

Humor as a way of life

In the Presence of Humour: A Guide to the Humorous Life

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IN THE PRESENCE OF HUMOR

A Guide To The Humorous Life



2. DISCOVERING HOPE

In the days of the old west two Indian chiefs prepared for a parley with a contingent of Union soldiers. One chief said to the other, "Have you noticed? We're holding these peace talks farther west every year."

The comic hero portrays the resiliency of the human spirit. Twist it, bend it, stretch it, squeeze it, stomp it, hurl it, club it. Still, the spirit snaps back ready to go again.

Life comes at us this way, too. It keeps pressing its demands upon us. Pressing, pressing, pressing in a way that makes understandable the homemaker who complained because each time she thought about having a nervous breakdown it was time to fix another meal.

We can cry, "Uncle!" but life seems as though it were deaf. Instead, it keeps coming like an enemy that will not break off the battle though darkness falls. We can try shouting, "Stop the world. I want to get off." But it doesn't stop. There are limits to our abilities, our knowledge, and our skills. It would seem prudent to stay within the bounds of these limits, but life shows little respect for this logic. Instead, it sweeps us, without apology, into situations, events and circumstances that seem too much for us. Then blithely goes its way littering our paths with the consequences. Like it was in the old story of the man who was told to cheer up because things could be worse. So he cheered up and, sure enough, things got worse.

What an unlikely arena this seems for humor. Its coming would surely be greeted in the same spirit that heavily armed Goliath greeted young David who carried a mere sling shot. Yet humor does sally forth with the same confidence of David. Humor is ready to meet life in any and all arenas; confident its peculiar strengths are equal to the task.

HUMOR'S HEROES

Our humorous heroes can help us here. And who are they? They're more likely to be the incompetent and bungling Laurel and Hardy of old-time movie fame. They are so certain they are right but are always wrong. They manhandle a piano up a long flight of hillside steps to the house on the top only to discover a road in the back leading up the hill. So what do they do? Nothing very intelligent. They carry the piano back down the steps that they might properly haul it up the road! Count, also, a figure like the inept and fumbling Inspector Clouseau in The Pink Panther movie series, played by actor Peter Sellers. Add your own favorites to this list.

Hope comes close to being the very heart and center of a human being.
– William F. Lynch

Humor is not upset about unpleasant events that befall us. It knows that recovery is the norm.

Such characters display a secret strength all but ignored in today's worship and idealization of perfection. This strength is our antidote to fear: Our fear of not making it, of not living up to what's expected, of being different from what image makers would ordain us be. This strength is lodged within our humanity and comprised of the very qualities it takes to give us hope and confidence. Humor knows of this. It's eager to share it with anyone who has the sense to listen.

These comic characters reveal more than the ineptness, tomfoolery and bungling that make us laugh. They possess more. They have the quality to keep on going. Their inabilities, their misadventures, their incessant failures never deter them from their goals. In other words, the comic character portrays the resiliency of the human spirit. Twist it, bend it, stretch it, squeeze it, stomp it, hurl it, club it, the human spirit snaps back ready to go again.

Often when we laugh at the comic characters, we do so unaware of the significance our laughter holds. If they were not resilient, did not snap back, our laughter would choke us. Our laughter senses the Swan rather than the Ugly Duckling even when we are not fully aware of it.

It's been said that comedy is the only art form that portrays the adaptability of the human animal. We laugh at our goings on, taking heart in our adaptable and resilient nature. Here lies the beginning of our discovery of hope. This unflattering picture that comedy paints of the human figure is, after all, an encouraging one.

*All tragedies are finished by a death
All comedies are ended by a marriage.*
– Lord Byron

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Our spontaneous laughter is our own confession that we are like the comic heroes. We compare our actual performances with our ideal performances and know we miss the mark. We miss it so often we try to keep it a secret. We try so hard that we even hide it from ourselves.

Then along comes a character like Charlie Brown in the "Peanuts" comic strip and, without effort, wins the sympathy and understanding of a nation. Charlie wins not just because we've all been there, but because we've been there we'll often admit to having a Charlie Brown syndrome. We understand him when he listens to a friend explain that you lose some and win some, and then says, "Wouldn't that be great."

Unfortunately, we look upon this syndrome as a weakness rather than as the strength it is. The laughter that arises is not so much over our stumbling and incompetence. It is laughter at the fact that we could possibly imagine ourselves as being any other way. Our laughter calls us from the unrealities of our ideal expectations and pumps life into the resiliency of our nature. Like Charlie Brown we bounce back to try again. It's the bouncing back that brings the accolade, "You're a good man, Charlie Brown!"

SETBACKS ARE TRANSIENT

Humor approaches life from the viewpoint that setbacks are transient or temporary. It knows that recovery is integral to life. Indeed, humor knows that recovering is the norm. As such it never gets too worked up about events that befall us. Setbacks, failures, abuses, and misuses are indeed real and often painful, but humor knows that these cannot prevent recovery.

