

Capstone: *Surviving Life with Humor*

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Course Description and Objectives

Disorders stemming from social anxiety have been increasing in the developed world over the last few decades, especially among the younger generations. In an ironic twist, the massively interconnected world created by technological advances has resulted in increased isolation among certain populations. Humor is a very powerful tool that can be used to navigate a myriad of social situations that may cause us anxiety and distress. Knowing yourself, and understanding the power of a well-honed sense of humor will serve you well, as you complete and review your education, and leave Boston College for the “real world.” Furthermore, since universal entities such as humor and music transcend individuals, communities, and cultures, humor can often be a tool that helps us reach out and make connections with others from different walks of life. This course will study the Capstone foundations of spirituality, vocation (or work), citizenship, and relationships through the lens of humor, and hopefully, equip you with yet another valuable tool to achieve success as you embark on the next chapter of your lives.

Humor and Emotional Intelligence

A well-honed sense of humor is a powerful tool that considerably enhances an individual’s emotional intelligence. It also acts as a valuable internal moral barometer that allows us understand ourselves, clearly defining our values, and guiding us towards becoming more self-aware. A good sense of humor also plays a subtle role in kindling critical values such as empathy and equanimity within ourselves; values that strengthen character and help us navigate life during unexpectedly tough times, or enable us to identify another’s point-of-view, and resolve our differences as adults. In today’s deeply polarized world, where compromise is quickly disappearing at an age it is needed the most, this type of emotional intelligence is unequivocally vital. An aim of this course is to help you sharpen these powerful, innate tools and develop values and attitudes that will serve you well in life.

Using Humor to Engage, Learn and Educate

Humor can be used to initiate a dialogue on issues that are uncomfortable, impolite or even taboo in our day-to-day lives. For example, stand-up comedians such as George Carlin, Chris Rock and Bill Burr have done an excellent job in tackling awkward subjects such as domestic violence, racism, sexism, gun rights, and religion in open forums. They force us to have conversations, and confront the ugly underbelly of what is otherwise considered to be “polite” society. Humor is also an excellent medium through which to educate the masses, and to shine a light on issues that we generally consider to be boring and difficult to grasp, such as gerrymandering or net neutrality. Over the years,

comedians such as Jon Stewart and John Oliver have emerged as such modern stalwarts who spearhead this type of difficult discussion to disseminate valuable information to the public. We will study some of these examples throughout the semester, and examine how infusing some humor into our lives may help deal with similar problems with minimal hassle. In an effort to make this part of the course more interactive and enjoyable, we will use an anthology of essays on modern ethics for in-class discussions, where hopefully, we debate serious subjects in a lively yet humorous forum. We will learn to acknowledge another point of view with empathy, or convey our own ideas with humor and humility.

A World Without Humor

Once we dissect the four Capstone foundations of spirituality, citizenship, vocation and relationships, we will ponder the existence of a world without humor by reading a classic work of dystopian literature: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Would you be able to put up with a life completely devoid of humor, or a world where any emotive joy (such as art or music), is suppressed? It is certainly chilling to imagine such an existence. Our discussion will help us seriously appreciate what we take for granted in our lives today. Dystopian literature will also allow us to refer back to the four foundations of Capstone, and identify how essential these fundamental aspects, along with humor, music and joy are to leading a truly well-rounded and fulfilled life.

Humor and the Capstone Foundations

Throughout the semester, we will focus on each of the individual Capstone foundations mentioned above, and with carefully chosen readings on each topic, we will examine the role of humor in each case. Additionally, as pointed out earlier, we will also examine how humor can be utilized to educate, debate, and even resolve conflict within each of these different areas, while maintaining respect and minimizing hostility with those we engage. As a secondary tier of the course, we will discuss how music, similar to humor, can be used to build bridges and dissipate any primal aggressions due to its universal appeal to people from all walks of life.

