

Here is an encore presentation about laughter. From time to time I bring to our attention some of the more outstanding topics from the past for the current issue. The recent high stress in social, political, and economic life needs a little comic relief. How timely to take another look at laughter. When we seem bent on the way we think things should be, then when they aren't, we get distraught. But nature is full of surprises. Time for a laugh. But that is when we feel least like laughing. Ha!

LAUGH UNTIL IT HELPS

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Much has been written about keeping a positive attitude, focusing on goals with high purpose, choosing to be happy, finding happiness within, connecting with the Source of joy. A very specific behavior or practice to cultivate this positive attitude is laughing.

An abundance of scientific data has shown many health benefits of laughing. Some of these many benefits are: improving function of the lungs and the whole respiratory tract, releasing endorphins (natural opiate-like substance produced by the brain), improving immune function, relaxing the nervous system, reducing the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline (Both are beneficial hormones but usually are in excess, leading to high blood pressure and many other stress-related conditions.), bringing harmony to physiological and neurological systems, connecting left and right hemispheres of the brain, balancing emotions, and increasing self-confidence.

Laughing with other people creates positive connections, and it can break tensions during confrontations or difficult negotiations. Once during a critical confrontation at the U.N., one ambassador demanded an answer from another. Tension mounted, until someone cracked a joke, and the whole room exploded with laughter. From then on negotiations and conversation could flow more freely.

An example of how important laughter is in our psyche is in the one of the stories in the myth of Br'er Rabbit. Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear (notice that they are all "brothers") caught him and was planning to eat him. Br'er Rabbit started laughing and laughing so hard he could not stop. Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear, astonished, shouted, "Why are you laughing? We are going to eat you! Br'er Rabbit stopped just long enough to say, "I was just thinking about my laughing place." "What laughing place?" they demanded. "Oh, when I go there, I just start laughing, and I can't help it," he spluttered. "Where is that laughing place? Show it to us, or we'll eat you now!" they demanded. Br'er Rabbit reluctantly led them to an old hollow tree. He instructed, "Now put your heads inside," which they did, then the bees started stinging them, and Br'er Rabbit escaped. The desire to laugh was so strong for Bear and Fox that they risked losing their dinner, and Br'er Rabbit's faith in the power of laughter was so great that he could laugh in the face of death, an example of great courage in the use of laughter.

On all levels, physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, laughing is highly beneficial. In urban, industrial societies, we laugh a lot less and less vigorously than in more tribal cultures, and adults laugh a lot less frequently than children. Does that tell us something we have lost in "growing up," and in developing materialistic civilizations?

I remember as a teenager, my pastor's wife, Irene, would have a little laugh at the end of almost every sentence she uttered. I thought, how amazing and how unusual!

Expressing feelings can open up readiness to laugh. Do you remember having a good cry, and near the middle or the end of it, switching to laughter? Children often will do that. A real, authentic cry can sound a lot like laughter. Laughing a real belly laugh can also open up frozen feelings so that a person can cry about something that he or she was holding back on, like the expression of grief. So laughing can be an opening of the heart, a healing experience. It is hard to hold on to anger, resentment, or fear when we are laughing. It can turn around negativity to more positive, constructive attitudes. Judgment divides, laughter unites.

In that silent moment after the laughter stops is a fertile moment to insert a positive thought or attitude. O. Carl Simonton, oncologist, an early pioneer in mind/body medicine in cancer, would lead his patients in visualizations to strengthen their healing defenses in overcoming cancer. If they had important decisions for their treatment plans that were difficult to make, he would get them laughing and then in that silent time after the laughter, ask them to make their choice then. That was the moment their courage and confidence were highest.

I remember when I was a student at Goshen College, Clarence Jordan, a minister from Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, held a spiritual renewal week at our chapel. He was full of funny stories and wrote the "Cotton Patch" version of the Gospels. After rousing us in laughter, in that silent pause that followed, he would speak a profound truth, and we gave that thought rapt attention, and it sunk into our consciousness like not in any other way.

We have teachings from various religions and philosophies promoting the expression of joy and laughter, and a positive attitude. From the Christian Bible, "In everything give thanks," "Rejoice in the Lord always," and from Proverbs 17:22, "A merry heart does good, like medicine." The Christian theologian Karl Barth said, "Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God." A Yiddish proverb – "what soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul." Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote – "Earth laughs in flowers." From the Quran – "He deserves paradise who makes his companions laugh." A Japanese proverb, "Time spent laughing is time spent with the Gods." Voltaire – "God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh." Meher Baba – "Don't worry, be happy." Khalil Gibran – "Keep me away from the wisdom which does not cry, the philosophy which does not laugh, and the greatness which does not bow before children." Is the fun-loving attitude in children part of the reason Jesus said, "Unless you become as little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God?"

