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Silence as the Root of American Indian Humor: Further Meditations on the Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion

LAWRENCE W. GROSS

Let us begin with a simple observation: people like to laugh. The comic instinct can be found in every culture, including every form of humor from slapstick to the sublime. If we are interested in laughing with others rather than laughing at them, there seems to be a consensus in the literature as to what makes something funny, usually focusing on the nature of incongruities.¹ At its simplest, incongruity consists of creating a juxtaposition between two items that normally would not be associated with each other, the proximity of which causes surprise. If the surprise causes an emotional response of delight, especially at seeing the world in a new and different way, that delight will support the interpretation that the juxtaposition is humorous. The emphasis on incongruities helps explain the nature of humor. However, it might be argued that this explanation for humor is insufficient to account for the entire process. In discussing incongruities, the emphasis, to a large degree, is on phenomena that exist outside the mental frame and on the nature of the mental frame. The aspect of the humorous event that lies outside the mental frame need not be explored here. As regards the mental frame, humor theorists will generally consider notions of language and cultural expectations. For example, a native speaker will get the joke, while a non-native speaker will be left in the dark. When it comes to cultural expectations, finding humor in something that is sacred in another's culture most likely will not result in laughter on the part of one's conversation partner but instead could instigate a quick end to the cross-cultural encounter.

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In this article, I take the examination of humor one step further by meditating on the mental frame involved with humor. I am interested in what cultural experiences would predispose the individuals within a given culture to have a sense of humor in the first place. In other words, is there something prior to language and cultural expectations that prime individuals to be open to the comic? In the case of American Indians, the answer might be yes. There appears to be a close connection between the mental attitudes engendered by a silent, attentive mind and what John Morreall has termed the "comic vision."² I applied Morreall's notion of the comic vision to Anishinaabe culture and religion in a previous study of Anishinaabe humor.³ For this article, I argue for a connection between silence and humor in American Indian cultures, with the Anishinaabe serving as a case study. I see silence and humor as sharing an attitude of open-mindedness that allows the individual to experience the world as it is and to appreciate the world for what it is, complete with all the contradictions and incongruities that lead to humor. Additionally, silence supports another key feature of the comic mind, the ability to observe the world keenly. For the purposes of this article, though, the emphasis will be on open-mindedness, with my comments on observation serving as a side argument.

In any case, I will explore the connection between silence, humor, open-mindedness, and observation by first eliciting the manner in which being open-minded is essential to having a sense of humor. From there, the role of silence in American Indian cultures in general will be delineated. Because I am most familiar with the Anishinaabe tradition, I will focus on silence within their culture because their emphasis on silence opens them up to the world, in effect helping them to be open-minded. That stance opens the Anishinaabe to listening to the stories the natural elements have to tell. This is an important consideration because the Anishinaabe comic vision very much resides in and comes out of their storytelling tradition. The open-mindedness resulting from silence in Anishinaabe culture provides them, in part, with the basis to have a sense of humor and, because that open-minded attitude is common to the culture, it helps lead the Anishinaabe to adopt the comic vision and develop what could be termed a comic culture.

Before delving into these issues, however, a few caveats are in order. First, it should be noted that I am not trying to come up with an exclusive or complete theory about the basis for Indian humor. It is not the case that the connection between silence, open-mindedness, and humor is the only dynamic at work in Indian humor. Certainly in the modern age, much of Indian humor is related to survival humor in dealing with the ongoing genocide of American Indian people.⁴ It is also acknowledged that every American Indian nation is different. So the remarks being made here about the Anishinaabe may not necessarily apply to other Indian people. Hopefully the insights generated by this discussion will spur exploration of similar themes in other Native cultures.

As far as I have been able to ascertain from the scholarly literature, the connection between humor and open-mindedness leads in the direction from humor to open-mindedness. The general assumption seems to be that humor generates open-mindedness. One problem is that the term *open-minded*

is not used explicitly. Instead, the connection between humor and open-mindedness needs to be made more on the basis of inference. However, the connection does seem to be there. Thus, for example, Sammy Basu discusses the relationship between humor and open-mindedness in his argument about dialogic ethics and the virtue of humor.⁵ Basu is interested in finding ways to navigate between the ideal speech situation as promoted by Jürgen Habermas and the pessimistic view of the possibility of dialogue found in the writings of Judith Shklar. Without going into the details of the argument, Basu is trying to find some way that political dialogue can occur in a liberal democracy that will provide the participants with equal representation free of the intimidation and silencing of voices that can occur due to imbalances in power relations. He makes the basic argument that humor provides a means to disarm the power relationships and so allow individuals to stand more as equals in political dialogue. Allowing people to talk as equals is an ethical imperative. Basu is hoping to promote dialogic ethics. In his view, because humor can contribute to dialogic ethics it can be seen as a virtue, and so he develops the virtue of humor.

