

Why We Ridicule What We Love

Whether with politics, people, or religion, sometimes we mock the things we value. It's normal, but it stunts our lives.

She may have won the Pulitzer Prize and had the president of the United States *interview her*, not the other way around, but Marilynne Robinson isn't exactly known for having her pulse on pop culture. She doesn't pump out hits *a la* novelists like John Grisham. Instead, her works emerge years apart and are quiet, enduring, and thoughtful.

Recently, Robinson said something obvious yet profound, and we'd do well to listen. Robinson offered a brief Q&A at the National Book Festival in Washington DC, which I attended. In her books "Gilead" and "Lila," Robinson depicts religion positively, in contrast with the general vibe that Americans are irreverent and indolent, and indicating she believes many Americans have a deeply treasured friendship with a minister.

"It's part of our national character to ridicule what we value," she said at the festival. "And this makes it difficult to articulate what we actually value."

Freud Got Here First

Turns out this is a real thing, and shrinks have named it. Freud said that to deal with conflict the ego employs a range of unconscious defense mechanisms to ward off anxiety. Reaction formation "is a kind of psychological defense mechanism in which a person perceives their true feelings or desires to be socially, or in some cases, legally unacceptable, and so they attempt to convince themselves or others that the opposite is true, often in a very exaggerated performance."

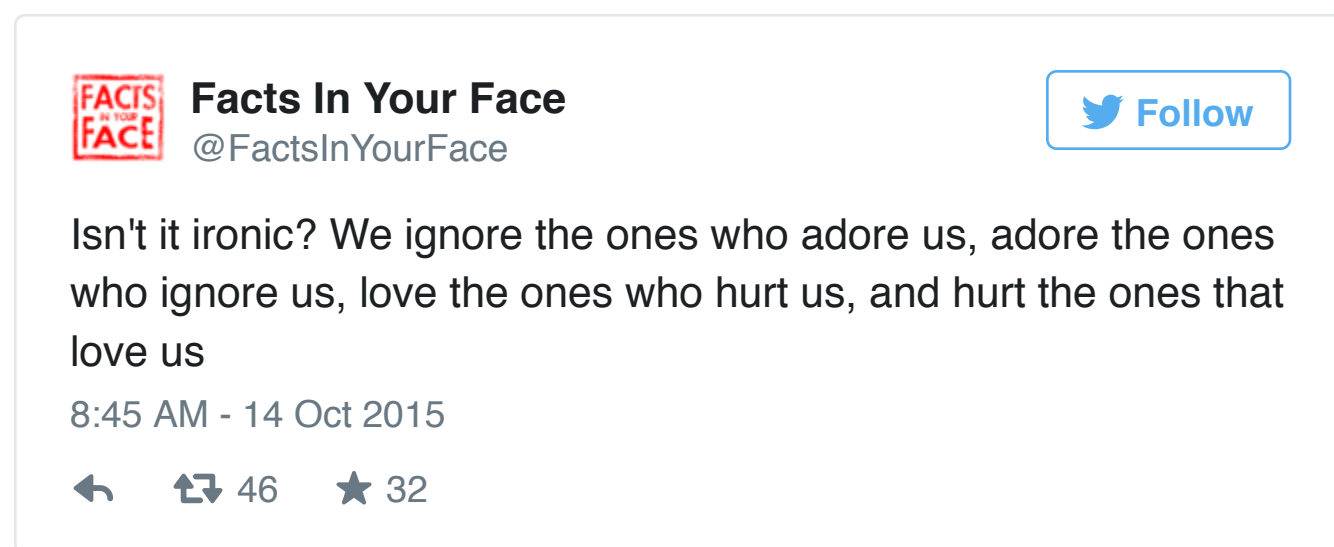
While the typical example of this is a closeted homosexual making gay jokes, I found it

more intriguing when viewing it through the lens Robinson mentions: That while quietly enjoying a close friendship with a pastor or finding rest in a quiet, peaceful prayer life, or hoping to foster a romantic relationship with someone we admire, we will ridicule or berate this person or thing.

April Masini, of the “Ask April” advice column, explained the phenomenon in an e-mail to me: “We mock what we admire because it gives us a feeling of having a closer relationship with it, than we otherwise wouldn’t have. When we mock what we admire, we’re talking about it, and by doing so, creating a more intimate relationship with it than we’d have if we didn’t... You can’t mock what you don’t know. And so what you mock, is what you’re close to.”