The great Sufi poet Hafiz, highly revered today in Persia (Iran) writes "I heard God laughing." Here are a few excerpts from that poem:

What is Laughter? What is laughter?

It is God waking up. O it is God waking up.

It is happiness applauding itself and then taking flight to embrace everyone and everything in this world.

Laughter is the pole star held in the sky by our Beloved (God), who eternally says,

"Yes dear ones, come this way, come this way towards Me and Love!

O What is laughter, Hafiz?

What is this precious love and laughter

Budding in our hearts?

It is the glorious sound of a soul waking up."

From "A Course In Miracles." "...hear God calling them in your happy laugh."

From Bharata Wingham, who wrote the book, Laugh - A - Yoga, "The more you laugh, the more you laugh." And "Laugh 'till it helps," from which I took the title of this article.

Swami Satchidananda said to Bharata, “You need to laugh more.”

The famous Indian sage Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982), whose name means “Bliss-Permeated Mother” said, “Laugh as much as you can. By this all the rigid knots in your body will be loosened. Making the interests of others your own, seek refuge at his (God’s) feet in total surrender. You will then see how the laughter that flows from your heart will lighten the world.”

Remember that the centenarians in Okinawa and Costa Rica in last month’s article, “The Blue Zones,” spent a lot of time laughing with their friends.

I know I run the risk of offending atheists and religious fundamentalists by bringing so many religious and spiritual metaphors, myths, and stories into this, but I feel certain that spontaneous laughter can be an important spiritual practice, no matter which spiritual path is chosen. As love is the purest attitude to have (all other attitudes being derivations or corruptions of it), and selfless service its prime expression, so unconditional joy is the purest emotion (all other feelings subservient to it), and laughter its supreme expression.

It is hard to judge while laughing. Look at the story of the Garden of Eden. God’s instructions were to eat of the Tree of Life, but not of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This metaphor can be seen on many levels. One interpretation is that every day, many times a day, we make a choice between these two trees. When we accept life on its own terms, when we accept the laws of nature, with its ups and downs, pains and pleasures, then we honor all life forms, we do our best for ourselves and for all forms of life, we are content with that and with our own inner happiness, and we let go of things we cannot change. We live in the present moment, and experience wonder at the mysteries we do not understand with our logical minds, we experience peace, and we are eating from the Tree of Life. We can laugh when we win, we can laugh when we lose. We don’t avoid difficult things like good health habits, and we don’t spend all our time seeking comfort and pleasure, as with addictive behavior. We take Life as it comes.

On the other hand, when we take our perceptions (which see only a small segment of the spectrum of things to be experienced) and we say, “I know,” and start to judge things (Jesus said, “Judge not, so that you be not judged.”) as favorable or unfavorable, desirable or undesirable (good and evil), and get caught up in running away from the undesirable, and chasing after and clinging to the desirable, narrowing our perspective further, we get overjoyed at getting something that “made us happy”, temporarily, and then begin to worry about losing it, anxious about the future, and when we don’t get or accomplish what we want, feel angry and/or guilty resentful, preoccupied with the past. This is a set up for addictions. When we are caught up in all that, we find it hard to laugh. We get really serious. Because we know what we want and what we don’t want. That is eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

So when we laugh, it’s much easier to eat of the Tree of Life. It’s hard to cling to something or to push away something while laughing. It’s hard to obsess about not getting something “exactly right” or to worry about potential catastrophes in the future while laughing. It’s hard to hold onto resentments and guilt about the past while laughing. Laughing puts us in the present moment where we can experience life and surrender to what is. It makes it easier to get up the courage to do what needs to be done and not fret or worry about the results. I like the motto, “Do your best and leave the rest, and don’t get excited.”

An excellent story to illustrate the choice between accepting versus judging things is the man with the horses. A farmer's horse got out of the corral and ran away. The neighbors said "Too bad!" The farmer said, "Good, bad, who knows?" The horse came back, brought several wild horses into the corral. The neighbors exclaimed, "how wonderful!" The Farmer said, "Good, bad, I don't know." The farmer's son fell off one of the wild horses while trying to train her and broke his leg. The neighbors, "How terrible!" The farmer, "Good, bad, don't know." The army came conscripting young men into battle. They couldn't take him because of the broken leg. The neighbors exclaimed, "That's great!" The farmer said, "Good, bad, who knows." And so on and so forth, you could continue the story.

