated Press article printed by many newspapers in 1983. There was only one catch: Boskin made the whole thing up. It took a couple of weeks for the Associated Press to realize that they'd been victims of an April Fools' joke themselves.

Prof. Boskin is correct, however, when he says that the jester was really a wise man, one who dared to speak the truth with humor in the presence of the powerful. In the Middle Ages they

wore motley clothing and floppy hats with bells on them. They were sometimes considered special cases, touched by god with a childlike madness.

Sometimes a jester went too far in his criticism. Archibald Armstrong was a famous Jester in the court of King James. During his lifetime he was given great honors at court, but he soon overreached himself with his insults to important persons and was thrown out of the king's employment. Even after this, however, books were sold in the streets quoting his jests. I think that some of today's comedians play the role of court jester if we listen carefully.

Christopher Fry writes: "Comedy is not an escape from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith. It believes in a universal cause for delight, even though knowledge of the cause is twitched away [like a chair] from under us. [But instead of falling we] rest on our own buoyancy. In tragedy every moment is eternity; in comedy eternity is a moment. In tragedy we suffer pain; in comedy pain is a fool, suffered gladly."

And then there are the sacred clowns, the holy fools, like the clown e.e.cummings wrote of:

*One winter afternoon
(at the magical hour
when is becomes if)
a bespangled clown
standing on eighth street
handed me a flower.
Nobody, it's safe
to say, observed him but
myself; and why? Because
without any doubt he was
whatever (first and last)
most people fear most:
a mystery for which I've
no word except alive
--that is, completely alert
and miraculously whole;
with not merely a mind and a heart
but unquestionably a soul-
by no means funereally hilarious
(or otherwise democratic)
but essentially poetic
or ethereally serious:
a fine not a coarse clown
(no mob, but a person)
and, while never saying a word,
was anything but dumb;
since the silence of him
self sang like a bird.
Most people have been heard
screaming for international
measures that render hell rational
--i thank heaven somebody's crazy
enough to give me a daisy.*

In late summer of 1983 I sat around an open fire at a Peace Camp in the Sierra Nevada mountains. I was listening to Jim Wallis tell about a large group of people of all different religious denominations standing along the border between Nicaragua and Honduras and presenting themselves as a human shield against the Contra war. He then spoke of establishing a permanent presence in the border town of Jalapa, Nicaragua and bringing in delegations of Americans regularly to do the same thing: to come to Nicaragua and get to know the people and the reality of their situation, and then to head for the border and face down the contras.

Wallis was talking about the beginnings of an organization to be called Witness for Peace and I determined that night that I would join Witness For Peace and be part of that human shield. I was 56 years old and had never studied Spanish in my life, but I applied to be a "long term" witness in Nicaragua and was accepted!

It was a crazy time: The U.S had just invaded Granada and Witness for Peace was afraid that if they didn't get someone down there pretty quickly they might not get anyone down there at all. I believe that that was the only reason I made the cut. But make it I did, and four of us were sent for training in non-violence at the home of a Quaker couple in Philadelphia.

A week later I was in the home of a Nicaraguan family in the town of Esteli learning Spanish. After a month I began accompanying delegations from all over the United States to towns like Somotillo, Ocotal, San Francisco de Norte, and staying on farm cooperatives and in the homes of Nicaraguan peasants. . On Palm Sunday in Somotillo we joined a procession led by a mechanical Jesus wearing a large purple sombrero, reenacting the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We followed along, waving palms and cheering. That same day we traveled up into a little town in the mountains where Jesus was portrayed by a small boy on a donkey. We, the long term team and the visiting delegates, followed him up the cobblestone streets and into a church with no walls.

During the year that I was there I worked with folks from Iowa, Massachusetts, California, Michigan, Indiana, and even a group of African American civil rights activists—the old timers, the ones who had been in the fray for a long time and who knew the power of non-violence.

Over the years that Witness was there, hundreds of delegates experienced with the Nicaraguans joyful times like the Palm Sunday processions, and sorrowful times when the Nicaraguans were burying their dead. They documented atrocities, picked coffee and beans and corn, prayed and laughed and wept with the people, and went home to tell their neighbors about what they had seen.

We took it all very seriously, but it really was a crazy idea. And it worked. It didn't stop the Contra war, but it opened the eyes of hundreds of North Americans to the reality of the role of the United States in Latin American relations. It worked because a lot of people were willing to brave the discomforts of living in primitive poverty with the poor of Nicaragua and then to go to the border and line up wearing their white hats to face down the Contra rebels. Witness for Peace took a lot of heat for that Human Shield concept, and they soon dropped the phrase from their literature. Even within the peace movement we were often laughed at. But we were Fools for Justice; we were clowns for Peace.

In 1985 Witness for Peace sent a delegation to El Castillo on the San Juan river, which marks the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. There, 29 North Americans and several news correspondents boarded a barge and headed up the river on a peace mission. The purpose was to encourage the establishment of an internationally supervised demilitarized zone on the border. The existence of contra camps in Costa Rica had been an open secret for years. Contra leader Eden Pastora had announced on Costa Rican television the night before the Peace Flotilla set out that he had ordered his men to fire on the Witnesses.

From WITNESS FOR PEACE, by Ed Griffin-Nolan: "Pastora's threat made what would otherwise have been a barely noted cruise into a media spectacular. The day before the threat only two reporters of any significance had signed on. On the morning of August 5th as the witnesses left Managua, their bus was besieged by network camera crews, photographers, and reporters. Having heard the threat, the press were now falling all over one another to tag along. They appeared less interested in the story the witnesses had to tell than in the possibility that the witnesses might get their heads blown off trying to tell it."

The group was seized by a band of contras on Costa Rican soil on the morning of August 7th. They were held for 29 hours before they were allowed to re-board the barge and return to El Castillo. The people there greeted them with open arms, but the media and the State Department reported the event as if it were a circus. In one newspaper we were referred to as "Witless for Peace". But none of that diminished the worth of what those 29 "fools" did. Sometimes, in order to live up to our own beliefs, we must be fools, or jesters, and not care what the world thinks of us.

In the Islamic world Sufi mystics tell tales of Mulla Nasrudin, the legendary 14th century mystic jester of Tamerlane. He appears as the whimsical character in a growing tradition of stories. (Now I am quoting from Wikipedia) ".....Some mystic traditions use jokes, stories and poetry to express certain ideas, allowing the bypassing of the normal discriminative thought patterns. The rationality that confines and objectifies the thinking process is the opposite to the intuitive, gestalt mentality that the mystic is attempting to engage, enter, and retain."

Here is a simple example of a mulla Nasrudin story.

A preacher was being entertained at dinner and the other guests were praising his sermon. One of them turned to Mulla Nasrudin, who was at the talk, but had remained silent, and asked, "Mulla, what did you think of the sermon?" "OH, IT WAS ALL RIGHT," said Nasrudin, "ONLY HE PASSED UP THREE REAL GOOD PLACES WHERE HE COULD HAVE STOPPED."