

On Humor As a Spiritual Path



THE GOD OF

aBsuRdiTY

BY PAUL KRASSNER



I FIRST WOKE UP AT THE AGE OF SIX.

It began with an itch in my leg. My left leg. But somehow I knew I wasn't supposed to scratch it. Although my eyes were closed, I was standing up. In fact, I was standing on a huge stage. And I was playing the violin. I was in the middle of playing the Vivaldi *Concerto in A Minor*. I was wearing a Little Lord Fauntleroy suit—ruffled, white silk shirt with puffy sleeves, black velvet short pants with ivory buttons and matching vest, white socks and black patent-leather shoes. My hair was platinum blond and wavy. On this particular Saturday evening—January 14, 1939—I was in the process of becoming the youngest concert artist in any field ever to perform at Carnegie Hall. But all I knew was that I was being taunted by an itch. An itch that had become my adversary.

I was tempted to stop playing the violin, just for a second, and scratch my leg with the bow, yet I was vaguely aware that this would not be appropriate. I had been well trained. I was a true professional. But that itch kept getting fiercer and fiercer. Then, suddenly, an impulse surfaced from my hidden laboratory of alternative possibilities, and I surrendered to it. Balancing on my left foot, I scratched my left leg with my right foot, without missing a note of the concerto.

Between the impulse and the surrender, there was a choice—I had *decided* to balance on one foot—and it was that simple act of choosing which triggered the precise moment of my awakening to the mystery of consciousness. *This is me!* The relief of scratching my leg was overshadowed by a surge of energy throughout my body. I was being engulfed by some kind of spiritual orgasm, by a wave of born-again ecstasy with no ideological context. No doctrine to explain the shock of my own existence. No dogma



to function as a metaphor for the mystery. Instead, I woke up to the sound of laughter.

I had heard that sound before, sweet and comforting, but never like this. Now I could hear a whole *symphony* of delight

and reassurance, like clarinets and guitars harmonizing with saxophones and drums. It was the audience laughing. I opened my eyes. There were rows upon rows of people sitting out there in the dark, and they were all laughing together. They had understood my plight. It was easier for them to identify with the urge to scratch than with a little freak playing the violin. And I could identify with them identifying with me. I knew that laughter felt good, and I was pleased that it made the audience feel good—but I hadn't *intended* to make them laugh. I was merely trying to solve a personal dilemma. So the lesson that I woke up to—this totally nonverbal, internal *buzz*—would serve as my lifetime filter for perceiving reality and its rules. If you could somehow translate that buzz into words, it would spell out: *One person's logic is another person's humor.*

There was, of course, an objective, scientific explanation for what had occurred. According to a textbook, *Physiological Psychology*, "It is now rather well accepted that 'itch' is a variant of the pain experience and employs the same sensory mechanisms." But for me, something beyond an ordinary itch had occurred that night. It was as though I had been zapped by the god of Absurdity. I didn't even know there was such a concept as absurdity. I simply experienced an overpowering awareness of *something* when the audience applauded me for doing what I had learned while I was asleep. But it was only when they laughed that we had really connected, and I imprinted on that sound. I wanted to hear it again. I was hooked. And the first laugh was free.



It was as if I had been destined to become a stand-up comic and editor of *The Realist* (1958-2001), a countercultural magazine with the credo, “Irreverence is our only sacred cow.” Although I was notorious for publishing outrageous social and

political satire, I also published investigative journalism and conspiracy theory. I researched cults, from the Moonies to Scientology, and assassinations, from President Kennedy to Charles Manson. In the process, I underwent a paranoid freak-out from information overload.

But I could still pass for sane in public. At the peak of my psychotic episode, I still managed to keep a dental appointment without revealing the utter turmoil in my mind. However, I was on a bus from San Francisco to my home in Watsonville, and my thumb began to feel numb. It was obviously a direct result of the cavity in one of my molars having been filled. When the bus stopped in San Jose, I got off and called my dentist.

“I know who you work for,” I said, “and I have two demands. I want everybody out of solitary confinement. And I want a cease-fire all over the world.”

He hesitated a second. “Hold on, Paul, let me get your chart.” He was stalling for time. When he got back on the phone, he asked, “Now, do you want my reaction?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’ve gotta go. Goodbye.”

I hung up the phone and got back on the bus. The man sitting in front of me, clearly an operative for the CIA, adjusted the ring on his finger in order to let his partner outside know that I was on the bus again. I had to let the man in front of me know that I was onto his game. So I took out my ballpoint pen. Clicking the top over and over like a telegraph key—this was before cell phones—I kept repeating, “Paul Krassner calling Abbie Hoffman”—just loud enough for the CIA guy in front of me to hear. He fidgeted nervously. He knew I was onto him.

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My mind had finally snapped. Allen Ginsberg’s poem *Howl* began, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,” and I had always identified with the “best minds” part but never with the “madness” part. Eventually I told Abbie Hoffman (fellow Yippie founder) who was on the lam as a fugitive, how I had tried calling him on the bus with my pen.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “I got your call, only it was collect, so I couldn’t accept it.”