The manner in which humor contributes to the epistemological practices of dialogue in a liberal democracy is of critical concern to our purposes here. In examining humor as a mode of cognition, Basu argues that humor “contributes openness, playfulness, and pleasure to epistemological practices.”⁶ As can be seen, he does not explicitly refer to open-mindedness. However, it seems apparent that the “openness” he mentions can be equated with open-mindedness. To the degree an individual has openness in his or her epistemological processes, that individual is open-minded or, to put it another way, possesses open-mindedness. The same argument can be made regarding the other attributes Basu attributes to humor in relation to modes of cognition. Thus, humor “gives reason room to play” and humor “sustains reflection.” The word *room* can be seen as a metaphor for an open field of play. In a closed-minded individual, there is no room for reason to exercise itself. In an open-minded individual, the mind is open enough to provide reason with sufficient room to examine the “disorder of categories.” In sustaining reflection, humor “keeps the process of reasoning open-ended.” Like the room to play, the open-ended nature of the reasoning process is indicative of an open mind. In order for reasoning to be open-ended, the mind cannot be closed to possibilities. By necessity it needs to be open enough to entertain possibilities, including the “undecidable or confused or absurd.”⁷ So in all the aspects of humor as a mode of cognition that Basu uses to support his argument, the underlying connection is the attribute of open-mindedness. Because being open to argument is a fundamental tenet of political discourse, it is evident why Basu considers the open-mindedness that humor contributes to dialogic ethics a virtue. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note the connection between humor and open-mindedness.

Robert Roberts provides additional supporting evidence for the connection between humor and open-mindedness. Roberts is interested in techniques by which individuals can develop virtues.⁸ Central to his project is the notion of blithe humility.

The best expression I can think of for the virtue of having a sense of humor about oneself is *blithe humility*. Such a person is humble, but in a completely unlugubrious way. A sense of humor about oneself is a lack of defensiveness (in the Freudian sense) and thus a kind of self-transparency, or openness to “seeing” painful truths about oneself. For there is often something painful about seeing oneself as significantly incongruous, but the pleasure of being amused at this incongruity may mitigate the pain and open the heart. And since one can hardly expect to improve morally without acknowledging foibles, the truthfulness which blithe humility entails is fundamental to any moral character.⁹

As can be seen, the key operative words here are *openness* and *open*. Roberts argues that in order for moral character to develop, an individual must have some level of self-transparency and be able to see him- or herself in a frank and open manner to recognize the shortcomings in his or her character. Although it may be painful to uncover those inconsistencies that exist within oneself, doing so helps one develop as a better human being in the long run. Humor, Roberts believes, can and should be seen as a virtue because humor contributes to the ability to see oneself honestly and, therefore, help one develop one’s character. Of course, the openness Roberts discusses here is, in essence, the state of being open-minded, or open-mindedness.

In the case of both Basu and Roberts, however, it is not clear which comes first, humor or open-mindedness. Does humor create the conditions for being open-minded, or does being open-minded create the conditions for humor? Basu and Roberts seem somewhat confused on this point, and the argument could be made that both alternatives are present in their respective studies. The discussion to this point seems to favor the notion that humor creates the conditions for being open-minded. Thus, for example, Basu talks about how humor “contributes openness” to epistemological processes. Also, Roberts argues that humor allows oneself to be open to “‘seeing’ painful truths” about oneself. But they both implicitly suggest that humor can be used in a homeopathic manner to develop what is needed to have a sense of humor in the first place: an open mind. In other words, being open-minded creates the conditions for humor.¹⁰

As mentioned, Basu is interested in creating the conditions for political dialogue to be conducted in an ethical manner. However, for political dialogue to occur, the parties involved must be open to each other’s respective positions. Especially in a situation wherein a power imbalance adheres, how can the dispossessed get the powerful to open up? Basu thinks humor can serve this function.

In parodies and comedic dialogues, disparate positions and perspectives are thrown together, forcing reflection upon what might otherwise go unnoticed, or appear unrelated. As such, humor can gain entry into a closed mind. . . . Sometimes one laughs or finds something funny in spite of oneself, one has trouble keeping a straight

face, a joke “cracks one up.” A well-placed joke may, then, act like a firm prod or provocation to another to reconsider what she holds dear in herself and dire in others.¹¹

