

Laughter

The August 2009 issue of Ode magazine is devoted to Laughter: how laughter evolved and how it makes us human; the positive impacts of laughter on health and productivity; how laughter creates trust, social bonds, and intimacy; how laughter helps people cope with stress, loss, trauma, oppression.

I was so touched and thrilled by the information on this subject that I wanted to summarize and share it with you. Laughter is a great example of the mind- body connection: notably, how powerfully the physicality of laughter affects our hearts and minds. Research studies are pouring in from around the world (see the 8/09 issue of Ode for details). Some highlights:

Laughter Promotes Health

Laughter triggers catecholamines in the brain that heighten alertness. Laughter releases endorphins, the body's natural pain killer. Laughter cleanses the body of the stress hormone cortisol, lowering blood pressure, reducing stress and increasing pain tolerance. Laughter's alternating contraction-relaxation of the diaphragm releases tension in the body, bringing our autonomic nervous system into balance. (The physiological effects of a good session of laughter can last up to 45 minutes.)

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Laughter increases the flow of blood and oxygen through our coronary arteries, reducing the risk of heart disease and stroke. Laughter staves off the anxiety and depression that can severely impact heart functioning. Laughter mitigates the damaging effects of inflammation, reducing the pain of arthritis. Laughter strengthens the immune system, helping the body fight off viruses and cancer. Laughter helps stabilize blood sugar levels in diabetics. Laughter improves respiratory functioning in patients with chronic lung disease. Laughter even burns calories.

"In the human condition, you cannot experience distress and emotional uplift at the same time," says Steven Sultanoff, professor of psychology at Pepperdine University and authority on therapeutic uses of humor. "When you're experiencing mirth, you're not experiencing depression, anxiety or anger. If you increase your humor quotient, it will change your life."

Laughter Promotes Work Productivity

Laughter's ability to counteract the body's physiological responses to stress provides great benefit in the work place, where stress is the number one cause of worker's compensation claims. Many different research studies show: workers who laugh regularly, long and hard, focus better, think more creatively, and problem solve better than co-workers who do not. People who laugh tend to be more efficient, more productive, and make fewer mistakes than their stressed out co-workers. Because laughter reduces the damaging effects of stress on the immune system, people who laugh a lot are less vulnerable to illness and take fewer sick days from work.

John Morreall, professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary tells the story in this Laughter issue of a police officer who responded to a domestic violence call after having completed a course of humor training. As the officer walked to the front door, she heard the sound of an argument inside. Suddenly, a television crashed through the window, landing in the yard. She knocked on the door. "Who is it?" yelled an angry voice. "TV repair," the officer replied. Her quick wit caught the quarreling husband and wife off guard, touched them with some amusement and irony, and made handling a tense situation easier.

Laughter Eases Loss, Grief, Trauma

Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at UC Berkeley, tracked a group of recent widows and widowers, looking for the markers of coping resiliently with devastating loss and grief. He found that the survivors who could smile and laugh as they remembered their loved ones experienced less anxiety and depression at six months after their loss, at 12 months, at 24 months. According to Dr. Keltner, the laughter seemed to give people a brief vacation from mourning, “a little trap door that allows you to escape from toxic stress.”

“To laugh in a painful or distressing situation isn’t to avoid emotional reckoning but to gain the perspective needed to make the experience productive, to see the dilemma as part of the somewhat absurd human drama, and to seek fellowship in the society of the living.” - Blaine Greteman.

Laughter Promotes Learning

The word “wit” has the same etymological root as the word “knowledge”: Old English witan – to know. The first definition of wit in the modern dictionary is intelligence. At every age, brain development and learning happen through play and fun. Children learn so quickly because they engage with the world through curiosity and play. Children at age 5 giggle and laugh between 20 and 100 times a day. Without enough amusement, fun, play, and laughter, this learning is stifled. Babies smile, coo, snort, giggle, chuckle, guffaw long before they speak. Laughter, in fact, helps develop the brain structures necessary for speech.

How Laughter Evolved

Laughter is ancient, pre-dating the development of language. Our hominid ancestors began to laugh about 2-4 million years ago, after we learned to walk on two legs but before we evolved speech. Walking on two legs took pressure off the thorax; humans could now walk and breathe in separate physiological rhythms. This enhanced vocal control re-structured our nervous systems, increasing brain volume in the areas that coordinate breathing, vocalization, and cognitive comprehension, thus laying the foundation for the evolution of speech.

Dacher Keltner, in his book *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*, calls laughter as “significant a shift in our social organize as the evolution of tool making and the evolution of opposable thumbs.”