The Reading List

All the readings required for this course are articles or chapters that will be uploaded onto Canvas. The bibliography below contains the full list, as well as some optional titles. What follows is a brief preview of the course material and a weekly outline of the road map for the semester, highlighting a few key readings.

Spirituality

This is arguably the most abstract and personal of the four underpinnings of Capstone. As you prepare to embark on independent lives, it would be worth to look back on how spirituality has shaped your journey thus far, and how you expect it to affect your future. We can address the similarities and differences among us regarding a spiritual life (e.g. casual traditions vs. non-negotiables), and explore if humor has a place in our spirituality.

We will spend some time exploring how a joyful, soulful life can be independent of any specific religious doctrine, and closely examine the extent to which humor is allowed into our daily spiritual life. Some overarching questions to ponder during this section of the course may include:

- What does spirituality mean to you: is it simply faith in practice?
- Is this a topic that may cause friction or hostility as you venture into the real world, and if so, can a sense of humor help you navigate these waters?
- Is your spiritual life defined by your personal “moral compass”? Does a sense of humor help you calibrate this moral compass?
- Can you allow humor into your spiritual life, to make it more enjoyable? Does music play any part in enhancing your spirituality?

Vocation and Work

In contrast to spirituality, the most tangible and practical of the Capstone foundations is *vocation* (or *work*). Since this topic is very relevant to many of you who will be graduating in a few months, we will set aside some time to discuss numerous practical topics such as the interview process, resume development, and general aspects of job-hunting, using a very popular book by Richard N. Bolles. We will also read parts of an autobiography by Richard Feynman, the Nobel laureate who truly lived a remarkable life. The text in question takes us through his formative years, through his time at MIT and Princeton, and would be particularly helpful to those of you heading to graduate school, or embarking on a new career. Mr. Feynman is an extremely popular historical figure, and this text embodies the intrinsic humor in the numerous life decisions he made, within the historical backdrop of World War II and the Manhattan Project. His story will exemplify the value of incorporating humor into our lives, and the absolutely critical relationship between happiness and work that is basic to any fulfilled life. This section of the course promises to be lighter than the previous, but will still be full of important lessons to prepare you for what lies ahead. A few overarching questions for discussion may include:

- What are your plans after graduation? How rigid are your expectations?
- Is there a difference between a *career* and a *job*? Is one “better” than the other?
- Is there an inextricable connection between “happiness” and “vocation”?
- Can humor defuse any inherent hostility or disdain we may have for others based on their work? e.g. lawyers, police, financiers etc.
- Would ethical concerns prevent you from pursuing a specific job?

Citizenship

Based on the Jesuit values perpetuated at BC, good citizenship is central to the overall educational experience here. One may argue that good citizenship encompasses a range of ideals, from simple actions such as paying taxes or attending jury duty, to those that have far-reaching consequences, such as having empathy for those traditionally marginalized in society, based on wealth, race, class, or gender. Good citizenship is also

inextricably linked to the Jesuit tradition of volunteerism, and therefore, to corporate social responsibility. Are we willing to make sacrifices as good citizens, to make society better? We will explore the collective nature of citizenship, and contrast it with our personal, individual rights and choices (a perfect example would be the different reactions of people during the pandemic). Defining the line that strikes the perfect balance between liberty and security is difficult, mainly due to our cultural diversity; tempering our passion with good humor during debates that deal with such issues will therefore be an extremely valuable tool in life. Discussions related to good citizenship would be an excellent forum to practice using your finely-honed sense of humor to defuse any anxiety or tension. Some questions of interest may include:

- What are your experiences in volunteerism, as part of the BC Jesuit tradition?
- Is volunteerism inherently selfless, or is the answer subtler than it appears?
- Is good citizenship universal, such as humor or music?
- Could a company's social responsibility policy sway you into accepting a job?