Basu is addressing the problem of closed-mindedness in political dialogue. He recognizes that an ethical political discourse cannot occur if one side is closed to hearing the arguments being made by the other side. The challenge is to open the mind of the party concerned. His prescription, as it were, is humor. Delivering a dose of humor improves the condition of the affected party. She now has the open-minded attitude to “reconsider what she holds dear in herself and dire in others.” It should be noted, however, that the aim is not to make the other party humorous but to make the other party open-minded so she can see the humor inherent in the situation. Open-mindedness provides the conditions for one to see the humor in the situation. In the situation Basu describes, humor is being used in a homeopathic manner. The closed-minded person is resistant to being open-minded. A small dose of humor, which requires an open mind, is delivered. The effect is to cure the closed-minded person of her malady and create a more open-minded attitude overall. Once an open-minded attitude is achieved on both sides, political discourse can continue. But, in any case, the point here is that open-mindedness is creating the conditions for humor to flourish. To appreciate the humor in a situation, one must first be open-minded enough to consider the incongruities upon which the humor is based.

A similar argument can be made in the case of Roberts. He writes,

We need, as part of our psychological repertoire, not just the right motivation, strong moral passions, and dispositions to see the world in moral terms: we also need capacities of openness or access to what is outside our character, capacities of self-transcendence.¹²

As with Basu, Roberts’s prescription is a good dose of humor. We have already discussed his emphasis on blithe humility. However, the central feature of the characteristic is a sense of humor about oneself that allows one to be open to the “painful truths” about one’s character. Roberts is trying to create within the individual an open-minded attitude. The homeopathic metaphor is instructive. In not being self-transparent, one is being closed-minded to one’s actual condition, in this case, one’s moral failings. A sense of humor opens oneself to broader possibilities and helps engender a more open-minded attitude. Once a state of open-mindedness is achieved, one can be open to what one normally thinks is outside one’s character. Being open in that manner introduces the possibility of change, of self-transcendence. But again, the dose of humor is being used to create what did not exist before—open-mindedness. Once administered, the dose of humor creates the conditions necessary for humor to exist in the first place, an open-minded attitude. Like Basu, in order to appreciate the humor in a situation, one must first be open-minded enough to consider the incongruities in one’s character upon which the humor is based.

Obviously, humor and open-mindedness are intimately connected, and it would be difficult if not impossible to tease apart all the various strands by which they are entangled. But if we are going to acknowledge that humor creates the conditions for being open-minded, we also need to recognize that being open-minded creates the conditions for humor. A similar dynamic is at work when it comes to silence and open-mindedness. As we turn to American Indian traditions, we will see there is a close connection between silence and open-mindedness.¹³ That open-mindedness creates favorable conditions for humor to flourish in their cultures, as exemplified by the Anishinaabe.

The role of silence in Native cultures is a little-examined phenomenon, yet it carries large implications for Indian conduct and beliefs. One of the underlying goals of this article is to encourage scholars to take a closer look at how silence functions in American Indian lives and cultures. Unfortunately, the scholarship to date on silence in Indian cultures is extremely limited and almost entirely focused on the linguistic aspects of silence in speech communication and rhetorical acts. Even so it can be demonstrated that, especially in regard to speech communication, silence connects to one important aspect of humor and open-mindedness: the development of powers of observation.

Keith Basso, a long-time student of the Western Apache in Arizona, did one of the more important studies of the linguistic uses of silence.¹⁴ He notes six situations in which, as one of his Apache informants put it, "it is right to give up on words."¹⁵ The six situations he examines are meeting strangers, early courting, children coming home after a long absence, getting cussed out, being with people who are in mourning, and dealing with patients at healing ceremonies. He concludes that,

- In Western Apache culture the absence of verbal communication is associated with social situations in which the status of focal participants is ambiguous.
- Under these conditions fixed role expectations lose their applicability, and the illusion of predictability in social interaction is lost.
- To sum up and reiterate: keeping silent among the Western Apache is a response to uncertainty and unpredictability in social relations.¹⁶

It might seem odd to include children coming home after a long absence, but the Western Apache have their reasons for this behavior. The situation most often refers to children coming home from boarding schools. Parents are not sure of the degree to which their children have retained their Apache customs and the degree to which they have adopted the ways of the mainstream culture. In other words, their status is uncertain. Under these circumstances, the Western Apache think it best for the parents to remain silent, sometimes for up to three days, and let the children talk so that they can reveal how they stand in relation to Apache culture.

As a matter of fact, the situation with strangers and early courting are somewhat similar in that the Western Apache prefer to allow what Basso calls the "focal participant" the opportunity to reveal him- or herself. When faced with an angry person or someone in mourning, the Western Apache believe the focal participant is at least temporarily unbalanced mentally. No amount of talking to the individual can change his or her state of mind. Instead, the

focal participant is left alone to calm down of his or her own accord. Patients at healing ceremonies are a special case. During the ceremony, they are plugged into sacred powers that can be unpredictable and dangerous. As a result, the Western Apache believe it is best not to talk to the patient once the healing ceremony has begun.

