

Soul Matters May 2014

What Does It Mean To Live A Life Of Laughter?

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Have you ever had to work with someone who took everything so seriously and worried every detail like a dog with a bone, that you just wanted to say, "Lighten up, already!?" I have. Sometimes a good joke, or even a bad one, is more important to find than perfection or precision.

Laughter is essential to balance out all the difficulties and stresses of life. When my sister was receiving radiation treatment for breast cancer, I accompanied her, sitting eight feet away behind a lead shield. She spent three days in a hospital room, into which almost no one else entered. We talked a lot, and laughed and joked, and I read to her for hours. She had brought a number of books, but the ones she wanted to hear were old-fashioned romance novels, ala Barbara Cartland – so that we could make snarky comments and laugh about them. Later on, after she died, I helped return her borrowed books and VHS tapes to the library. They were all comedies, mostly farce, because she had just wanted a good laugh in her final days when cancer was getting the best of her.

My family knows that I take my work as a minister seriously. I also like to laugh and make jokes. They know they have hit the mother lode when they can get a real belly-laugh out of me. My laughter lights up their faces. Laughter does that. When someone is really laughing, it's hard for the people around them to not at least smile along with them. And laughter is so good for us. A deep, hearty laugh relieves stress and boosts the immune system. It releases endorphins that decrease pain, and may help protect against heart attacks.

My cousin Pat collects and shares the funniest email messages and facebook posts. I love getting them, because I know I'll get a good laugh out of them. The days when she sends them out are the days that are hard for her... the days when she really needs a good laugh.

Three clergy were discussing death, and one of them asked, "If you were in your casket, and friends and family were gathered, what would you like to hear them say?"

The Baptist preacher said, "I would like to hear them say that I was a wonderful husband, a fine spiritual leader, and a great family man."

The Catholic priest said, "I would like to hear that I was a wonderful teacher and a servant of God who made a huge difference in people's lives."

The Unitarian Universalist minister said, "I would like to hear them say, 'Look, he's moving!'"

Laughter is a precious gift. This month, let's share that gift as much as possible.

Wishing you a May filled with love and laughter,
Rev. Beatrice

Our Spiritual Exercise(s):

Tell and Testify

Two exercises this month. And yes, everyone needs to do both.

EXERCISE #1: TELL YOUR TWO BEST

Analyzing and dissecting laughter has been compared to analyzing and dissecting a frog: it can be done, but the subject tends to die in the process. So let's not kill laughter by being too heady with it. This exercise asks you to focus on experiencing and sharing it. To be specific:

Hunt down your best two jokes and bring them to your group to tell.

Now be careful; this is trickier than it may seem. You might already know your two ringers. Good for you. You could certainly leave it at that. But an alternative might be to spend a week asking your family and friends what their favorite jokes are and then picking your two favorites from those choices! Personally, I'm taking this route. It will give me the experience of being made to laugh, not just making others laugh. A wonderful extra!

Questions to ask after the group has shared their jokes...

Ok, so let's do a little bit of dissecting. :) After everyone has shared their two jokes, take some time (2 minutes of quiet at least) to remember your check in--especially what was weighing down your spirit or what sorrow or struggle you are currently wrestling with right now.

Did the round of jokes change that for you in any way? It's said that laughing with a close circle of friends heals us, opens us, connects us, helps us see our lives anew. Did any of that happen for you in a significant way? Maybe listening to your group members' jokes was just a fun reprieve, with no impact. But maybe not.

EXERCISE #2: TESTIFY TO A TIME THAT LAUGHTER BUTTED IN... AND "PULLED YOU OUT"

The introduction mentions a time when laughter barged in--got in between loved ones and cancer. All of us can relate. In the midst of tears, we've found ourselves suddenly laughing at the most absurd thing--or the absurdity of everything! At funerals, people sometimes laugh the hardest. We tell our friend about a break up or a job loss and they reply with a sarcastic line that leaves us laughing so hard we cry. In short, we've all been "saved" by laughter. If "saved" is too strong for you, than think "given new sight" or "cured." Or maybe just "got me through."