Relationships

We live in a world where impressive advancements (such as the highest gender equality index, and massive technological innovations) are coupled with new problems (such as a crippling climate crisis, and debilitating income inequality). Moments of alternating social progress and retrogression will continue to leave their imprint on personal and societal beliefs, invariably affecting our relationships (consider the #MeToo and #BLM movements and challenges to these movements). For this section of the class, we will focus primarily on a contemporary play by Edward Albee that won the Tony Award, and was a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize in 2003. The play (among many things) is a commentary on the limit of acceptance towards unconventional relationships; a dark comedy that exposes serious subject matter through subtle, almost absurdist humor, and sets the scene for us to reflect on our own relationships, and how they evolve. We will share our views on "traditional" relationships, and discuss our personal bounds of approval. Being the most emotive of the four Capstone foundations, this section of the course promises many passionate discussions, infused with good humor. A few discussion topics may include:

- Does humor have a place in your daily relationships?
- What are your limits on social acceptance and approval?
- Have you ever been exposed to, or been part of a "twitter mob," the modern-day equivalent of communal judge-and-jury? How would you react to one?

Review Your Boston College Education

An integral part of the Capstone Program at BC involves a retrospective look at the past four years, and a detailed review of your education here. As a required exercise, each of you will evaluate in detail all pertinent educational milestones at BC. How has your education at Boston College shaped your life thus far? Has humor had a role in your life as you completed your education here? Do you expect it to have a place in your life in

the future, as a possible asset? A written report reflecting upon your BC education will be a mandatory, graded deliverable of the course. We will of course discuss the details and guidelines in class, well before the due date.

Assignments and Grading

As outlined above, we have a broad range of potential readings (bibliography attached at the end) to drive us forward through the semester. We may add or subtract from this list as the semester progresses. The tentative set of deliverables, and their overall weighted percentages towards your final grade are as follows:

- **Participation (20%)**: this should be obvious, and is absolutely necessary, because individual contributions are crucial to a successful seminar course. Thoughtful observations based on the readings, and/or original ideas that propel the discussions are the basic requirements. We can always discuss any anxieties you may have regarding this either one-on-one, or as a group in class. Despite being subjective, we will agree on a basic rubric regarding participation, just for grading purposes.
- **Reflections (20%)**: you will be expected to write a reflection (1-2 pages, submitted electronically via Canvas) based on the readings for each class. These would help you stay engaged and up-to-date with the class material, and your ten best efforts will account for your final grade for this section. Failing to submit a weekly reflection may affect your final grade.
- **In-class Presentation (20%)**: in an effort to prepare you for presentations that may arise on potential job interviews, you will be expected to make a short presentation based on the subject area you pursued at BC. Select a specific topic in which you are fluent, and consider yourself to be a passionate expert, and make a presentation to the class. Be ready to answer our questions with deftness and good humor!
- **BC Education Review (20%)**: this written assignment, described briefly above, should be completed before the mid-term break. We will spend some time in class answering questions and outlining specific expectations, a few weeks before the due date (see weekly breakdown).
- **Final Term Paper (20%)**: essentially as a continuation of the first assignment, this write up should focus more on what you have (hopefully) learned from this class; how it may have changed you, and any tools/lessons that would be of practical benefit in the future, focusing on the four Capstone foundations through the lens of humor.

Final letter grades will be based on the sliding ladder generally adopted by Boston College, with room for scaling scores if necessary. Please feel free to talk to me if you have any anxieties over grades in this relaxed seminar course.

Attendance

Missing a seminar class makes no sense; but up to a maximum of two excused absences may be tolerated. More absences or constant tardiness may affect your final grade.

Academic Integrity

Please familiarize yourselves with Boston College's definition and policy regarding academic integrity, and make sure to abide by these ethical standards (in our class discussing morality!): <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/political-science/undergraduate/academic-integrity.html>

Any form of cheating in this class would be particularly silly. Please talk to me if you have any concerns or doubts about the material. You will be treated as adults, and expected to behave with maturity.

