



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Fun and Laughter as a Spiritual Practice

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Guest Speakers

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Homily – Clyde Derrick:

I had the good fortune to work at Art Center College of Design several years ago, and there I befriended a wonderful instructor named Jay Chapman. Jay not only taught film classes, he was the creativity coach for students and staff alike. When I learned this, I signed up for a coaching session immediately, not only because I trusted Jay's opinion, but because for the first time in my life, I no longer wanted to write...and I didn't know why.

When I met with Jay and told him I had completely lost interest in writing, he asked me what I had been working on. I started to describe one project after another, and when I got to the third with two more to go, he shouted, "Stop! You're insane! You're not a machine!" He got me to see that the reason I didn't want to write anymore was I was trying to work on five projects at once while also working a demanding job and I was easily burning myself out. He advised me to work on one project at a time only and my love for writing would return. His advice would prove to be amazingly spot-on.

After offering this advice in our session, he looked at me suspiciously. "Say...what do you do for *fun*?" I told him that I was watching all the films of the great Swedish director Ingmar Bergman in chronological order. He looked like he had just swallowed a bottle of ink. "We'll have to work on *that*," he said.

He didn't have to say much more...for I suddenly realized I wasn't having much fun anymore, nor did I know how. I had become so task oriented I didn't know where to stop, and everything seemed like work. This made me very sad, and I resolved to rediscover what fun really is.

Many men in middle age, when they think they aren't having fun, either go for a fast car or a fast woman – or a fast man. Being single for much of my adult life as well as the son of a used car dealer, I already knew either one of these endeavors was too high maintenance – and no fun. So I chose to look back in my life to a time that I remembered had been really fun – my childhood.

I had challenges in childhood like everyone, but overall it had been pretty great. I had tons of friends growing up and there was no end to what we would do together. Of course, in my mid-50s, many of these activities were no longer very interesting. I could never see myself in the middle of a two-hour dirt clod fight again – or building a fort in the backyard – or climbing a eucalyptus tree so high that your friend's mother would rush out screaming you were going to fall to your death. I spent most of the 4th grade on a bicycle, but I had also spent 14 years as an adult on one to stay in shape, and I'd pretty much had my fill.

Do you remember the hoola hoop? I could make that thing go for what seemed like hours as a kid, but as a 55 year old man, I could only make it go around and around with my neck, and I got a bad neck ache as a result. Then I tried the foods I had loved as a kid and learned that two things I could not get enough of, Franco American spaghetti and Vienna sausages, were close to inedible. Ditto Nestlé's Qwik and Ovaltine. And I almost lost my teeth on a Big Hunk nougat bar, which had been my favorite candy bar way back when.

At 7 years old I had planned to marry Shirley Temple until I found out she was my mom's age. I loved her movies as a kid, but I found out they are mostly impossible to watch as a grown man – I just can't bear to see a child cry. I fared much better with old TV shows like The Roy Rogers Show, Perry Mason and Alfred Hitchcock Presents – and though they afforded a joyful hour or two, I still didn't feel like I'd hit pay dirt.

My last touchstone with childhood was a movie called Dr. Dolittle – a big expensive musical with Rex Harrison that is generally regarded as one of the worst films ever nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. The critics used words like “elephantine” and “interminable” to describe it. Dr. Dolittle has a really beautiful score by Leslie Bricusse with songs that everyone from Bobby Darin to Diana Krall has recorded, and that score was what pulled me into the movie, as well as the fact that Dr. Dolittle was as baffled by people as I was weathering my first year of middle school. Whenever I'm blue I pull out my souvenir sheet music and play the songs, or I put on the album, or I watch one of the elephantine, interminable musical numbers on DVD, and I feel lighter.

