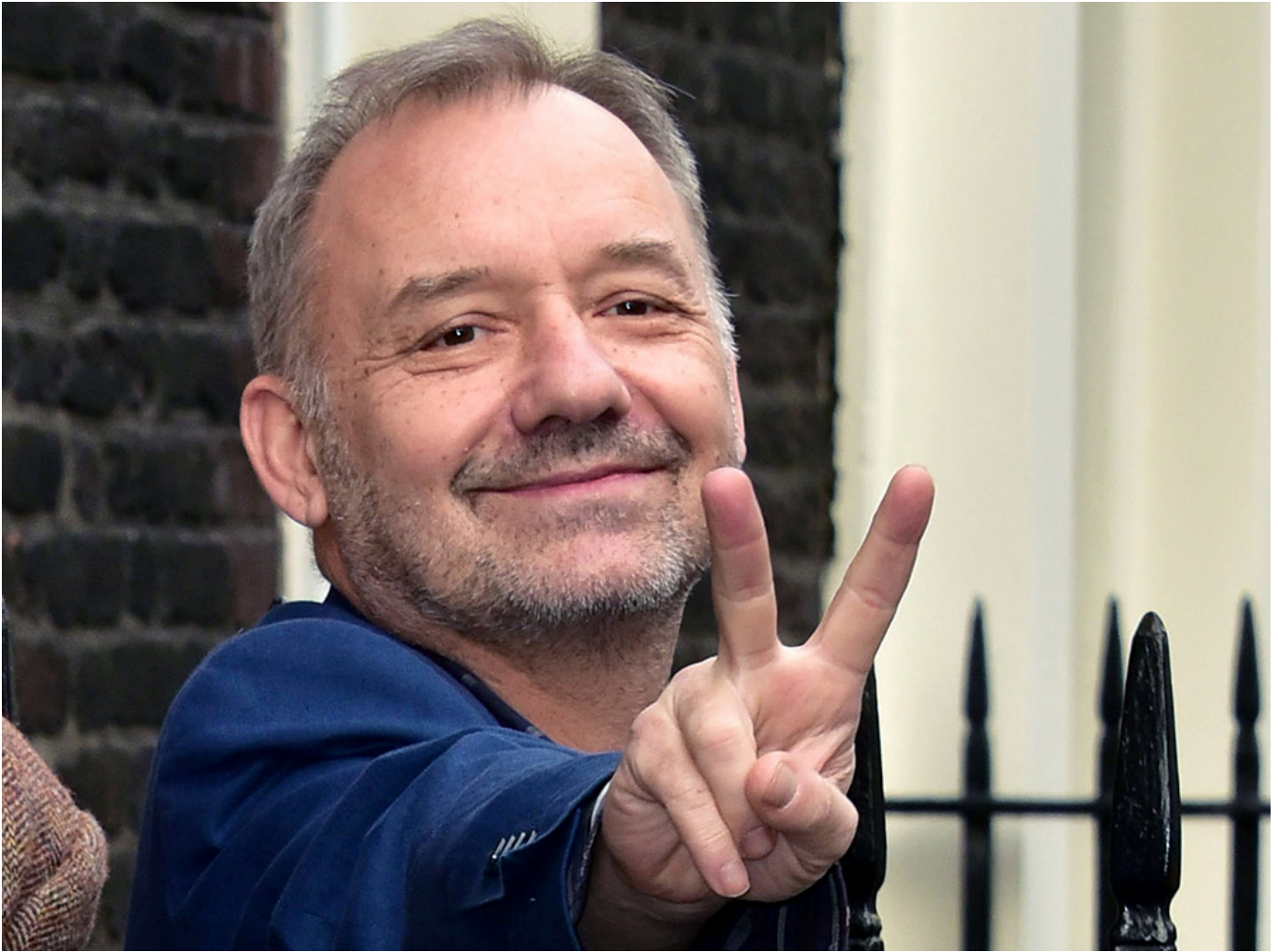


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English comedian Bob Mortimer (Newscom/ZUMA Press/Nils Jorgensen)



by Jim McDermott

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Pop culture has long been a place that helps me understand myself and my relationship with God better. Recently I've been drawing solace from, of all things, the improvisational comedy of the English comedian Bob Mortimer.

In the United Kingdom, Mortimer is legendary for his wacky characters and gloriously anarchic sense of humor. I discovered him only a few years ago on one of the U.K.'s many panel shows where comedians are asked to do things like riff on the news of the day, tell convincing stories that may or may not be true, or complete ridiculous tasks.

There's just something about Mortimer, a puckish, happy freedom that I find infinitely appealing. He sees choices that others don't realize are possible, usually wonderfully silly ones.

In [one contest show](#), he and other comedians are asked to interview a woman named Rosalind and then write songs about her. While others ask her age, her favorite things to do, what she does for a living, Mortimer wonders whether she's ever stolen anything and what is her favorite meat. In his performance, he whispered, to everyone's surprise and delight, "Rosalind's a nightmare."