What Does This Look Like?

You may thinking *psh, I don't do this*. But you do. We all do. For example, recently this tweet popped up on my feed and I found it a profound summary of the thing we all do but wish we didn't.



Ironic, yes, but unusual, no. Why? One theory: Lori J. Warner, a behavior analyst and director of the Center for Human Development and Ted Lindsay Foundation HOPE Center, told me via e-mail that mocking something you admire “depends on why the person is trying to hide his or her true feelings—for example, do they think they will be thought less of or ostracized somehow if they admit the true feelings? In that case, it may function as a self-defense strategy related to social acceptance/inclusion.”

Criticizing What We Love Is a Defense Mechanism

This seems to be particularly true among political aficionados and within religious circles. For years I truly admired a particular politician. Over time, she began to say things publicly that sounded a bit nuts and got her criticized. Despite feeling, deep down, that she was misunderstood and still admiring her, I found myself jumping on the bandwagon whenever she was publicly criticized. This was partly because I didn't think anyone would understand my prolonged (yet justifiable) admiration, but also I didn't want to be criticized myself.

Similar things often occur regarding prayer or fervently religious people. Carole Lieberman, a psychiatrist and best-selling author, says someone experiencing reaction formation "tries to convince himself and others that he feels the opposite way by exaggerating his behavior. For example, if someone is afraid that his deep religious beliefs and rituals will be mocked, he might mock others for theirs, hoping for approval."

For example: You adore this certain woman but think she's too good for you. So you take a jab at her favorite movie, just to keep that distance. Or you attempt to heal from a broken relationship with a lover you still admire by scoffing at his new girlfriend or making fun of his new job. How about the way you make fun of a pastor's mannerisms at lunch, despite being particularly motivated by his sermon that very morning?

Masini further elaborated, "We mock what we admire because it distances us from what we think we'll never have, and the distance preempts failure at a relationship with it. I see this a lot when people want to have a relationship with someone they think is out of reach, so instead of giving it a shot, they torpedo the relationship before getting to hello, because their commitment to failure is greater than their commit to winning a relationship while risking rejection."

What We Should Do About It

Although this defense mechanism is somewhat subconscious, it's also unhealthy and destructive. Instead of defensively over-reacting through scorn, whenever possible we

Despite feeling, deep down, that she was misunderstood and still admiring her, I found myself jumping on the bandwagon whenever she was publicly criticized.

should strive to examine why we're responding that way and embrace the potential intimacy or feelings of rejection (as the case may be).

Whenever possible we should strive to examine why we're responding that way and embrace the potential intimacy or feelings of rejection.

Ryan Hammill at Sojourners **inferred** one solution: "Our lack of solitude may be related to our habit of ridiculing what we value. With the ubiquity of cars, computers, cell phones, and social media, the quietude of Gilead is no longer an identifying feature of the American landscape. Without the space to think long thoughts on our own, we always think for an audience—real or hypothetical. And aware of an audience, we tailor and adjust our thoughts based on immediate reactions, or at least the reactions

we imagine getting."

That is a very Robinson-esque solution, and Hammill is on to something. But I think it goes deeper than wanting to react to a specific audience, though that's certainly part of it. I think we scramble to ridicule the people and things we love because rejection, personal or public, is intensely painful. To be rejected chips away at the trunk of core human needs, *a la* Maslow's **hierarchy**: to self-actualize, to have esteem, and be loved and belong. Yet to react to those things through derision only widens the chasm of self-actualization; it only further delays intimacy with the people and issues that truly matter.

On the other hand, if we faced the fact that a person we admire or love has rejected us, if we realized our deep need for spiritual connection with God through prayer, and restrained from reacting contempt, it might ultimately propel us toward relationships that are mutually edifying—personally, politically, and spiritually.

Wouldn't this be so much more illuminating and beneficial long-term than the split-second devilish glee we feel when we say that thing we mean to say, yet the moment we say it, feel such terrible and shameful regret? Mocking what we admire might be natural and feel good momentarily, but we can enjoy a lifetime of benefits when we learn lessons from those who reject us, and draw closer to spiritual renewal, however unpopular or unsafe that might feel.

Nicole Russell is a senior contributor to The Federalist. She lives in northern Virginia with her husband and four kids.