In this period of soul-searching, I started finding Dr. Dolittle memorabilia showing up on my doorstep courtesy of eBay and my own temporary insanity. Well it was fun buying it – and then I had no idea what to do with this stuff. When I ended up with a boxful of Dr. Dolittle junk – including a mint Mattel effigy of the doctor himself – I finally asked myself, “What on earth are you doing?” The answer was, I was trying to recreate the joy I had as a kid with things that were no longer joyful.

If I was going to find my joy, it would have to be in the present. I made a list of the things that I did find fun and suddenly found it was rather long, starting with friends and loved ones, including the four-legged kind; riddled with chocolate and simple carbohydrates, old movies and TV shows, hiking trails and lap pools, San Francisco, London and New England, crossword puzzles and mental health days. It also included Neighborhood Church and last but not least – the films of the great Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman in chronological order. Maybe Jay didn't think they were fun, but watching the work of this great director had brought me considerable joy.

So why wasn't I having fun? – I wasn't letting myself. I wasn't making the time out of guilt and too strong a sense of responsibility. When I shared this with a wonderful friend who knows me too well, she suggested that I schedule fun a handful of times a week to be sure I didn't miss out – make fun a regular *practice*. When I realized how it benefited my soul to do this and how much more balanced I felt, I realized that for me, fun has to be a spiritual practice for a full life

– right alongside reflection in solitude and worship in community. Being spiritual doesn't mean being humorless; in fact, I believe it means the direct opposite. Accordingly, I feel it only appropriate to close this homily with the words of that great American theologian, Mae West, who wrote: "You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough."

Homily – Grady Goddard

Several years ago I was lucky enough to attend a training in Santa Barbara with a woman named Dr. Annette Goodheart who had gained an international reputation as a laughter therapist. She walked out to the front of the room and without introduction or without saying a word, she started laughing. She continued to laugh for 10-15 minutes and as you can imagine, everyone in the room had joined in. As she stated in an interview, she doesn't start her training like that to relax her audience, she does it to relax herself. And while laughter is highly contagious, many people still feel they need a reason to laugh and are nervous at first. She practiced the art of cathartic therapy and created a framework that wove together physiology, psychology, and historical literacy and cultural references. Cathartic therapy, as she practiced it involved four basic steps:

First you get in touch with your feelings.

Second you release them through catharsis.

Third you rethink the situation of the experience associated with the feelings which now has become possible because the chemical rebalancing in your body allows you to think more clearly.

Then finally you take whatever sensible action is appropriate.

Catharsis in therapy has long been valued but has often taken the method of crying or rage to release pent up feelings. Why not laughter? It seems much more sensible doesn't it? Her hypothesis was that our discomfort with laughter is that it is perceived as a loss of control. She stated that much of the time laughter is all about control. When we laugh, how we laugh, what we laugh about, who makes us laugh, why we stop laughing, how we stop ourselves from laughing – all that is about control because laughter is literally the loss of control. Sometimes we laugh so hard we cry which she believed is not surprising because laughing and crying are not opposites. They are on a continuum and once you realize that laughing doesn't come from happiness then laughing and crying are seen as being side by side.

Her early work as a therapist was focused on catharsis and she saw laughter as the easiest tool to achieve it. She had been doing this for about eight years when she heard Norman Cousins, who Clyde did a reading about earlier, was coming out with a book about his own healing through laughter. His experience of having two hour intervals of drug-free and pain-free sleep was confirmation of what she had been finding in her work with people. She met with him, they discussed it thoroughly and she got the message that a famous person was about to put laughter on the map and she had a wealth of clinical experience and information. It was an idea whose time had come! She knew that she was about to go into the laughter business. She

called UCSB and asked how they would like a workshop on laughter. They laughed. But she didn't give up, she went to other campuses and did workshops and then the people who came to those workshops wanted her to repeat it for their hospitals, welfare departments, church's, clubs and so forth. Eventually she taught Beginning and Advanced Laughter classes at Santa Barbara City College for ten years.

