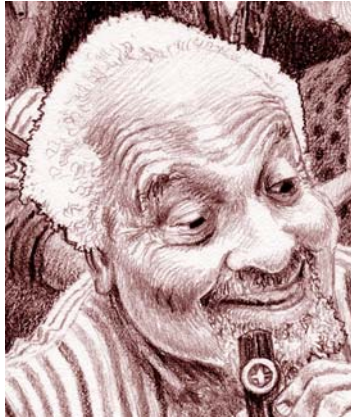


My 2-cents Worth... By Steve Wilson ©2008



THANKS A MILLION...YEARS!

If you've been hoping to be the one having the last laugh, stick around. You have a long wait ahead of you. Like about a million years.

Writing for the July 2008 issue of *DISCOVER* magazine, Jim Holt, provides an unusual take on why laughing matters. His perspective is, I suspect, quite different from the way most of us interested in this field look at things. Using a specific scientific theory – the Copernican principle – he explains why laughter will still be around a million years from now.

I hope his prediction is safely stored in a time capsule somewhere so someone can check up on it because it won't be me.

According to Wikipedia, *the Copernican principle, named after Nicolaus Copernicus, states the Earth is not in a central, specially favoured position.* And, since the 1990s, the model has been used for prediction of duration of ongoing events.

Not being so scientifically-minded, I won't bother with the mathematics here. The formula is used for predicting how long something will last based on how long it has already been in existence. For my similarly not-so-scientifically-minded friends, I will attempt a brief explanation of the formula: things that have already been around for a long time are more likely to last longer than things that have not been around for such a long time. Apparently, your personal life expectancy would be an important exception. To you.

Anyway, Holt estimates that human beings, having already been here for at least a couple of hundred thousand years, have “a decent shot at being around a million years from now.”

Whereas, the Internet, an infant by comparison, may not even last another thousand years. You'd better download all you can while it lasts.

Using the Copernican model and some logic, some philosophy, and some assumptions which I am sure are terrific, Holt is betting that laughter will carry on at least until the Year Million.

With the acumen we expect from a science philosopher, he contends that in Year Million, "humor will be esteemed as the most universal aspect of culture." That sounds like a good thing. It seems that laughter is thought to have evolved as a really good way for hominids to communicate to each other that it was safe to relax. Would that be like, "Ha-Ha! The boss is on vacation and we are photocopying unmentionable parts of our bodies"?

Scientists use a very complex and unfathomable vocabulary for stuff like this. They tend to use terminology like *hominid*, which I looked up while the Internet was still working. It refers to any member of the biological family of the great apes, including the extinct and extant humans, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans. Not to be confused with hominoids or humanoids, of course.

Holt mentions that some scientists and philosophers talk about laughter as a "luxury reflex" in that it "serves no obvious evolutionary purpose." I hope to contact him soon to find out what that means because I think of my laughter as a definite necessity for getting through each day with at least part of my sanity intact.

In his essay, Holt speculates about what jokes will look like in the Year Million. He thinks laughter will then largely be the result of a highly evolved form of incongruity humor. Alas, a civilization a million years more advanced than our own won't get our jokes. No wonder. Come to think of it, now that we are being exposed to the new season of *Last Comic Standing*, that may be their good fortune.

And, if you were wondering: Will one of this season's new comics be the actual last comic standing? I can tell you. Not in a million years!

Jim Holt's essay, "The Laughter of Copernicus," is in *Year Million: Science at the Far edge of Knowledge*, edited by Damien Broderick (Atlas and Company, \$16). Holt is also the author of *Stop Me If You've Heard this: A History and Philosophy of Jokes* (W.W. Norton and Company).

Steve Wilson is a psychologist, professional speaker, co-founder and Cheerman of the Bored of the World Laughter Tour, Inc., whose mission is *leading the world to health and peace through laughter*. His training workshops on therapeutic laughter lead to the designation Certified Laughter Leader, and are offered throughout the year. For more information, a complete schedule of workshops, and valuable educational resources visit the website www.worldlaughtertour.com, or call toll-free 1-800-NOW-LAFF.