The turning point in my insanity came inadvertently one day while hiding out with my friend Lee and his wife, Guadalupe. I was sitting in the back seat of his car at a gas station. While Lee was out of the car, I noticed two guys staring at me. Just as I was convincing myself that now *they* were out to get me, I flashed back five years to the West Side Highway in New York. My secretary Sheila was driving her motor scooter, with me sitting behind her, my arms circling her waist. She was wearing a miniskirt. Truck drivers were making animal sounds and whistling. “They recognize me,” I joked to Sheila. And now, the moment I realized that these two guys in the gas station were staring, not at me in the back seat, but at Guadalupe in the front seat, my perspective began to return. I would be okay again.

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Losing my sense of humor had been the direction of my insanity. I had violated the 11th Commandment by taking myself as seriously as my causes. I developed an investment in my craziness, and I needed to perpetuate it. Only in retrospect would I realize that what my dentist had said in response to my megalomaniacal demands—"Hold on, Paul, let me get your chart"—was unintentionally, screamingly funny. By publishing controversial articles, I had been on a mission from the God I didn't believe in. I had bought into a *celestial* conspiracy. I had gone over the edge, from a universe that didn't know I existed, to one that did. From false humility to false pride.



In 1987 I went to a chiropractor, who referred me to a podiatrist, who referred me to a physiatrist, who wanted me to get an MRI to rule out the possibility of cervical stenosis. But the MRI ruled it *in*. The X-rays indicated that my spinal cord was being

squeezed by spurring on the inside of several discs in my neck. The physiatrist told me that I needed surgery. I panicked. I had always taken my good health for granted. I went into heavy denial, confident that I could completely cure my problem by walking barefoot on the beach every day for three weeks. "You're a walking time bomb," the doctor warned me. He said that if I were in a rear-end collision, or just out strolling and I tripped, my spinal cord could be severed, and I would be paralyzed from the chin down. I began to be conscious of every move I made. I was living, not one day at a time, not one hour at a time, not one minute at a time—I was living one *second* at a time.

A *walking time bomb!* I was still in a state of shock, but since I perceived the world through a filter of absurdity, now I would have to apply that perception to my own situation. The breakthrough came when I learned that my neurosurgeon moonlighted as a clown at the circus. "All right, I surrender, I surrender." *Paralyzed from the chin down!* I tried dialing—that is pushing—my wife Nancy's phone number with my nose. I fantasized about using a voice-activated word processor to write a novel called *The Head*, in which the protagonist finally dies of suffocation while performing cunnilingus because he can't use his hands to separate the thighs of the woman who is sitting on his face.

I met my doctor the night before the operation. He sat on my bed wearing a trench coat and called me Mr. Krassner. I thought that if he was going to cut me open and file through five discs in my upper spinal column, he could certainly be informal enough to call me Paul. He was busy filling out a chart. "What do you do for a living, Mr. Krassner?"

"I'm a writer and a comedian."

"How do you spell comedian?"

Rationally I knew that you don't have to be a good speller to be a fine surgeon, but his question made me uneasy. At least his *hands* weren't shaking while he wrote. Then he told me about how simple the operation was, and he mentioned almost in passing that there was always the possibility I could end up staying in the hospital for the rest of my life. *Huh?* There was a time when physicians practiced positive thinking to help their patients, but now it was a requirement of malpractice prevention to provide the worst-case scenario in advance.

Early the next morning, under the influence of Valium and Demerol, I could see that my neurosurgeon had just come from the circus, because he was wearing a clown costume, with a round, red plastic nose above his surgical mask. He could hardly reach the operating table because his outlandishly big pointed shoes were so long, and when he had to cleanse my wound he asked the nurse to please pass the seltzer bottle....

"Wake up, Paul," the anesthesiologist said. "Surgery's over. Wiggle your toes." Nancy was waiting in the hall, and I was ever so glad to see her smile. That evening, at a benefit in Berkeley, Ken Kesey told the audience, "I spoke with Krassner today, and the operation was successful, but he says he's not taking any painkillers because he never does any legal drugs." Then Kesey led the crowd in a chant: "Get well, Paul! Get well, Paul!" And it worked. The following month I was performing again, wearing a neck brace at a theater in Seattle.

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In 1976, I attended a symposium held in Sun Valley, Idaho, “The American Hero: Myths and Media,” where I delivered a keynote address. I met Tom Laughlin, of *Billy Jack* movie fame, at the conference, and a few years later he invited me to a dinner party.

He was a Thomas Jefferson enthusiast. In his home, there was Thomas Jefferson’s furniture, Thomas Jefferson’s silverware, Thomas Jefferson’s recipes—we started with peanut soup—and even Thomas Jefferson’s violin. I mentioned playing the violin as a child, and Laughlin invited me to play this one. I hadn’t held a violin for 25 years—not since I had used it as a prop when I started doing stand-up comedy—and four decades had passed since that concert in Carnegie Hall. It felt like a previous incarnation. But now Billy Jack himself was handing me Thomas Jefferson’s violin.

“I’d like to dedicate this to Thomas Jefferson’s slaves,” I said.

And then I played the only thing I felt competent enough to perform—“Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” While I was playing, I stood unobtrusively balancing on my left foot, and scratched my left leg with my right foot.

It was a private joke between me and the god of Absurdity.