Your assignment:

Reconnect with this moment when laughter "budded in" and tell the story of it to your group.

Some questions to think about as you tell your story:

1. Was it easy or hard to remember this experience? Did you stick with the first one you thought of? Or end up switching to another?
2. What in particular made the laughter "healing" or "helpful" or "saving"? Did it connect you to someone more deeply? Did it help you stand back? Back down? See something new? Laugh at yourself?
3. Was there a "spiritual" element to the experience?

Questions To Wrestle With:

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find the one that "hooks" you most. Then let it take you on a ride. Live with it for a while. Allow the question to regularly break into--and break open--your ordinary thoughts. And then come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.

1. Who is the funniest person you know?

There's not much to say with this one, except: Go tell him or her how much they mean to you and what a great gift their humor is.

2. Have you lost your laughter?

Researchers tell us that the average child laughs 400 times a day. The average adult: 18. So in truth, we all have lost our laughter to some degree. But does this loss characterize you in a particular way? Have you ever been told that you are "too serious"? Or that "you don't laugh anymore?" What have you done with those comments? What do you need to do with those comments?

3. Why do you laugh?

Many of us never think about it, but why we laugh says a lot about us. Do you laugh out of sheer joy? Out of nervousness? For just the fun of it? To make others comfortable? To avoid serious conversations? Does laughter come easy to you? Or does it take effort? Is it only with those you trust? Is your laughter mostly genuine? Or do you fake it more often than not? In short, what does your laughter say about you? Do you know what your laughter says about you?

4. Can you laugh at yourself?

Don't even bother answering this question yourself. Ask your spouse or best friend, or child. They will tell you the truth. Do you agree with that truth?

5. What do you laugh at?

The poet, Goethe says, "Nothing shows one's character more than what he [or she] laughs at." When have you been most proud about what you laughed at? When have you been most ashamed about what you laughed at?

6. Have you ever bullied someone with your laughter?

We use laughter and jokes to "make fun" of people all the time? This is not just kid stuff. Adults knock each other down and humiliate each other all the time with jokes and teasing that is supposedly "all in good fun." When was your most recent "all in good fun"? There is still time to fix it...

7. What were you taught as a child or young adult about "laughing"?

When was the last time you thought about "the rules" around laughter. More of us had them than you might think. A friend's grandmother thought she was sick if she didn't laugh loud enough. A college room mate was told that laughter and silliness was a sign of stupidity, and "beneath him." What were you taught? And do you need to re-learn or un-learn any of it?

8. Who gave you your laugh?

I laugh like my dad. Who's laugh rubbed off on you? How'd that happen? And how does it alter you every time you remember where your laugh came from?

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Recommended Resources:

As always, this is not “required reading.” We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started--and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “live a life of laughter.

Wise Words:

The average child laughs 400 times a day. The average adult: 18.

“It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over. Sometimes they really do struggle with it . . . so I wonder what it is and where it comes from, and I wonder what it expends out of your system, so that you have to do it til you're done, like crying in a way, I suppose, except that laughter is much more easily spent.”

— Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

We cannot really love anybody with whom we never laugh.

- Agnes Repplier

Laughter is the closest distance between two people.

- Victor Borge

Among those whom I like or admire, I can find no common denominator, but among those whom I love, I can: all of them make me laugh.

- W.H. Auden

Nothing shows a man's character more than what he laughs at. - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

There's a thin line between to laugh with and to laugh at.

- Richard Pryor

You laugh at me because I'm different, I laugh at you because you're all the same.

- Jonathan Davis

If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.

- Woody Allen

A good laugh is as good as a prayer sometimes.

- L.M. Montgomery

To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain, and play with it!

- Charlie Chaplin

Life does not cease to be funny when people die; just as it does not cease to be serious when people laugh.

– George Bernard Shaw

A law firm in Philadelphia opened an office in Washington, DC. To celebrate the opening, the Philadelphia office sent an arrangement of flowers to the Washington office. However, there was a mix-up in the delivery. The flowers that arrived had a note attached that said, “Our deepest sympathy”. And elsewhere, at someone’s funeral, there was an arrangement of flowers with a note that read, “Congratulations on your new location”!