Although he does not say so explicitly, the situations described by Basso call for at least two things: respect for the focal participant and observation. In not talking to the focal participant, in remaining silent, the Western Apache are showing the highest degree of respect for the individual. The individual autonomy of one's conversation partner is acknowledged, and it is recognized that that person knows best either how to reveal him- or herself, as in the case of strangers and courting, or how to restore his or her mental balance, as in dealing with an angry person or someone in mourning. Additionally, all of these situations require the Western Apache to be observant. It is much easier to engage in the process of observation while maintaining silence, which points to the connection between silence and observation. There is also a connection between humor and observation. Along with an open-minded attitude, the strong affinity between silence and humor starts to manifest itself.

Two commentators have remarked on the importance of silence in Indian rhetoric. Marjorie Murphy concentrated more exclusively on rhetoric, and Lynn Osborn focused on silence in her discussion about educating American Indian children.¹⁷ Murphy is interested in exploring the power of Indian rhetoric. She wants to know what gives Indian rhetoric its force and argues that Indian rhetoric "has its source in the whole lifeview towards silence and respect for the *word*."¹⁸ She quotes Charles Eastman, a Dakota who wrote in the early twentieth century, in support of her observations, "Eastman called the silence 'The Great Mystery . . . the holy silence is His voice.' As the cornerstone of character, one derived self-control, true courage, endurance, patience, dignity, and reverence from it."¹⁹ The respect for silence and the word compels Indians to take care with the spoken word, which, in turn, lends power to Indian rhetoric. Osborn is concerned with the practical effects of silence on educating Indian children. She quotes Shirley Witt, an Iroquois anthropologist: "Silence is a thing of power. Beyond any utterance, the power of silence stands vast and awesome."²⁰ She goes on to argue that taking a stance in silence is an important traditional method for Indian education. Modern-day educators need to be aware of this cultural trait and not belittle Indians as "silent sitters."²¹ In their silence, they are learning.

What is of particular interest in both these articles is the articulation of the importance of silence in Indian cultures from old-time Indians who were well conversant with Native traditions. However, neither Murphy nor Osborn presents the quotes in full, which are worth repeating from their original sources. Murphy provides a telling quote from Charles Eastman:

The first American mingled with his pride a singular humility. Spiritual arrogance was foreign to his nature and teaching. He never claimed that the power of speech was proof of superiority over the dumb creation; on the other hand, it is to him a perilous gift. He

believes profoundly in silence—the sign of a perfect equilibrium. Silence is the absolute poise or balance of body, mind, and spirit. The man who preserves his selfhood ever calm and unshaken by the storms of existence—not a leaf, as it were, astir on the tree; not a ripple upon the surface of shining pool—his, in the mind of the unlettered sage, is the ideal attitude and conduct of life.

If you ask him: “What is silence?” he will answer: “It is the Great Mystery!” “The holy silence is His voice!” If you ask: “What are the fruits of silence?” he will say: “They are self-control, true courage or endurance, patience, dignity, and reverence. Silence is the cornerstone of character.”

“Guard your tongue in youth,” said the old chief, Wabashaw, “and in age you may mature a thought that will be of service to your people.”²²

Luther Standing Bear, a noted Lakota orator, delivered the following comments on the child-rearing practices native to his culture:

The conditions and surroundings of Lakota life were such that much depended upon the senses of hearing, seeing, and smelling. This keenness not only protected and aided in the procuring of food but also added much to the enjoyment of life. The senses of the Lakota were, I believe, developed to a degree that almost matched those of the animals that he caught for food. On the other hand, with senses alive and alert to the myriad forms of life about him, his own life was full and interesting. Half-dormant senses mean half living.

Training began with children, who were taught to sit still and enjoy it. They were taught to use their organs of smell, to look when there was apparently nothing to see, and to listen intently when all seemingly was quiet. A child who cannot sit still is a half-developed child.²³

But just as important were inner feelings that I believe came from natural experiences, but so fine that sources are hard to define and place. These senses were protective senses also and served well until the general disruption of our society took place. Then it was that we lost much of our inner power, which vanished at the same time with our physical attainments.²⁴

These quotes are almost maddeningly tantalizing in their hints at the degree to which silence influences Native cultures. It is readily apparent silence was and is a great cultural force among some Indian cultures. However, closer inspection reveals the limited number of observations we have on the subject. Basso deals with the Western Apache, and he does note that the Diné, or Navajo, have similar patterns regarding silence in relation

to speech.²⁵ Both Eastman and Standing Bear were members of the Great Sioux Nation. In effect, that only gives us examples from three nations at best. Even at that, the evidence is somewhat lacking. For example, Basso deals mainly with speech conventions, and any observations made beyond those parameters can be done only on the basis of inference. My own work on the Anishinaabe can perhaps start to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge. It is fairly clear that silence and its attendant mental state of concentration are important components to consider when examining Anishinaabe culture.