There had been workshops before on humor, but not laughter. They are different and understanding that difference is the real key to understanding the real power of playful laughter. Humor is intellectual, a way of viewing the world. There have been lots of studies on humor but no agreement on what's funny. We find different things funny because we have different senses of humor. People in different countries or even in different parts of this country find different things funny. A man's idea of funny is sometimes different than a woman's. What my own children find funny and what I find funny are often very different. Laughter, on the other hand is universal. It is a profound process that involves every major system in the body. It's spiritual, psychological and emotional. Think of the kind of laughter babies do. Lisa Groening shared a video on Facebook, you might have seen it, of two babies laughing sitting in high chairs next to each other. They would spontaneously trigger each other into fits of laughter that couldn't help but make you laugh if you were watching it. No one ever says, "Doesn't that baby have a wonderful sense of humor?" Babies learn to laugh first and later develop a sense of humor.

In the seminar I attended with Dr. Goodheart she asked during the morning for a couple of attendees to come see her during the lunch break and volunteer to do a demonstration with her in the afternoon of her work of cathartic laughter. When she worked with both of them in the demonstration they shared material in a very vulnerable way. She listened attentively and asked questions and at some point in the work with them asked them if they had had a chance to laugh about it yet. It was pretty astounding to see their initial reaction and then their ability to get there as she met them in their pain and helped them see the benefit that her approach offered. Her philosophy was that although we have relatively little control over the events in our lives, we really do have choice about how we respond to them. We are not hopeless victims of our feelings. She believed we can be serious about our problems or enjoy them and if we're going to have a problem why not enjoy it? She believed anyone could do it. She worked a lot with cancer patients helping them to figure out how to enjoy the process of having cancer. When asked in an interview how one can enjoy cancer she responded, "What are the options? A person has cancer. I'm not suggesting a person should laugh at themselves because they have cancer. The laughter that's healing has to do with releasing the tension which is set up by how we relate to what happens to us." In other words, if a person drags around feeling depressed, all that tension and feeling about having cancer becomes part of the sickness, increasing the severity of the problem, not becoming part of the solution.

In the interview I mentioned, Dr. Goodheart told the following story:

A woman came to me at a workshop and said, after some crying, that she'd like to be able to laugh about her ovarian cancer. I suggested that she say 'I have ovarian cancer,

tee hee.’ The ‘tee hee’ was up in her head and it didn’t make her laugh. So then I suggested that we move down her body’s energy centers. We started with “I have ovarian cancer, heh, heh.’ That came from her throat and it, too, brought no response. She continued: ‘I have ovarian cancer, ha, ha.’ Nothing. We finally reached the actual area of her ovaries. “I have ovarian cancer, ho, ho.” With that she’d hit the tension area around her ovaries. The idea, the whole thing, was so playfully painful that it triggered her laughter. Soon she was laughing spontaneously and feeling much better, specifically about her cancer. Charlie Chaplin believed that the formula for laughter was to take pain and play with it. This is the method I use to help people laugh about the unlaughable.

People always say they feel better after laughing. She was sure that part of that comes from the release of endorphins. There was an elderly woman in her advanced laughter class who had to have eighty pre-cancerous skin lesions burned off. It was a very painful procedure, because the attending physician felt that giving her novocaine would be unwise. She decided on laughter as an alternative. It worked for her. With the second burn, the endorphin effect kicked in and she felt very little pain.

She often worked with people recovering from surgery. Laughter works very well for them. She gave another example of working with a man who had a tumor the size of a grapefruit removed from his knee. They agreed that, if possible, he should have a local anesthetic, which is preferable. And he was willing to go to the extra expense to have a private room so they could work together. She was there as soon as possible after the surgery, sitting with him for half an hour while he pressed on his knee. She told him to say “ow” as he pressed. Each time he did this, he would laugh. She found it interesting that when adults admit they have pain, they almost always laugh. So she’d say “louder” and he’d say “owwww!” Then he’d laugh and laugh. He was actually playing with his pain. As they went along, it took greater and greater pressure on his knee for him to feel the pain. Just before she left, the surgeon came in to ask how he was doing. The patient said, “Fine!” and kicked his leg out. The doctor was so surprised, he nearly fell over. When he recovered himself, he said he’d never seen anything like it before. By afternoon the patient was walking.