Weekly Breakdown

- I. Introductions
Overview of the syllabus
Expectations of the class

BREAK

Interactive exercise and discussion: The Myers-Briggs test
Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay on *Human Nature* for discussion in **2 weeks**

- II. Humor in Our Day-to-Day Lives (Capstone foundations: Spirituality & Relationships)
Discussion of reflections based on readings for this 2-week period:
- Fr. Martin: *11 ½ Reasons for Good Humor* (34 pages)
 - Kile, Part One: *Rationale for Humor and its Implementation* (29 pages)
 - Kile: *Humor and Conversation* (32 pages)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *Goodbye, Mr. Gordon*
First discussion on individual presentation scheduling
Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Human Nature* (uploaded onto Canvas)

- III. Job Hunting (Capstone foundations: Vocation)
Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:
- Feynman: pages 52-71 (uploaded onto Canvas)
 - Levy: *Heeding the Call/Right Man for the Job* (17 pages, uploaded onto Canvas)

BREAK

Interactive discussion: Left or Right brain?
Career discussion: Richard Bolles (relevant pages uploaded onto Canvas)
Practical tips: cover page, CV, interviews, and presentations: “do’s and don’ts”
Independent survival tips: budgeting
Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Religion*

- IV. Spirituality, Religion and the Law (Capstone foundations: Spirituality & Vocation)
Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:
- Fr. Martin: *A Brief but 100% Accurate Historical Examination of Religious seriousness* (31 pages)
 - Fr. Martin: *Joy and the Spiritual Life* (19 pages)
- Individual presentation (15-20 minutes)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *Who’s God is it Anyway?*
Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Religion* (uploaded onto Canvas)
Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Existence*
Expectations and guidelines for the midterm paper, **due in 3 weeks**.

- V. The Power of Music (Capstone foundations: Citizenship & Spirituality)
Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:
- Kile: *Hospice and Music* (8 pages)
 - Jackowitz: (60 short pages, uploaded onto Canvas)
 - Levy: *Letting Music Lift Your Soul* (7 pages, uploaded onto Canvas)
- Individual presentation (15-20 minutes)

BREAK

Listen and discuss short audio clips: *Anton Jones, Eddy Grant & Adele*
Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Existence* (uploaded onto Canvas)
Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Family*

VI. Are We the “Elites”? (Capstone foundations: Vocation & Relationships)

Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:

- Feynman: *The Princeton Years* (46 pages)

Two individual presentations (15-20 minutes each)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *The Club*

Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Family* (uploaded onto Canvas)

Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Morality*

VII. In Service of Others (Capstone foundations: Vocation, Spirituality & Citizenship)

Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:

- Fr. Martin: *How Vocation, Service and Love Can Lead to Joy* (15 pages)
- Corporate Citizenship: Karmani, Porter & Kramer (uploaded onto Canvas)

Individual presentation (15-20 minutes)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *The Good Samaritan*

Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Morality* (uploaded onto Canvas)

Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Citizenship*

Midterm paper **DUE**.

VIII. Citizenship vs. Jingoism (Capstone foundations: Citizenship)

Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:

- Bradbury: *The Hearth & the Salamander* (67 pages)

Two individual presentations (15-20 minutes each)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *The Chosen*

Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Citizenship* (uploaded onto Canvas)

Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Government*

IX. Civics (Capstone foundations: Citizenship)

Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:

- Bradbury: *The Sieve and the Sand* (30 pages)

Individual presentation (15-20 minutes)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *Gerrymandering*

Discuss short video: *Net Neutrality*

Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Government* (uploaded onto Canvas)

X. Minorities (Capstone foundations: Citizenship & Relationships)

Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:

- *Race, Truth and Our Two Realities* (uploaded onto Canvas)
- *Getting Past the Outrage on Race* (uploaded onto Canvas)
- *Philosophy's Western Bias* (uploaded onto Canvas)
- *Is Real Inclusiveness Possible?* (uploaded onto Canvas)