When we begin to take our failures non-seriously, it means we are ceasing to be afraid of them. It is of immense importance to learn to laugh at ourselves.

-Katherine Mansfield

You grow up the day you have the first real laugh at yourself.

-Ethel Barrymore

Brotherhood of Man

I'm much better at the brotherhood of man thing, he said, when I can afford to live in a good neighborhood.

- Brian Andreas

Humor enables us to poke holes through the dense mask of egotism that so stubbornly imprisons us. We learn, through giggling and guffawing at ourselves, that "I," the self, is largely a figment of our imaginations, a creation we erect before the world to protect ourselves from its sting... The holy fools helps us to let down our defenses so that instead of retaliating with anger at arrogance or stubbornly denying the truth about ourselves, we find ourselves laughing at our own foolishness, and unknowingly learning from our laughter how to become less foolish.

- Rev. Michael McGee

"Laughter is the number one thing in the section of my [online] profile that lists "The Six Things I Could Never Do Without." It comes before food, exercise, family, friends, sunshine, and music. Yeah, I know it says 'six things.' I've never been good at following the rules."

- A Soul Matters Facilitator

I had a dream & I heard music & there were children standing around, but no one was dancing. I asked a little girl, why not? & she said they didn't know how, or maybe they used to but they forgot & so I started to hop up & down & the children asked me, Is that dancing? & I laughed & said, no, that's hopping, but at least it's a start & soon everyone was hopping & laughing & it didn't matter any more that no one was dancing.

- brian andreas

One of the creation myths of the Aborigines of South Australia says "humans were created from dung molded into human form and tickled, thus causing the image to laugh, and as it laughed, it came alive."

According to a Polynesian creation legend at the moment of creation the first couple looked at each other's naked bodies and couldn't stop laughing.

In ancient Egypt the Creator confronted Chaos and, as he laughed it off, delivered a world of joy and exuberance. "When God burst out laughing there was light..."

In Apache myth the creator made humankind able to do almost anything. The creator was not satisfied, though, till humankind was able to LAUGH. And so the people laughed and laughed. And the creator said: "Now you are fit to live."

Someone should start laughing now

by Hafiz

I have a thousand brilliant lies

For the question:

How are you?

I have a thousand brilliant lies

For the question:

What is God?

If you think that the Truth can be known

From words,

If you think that the Sun and the Ocean

Can pass through that tiny opening Called the mouth,

O someone should start laughing!

Someone should start wildly Laughing –Now!

Online Videos:

Mr Diety

An online video series that is brave enough (and clever enough) to laugh at God.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qzf8q9QHfHl>

A funny challenge to get you to invite friends to church: <http://jesus-loves-you.org/?p=2608>

“Fun Theory”: Proving that laughter and fun can change behavior

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbEKAwCoCKw>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=SByyymar3bds>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4o0ZVeixYU&feature=relmfu>

What happens when one person’s laughter drops into a train-full of burdens and worry?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1CNwwNUmbc>

from Steel Magnolias: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EjNa8Ukg_0

Charlie Todd causes bizarre, hilarious, and unexpected public scenes: Seventy synchronized dancers in storefront windows, "ghostbusters" running through the New York Public Library, and the annual no-pants subway ride. At TEDxBloomington he shows how his group, Improv Everywhere, uses these scenes to bring people together through laughter.

http://www.ted.com/talks/charlie_todd_the_shared_experience_of_absurdity.html

The Growing Popularity of Laughter Therapy

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5165226>

The practice of "laughter therapy" is growing in popularity. Devotees say the simple act of laughing helps relieve stress and improves things like blood flow and digestion. It's getting so popular that even the Pentagon is training military families to use it.

Laughter Yoga: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4WP1MfRoSA&feature=related>

Books:

Bossy Pants, by Tina Fey

Anything by David Sedaris

<http://davidseदारिसbooks.com/>

Movies

A Fish Called Wanda

“The funniest movie I know!”

- A Soul Matters Facilitator

Bridesmaids

“The funniest movie I know!”

- A Soul Matters Facilitator

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