Starting with concentration, it seems the ability to maintain mental focus was a literal matter of life and death earlier in Anishinaabe history. Concentration was a survival skill for the old Anishinaabe. So, for example, when ice fishing in the winter, they needed to maintain a state of relaxed concentration. Missing the moment when a fish struck the line could be a matter of having supper that evening or going to bed hungry. This need to maintain a state of relaxed concentration crossed over into other areas of the traditional lifestyle of the Anishinaabe as well. For example, in the old days the woods were fraught with danger, such as cougars and enemies from other nations. Under these conditions, traveling in the woods, or even by canoe, required individuals to be on the alert, to maintain a state of concentration. So whether on the lookout for food or trouble, being able to maintain concentration was an important skill for the old Anishinaabe.

Silence was a matter of survival for the old Anishinaabe. It was very important for them to hear and not be heard. Imagine making a living in the wild. There are a couple of things about the traditional lifestyle that would compel a person to value silence. For example, silence was necessary for hunting. The old Anishinaabe did a great deal of hunting; it was a major source of food. Hunting was not a game or a sport. It was serious business. When hunting, silence must be maintained, and the hunter must listen for those clues that might help lead to tonight's supper so that tonight's supper will not hear the hunter and get away. If a hunter did not maintain silence, his family might go hungry.

Silence was an important part of their environmental condition, especially in winter. The men often spent weeks in the woods alone, hunting, being silent, and immersed in silence. Children were encouraged to immerse themselves in silence, that is, to spend time alone in the woods being quiet and taking in the world around them. Evidence from the literature supports these contentions. Ignatia Broker wrote an account of her ancestors in *Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative*.²⁶ Of interest is the section about a family traveling deep into the woods. In this case, the family wanted to move through the woods to escape detection by government agents. They wanted to remain free of federal interference in their lives. So they made a "silent, secret journey." The children were "told of the silence they must keep."²⁷ Though a fictionalized account, Broker's intention was to relate an accurate representation of traditional life, and her story provides our first hint of the importance silence could have had for the old Anishinaabe.

More to the point is the role of silence in the vision quest of young boys and girls. Young children were encouraged to spend time fasting alone in the woods, and, when the time came, they would go on a vision quest. The

Anishinaabe vision quest can last up to ten days. During this time, children refrain from eating or drinking. It is also customary for the quest to take place in a lonely and isolated location.²⁸

Unfortunately, the accounts provided in the literature are incomplete in their descriptions of the Anishinaabe childhood experience with fasting. During the late 1970s, I had the privilege of knowing Thomas Shingobe, an important spiritual leader of the Anishinaabe in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He related to me some of the deeper aspects of fasting and the vision quest from the traditional culture that went beyond the superficial descriptions provided by the scholarly literature. Of special importance was the emphasis placed on silence. While growing up, children were encouraged to spend time alone fasting in the woods. However, parents did not simply send their children into the woods to wander undirected. Instead, they were given instructions to maintain silence, pray, meditate on their lives, and observe the world around them. The same behavior was encouraged during the actual vision quest. So although it is true that the ultimate purpose of the vision quest was to obtain spiritual help, in my opinion there is too much focus on the acquisitive aspect of the vision quest. It is not simply the case that children are sent into the woods to acquire spiritual power. An additional, and perhaps more important, part of the quest is to encourage children to know themselves.

Basil Johnston, a noted Anishinaabe writer from Canada, made much the same point in a presentation.²⁹ He spoke from the oral tradition, not a prepared text. My account is based on his presentation, which I attended. He told an interesting story of an Anishinaabe who was visiting with an Anishinaabe elder to learn about the culture. Each day the elder sent him to a pond deep in the woods. The young man was instructed to look in the pond and report back to the old man what he saw. The young man did not realize the aims and purposes of the elder until years later when he came to a sudden understanding. The old man had sent him into the woods to find himself and discover who he was as a person. The teachings of Shingobe and Johnston indicate that the conclusions usually drawn in the literature about the vision quest—that it is primarily concerned with the acquisition of spiritual power—needs serious reconsideration.³⁰ It can be argued that the old Anishinaabe knew the value of silent meditation in helping an individual achieve not just power but an important additional goal—the need to “know thyself.”

Evidence exists that silence remains an important cultural factor for the Anishinaabe. Jim Northrup is an Anishinaabe writer who lives on the Fond du Lac Reservation in northern Minnesota. He writes a monthly newspaper column, the “Fond du Lac Follies,” relating the events in his life. Every spring he discusses making maple syrup. He gave the following account in his May 2001 column:

Before we went into the woods we gave the three grandchildren the standard lecture.