So if laughter is so great, why don't we do it more? Well, we do like to tell jokes and funny stories, and we like to watch situational comedies, but there is a missing element here. We think that we need a reason to laugh, that we have to laugh at or about something. We spend a lot of time waiting for a reason to laugh. Just as waiting for someone or some thing to make us happy is foolish, when we can choose to be happy, likewise, why should we wait to laugh until we have a reason? Why not just choose to laugh? The research shows that fake laughter has just as much of the health benefits as real laughter. Good news! We can "fake it 'till we make it." How come I didn't think of that? I learned it in one of Bharata Wingham's Laugh-A-Yoga Workshops at Yogaville, VA. Just fake laughter for 10 minutes straight, and try to not really laugh!

The only problem is, if you are not alone, or if you are not with someone or with other people who agree to do the same thing, people who are not laughing may declare you to be insane, (when in fact being too serious is insane). So you have to choose your setting or venue to do spontaneous or fake laughter. In India people gather in huge sports arenas to just laugh together. I have attended many of Bharata's workshops. We would do exercises like making funny faces and playing laughing games, then we would lie on the floor and laugh for 10 minutes, then have a few minutes of silent meditation. Those quiet times were some of the most relaxing, peaceful meditations I have known. I mentioned before that that is an excellent time to introduce a positive thought or affirmation or prayer. Remember that the health benefits come from prolonged belly laughter, (when tears come to your eyes and you have to clear your throat and you want to roll on the floor), but it doesn't hurt to do a little chuckle now and then whenever possible throughout the day also.

There are a few caveats about telling jokes or funny stories where you are laughing about someone or something: Here are some ethical guidelines recommended by Sri Swami Satchidananda: Eliminate these types of humor that are hostile, critical, sarcastic, ridiculing, degrading, or sadistic. And I would add, avoid anything offensive, racist, or in poor taste for the audience.

More info can be obtained about Bharata's workshops, printed materials, and CD's by contacting Satchidananda Ashram, Yogaville, VA, and www.yogaville.org. Publications are at www.shakticom.org.

I will conclude by adding a few more quotations I gleaned from Bharata's book:

"You can't stay mad at somebody who makes you laugh." – Jay Leno

"Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for a friendship, and it is far the best for ending one." – Oscar Wilde

"Always laugh when you can. It's cheap medicine." – Lord Byron (1788-1824)

"The most wasted of all days is one without laughter." – e.e. cummings

"Laughter rises out of tragedy, when you need it the most, and rewards you for your courage." – Erma Brombeck

"At the height of laughter the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of possibilities." – Jean Houston

“Even if there is nothing to laugh about, laugh on credit.” – Author unknown

“I was irrevocably betrothed to laughter, the sound of which has always seemed the most civilized music in the world.” – Peter Ustinov

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” – Victor Borge

“The human race has only one really effective weapon and that is laughter. The moment it arises all hardness yields, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place.” – Mark Twain

“What monstrous absurdities and paradoxes have resisted whole batteries of serious arguments and then crumbled swiftly into dust before the ringing death knell of a laugh.” – Agnes Repplier

“With the fearful strain that is on me day and night, if I do not laugh I should die.” – Abraham Lincoln

“Mirth is God’s medicine. Everybody ought to bathe in it.” – Henry Ward Beecher

“We should consider every day lost in which we have not danced at least once. And we should consider every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh.” – Friedrich Nietzsche

“We cannot really love anybody with whom we never laugh.” – Agnes Repplier

“Laugh and your life will be lengthened, for this is the great secret of long life.” – Og Mandino

“Perhaps I know why it is man alone who laughs. He alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter.” – Friedrich Nietzsche

“Laughter is an instant vacation.” – Milton Berle

“A good, real, unrestrained, hearty laugh is a sort of glorified internal massage, performed rapidly and automatically. It manipulates and revitalizes corners and unexplored crannies of the system that are unresponsive to most other exercise methods.” – Author Unknown

“Laughter is inner jogging.” – Norman Cousins

“Humanity has unquestionable one really effective weapon, laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution, these can lift a colossal humbug, push it a little, weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.” Mark Twain

“There are three things which are real – God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension. So we must do what we can with the third.” – John Fitzgerald Kennedy

“Since everything is but an apparition

Perfect in being what it is,

Having nothing to do with good or bad,

Acceptance or rejection,

One may well burst out in laughter.” – Long Chen Pa