Individual presentation (15-20 minutes)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *Something About Dr. Mary*

Discuss short video: *Common Sense*

Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Eating*

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- XI. All in the Family (Capstone foundations: Relationships)
Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:
- Albee: *The Goat Or, Who Is Sylvia?* (53 mini pages, uploaded onto Canvas)
 - Archer: *Christina Rosenthal* (short story, uploaded onto Canvas)
- Two** individual presentations (15-20 minutes each)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *The Social Contract*
Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Eating* (uploaded onto Canvas)
Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Violence*
Expectations and guidelines for the final paper, **due in 3 weeks.**

- XII. Dystopia (Capstone foundations: All Four)
Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:
- Bradbury: *Burning Bright* (51 pages)
- Complete discussion of *Fahrenheit 451*
Individual presentation (15-20 minutes)

BREAK

Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Violence* (uploaded onto Canvas)
Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *Women*
Class consensus: Choose and distribute stories from Kile, chapters 7-9.

- XIII. Empathy and Equanimity (Capstone foundations: Relationships & Vocation)
Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:
- Kile: *Humor and Bereavement* (22 pages)
 - Kile: Chapters 7, 8 and 9: (predetermined distribution of stories)
 - Kipling: *If* (uploaded onto Canvas)
- Individual presentation (15-20 minutes)

BREAK

Discuss short video: *Bill Burr*
Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *Women* (uploaded onto Canvas)
Class consensus: Choose Catapano essay for discussion next week on *The Future*

- XIV. Light Up the World! (Capstone foundations: Spirituality)
Discussion of reflections based on readings for this week:
- Fr. Martin: *Answers to the Most Difficult Challenges of Living a Joyful Life* (22 pages)
 - Fr. Martin: *Discovering Delight in Your Personal Spiritual Life* (19 pages)

BREAK

Final Individual presentations (15-20 minutes each)
Debate the merits of the Catapano essay on *The Future* (uploaded onto Canvas)
Final paper **DUE.**
Adjourned!

Bibliography

Selected supplementary readings (the ones in bold print will be uploaded onto Canvas, partially or completely, while the others are optional material you could cite in your written submissions):

1. **Between Heaven and Mirth**, James Martin, S.J.
2. **Hospice, Humor, Music and More**, Jack E. Kile
3. **Fahrenheit 451**, Ray BRadbury
4. **Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul**, Naomi Levy
5. **“Surely, You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!”: Adventures of a Curious Character**,
Richard P. Feynman
6. **What Color Is Your Parachute? 2020: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and
Career Changers**, Richard N. Bolles
7. **The Goat Or, Who Is Sylvia?**, Edward Albee
8. **No, I’m Not Drunk!: Taming My Parkinson’s With Humor, Music and Charity**,
Alan Jackowitz
9. **Christina Rosenthal**, Jeffrey Archer
10. **The Case Against Corporate Social Responsibility**, Aneel Karmani
11. **The Competitive Advantage of Corporate Philanthropy**, Porter & Kramer
12. **Modern Ethics in 77 Arguments**, by Peter Catapano
13. **If**, Rudyard Kipling.
14. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Sigmund Freud.
15. Cat’s Cradle, Kurt Vonnegut.
16. Mysterious Stranger, Mark Twain.
17. Stages of Moral Development, Lawrence Kohlberg.
18. The Power of Now, A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment, Eckhart Tolle.
19. Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning,
James Fowler.
20. A Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life, James Martin SJ
21. Crowded in the Middle of Nowhere: Tales of Humor and Healing from Rural America,
Dr. Bo Brock.
22. Four Ways to Help Your College Student Grow Up, Natalie Friedman.
23. Becoming a Man: What I learned from My Father, P. Carl.
24. We, Yevgeny Zamyatin.