

Alan Watts, from *Nonsense* (1967), Illustrated by Michel Dattel, Produced by Jeff Berner, New York: E.P.Dutton, 1977

Introduction

The following ditties, mellifluous and cacophonous, are presented without apology or explanation. Some of them have been running in my head since childhood and early youth, including the epic limerick on the folly of reaching for the moon (1935), which is somehow more appropriate than ever in 1967.

They are written to be read aloud--to be chanted, muttered, declaimed, or bellowed while showering, shaving, dusting, or driving. You can also make up variations of your own, only be sure not to do this kind of thing within the hearing of a psychiatrist. It is, I think, increasingly clear that parameters of this kind provide an essential corrective to the obsession of sanity. More and more, one feels that free and dominant methods are loud, tough, and frequent. Obviously, closed corners must be very carefully under-rated; otherwise, popular notions of frame and texture will show that the entire system is purely academic, and that the particular point of convergent energies is that they are finally globular.

Cows are, naturally, free of dust. But stops are most difficult to try. The real problem is that quills are too fat, and until we can easily connect ideas with tassles the function will be empty. Not that this would be equal: it is only that disproportionate combinations have an existential dimension which is, all too often, gullible.

On the whole, I prefer dongulation. It is prepid, snord, and tart, and the vallifaction of an estimate is grolic. Churdles and mards will always require fronicks, and lapsy daddles are usually bequeathed to the snorder kind of lumpens. Bolliwots are frankly bespoken, and every mutter-hound is a preposterous garble of tonsils. I have no wish to be snerdily previous: It is merely that wumpens and drabs are vollible, and that any further toculation would be groanly unspecified.

On Nonsense

Life is a kind of nonsense in the same way that music is a kind of nonsense, because music isn't usually supposed to mean anything other than itself. Using the nonsense in words means using words for their musical value, like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear did. I mean you can have a limerick like:

Flumula flumula flope
Comlipsula lipsalipslip
 Dim thick and me thum
 Gum tumbulous stom
Gurgle come bumbula blip

Its humor doesn't consist in anything that it means, but rather in what it doesn't. The same way with Edward Lear:

There was an Old Man of Spithead,
Who opened the window and said, —
“Fil-jumble, fil-jumble,
Fil-rumble-come-tumble!”
That doubtful Old Man of Spithead.

Sir Arthur Eddington, the physicist, said that no one is asking the question, “What is an electron?” anymore. “What we know,” he said, “is that something unknown is doing we don’t know what.” I seem to have heard something like it before:

‘Twas brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe

The Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton made an act of faith in great scientists, mathematicians, and historians when it decided to let these people sit in their studies with no requirements whatsoever except that they just be themselves. The founders trusted that if these scientists were allowed to goof off, to play around in their fields, they would eventually produce results, and it was all the better for not being in any hurry or under great compulsion. Strangely enough, IBM discovered the same thing when they stopped requiring their top research people at San Jose to punch clocks.

It is this kind of faith in the inventive mind that is necessary for getting any really inspired insights into the nature of the world. You can’t demand spontaneity.

A Conversation on Goofing

Alan Watts: A goof basically means a mistake, doesn’t it?

A friend: Correct. It also implies sort of hanging loose. It’s actually bisexual. It can be, “He made a goof” (he made a mistake) or it can mean, “He’s goofing,” in the sense that he is just doing nothing.

Alan Watts: Goofing off is pretty much idleness. This is all right in a way because an engine idles and anything that a machine can do is all right!

My father used to get enormous pleasure out of untangling string. Too many people today have absolutely no sense at all, as far as I can see, of doing little unimportant material things. It’s got to be a gas or something terrific. It’s got to be tremendously significant—religiously or politically important. All the flavor of the very, very unimportant ordinary has disappeared. Where it’s most needed.

A friend: I remember, for example, when I was in the Army, an especially desirable job among the new recruits was to work in the supply room because there was a certain place in the back where they had mattresses piled up and some people would go back there and read comic books or smoke or play poker or whatever. It became an archetypal “goofing off temple.”

Alan Watts: When Arnold Toynbee was asked by *Le Figaro* to write an article on the leisure age, he pointed out how very, very wealthy or powerful people never have any leisure at all. They are always out.

A friend: Leisure and goofing off are different.

Alan Watts: Yes. Leisure means time to do something other than one's money-earning work, like following an avocation or hobby. You can use your leisure time to do anything, including goofing off.

It seems so strange that we have to justify the idea of playing by inventing some excuse why it should be "good for us," "therapeutic," "good exercise," or "recreation." Whenever we experience highbrow artistic entertainment, it is always justified on the pretext that it's culture, that it's good for us, that it somehow improves us, and, therefore, we can afford the waste of time and money involved.

What do you think the universe is doing, anyway? What are trees all about? What are giraffes about, what are rhinoceroses about, what are cats about? Is theirs a serious purpose? Are they all doing what they're doing because it is *good* for them? No—they don't even *know* what's "good" for them.

Living is a spontaneous process. And the minute you say to a spontaneous process, "You *must* happen," that's when it doesn't happen. When you say to a child, "Now darling you must go to sleep," that is sure to keep the child wide-awake. If you say to someone, "Now you must love me," immediately the whole relationship is called in question. You cannot command what happens spontaneously.

You can say, "Well, I won't like it if it doesn't happen," but that's your problem. I'm sorry that it doesn't, but if it doesn't, it doesn't. When we're under this compulsion to survive, when we regard it as our duty to play, because it's good for us—then we have stopped playing entirely. It's all in your point of view.