“We are quiet in the woods because this is the deer’s house and we are just visitors. See the tracks?”

When we went to gather the sap the kids got the standard lecture.

“Spilling sap is a felony, anyone spilling sap spends a night in the box. (Oh, wait a minute, that’s from *Cool Hand Luke*.) Just be careful with the sap. Remember, we are quiet in the woods.”

The laughter of the children broke the quiet rule as they run from tree to tree, laughing, wanting to be first to empty a full jug.

This has been a good learning season for the grandchildren. They learned to be quiet in the woods, to respect the gifts we have been given.³¹

Northrup’s quote indicates, in part, the pedagogical approach of the Anishinaabe. It may seem incongruent for Northrup to say the grandchildren learned to be quiet in the woods when they broke the quiet rule as they ran from tree to tree, wanting to be the first to empty a full jug. But the Anishinaabe know it is enough to impart the lesson and let children be children. The attitude will eventually find its way into the children’s consciousness. In time, they will learn the Anishinaabe ancestral wisdom and actually maintain silence while in the woods. Of special interest is what happens as a result of being quiet in the woods. Northrup provides another perspicacious comment in his April 2000 column.

While sitting around the fire with friends and family it is easy to tell stories. There is enough time for everyone to tell all the stories they want. Still, there is always more silence at the fire than stories. The sound of the fire and boiling sap tells its own story.³²

The sentence, “The sound of the fire and boiling sap tells its own story,” seems simple on the surface, but there is depth of meaning that extends far beyond superficial appearances. This is an entire aspect of the dialogic process that has been overlooked by the literature. This sentence reveals that natural elements, and the members of the natural world by extension, have their own story to tell and so engage in the dialogic process as well. In acknowledging that the natural world has its story to tell, several phenomena open up. Perhaps first and foremost is the need for human beings to be able to maintain silence when appropriate. Before one can hear the stories nature has to tell, one has to learn to be quiet, be comfortable with silence, and open one’s heart and mind to the wider world.

After one can open one’s heart and mind, nature begins to open itself up in turn. It then becomes apparent that the fire and the sap have their own story to tell. The complete manner in which storytelling permeates Anishinaabe life starts to become clear. This is why Northrup can say, “By gathering the stories throughout the year, I can mark the places we have been and expand the limits of where we can go.”³³ Northrup can mark the places he has been because he has listened to their stories. One important lesson he has learned is that the

seasonal cycles are an ever-unfolding story. No two seasons are the same, and each new season presents new twists, new possibilities on the patterns of the seasons. This is why he can also write that seasons are questions and answers, patterns and surprises.³⁴ They answer who we are. But they also pose new questions and in doing so challenge us to imagine new possibilities, to “expand the limits of where we can go.” Being silent helps the Anishinaabe expand the limits of where they can go. Taking a stance in quiet, keenly observing the world, and listening to the stories the natural world has to tell, in part, led the Anishinaabe to embrace what John Morreall has described as the comic vision.

The notion of the comic vision is based on the work of Morreall as discussed in his book *Tragedy, Comedy, and Religion*.³⁵ Because I have examined his ideas about the comic vision in relation to Anishinaabe culture elsewhere, I will not go into detail here but instead provide a brief summary of the topic.³⁶ In comparing the general characters of the tragic hero and the comic protagonist from ancient Greek theater, he argues that the comic protagonist, the character of interest here, takes a particular approach to dealing with conflict. The emphasis is on two specific features. First, the comic protagonist recognizes the limits and frailties of human beings. However, rather than struggling against them, as does the tragic hero, the comic protagonist instead chooses to use his wits to deal with problems. Acceptance of the limitations of human nature leads to the second feature of the comic protagonist, the ability to accept the world as it is. The comic protagonist feels very much at home in the world as it exists, complete with all its complexities and incongruities.³⁷ Morreall thus describes the comic vision as follows:

In the comic view, we live in groups. Much of our activity is for its own sake, and much of that is not serious. We play as well as work. And even when we are trying to accomplish something, taking risks can bring delight, whether or not we meet our goal. The adventure is rewarding in itself. When we are striving for a goal, too, we should not be emotionally engaged by every negative event, for emotions often make us less able to cope with problems. Besides, it feels better to laugh than to cry.³⁸

Morreall delineates twenty features of the comic vision as derived from cognitive and social psychology.³⁹ Included among them are complex conceptual schemes, a high tolerance for disorder, seeking out the unfamiliar, pragmatism, forgiveness, equality, embracing physical existence, and nonseriousness. As it turns out, the features of the comic vision are very much exemplified by the sacred stories of the Anishinaabe. Thus, for example, stories can be found of the culture hero of the Anishinaabe, Wenabozho, or Nanabush, seeking out the unfamiliar as he sets out on a new adventure. Oftentimes, he engages in foolish actions, for which he forgives himself and his “aunts and uncles” (that is, human beings). Wenabozho treats even the smallest animals as equals, and, in listening to Anishinaabe tell their sacred stories, it quickly becomes evident that the tales emphasize physical existence with their slapstick comedy and frequent references to anal humor.