Laughter is Social Glue

By signaling safety and facilitating group interactions, laughter helped humans evolve sustainable social groups, just as laughter helps create social cohesion today.

The essential ingredient for laughter is other people. Laughter seems to be primarily a social lubricant, not a response to “funny” situations. We are 30 times more likely to laugh in group situations than in solitary ones. We laugh most often when we’re nervous or in an awkward situation, when we’re talking to people more powerful than we are. Women consistently laugh more than men (signaling submission to the more powerful? Needing to influence of moods of those around them?) Laughter eases tension, deflects bullying, sarcasm, conflict. The absence of laughter predicts divorce far more consistently than the presence of outright animosity, according to psychologist John Gottman.

Laughter is contagious, sometimes uncontrollably so. Mirror neurons fire when we see someone else laughing; our body responds with an impulse to laugh, too. Laughter facilitates group cohesion and solidarity because people are sharing a mental and acoustic space with each other. Our laughter builds a reciprocal resonance; we laugh together with another like a duet or chorus, especially with

friends. Laughter signals a shared understanding of the world; it's foundational to like-mindedness, interdependency, and intimacy.

Laughter as a Survival Tactic for People under Siege

Ron Jenkins, professor of theater at Wesleyan University, shared his personal experiences in South Africa, Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia in this issue of Ode, documenting how laughter can be a powerful tool to confront, ridicule, and criticize oppressive regimes. "Humor is one of the animating forces that keeps the spirit alive when things look bleak.

Humor helped provide the unstoppable energy of the movement against apartheid, as it typically does for any struggle for justice."

You can order the August 2009 Laughter issue of Ode magazine, if it's sold out at your local newsstand/bookstore, at www.odemagazine.com. The website has links to the editors' favorite laughter videos. Ode for Intelligent Optimists is a gem of a monthly magazine – politically-socially-environmentally-culturally-spiritually correct. When you subscribe, they plant a tree.

This article was revised from the August 2009 news-letter Healing and Awakening into Aliveness and Wholeness, archived on www.lindagraham-mft.com.

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Words of Wisdom: Excerpts from The Time Being

1 An ancient Buddha said:

For the time being stand on top of the highest peak. For the time being proceed along the bottom of the deepest ocean . . . For the time being the earth and sky.

"For the time being" here means time itself is being, and all being is time.

3 The way the self arrays itself is the form of the entire world. See each thing in this entire world as a moment of time.

Things do not hinder one another, just as moments do not hinder one another. . . .

4 Know that in this way there are myriads of forms and hundreds of grasses throughout the entire earth, and yet each grass and each form itself is the entire earth. The study of this is the beginning of practice.

When you are at this place, there is just one grass, there is just one form; there is understanding of form and no-understanding of form; there is understanding of grass and no-understanding of grass. Since there is nothing but just this moment, the time-being is all the time there is. Grass-being, form-being are both time.

Each moment is all being, is the entire world. Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment.

7 Do not think that time merely flies away. Do not see flying away as the only function of time. If time merely flies away, you would be separated from time. The reason you do not clearly understand the time-being is that you think of time only as passing.

In essence, all things in the entire world are linked with one another as moments. Because all moments are the time-being, they are your time-being.

11 Just actualize all time as all being; there is nothing extra. . . . Vigorously abiding in each moment is the time-being. Do not mistakenly confuse it as nonbeing. Do not forcefully assert it as being.

15 . . . Mountains are time. Oceans are time. If they were not time, there would be no mountains or oceans. Do not think that mountains and oceans here and now are not time. If time is annihilated, mountains and oceans are annihilated. As time is not annihilated, mountains and oceans are not annihilated.

This being so, the morning star appears, the Tathagata appears, the eye appears, and raising a flower appears.

Each is time. If it were not time, it could not be thus.

16 Zen master Guixing of She Prefecture is the heir of Shoushan, a dharma descendant of Linji. One day he taught the assembly:

“For the time being mind arrives, but words do not. For the time being words arrive, but mind does not. For the time being both mind and words arrive. For the time being neither mind nor words arrive.”

Both mind and words are the time-being. Both arriving and not-arriving are the time-being. When the moment of arriving has not appeared, the moment of not-arriving is here. . . . Having-already-arrived is words and not-having-left is mind. Arriving is not “coming,” not-arriving is not “not yet.”

17 The time-being is like this. . . . [Y]ou go out and meet someone. Someone meets someone. You meet yourself. Going out meets going out. . . .

18 . . . Arriving is the moment of casting off the body; not-arriving is the moment of being one with just this, while being free from just this. In this way you must endeavor to actualize the time-being.

