

“The Best Medicine”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
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Positive Psychology

My favorite college course I ever took was Positive Psychology. I was fascinated by the idea of studying happiness. What a fantastic subject, right? What an interesting thing to do, to try to measure and quantify happiness.

And, I wanted to know if there were things I could do personally to create or enhance happiness in my life. Prior to taking the class, I had not given it much thought, but I guess I believed that happiness was just a reaction that we have when things go well for us. In other words, happy people are the results of happy circumstances.

But in my positive psychology class, I was introduced to the possibility that we have a say in our happiness, and not just insofar as we have the ability to control whether good or bad things happen to us. We also have a choice in how we respond to our circumstances; that, to some degree (40% to be precise), we can *choose* happiness.

According to research on the heritability of happiness, when it comes to how happy we are, 50% is determined by genetics, 10% is determined by circumstances, or environment, and the remaining 40% of how happy we are is within our control.

This means that 40% of how happy we are is a result of our attitudes, and the habits, choices, and actions we take on a daily basis that either cultivate happiness or diminish it. And *this* means, that if we are intentional about practicing the things that cultivate happiness, then we can lead happier lives than leaving it to chance and hoping good things happen to us.

Laughter Yoga

How many of you want to cultivate happiness in your lives?

Part of happiness is *feeling* good!

If I could tell you about a way to get our bodies to release a flood of positive neurotransmitters that would stimulate our brains, our immune systems, and our

nervous systems, increase blood flow, burn calories, and reduce stress, how many of you would at least be willing to try it?

Oh, I'm so glad! It just so happens we can try it right here and now: no going back, you already said you'd be willing to try! I expect a robust level of participation.

In researching this sermon, I came across something called Laughter Yoga, invented by Dr. Madan Kataria.

Dr. Kataria knew that all of the positive effects I just mentioned can be produced by laughing. And further, he discovered that our bodies don't know the difference between real and fake laughter. This means that faking laughter gives you all the same benefits of real laughter.

This led him to create Laughter Yoga as a way to laugh without needing to find something funny to laugh at. No jokes. No funny stories. He even says you don't need a sense of humor (which means I have no excuse not to try it, and neither do you)!

The idea behind Laughter Yoga is to fake it 'til you make it. And here's the thing: you don't have to fake it long before the laughter becomes real, especially in a group.

Now, I'd like to remind everyone that the holiday season is over, so don't be the Grinch in the group. If we're all silly together, then none of us needs to be self-conscious about how silly we're being.

Will you be silly with me? Great!

Let's ease into it. Sit up nice and straight for me, and let's all breath in. And as we do so, let's raise our arms up, like this. And then, as we breath out, let out a loud sigh, like this. Ok ready? Breath in and out with me.

Very good. Now this time, same thing, arms up as you breath in; and as you breath out, instead of a sigh, laugh as you exhale.

Ok, ready to do it with me?

Again!

Great! So, let's start our laughter engines! Oh, it's winter though, so it may take a few tries to get our engines to start. Everyone take out your key, put it in the ignition, and turn it (one "Ha!"). Try again! ("Ha Ha") Again! ("Ha Ha Ha") It warming up! Try again! ("Ha Ha Ha Ha" leads to laughter)

That was fun! Thank you for being silly and laughing with me!

The Shadow Side of Laughter

But laughter is, unfortunately, not all fun and games. Have you ever been laughed at?

I have. In fact, I'll admit this, hoping that you all will be kind enough not to use it against me: the thing that bothers more than anything else is to not be taken seriously. It stems from a fear of not mattering, of being perceived as worthless, of not having value. So when this kind of laughter is directed *at* me, it cuts straight to the heart of these insecurities. I imagine some of you might be similar to me in this way.

And even if you have thicker skin than I do, it still doesn't feel good to be laughed at. When laughter is used as a weapon, even if it doesn't hurt, it certainly doesn't feel good to know that the intent of the laughing is to harm, or demean. To joke about someone, or to make fun or be dismissive of something that they take seriously is to intentionally disregard their inherent worth and dignity.