The Anishinaabe have embraced the comic vision of their stories, and humor is very much a central component of Anishinaabe culture. This phenomenon has been remarked upon by a number of researchers.⁴⁰ The comic vision of Anishinaabe sacred stories has thoroughly penetrated Anishinaabe culture and religion. So the Anishinaabe do not simply have a religion that reflects the comic vision but an entire culture. Anishinaabe culture can be described as a comic culture.

What is at the basis of that comic culture? Of course, we do not want to reduce the complexities of Anishinaabe culture to any one phenomenon. However, the role of silence in the lives of the Anishinaabe should not be overlooked, especially in relation to their humor. Silence and humor share at least some features in common, and silence seems to prime the mental frame for humor. When maintaining a quiet, attentive attitude, at least three things seem to occur. First, silence helps open one's heart and mind to the world. Second, once the heart and mind are open to the world, one can make the next step and become a very keen observer of the world as well, able to discern and appreciate the inconsistencies and incongruities of life. For the Anishinaabe, observing the world helps make them good listeners. They can hear the stories the natural world has to tell. Finally, being good listeners helps them relate those stories by being good storytellers. And of course, as we have seen, the stories the Anishinaabe hear and best love to tell are the funny ones. At a minimum, having a sense of humor requires these traits as well. It is difficult, if not impossible, for a closed-minded person to have a sense of humor beyond the malicious "laughing at" type of humor. Humor requires an open mind. It is hard to know which comes first, the sense of humor or the open-minded attitude. In any case, they are obviously intimately connected. Any successful humorist also needs to be a keen observer of the world, able to discern skillfully, for example, the foibles and follies of human nature. Being able to observe the world is not enough, though. One needs to be able to relate the incongruities of life to others and be talented at telling a good joke. A good joke needs a good delivery.

Is silence the root of American Indian humor? It is probably best not to say it is *the* root. However, if we ignore the role of silence in American Indian life, we will miss a great deal of what accounts for the depth of American Indian cultures in general. We will also miss a great deal of what accounts for what my wife, who is a Japanese national, says was her American surprise: Indians are funny.

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NOTES

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1. John Morreall, "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 188–207; Robert C. Roberts, "Humor and the Virtues," *Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (June 1988): 128–29.

2. John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

3. Lawrence W. Gross, "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion," *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 436–59.

4. See, e.g., Vine Deloria Jr., "Indian Humor," *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969), 146–67; Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3–5. For an examination of Western Apache humor along these same lines, see Keith Basso, *Portraits of the Whiteman: Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). For Indian humor in an urban context, see Darby Li Po Price, "Red Wit in the City: Urban Indian Comedy," in *American Indians and the Urban Experience*, ed. Susan Lobo and Kurt Peters (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), 231–46. For an earlier version of Price's study of urban Indian humor, see Darby Li Po Price, "Laughing without Reservation: Indian Standup Comedians," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 22, no. 4 (1998): 255–71.

5. Sammy Basu, "Dialogic Ethics and the Virtue of Humor," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 7, no. 4 (1999): 378–403.

6. *Ibid.*, 387.

7. *Ibid.*, 388.

8. Roberts, "Humor and the Virtues," 147.

9. *Ibid.*, 142.

10. Homeopathy is a type of alternative medicine whose efficacy has not been fully established for treating illness by administering small doses of a substance that in a healthy person produce symptoms of the disease. For example, treating rabies by administering the diluted saliva of a rabid dog. The use of the homeopathic metaphor here is intended for heuristic purposes only and in no way should be taken in a literal manner.

11. Basu, "Dialogic Ethics and the Virtue of Humor," 392.

12. Roberts, "Humor and the Virtues," 142.

13. Of course, it should be noted that silence plays a role in other traditions as

well, although it is not the intention of this article to engage in a comparative enterprise. However, for more on silence, see Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Godman (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), especially the first three chapters, "The Nature of Silence," "The Basic Phenomenon of Silence," and "Silence as the Origin of Speech." Certain observations of Picard's regarding nature and silence need to be challenged. E.g., he writes, "Man is not, however, only a part of nature, but also spirit, and the spirit is solitary when man is connected with things only through silence, for the spirit needs to be connected with things through the word" (129). As will be seen in the following text, this is hardly the case. In being silent, the Anishinaabe hear the stories the natural elements have to tell. So rather than a solitary experience, one can connect on a very fundamental basis with the world through silence. Other individuals who have written about silence include Thomas Merton. For an example of his writing on the subject, see Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Books, 1961).