Clowns have largely fallen on hard times in pop culture today. They're either creepy or sad — or both. But watching Mortimer be silly, I see something sacramental. When he fools around, it's like he's giving us a glimpse of a bigger life that is possible for us, a lightness about existence that I didn't know I could have.

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A great friend recently admitted to me that sometimes she plays the buffoon when dealing with customer service agents. Once she needed to return something without a receipt so she acted like she had no idea what receipts were. The young attendants went from baffled and confused to enormously amused.

Eventually they did help her, which of course was her aim. But I was struck by how her choices ended up making the world more fun, both for her and them. Instead of demanding to get her way, my friend gave those attendants an experience that they could dine out on for ages, the story of the crazy lady who could not understand what a receipt was.

Fools help us discover that the happy ridiculousness we find on sitcoms can also be a part of our lives.

I've never really loved the term *discipleship*. It's so formal. It's the kind of thing your third grade religious ed teacher tells you that you should want. And as any third grader can tell you, when an adult insists you should want something, that thing is probably not something you're going to like.

The term *discipleship* can also seem like a call to self-erasure. We're supposed to be like Jesus, they say. But what about being like us?

I wonder whether silliness doesn't offer another path to holiness. It does involve a kind of self-sacrifice: Our clowns force us to surrender what we think we know in favor of a greater joy. They also teach us a sort of mercy toward a world not living up to our expectations. And yet in their hands that revelation brings us relief. We laugh because we relish the letting go that they offer.

Maybe there's an invitation to forgive ourselves in the merry foolishness of others, too. No matter how hard we try or what we present, aren't we all secretly kind of a mess?

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My grandma Alice once called my mom in a total panic. "I've been bitten by a pot-bellied pig!" she said.

"What?" said my mom, at a loss. "How can you have been bitten by a pig on the streets of Chicago?"

"It's someone's pet. They were walking it and it was so adorable I bent down to touch it and it bit me." Before my mom could ask any of her many questions, Grandma dropped the punchline: "So do I have rabies?"

My grandmother was a character, for sure. But when you get right down to it, aren't we all? How great would it be to simply embrace the unintentional pratfalls and own-goals of our existence?

When I lived in Los Angeles, I used to attend San Diego Comic-Con. My great unfulfilled dream was to organize a cosplay Mass. Somehow the absurdity of seeing a grown adult dressed as Spider-Man doing the first reading and the Eucharist distributed by Dumbledore, Wonder Woman, Kamala Khan and the Black Panther seems so much more real to me, such a truer glimpse of our messy, ridiculous, wonderful humanity than the quest for sterile perfection you see at some Masses.

The Bible is hardly a comic text. But one of my favorite moments in all of Scripture is Sarah laughing at the angel who says she's going to have a baby. I love Sarah in part because her reaction is so true to life and so bold. Who laughs at an angel? A 90-year-old woman who keeps getting told she's going to have a baby, that's who.

But I also love her just because she laughs in the first place. In the entirety of the Bible, she and Abraham are the only ones I know of who laugh in that broad, expansive way of people who have been shown the absurd and random silliness of existence, and somehow gotten beyond disappointment to delight.

Life not only looks brighter after a good laugh, it is brighter, and filled with more possibilities than we had realized we had.

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The writer of their story considers that fact such an essential element of who they are, he names their child Isaac, which depending on who you talk to translates as "He who laughs" or just "laughter." How great is that?

It's too bad that there's no story of Jesus laughing after the resurrection, because that is the greatest joke of all. You thought death was the end of everything? Ha! Not so much! And the fact that the one who revealed it, the guy who turns out to be the Son of God happens to be some kid who was born in a barn is icing on the cake.

The actress Anne Bancroft was once asked why she ended up with the comedian Mel Brooks, a guy with boatloads of talent but none of her movie star glamor. She

reportedly responded, "Because when I hear that key in the front door, I know the party is about to begin."

I think that's the grace that silly people like Mortimer offer, a taste of something more and something better. Life not only looks brighter after a good laugh, it *is* brighter, and filled with more possibilities than we had realized we had.

A couple months ago, I began a leave from the Jesuits, the religious community in which I've spent the last 31 years. I'm grateful for my life and friends in the Society of Jesus, and also for this chance to take a step back and look at some things that have been going on inside me.

When I confided to some friends that I was considering a leave, one person told me that at some point you have to leap and trust that you can build the parachute on the way down. But, in reality, I'm actually finding it's more like leaping off a building and hoping that, despite all evidence to the contrary, everything is going to be OK.

That's an absurd belief. But watching Bob Mortimer be silly with the eyes of my soul, I can't help but think he'd chuckle and say, "It really is. Isn't it great?"

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