

## **Ha, Ha, Ha**

*A Homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

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When we first began our conversation about laughter, our youth group members were skeptical that there was much to say about laughter and spirituality or wisdom. Humor and spirituality seemed like two unrelated things, they thought. Perhaps you think the same thing.

But the more we talked, the more wisdom emerged... wisdom about laughter and wisdom through laughter. I hope to share some of that wisdom today with you.

### **What is laughter? It is the glorious sound of a soul waking up.**

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh tells a story of the Buddha that goes like this – The Buddha arrived for a long awaited visit to a religious community, and more than a thousand monks and nuns came to learn from his wisdom. They had long awaited his visit and eagerly gathered to experience his teaching. The Buddha took the platform and held up a flower. There he stood for quite some time, holding the flower, saying nothing. The audience was perfectly silent. They seemed to be thinking hard, trying desperately to understand what the flower might mean, what the Buddha's gesture might signify. They silently sat and thought. Then, suddenly, the Buddha smiled. He smiled because one in the crowd smiled in joy at him and at the beauty of the flower.

Thich Nhat Hanh observes that when someone holds up a flower, they want you to see and enjoy it. If you keep thinking, you miss the flower and the enjoyment, he says.

See the flower. Notice its beauty. Enjoy it. Wake up to the moment.

So it is with laughter. Though laughter can be nervous or hysterical or deep or light, it often arises directly from a moment – a non-conscious response to external stimuli or other people. Genuine laughter may result from a joke that engages the intellect, but at its heart, genuine laughter is not a rational act.

Laughter, therefore, can be a way to short circuit or circumvent the rational and get to the heart of a more intuitive experiences, to wake us up to exactly what is before us, without any sense of distance or removal.

Some Buddhist teachers are known for using humor in this way – as an access point to the somatic sleeping mind. Teacher Carolyn Rose Gimian writes: “In Buddhism, one of the roles of the teacher is to provide an insult to ego and to undercut the kind

of solidity of our projections, our solid world. One of the ways that often happens is through humor, through words and actions, and even through practical jokes.”

I imagine the Buddha himself, taking a pratfall, then ignoring the perplexed crowd in favor of giggling with the student who snickered in the back row.

**What is laughter? It is the glorious sound of a soul waking up.**

I have cried tears of mirth while laughing. I have also laughed in the midst of deep grief, telling stories of a loved one at his wake and laughing through tears of loss.

We laugh until we cry, we cry until we laugh, until laughter and tears seems to show themselves as flip sides of the same experience. Tears and laughter both can creep up on us in comfort and discomfort, joy and sorrow – reminding us that the two states are not so cleanly divided from one another, but part and parcel of a reality that is not dual.

Buddhist teacher Norman Fischer writes: “Impermanence is permanence, suffering is joy, egolessness is freedom, and the only trouble is that we don’t notice that. Somehow we knew that and we forgot. That’s kind of absurd, laughable, slapstick. The whole proposition of human trouble is serious and not serious at the same time, and that paradox is essentially funny.”<sup>1</sup> It is absurd, this life of ours. It is paradox, it is unlikely oneness. So beautiful, so terrible, so laughable. When we get this, we are awake, light, free.

**What is laughter? It is the glorious sound of a soul waking up.**

I have a particular friend who makes me laugh my head off every time we’re together. We live far apart, so these laughing sessions are few and far between. The last time we spent time together, I realized anew what an entirely embodied experience laughter is.

Tears streamed down my face until my nose started to run. My cheeks started to hurt. My diaphragm pressed uncomfortably on my bladder. You know you’ve all said it... “Stop! You’re going to make me pee my pants!”

The next day, my abdominal muscles were sore from their laughing work out, and I wondered when I had last been so in my body, in the moment. When I had last felt such wholeness of brain, body, heart, such joy.

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[http://www.shambhala.com/images/illus/BD\\_SMR11\\_9\\_Forum%20on%20Humour-1.pdf](http://www.shambhala.com/images/illus/BD_SMR11_9_Forum%20on%20Humour-1.pdf)

Laughter connects us to our embodied emotional selves, and so doing it heals us from the internal divisions and categorizing mental constructs that fragment and split our lives.

Buddhist teacher Bernie Glassman, who also has training as a clown, writes that good joke is like a good teaching: “They take away your opinions and concepts rather than give you more of them. The key is pulling the rug out, saying things that cause people to drop their preconceptions. A red nose can do that too. It’s about not knowing, being totally open to what’s going to happen. At that point, your mental constructs fall apart.”<sup>2</sup>

Laughter helps us get unstuck from the traps laid in our minds. Like our breath, it is a shortcut into the heart of our undivided experience. Don’t think so hard about it. Just laugh.

### **What is laughter? It is the glorious sound of a soul waking up.**

Laughter is brutally honest, puts us in touch with parts of ourselves that are most open for truth and transformation.

Have you ever seen some one fall down in a spectacular way and experienced a bark of laughter before you could stop yourself and rush over to see if they needed help? I have.

I do not say this proudly or to encourage laughter at the expense of others, but to illustrate the honesty and wildness of laughter, which is not always appropriate, and which is rarely in our control. I have laughed when I would rather not.

Openness to genuine laughter is a letting go. Allowing for expressions of laughter, which never seem to come in the appropriate or appointed time or place and which sometimes show us personal truths we would rather not see, is an act of liberation – a ceding of control, and therefore among the wisest of spiritual acts.

Comedian Elaine Smookler writes: “In the world of clown, when things go awry on stage, it’s considered a gift from the gods. Nothing could be better than things falling apart, because in that groundless place something fresh and surprising can occur— if you’re open to it. We all know that painful things happen, and that ultimately we’re going to die. But we don’t have to take it so personally. Being able to laugh about incontinence, heartbreak, and the many painful attachments we humans fall prey to is a great relief. It goes a long way to reduce suffering, particularly when we are reminded that things aren’t happening to us, they’re just happening. Bringing a sense of humor and curiosity to our fear and anxiety is liberation.”<sup>3</sup>

Laughing is a surrender, and therefore a liberation from our own clutching and

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

grasping for control.

Once we are so freed, we can stay with our discomfort, sit with uncomfortable truths about ourselves, and name uncomfortable truths about our world. Since laughter is brutally honest, it speaks the truth, even unto power. Comedy very often names the absurdity of injustice – can allow us to engage with racism, sexism, ablism, colonialism, violence in ways that allow the oppressor to hear and the oppressed to speak.

Indeed, for those who are oppressed, laughing in the face of such oppression is an act of freedom and creative agency, a claiming of humanity and life where they are denied.

There are many situations where unjust forces or individuals hold great power over people's lives, but even such forces cannot control the bodily function of laughter or tears, humor or lament. Laughter is too wild, too brutally honest to be so contained.

So laughter can be a spiritual surrender to the worldly forces all around us, *and* it can at the very same time be an act of resistance to systems and acts of oppression.

As surrender, as resistance, laughter frees.

**What is laughter? It is the glorious sound of a soul waking up.**

It is our connection with the present moment, with our deepest intuition, and embodied selves, and with each other.

It is that space beyond category or division, where life is beautiful and terrible and our tears and laughter fill the sky.

Laughter is surrender, resistance, freedom itself.

**What is laughter? It is the glorious sound of a soul waking up.**

**Let us wake up.**