19 The old masters have thus uttered these words, but is there nothing further to say?

. . . [T]o study thoroughly, coming and going, and to study thoroughly, arriving and not-arriving, is the time-being of this moment.

On the first day of winter, first year of Ninji [1240], this was written at Kosho Horin Monastery.

Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken.

Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water. Enlightenment does not divide you, just as the moon does not break the water. You cannot hinder enlightenment, just as a drop of water does not hinder the moon in the sky. The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. Each reflection, however long or short its duration, manifests the vastness of the dewdrop, and realizes the limitlessness of the moonlight in the sky. Zen Master Dogen

Finding Possibility in the Midst of Adversity

What do we do when adversity hits? Is there a way to work with adversity that makes a difference and is it something we have influence over? The answer is yes. The way we approach whatever happens to us can have a profound affect on the outcome. Call it the power of positive thinking. Call it finding the good in any situation. Call it making lemonade out of lemons. Call it any cliché you like, but the truth is, our approach makes a difference.

When I was growing up I though these clichés were ridiculous. I thought they simply meant taking a dismal picture and pretending it looked better than it was. I was naïve. Life is much more complicated than that and neurological research has amply substantiated the power of the way we think to affect our bodies, our minds, and the people around us, and, therefore, the outcome of our situations.

The sequence of emotional reactions most people have to adversity is disbelief, followed by fear, followed by grief and anger. Anger may then be followed by despair and depression. In between anger and despair we make decisions that affect the outcome of what has happened to us. We can decide to stay stuck in those feelings leading to despair and savor being a victim or we can decide to deal with whatever has befallen us and discover what is now possible. Here are four ways we can help ourselves make this choice.

First: Forgive ourselves. Most of the time we hold ourselves accountable in some way for what happened to us. Even if we don't think we are directly responsible, we might think we shouldn't have been in that particular place at that particular time. It's one thing to acknowledge responsibility, take corrective action and move on. It's another thing altogether to get stuck in self-blame. Self-blame is wasted energy. The sooner we can acknowledge and then forgive ourselves for whatever part we have had in what has happened, whether large or small, the sooner we can use the energy we have available to deal with the problem.

Second: Start from where we are. That seems self evident, but often it's not. We wouldn't consider it adversity if we were happy with whatever we are dealing with. The word adversity comes from the same root as adversary. Many times our immediate response is to fight what has happened and try to push it away and refuse to look at it. If we don't look, we don't have information.

Instead of fighting what happened, we can sit quietly and notice our internal conversation. Are we talking about "poor me?" Are we telling ourselves that whatever happened to us just isn't fair? Are we making up a story about the way things ought to be? If we are, we have an immediate clue that we are either holding onto the past or trying to live in the future. We are not looking at the present and paying attention to things just as they are.

Try being genuinely curious. Practice letting go of believing that things "should" be one way or another. Just look and pay attention. The situation is what it is. The more information we can gather, the more we will have to work with.

Third: Believe in the power of our own creativity to help us work through the problem. Every human being is creative in many ways. Getting through just one day of our daily lives demands creative problem solving abilities moment to moment whether we realize it or not. We respond to everything we encounter from choosing how we dress ourselves to choosing how we open a can with our own unique approach. We all have practice solving problems. If we look at adversity as a problem to solve, we can put our creativity to work on it.

Fourth, and perhaps most important: Look for the possibilities, the good things, in whatever we encounter and keep our minds open to change. The world is bigger and more complex than we can begin to imagine or take in and it is constantly changing. We are human. Our brains and our five senses can only process so much information. No matter how intently we try we won't immediately see everything that is possible.

Because we can only take in a part of the available information, we make choices about where we focus our attention. We see what we set out to see.

Adversity hits. We don't like it. We assume nothing good can come from it. When we assume nothing good can occur, we don't look for the good. Instead we look for the difficulties and say: "See! See how hard this!" Once we have decided this is hard, hard is what we see. We find what we look for. It's as simple as that.

Don't be in a hurry. Practice patience. Look for the possibilities. No matter how difficult the adversity, new possibilities are always unfolding and are always more amazing than our limited imaginations can see.

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An Interview with Allison Bonds Shapiro

What does it mean when you say the disability habituates?

Our bodies make habits as a way to make actions efficient. When a part of the body has been injured, disabled, the brain will concentrate on the parts that work well and create something called "learned non-use." In other words, our brains will ignore the part of the body that is not working and make a

habit of the disability. Habits become hard-wired in the brain and, as you may have experienced, become increasingly harder to change – not impossible, but increasingly harder.