*To expect the unexpected
shows a thoroughly
modern intellect.*

— Oscar Wilde

Some years back, long before the popular availability of the camcorder, those who watched the TV Emmy Awards felt the positive force humor gives to the human spirit. We watched a kind of Candid Camera for real.

The film clips were outtakes from the coverage of news events. Incident after incident, many of national and worldwide concern, came to the screen lasting for at least 10 minutes. Now I can remember only three:

The camera showed a well known commentator sitting on a college-campus bench against a long expanse of lawn. The visit had to do with the student unrest and riots in the days of the Vietnam War. As the commentator gave his analysis, off in the background a male figure strolled across the campus lawn. He looked toward the camera, paused, then turned toward it dropping his pants and shorts exposing himself.

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In another the newscaster was making an on-camera introduction of a foreign dignitary in preparation for the interview to follow. And in rapid succession he mispronounced the difficult name six or seven times. Each time he quickly began again with the intent of saying it correctly.

Then a well known sportscaster with a melodious voice and a highly educated vocabulary expounded the highlights of a particular sporting event. As he spoke in his eloquent style, a not-so-quiet barking of a dog was heard off camera. The sportscaster ignored the disturbance as long as he could. Then in a sudden turn to his left with raised voice he referred to the dog's ancestry and told it to "shut up."

Here were solemn, serious events to be reported on in like manner with all the precision and accuracy expected of professionals. But these conditions did not dampen the activities of our clown. From the sound of the audience's reaction we knew they were twisting, turning and doubling over in their studio chairs just as we were in our chairs at home. I alternated from wiping the flowing tears from my cheeks to holding my sides in a vain attempt to reduce the ache.

When we have confidence in our ability to respond, we live with hope.

It was as though humor, too, was present, giving its own verdict of the proceedings. It also gave us hope. After the laughter came the leaning back in the chairs to catch the breath, and there was a deep, unmistakable feeling of "Hey, we can make it!"

THE EXPERIENCE OF HOPE

We have the ability to make responses that can lead us out of seemingly hopeless situations. Our sense of humor helps us make this discovery. In his movie *The Tramp*, Charlie Chaplin portrayed this discovery of hope. After rescuing a farmer's daughter from thieves, she took him to her father who gave him a job. The tramp read the daughter's showing of playfulness and pity toward him as signs of love. Then her true boy friend burst into the scene, and the tramp realized that she had never been his.

To hope means to be ready every moment for that which is not yet born.

– Erich Fromm

With a heavy heart he wrote her a farewell note in preparation to leave the farm. He attempted a final goodbye, but the girl hardly noticed him, being too absorbed in talking to her boy friend. With drooping spirits he shuffled down the same dusty road that he'd traveled just a short time

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before. Then in the film's last moments the Tramp straightened himself, kicked up his heels as a surge of new life snapped into his walk and he strode away with a jaunty swagger. Hope reborn!

Along with this discovery of hope there comes a welcome and relaxing insight into life: We have no need to try to control events. Indeed we cannot. Even the news film clips tell us this. But then again, we don't need to.

Hope, after all, is found not in our ability to control but in our ability to respond. That's the key, that's the humor of it all, that's the strength of the human spirit. Humor gives us the chance to use our energies not for control but for choices and to proceed with the business at hand. That business is being human.

We use so much energy trying to control. We try to control our children, our spouses, our work, the economy, the nation, the world. Probably the majority of the things we worry about have to do with what we are trying to control. But humor's saying, "Don't bother about that. Your hope, your strength is in your ability to respond." That's a God-given ability. We read in the Bible that we will never be given a cross heavier than we can bear. Humor's telling us the same thing: We can respond successfully to anything. There's hope in that.

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

– Vaclav Havel

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CLOWNING ACTIVITIES
(For instructions see pages 60-66.)

A practice in responding with humor to situations where one faces many of life's extremes.

- What do you feel to be some of the extremes in your life? That is,
 1. When have you felt your were called on or expected to do more than you could do.
 2. More than it seemed fair to expect of you?
- What were some personal experiences or situations that came to mind while reading this chapter?

After considering these questions, list four specific situations under "Step 2" on the worksheet on page 72.



5. DISCOVERING REBIRTH

Being born and raised in western Kansas, the fabled romance of the Pacific Northwest held an attraction for me since I was a small boy. So I was a wide-eyed adult as we drove through lush Columbia River Gorge. We stopped to admire a beautiful waterfall plummeting over a high cliff into a green, park-like setting. Then the family went back to the car, and as I turned to follow, I saw near the water's edge a long, grayish brown creature. I'd never seen anything like it. Because of its two antenna I concluded it to be some kind of snail. I watched it in sheer fascination. Then hurrying to the car I excitedly told of the soft-shelled snail I'd seen. I wanted to know more about it, especially its name.

Seeing life and your surroundings as though for the first time keeps childlike innocence alive.

At the first opportunity I inquired. The lady I asked seemed puzzled, not sure she could identify what I'd described. But she said, "It sounds like a slug to me." Her tone of voice in pronouncing "slug" told me that this could not be the wonderful creature I'd seen.

