

Joy and the Humor Factor

Have you ever been sitting in traffic, and you look in the rearview mirror at the car behind you only to see a guy with his finger jammed up his nose, two knuckles deep? “There’s gold in here somewhere!” It reminds me of a popular greeting card featuring a toddler on the cover with his finger up his nose, with the caption saying, “I picked a good one for you!” Kids are natural nose pickers. Noses are irresistible, offering their cavernous passageways for exploration at our fingertips. Have you ever been the person caught picking your nose?

If not nose picking, have you ever found out too late that you have toilet paper stuck on the bottom of your shoe, and you’ve been announcing your latest achievement with a white paper streamer?

Or have you spilled food on yourself, and for the next little while everybody knows it? Some oil from a sandwich dripped on a very unfortunate spot on the front of my pants once. Until I could get home, it appeared that maybe I was having some issues...

Or have you ever been somewhere in public and tripped? Did you find yourself immediately looking around to see if anybody saw it?

We are funny creatures. We do funny stuff. We say funny stuff. All of it part of the human experience. I wonder if aliens from other planets with far greater technology than our own don’t have to spend money on streaming services – they just have advanced cameras that capture our everyday living. Comedy Central 24/7! We are the zoo animals they laugh at.

Today we are wondering how humor might be a significant fact in the pursuit and experience of joy. Last week, we considered the impact that humility has on our experience of joy. Pride and ego, we reasoned, are joy thieves. Humility strips away barriers that influence our self-importance and sometimes unreasonable expectations that focus our attention on how we are different more than how we are the same.

Humility is directly tied to humor – both find their origin in the same root word, humus, which means earth. Humility is to be grounded. Humor grounds us as well. Humility and humor are deeply connected when they come from a place of health. Humility isn’t healthy if it is feigned humility. Humility isn’t healthy if it is coming from a place of humiliation and self-loathing. Healthy humility is grounded in the reality that we are all made of the same stuff, and that we are all of inherent value. The Judeo-Christian vision from creation is that we are all innately not just good, but very good.

Similarly, unhealthy humor can be more destructive than healing, becoming a joy thief. When we cut on ourselves with humor that comes from self-loathing, that is a joy blocker. It can be funny, but it can also be destructive. Unhealthy humor also shows up when it is mostly about cutting others down. Especially when the jokes are directed toward one’s persona and not just actions, this type of humor can not only be destructive for the target, but subtly for those entertained as well. Cutting humor perpetuates more cutting, which leads to dehumanizing others, and eventually calls into question our core beliefs about humanity’s goodness, and specifically about our goodness.

Healthy humor, however, helps keep us grounded when we make fun of ourselves. We remind ourselves that we are grounded as much as everyone else. When we make fun of ourselves, we give license for others to do the same. We can relax, be real, and subtly encourage others to do the same.

Joseph and Joy. We don’t always catch it because we are so focused on taking the Bible so literally and seriously, but humor is strewn throughout the biblical text. The story of Jonah and the whale? It was a whopper of a tale crafted to get a crowd in the city center busting up laughing. Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan was similar – listeners would snicker and guffaw as he shared about different characters and their behavior. The very story of Joseph is in many ways tragic but also ridiculous. Depending on the lighting and score, a film about his life could either fit into the heavy drama/suspense category or an awkward dramedy featuring Mr. Bean.

The Dalai Lama visited Belfast in northern Ireland after the Troubles. He was invited to attend a private meeting where victims and perpetrators of violence were present. The atmosphere was very tense, as the suffering was practically palpable in the air. As the meeting began, a former Protestant militant spoke of how, when he was growing up, he was told by other loyalists that what they did in opposition to the Catholics was justified because Jesus was a Protestant and not a Catholic. Knowing that Jesus was, of course, a Jew, the Dalai Lama laughed so hard that he completely changed the atmosphere. Able to laugh at the absurdity of our prejudices and our hatreds, everyone was able to communicate more honestly and compassionately with each other (218-219).

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once noted, “I have been helped by my wife, Leah, who was very – is very – good at keeping me humble. Once, we were driving, and I noticed that she was a little smugger than she normally is. And then when I looked again at the car in front of us, I saw a bumper sticker that said: ‘Any woman who wants to be equal to a man has no ambition’” (219). Who can deny it? Desmond Tutu continued:

“I reckon there are many people who think they have to be somber because it gives them gravitas, and they feel they are more likely to be respected if they are serious. But I believe very fervently that one of the ways of getting into the hearts of people is the capacity of making them laugh. If you are able to laugh at yourself, then everyone knows you’re not pompous. Besides, you hardly ever knock down someone who is knocking himself down. You’re not likely to clobber someone if they’ve already, as it were, self-clobbered.

“I don’t think I woke up and presto I was funny. I think it is something that you can cultivate. Like anything else, it is a skill. Yes, it does help if you have the inclination, and especially if you can laugh at yourself, so learn to laugh at yourself. It’s really the easiest place to begin. It’s about humility. Laugh at yourself and don’t be so pompous and serious. If you start looking for the humor in life, you will find it. You will stop asking, Why me? and start recognizing that life happens to all of us. It makes everything easier, including your ability to accept others and accept all that life will bring” (221-222).

Not only does humor help us stay grounded, as the root word implies, it also helps build bridges. Shared laughter breaks down barriers, as former attorney, professional comedian and ordained Baptist pastor Sarah Sparks pointed out in her [TedxTalkPeachtree talk](#). I’ve experienced what she talks about in Napa’s Interfaith Council, a collective of faith leaders who have learned to love each other. One component of every meeting? Laughter.

This week, may you catch yourself being a zoo animal and laugh at your silly self. May we be joyfully humble about the fools that we all are. May it reshape our eyes so that we see each other more clearly, more humanely and allow our bonds to grow. Because we’re all nose pickers at the end of the day, and somebody – probably an alien – is laughing hysterically.

All quotes, unless otherwise cited, are from [The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World](#), based on an interview of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, conducted by Douglas Abrams. Page citations are from the Kindle Edition.