This is what infants and small children do. They keep giving attention to their pain. They tell everybody about it as they come to a point of catharsis over and over, then they are finally done with it. That’s what really involved when we describe an operation to people. We’re trying to release tension. But if it isn’t done with catharsis, the pain doesn’t get released and we just keep bringing the story up again and again.

Dr. Goodheart admitted that she herself personally took a long time to reach catharsis herself on the issues in her life through laughter. She was abused as a child, had struggled with depression, had been through an alcoholic marriage and a divorce, raised three kids virtually alone, and had three major surgeries. She was not naturally what you would call a “happy-go-lucky” person. She said things hadn’t always been rosy for her but she laughed because she had a lot of pain to release. In other words, she believed that if she could laugh through her

pain, anyone could. She knew that people wanted to think of her as happy all the time but that was not the case and because she laughed her way through a lot of old pain, she had a lot of empathy for others in similar situations.

One of her seminars was titled, "You and Your Spiritual Funny Bone." Those workshops were always packed, in spite of the fact that her premise was that laughter comes out of pain and pain is okay to have. That must have come as a relief as well as a revelation, because most people on a spiritual path seem to think that to be spiritual means to have no pain or at least to deny pain.

They apparently forget that Jesus wept and sometimes raged. He lost his temper with the money changers and went after them with a whip. She said she couldn't believe he also didn't laugh, despite the fact that in Western religion, laughter is a no-no. Playboy received more irate mail after running a picture of Jesus laughing than they ever got for any other picture. That's really amazing when you consider the content of that magazine. How could Jesus laughing be more threatening than any picture they had ever run? Yet apparently it was.

Our ideas are surely a long way from Eastern philosophies where there are things like the laughing Buddha; the wry Sufi stories; the Hindus, who think the universe was created in play; or Zen Buddhists, who believe that if you laugh for ten minutes upon waking, you've achieved the equivalent of six to eight hours of rigorous meditation.

There's a tremendous resistance in the Western spiritual movement today to acknowledging pain, because many people have become intensely interested in spiritual matters just to avoid such acknowledgement. In those cases, religion is like a drug. But pain is a lifesaving feedback sensation which tells us when we need to pay attention to something potentially destructive. It is a natural part of being human. Many people think that because they've become involved with spirituality, they shouldn't ever feel pain again. When they do feel pain, they fear they're doing something wrong and they wind up not only with pain but with guilt as well. This fear of "doing it wrong" is the very opposite of the spirituality they're trying to achieve. So they become trapped in fear, afraid to laugh, when ironically laughter is the one thing that will release them from the fear. There is a saying that if fear is the lock, laughter is the key.

Also, the fear, pain, and guilt create feelings of isolation and separation, when the reality is that we are all One and separation is an illusion. The tragedy is, we don't always experience that. The key, once again, is laughter. When we laugh together, we actually experience connection. So, for her, that's what spirituality is all about – being present together, experiencing the here-and-now together, and moving together in a shared catharsis.

Dr. Goodheart died in 2011. In her obituary, written by her daughter, she said the world had lost a brilliant laughter, adventurer, artist, and remarkably empathic human being. In 2005, at the age of 70 she had decided she wanted one great last adventure. She left her sailboat that she lived on in the Santa Barbara harbor, (the "TeeHee") and moved to Mexico where she created yet another circle of friends, learned to speak Spanish, and painted her house an astonishing

combination of colors. She died of cancer with her daughter by her side. Not knowing that a consulate seal was required, her sons smuggled her ashes across the border. Her children agreed that had they been confiscated as contraband, Annette would have laughed.