A year later we moved to the Northwest, and I discovered that my beloved soft-shelled snail was indeed a slug. Before long, I, like the rest of the locals, engaged in ceaseless warfare against them within the confines of my garden. Yet even now, decades later, I cannot engage in slug warfare without remembering fondly that one aesthetic moment when my unofficial greeter bid me welcome to the Pacific Northwest.

When I tell this story, it always gets a laugh. Yet who is the joke really on? I'm sure I carry a fond memory for slugs not shared by many others. "Seeing as for the first time" carries virtues forever that have become dulled in the sophisticated. For all the jokes about the country bumpkin's adventures in the

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big city, his wide-eyed innocence is more in keeping with the spirit of living than is the laugh of his sophisticated city cousins.

STAYING CHILD LIKE

How does one keep childlike innocence alive? By continuing to see the world as though for the first time. Never mind that life's ever-repeating processes go on with seemingly monotonous regularity. Men and women join together, babies are born, all struggle to survive and then die. Never mind that it has always been, and so will continue to be. Never mind that it is all common, ordinary, and universal.

*You see things; and you say,
Why? But I dream things that
never were; and I say, Why not?
– George Bernard Shaw*

To the person it is happening to, it is none of these. It becomes personal, unique as though nothing like it had ever happened before. It seems to matter. It seems to matter very much. As that person, we feel the force and power of the potentials within us straining to get on with the adventure, much like racing thoroughbreds prancing in the starting gate eager to be off.

We have the sense of humor to help maintain our enthusiasm. Humor inspires our clown to keep our spirits fresh and alive, removing the conditions that breed monotony and boredom. One way it does this is by holding up to view what we so nonchalantly overlook. One college student learned of this the day he went to his philosophy class unprepared for a scheduled test. Classes had been canceled the two previous days because the professor became ill. So on this day, when the test papers were passed out, the student protested. He said, "I assumed you'd want to us hear the two lectures we missed before giving us the test."

However valid and reasonable one's conclusions and impressions may seem, humor understands there is yet more to behold.

The professor walked to the blackboard and printed in big letters "ASS/U/ME." Then he said, "Assume. That's the word that makes an ass out of you and me."

Living requires us to form impressions and draw conclusions. But we do this by selecting bits and pieces from an experience, make conclusion and discard the "unnneeded leftovers." There is a scene in a "Little Rascals" production (some remember these as the "Our Gang Comedy") where the boys were given an artichoke as part of a meal. They peeled it back, leaf by leaf,

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looking for that something to eat. Finally having peeled it all back, they threw it away as of no consequence.

Certainly our ability to discern, evaluate, draw conclusions and make judgments is a strength. Among other things it adds reason to the human experience, gives us a basis to envision the not yet of life and move toward a future, to consider Good and Evil. But it carries with it its own limitations, because our process in making judgments is selective. This should be no secret to anyone who ever married. There comes that inevitable day when one looks at the other and says, "I didn't know you were like that!"

Seeing the humor that underlies our varied impressions and conclusions returns us to that state of innocence, where, for the moment at least, we're freed to look afresh and start over again.

There is a routine used by many comics. Taking an ordinary object, such as a carpenter's folding rule, they will show what else it can become: a back scratcher, a golf club, letters of the alphabet, a lance, a sword, a rifle, a cane. These maneuvers bring great laughs from audiences. The talented comic Jonathan

*Life is a meadow and your
happiness depends upon
which flower you pick.*

- Erik Bendre,
10 years old

Winters was a past master at this. The laugh is there because we sensed the humor in seeing something being other than what we had judged it to be.

But if our living is a continued refinement and modification of the old impressions, we will become something like the lady who never traveled because she already lived in Boston. Humor knows the whole is still there. It refuses to limit itself to our selected evaluations. If we'll use our sense of humor to get beyond such limits, we are assured of not straying far from the ground that nourishes the human spirit.

With enthusiasm revived, we're curious about the world once again. The common place, the familiar and the ordinary beckon to us with the attractions of seeing them as for the first time. Marvel, wonder, enthusiasm, awe, stirrings of the imagination, these are the qualities that give zest to the full life.

How long has it been since you saw the dandelion as a flower instead of a weed to be pulled? How long since you saw the mosquito as a delicately formed insect instead of a pest to be exterminated? How long since you saw the jay as a bird with brilliant blue plumage rather than as a camp robber to be shoed?

Someone devised a playpen to prevent toddlers from exercising their natural inclinations to explore their worlds. But as adults we have no such artificial barriers. Our barriers come from our formed opinions and impressions

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that make our worlds common, ordinary, and uninteresting. Our sense of humor can remove such barriers and give us a rebirth. With our sense of humor we can rediscover the world by seeing it as though for the first time.

CLOWNING ACTIVITIES
(For instructions see pages 60-66.)

A practice in responding with humor to situations of sameness and routine.

- What are some of the most boring things you have to do?
- What are things you have to do, but do them without much enthusiasm?
- What were some of the personal experiences that came to mind while you were reading this chapter?

After considering these questions, list four specific situations under “Step 2” on the work sheet on page 78.

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