If the habituation of the disability is actively challenged from the beginning and throughout the recovery, the opportunity to gain more function is improved.

What does self-care mean?

Self-care is the basis of health and satisfaction in our lives. It literally means holding our selves with kindness, concern, and care, just as we would someone outside of ourselves whom we love dearly. It means loving ourselves. Self care starts with two fundamental understandings: One: that we are the only tool we will ever be given to build our own lives.

We only get one body, one mind, one spirit. It only makes sense to take the best care of that tool that we can. And, two: with the understanding that we are part of the whole of life. When we care for ourselves, we care for life. If we care for life, we include caring for ourselves. By caring for ourselves we give a gift to those who love us by taking care of the person they love.

Why do you say it is important not to give up –how long can change occur?

Giving up cuts short our ability to do anything. Each one of us has profound influence over the outcome of what happens to us. If we give up on ourselves we give up building a life. In stroke recovery this is particularly important. When we stop asking the brain to reconnect the functions that were lost due to the injury, the brain quits trying and the injury habituates. I have seen no limit to either the time or the age in which change can occur. Change may slow down as time progresses but it does not have to stop unless we let it.

What is living around your limitations?

We each have the capacity to be stopped by what we perceive to be something which limits us – our age, our education, our physical ability – or to find ways to make a satisfying life with what we have. A tree root grows around a rock and finds nourishment. It doesn't stop growing when it encounters something that blocks its path. This is a fundamentally creative approach to life. If I cannot accomplish what I want to do one way, I find another way. If we spend out time crying over what we do not have, we never discover what we do have and what we can with it.

What part does humor play?

When something difficult happens in our lives we often think that it would be wrong to laugh – that somehow we have to insist that nothing can be funny in the face of a serious problem. If we focus on only the hardship we lose something essentially life giving.

Laughter lowers blood pressure, calms the mind, and invites others into our lives. All those things have a powerful effect on recovery. Life seems more livable and problems seem more solvable when we remember to laugh. That doesn't mean we are laughing at somebody else or are trying to be cruel. We are remembering that it is possible to find joy even in hardship.

How important is paying attention?

Paying attention is critical. First by paying attention we find out what actually is happening. We don't make a story about what is happening. We honestly look. When we have as much information about what we can do in this moment as we can get, we can make wise, safe choices about how to work on our recoveries or another aspect of our lives. The second way that paying attention is critical is that paying attention helps the brain use itself well. We literally form what we study. If we study music, we become better musicians. If we study walking we become better walkers. If we study ourselves during recovery we create fuller recoveries.

What can family members do to help?

Life is a team effort. Our families, those we are born with and those we choose, can provide us with the strength and comfort to face life's challenges. Family members can inspire us by helping us believe in ourselves and our capacity to continue to improve. They can provide a social network while we recover so we remember that we are still a part of life. They can help us do things while we relearn how to do them for ourselves. They can remind us to stay safe and not hurt ourselves in our eagerness to recover function.

Why is letting go important?

It's hard to walk facing backwards. The moment a major injury or challenge occurs our lives are irrevocably changed. That injury or challenge often leaves us with little energy to waste as we are trying to understand what has happened to us and find a way to deal with it. Letting go of what we thought our lives would be frees up our energy and makes space in our hearts to discover who we can be now. This is the key to transforming our lives. The possibilities are always greater than either our imagination or our fixed ideas. Letting go allows us to see the possibilities and reach for life.

What do you do with the grief and anger?

Grief and anger get in the way of letting go. There is only one way through grief and anger and that is to acknowledge the feelings and allow ourselves to feel them. Not to act out and hurt other people with them, particularly those who love us – that is never a successful way to deal with feelings. We need to be willing to face the grief and anger and hold ourselves with love and compassion until the grief and anger move through us and we are able once again to remember those things for which we are grateful. Other people who have faced similar challenges and professional counselors can be a great source of support in talking through and holding our grief and anger. This process will occur throughout our recoveries and our lives. Realizing this and building support to deal with it can be a great benefit.

How do you apply what you have learned to other places?

Fundamentally I learned that how we approach problems is far more important than the problem itself. Whatever problem we face is something that has already happened. Now that it has happened, the useful approach is to find out what can be done with the situation. I ask myself: What is the opportunity embedded in this problem? I pay close attention to fully understanding what the situation is, just as it is, then I look for creative responses that I can make – I seek the possibilities I can discover. It takes practice and once we know how to do it, we can help other people do the same thing. The 8 principles I teach are simple steps that allow us to move quickly through problems.

When they are practiced, we begin to discover possibilities beyond anything we could imagine.

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