So what is a sensitive-soul like me to do? Clam up and hide whenever someone makes a joke at my expense? Lash out and retaliate with some adult version of "I know you are but what am I?"

When a joke is at my expense, I'm likely to take offense; but if I know what's good for me, I can take that internal, felt reaction, and use what I learned in my positive psychology class.

When I remember that my happiness is 40% under my control, I can "choose" not to let the jokes at my expense bother me. I can remind myself that I have inherent worth and dignity, and that this laugh-attack is probably more about the insecurities of the attacker than it is about me. And if it is about me, well, then maybe I just need to remember to not take myself so seriously all the time!

Is there a kernel of truth somewhere in the joke, and that is what bothers me about it? If the answer is no, then it should be no problem to just let it go. If the answer is yes, or maybe, then I should thank the joker for providing me with an opportunity for self-reflection. Because the reality is, we're all human. None of us are perfect. We all have flaws, and make mistakes, and do things imperfectly. That is just a reality, not something I have to get defensive about. Heck, maybe what the joker is pointing out about me actually *is* funny.

The Theer-ter

For the longest time, I would pronounce the word theater, *theer-ter*. Not sure how that extra "R" snuck in there, but for as long as I can remember, I've been saying it that way. I'm still working on it.

When one of my friends called me on it, it was an uncomfortable moment of realization. I'm sure my reaction was to either deny or defend my pronunciation, but the truth is, I was just wrong. I double, checked and there is no second "R" in "the-a-ter" (English accent).

It's become an inside joke: "Let's see a movie. What *theer-ter* should we go to?" And I've learned to laugh along.

After all it is hard to laugh *at* someone who is already laughing. How's that for a resilience strategy? We don't need to be perfect, we just need to not take ourselves too seriously.

Participation, Not Perfection

Communities can adopt this mentality too. I was introduced to this idea by Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran Pastor in Denver. In her church, she promotes what she refers to as "an emphasis on participation, not perfection." As an example of this, she says it is more important to her that many lay folks be involved in leading the liturgy and have active roles in the services, than to insure everything is done exactly the right way by doing it all herself.

This extends beyond just worship services. It means allowing people to take the reins, learn as they go, and to support them as they do the messy work of being in beloved community. Because it is more important that we *do* the work of beloved community than to *try* to do *the* right thing, *the* right way."

Now, this is not to say that we should be unnecessarily sloppy or careless in our work; or that we shouldn't try to avoid pitfalls when we see them coming. It also doesn't excuse us from listening to the experiences of others and allowing ourselves to be mentored by those who might have done before what we are trying to do now. In fact, this is why we do our growing and transforming *better* in community, rather than as isolated individuals: we can learn from the experiences and perspectives of others, and maybe see the world through a lens that isn't our own.

This is only possible in a community that doesn't take itself too seriously; that can joke about itself. And even with self-deprecating humor, we must be careful not to use it so much that we internalize a diminished sense of self; that the

jokes we make at our own expense are purely to create a moment of fun and levity.

Laughing With

This humor-with-accountability thing is harder than it looks!

But it seems to me that it is worth the effort to become more resilient people, who can let the laughter flow freely when it's well-intentioned, and let it roll off our backs when it's not.

In today's reading, which is actually part of a song by Regina Spektor, she says "no one's laughing at God, we're all laughing with God."

The God of Regina Spektor's song seems to be a good role-model in the humor department. This God is pretty resilient, and able to laugh at God's self. "God can be funny," she says, "at a cocktail party when listening to a good God-themed joke."

Well there's God setting a good example at letting it roll off God's back!

She continues: "God can be funny, when told he'll give you money if you just pray the right way... or grants wishes like Jiminy Cricket and Santa Clause. God can be so hilarious!" Sounds like the God of her song is a trickster! Imagine being all-powerful, but allowing people to create these incredibly narrow and self-serving ideas of God! Hilarious!