Silence plays a large role in Buddhism as well, as exemplified by the writings of the Dalai Lama; see Tenzin Gyatso, *Cultivating a Daily Meditation: Selections from a Discourse on Buddhist View, Meditation, and Action* (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1991). Zen Buddhism also places a heavy emphasis on silence. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*, trans. Mobi Ho, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). Another Zen master to consider is Dainin Katagiri, *Returning to Silence*, ed. Yûkô Conniff and Willa Hathaway (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1988). Although, his second book takes a slightly different approach: *You Have to Say Something: Manifesting Zen Insight*, ed. Steve Hagen (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998). Conrad M. Hyers has written extensively about humor and religion, including *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996) and *Zen and the Comic Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973). One of the better-known examples of Zen and humor involves the Japanese Zen priest Ikkyû Sôjun (1394–1481). See, e.g., James H. Sanford, *Zen-Man Ikkyû* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); Jon Carter Covell, *Unraveling Zen's Red Thread: Ikkyû's Controversial Way* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International Corp., 1980).

I compared the Zen and Anishinaabe traditions in a paper I delivered at the 1996 New England-Maritime regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion held at Harvard University, "Making the World Sacred, Quietly, Carefully: Silence and Concentration in the Sôtô Zen and Ojibwa Indian Experience." None of these works consider the connection between silence and humor, however, including my own paper. At a later date I plan to return to my comparative research on the Zen and Anishinaabe traditions, at which point I intend to add material on the role of silence and humor in these two areas of study.

14. Keith H. Basso, "'To Give Up on Words': Silence in Western Apache Culture," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1970): 213–30.

15. *Ibid.*, 217.

16. *Ibid.*, 227.

17. Marjorie N. Murphy, "Silence, the Word, and Indian Rhetoric," *College Composition and Communication* 21 (1970): 356–63; Lynn R. Osborn, "Traditional Requisites of Indian Communication: Rhetoric, Repetition, Silence," *Journal of American Indian Education* 12, no. 2 (1973): 15–21.

18. Murphy, "Silence, the Word, and Indian Rhetoric," 359. Emphasis in

original.

19. *Ibid.*, 360.

20. Osborn, "Traditional Requisites of Indian Communication," 17. The citation for the original source is as follows: Shirley Hill Witt, "Listen to His Many Voices: An Introduction to the Literature of the American Indian," in *The Way: An Anthology of American Indian Literature*, ed. Shirley Hill Witt and Stan Steiner (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), xxiv.

21. *Ibid.*, 19.

22. Charles A. Eastman, *The Soul of the Indian: An Interpretation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 88–90.

23. Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933), 69–70.

24. *Ibid.*, 72.

25. Basso, "To Give Up on Words," 227–28.

26. Ignatia Broker, *Night Flying Woman: An Ojibway Narrative* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983).

27. *Ibid.*, 27.

28. M. Inez Hilger, *Chippewa Child Life and Its Cultural Background* (St. Paul: Minnesota Society Historical Press, 1992; repr., Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1951), 39–48; Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 121–43.

29. Basil Johnston, "Keynote Address," Who Will Listen and Remember: Anishinaabeg of the Great Lakes Region Symposium on History, Culture, and Contemporary Issues, University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire, September 1999.

30. Probably the clearest example of the stress on the acquisition of spiritual power as the goal of the vision quest comes from Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes*. E.g., he writes, "Like their myths, Ojibwa visions emphasized the achievement of power and control. . . . The one fasting heard from the most powerful beings in the universe that they had a personal interest in his or her welfare and that they would help whenever needed or called upon. What a feeling of pride and self-importance the Ojibwa youth must have felt as a result of such a revelation!" (137). For another example, see A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View," in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, ed. Stanley Diamond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 46.

31. Jim Northrup, "Fond du Lac Follies," *The Circle: Native American News and Arts*, May 2001.

32. *Ibid.*, April 2000.

33. Jim Northrup, *Rez Road Follies: Canoes, Casinos, Computers, and Birch Bark Baskets* (New York: Kodansha International, 1997; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 97.

34. *Ibid.*, 37.

35. Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*.

36. Gross, "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion," 436–59.

37. Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*, 14–15.

38. *Ibid.*, 39.

39. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

40. Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion*, 93–94; A. Irving Hallowell,

“Some Psychological Characteristics of the Northeastern Indians,” in *Culture and Experience* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1955), 133, 145; J. A. Gilfallan, “The Ojibways of Minnesota,” *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* 9 (1901): 64.