The joke here is that anyone would conceive of a God so small and petty. And yet, for those who have stopped doing the theological work we are all called to do, this is the God-belief that some people have landed on and no longer question the relevance of.

This is why it's important that we reflect on our beliefs, theological or otherwise. If you believe in God, you should know why. If you don't believe in God, you should know why. Most importantly, whatever you believe and why-ever you believe it: *most importantly*, you must ask, how does this belief affect my actions? And how do those actions affect the lives of myself and others? Are they life-affirming? Or life-limiting?

Are we laughing *at*, or are we laughing *with* ?

If God exists, then I'd like to believe that God has a pretty good sense of humor. After all, *if* (and this is a big "if", I am not actually making the claim that this is true); but *if* God exist, and *if* God *is* responsible for the creation of the whole universe, then that means that God created absolutely everything that is funny. *Everything that is funny*. Let that sink in for a moment.

It seems to me it would be hard to offend this kind of God; and it seems to me that maybe we should be more concerned with not offending each other.

The Humanists

Not specifically with regard to humor, but this was the thinking of some early 20th century Unitarian theologians who developed a theology of Humanism. The type of humanism they advocated for didn't deny the existence of God, but thought that most forms of theistic belief were focusing on the wrong things by trying to define the nature and will of God.

Instead these Humanists believed that, regardless of God's existence, nature, and abilities, we should be more concerned with humanity. Rev. Curtis Reese, a leading Unitarian Humanist thinkers of the time, wrote, "the Humanist regards the *universe* as the given and is not likely to speculate unduly on either the beginning or the end of things cosmic... the primary concern of Humanism... is human development."¹

And so, in that human development, let us not forget to develop our human tendency toward humor, and to use our laughter in the spirit of the Humanists: towards the progress of humanity, and not as a weapon.

We Laugh, We Cry...

Sometimes, it's not laughter we are having to be resilient against; sometimes laughter can actually be the tool of our resilience. Have you ever faced a situation where it seems like your only choice is to laugh or cry? Let me say that often in these situations, either response is totally acceptable. It's ok to cry. And sometimes in these situations, we do both. We laugh *and* we cry. I've done it.

I remember once being *so* frustrated; it's funny, now I don't even remember why. That is the power that emotion has over our memories; we can often remember *how we felt* long after the details of who, what, where, when, and why have faded.

Anyway, I remember being more frustrated than I have ever been before or since. I went for a drive to cool my head. A few blocks down the road, away from eyes that might see and ears that might hear, I pulled over. My frustration had reach it's boiling point, and I just... yelled; as long and as loud as I could.

And then the tears came. The yell gave way to crying... and then I pictured myself; I pictured myself watching myself essentially throwing a tantrum in the

¹ *The Unitarians and the Universalists* by David Robinson. Greenwood Press, 1985 (p 147-8).

car. And this image made me start to laugh. I slipped back and forth between crying and laughing, which made the image I had of myself seem even more absurd.

Again, I don't remember what I was so frustrated about, but I will never forget being in the car, yelling, crying, and laughing. And when it was done, I felt like a pressure valve had opened, and my frustration had been released.

Called to Cultivate Happiness

Sometimes we need to cry. And sometimes, we need to laugh, because as painful, and as frustrating as life can be, we still have that 40% of our happiness that is within our control. We have that 40% that we can intentionally cultivate, by training ourselves to see the blessings in our lives. This is why gratitude is important. We can cultivate happiness by being willing to laugh, like you all were when we did Laughter Yoga. And we can cultivate happiness by building strong bonds, in a beloved community like this one. Like the Unitarian humanists from a century ago, may we commit ourselves to human development, both personal and in society. May we cultivate happiness in ourselves and others. And if such a thing as God there be, may we laugh *with* God. May it be so.