

Laughing for No Reason

By Gwen Gordon

“A deep belly laugh might be the one true cry of the human being.”

- Brian Swimme, Cosmologist

It was official. I was definitely in a funk. It was going on two weeks that I'd wake up with the same grim cloud hanging over my head. Nothing interested me, nothing was particularly funny, and worst of all, nothing seemed to make any difference. The most peculiar thing about this mood was that I could find absolutely no reason for it. I don't have a history of depression, I wasn't premenstrual, and nothing in my life seemed to be any different in any significant way from when I was happy. Of course, I can always find something to justify my mood; the weather, the news, my status as a single woman over forty who hasn't had a real date in over two years. But, I can't really get away with it since I know that I can feel just as good without anything being different.

Then I got an unusual invitation from a friend. “Come to an evening of laughter yoga and laugh for no reason.” First thought: “I'd rather eat broken glass.” Then I got a little curious. If I could scowl for no reason, maybe I could also laugh for no reason. I thought it over: I trust and respect the friend who invited me. She wouldn't involve herself in anything too ridiculous. I can leave whenever I want to? Okay fine, I'll go.

I walked into the workshop with a straight face. There's nothing worse than feeling pressured to laugh. It's just not funny. I needed a reason to laugh for no reason, and it better be good. As the group began stretching and making sounds, my defenses slowly began to melt. Nobody was looking at me to make sure I was laughing. Nobody was pushing it. In fact, it was a lot like a yoga class, except that the postures were

different types of laughter. There was the greeting laugh, the angry laugh, the sad laugh, the lion laugh, the yawning laugh, the snobby laugh, the evil laugh, the oops I tripped laugh. And each one had a physical movement and breath to keep your focus so that you didn't have to think about laughing. Soon exhales turned into giggles, then chuckles, then light laughter, and then it happened. I caught myself in a full guffaw.

The thing about laughter is that it is terribly contagious. Somebody in the group has a great, infectious laugh and it's all over. Resistance is futile, so I just surrendered. Nothing was funny, but what a relief it was just to laugh. As I did, it felt like a flock of bright green and red and yellow parrots had busted out of a cage. I laughed and laughed and laughed. Soon I was on the floor cackling and hissing and sputtering and spewing, my whole body heaving and it felt great.

Then I had the wacky idea, in the middle of my mirth, to think of a few things that cause me stress. I thought about my finances. No money to pay March mortgage? Now THAT's funny. Work challenges? Heeeeeeeheeeee. No romantic adventures? HAHA HAA! And as I laughed in the face of these challenges, I could feel all my habitual wiring going haywire. My patterns of reaction were getting short-circuited as the neural networks got redirected from resistance toward mirth.

As they did, I felt myself fall back into deeper cascades of hilarity. Wheeeee. I seem to have landed right in the punch line of the great cosmic joke. That everything is pure, joyful, exuberant play. It was what Milan Kundera, in the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* calls the laughter of angels. Angels laugh with the meaning of the world while devils laugh at its meaninglessness. I was paradoxically both closer to and more detached

from reality, both more embodied and more transcended. I wondered if maybe that's how angels feel.

Eventually, the laughter gently subsided like the tide going out and leaving lots of frothy bubbles on the soft sandy shore to glisten in the sun. I was left with a tingling happy body and a sense of vast space within every one of my cells. Funk? What funk? That was the best, most affordable therapy I'd ever had.

When Norman Cousins healed himself of cancer by watching and howling to hours of the Marx Brothers, he got a lot of people thinking. One of them was Dr. Madan Kataria, a family physician from India. Inspired by the health benefits of laughter and its relationship to yogic breathing practices, Dr. Kataria and his wife created the first "Laughter Club." The laughter clubs, also called laughing yoga, were contagious and now there are over 5,000 of them in countries on five continents.

The health benefits of laughter have been well proven. Research by Dr. Lee Berk from Loma Linda University, in California has revealed that after laughing we have a stronger heart, lower blood pressure, lower Cortizol levels, higher Seratonin levels and a stronger immune system. Now there's a good reason to laugh for no reason! What is less well understood, however, are the spiritual benefits of laughter.

I notice that whenever I lose my sense of humor, it's a sure sign that I've lost my perspective. As a friend of mine likes to say, "the truth shall make you laugh!" No matter how difficult and heavy the facts might be, facing them makes us lighter. The truth makes us laugh because, after all, it sets us free and when we're free, we're free to laugh. With every joyful breath, we assert our freedom, reminding us that even ordinary life rests inside a bigger enchanted game, a larger truth in which all things hold meaning.

We are born with a breath, our first wind. Breath is the basic miracle of life – whether prahna, spiritus, ruach, afflatus, pneuma, anima – it’s always regarded as sacred. Laughter is a second wind. Aha! A rebirth. It heralds our capacity to be reborn, by laughing off the weight of the past. That’s what we always laugh off – gravity; the weight and pressure of life – until we feel light enough to rise above our problems. The laughing Buddha is fat to show that even the biggest bulkiest belly can be lifted with a big enough laugh.

Laughter is also the sound of liberation. The breath, the instincts, the Spiritus comes out of the lungs with a HA! Free at last!. If we can laugh at ourselves, we’re a little freer from the tyranny of the frightened ego. And if we can laugh at authority, we have loosened their grip on us. The Daily Show, Saturday Night Live, political cartoons, and irreverent taboo-busting comedians all remind us that we can have a sense of well-being, power and even joy, no matter what’s going on, by laughing. What we can laugh at cannot control us. Our spirits are always free.

Laughter defies control, even self-control. We simply cannot stay poised while we’re laughing. Our whole body convulses, fluids fly out of our orifices. We may even wet our pants. And neither can we control when we laugh. We can hold our breath, our bladders, our tongues, and even our sexual impulses, but try to suppress your giggles, especially at churches, funerals, and graduations. In the face of such reverent formality when laughter would cause the greatest disruption, our funny bones are the most vulnerable. Something will inevitably strike us as hysterically funny; the priest’s nervous tick, the parade of black coats, heck, the color of the wallpaper...and it’s all over. And what a relief! For one brief blissful moment, we are released from the prison of our

inhibitions, our incessantly monitored high maintenance fragile egos trying desperately to maintain civilized decorum. In our laughter, we fall back through the cracks in civilization into our own wild nature and the heavenly anarchy of the soul.

What's so funny? We're laughing at what philosopher Henri Bergson calls, "the human encrusted in the mechanical." The more rigid, formal, humorless, and significant we become, the more laughable. What I see when I gaze directly into the eyes of my most menacing inner demons is that, while they may be immensely painful, they are also, actually pretty silly. Their biggest weakness is that they can't take a joke. No sense of humor. So, I've found the best way to disarm them is to laugh at them. My friend Christi and I have a running joke. She's sensitive about her weight, and I'm afraid of abandonment. If I say something as innocuous as "pass the salt," she responds with something like, "Are you saying I have a big butt?" to which I reply, "No, don't leave me." Every inane comment is misheard through the filter of our fears, which, when exaggerated, gets pretty ridiculous. And when we laugh at them, we turn our biggest insecurities into jokes.

There may always be a twitching little ego hearing "You have a big butt!" and afraid of being abandoned. How silly, how adorable, how utterly human...how lovable, how painful, how filled with suffering. But when we see it for what it is, we can bust out of the prison, and burst out laughing. Laughter is the sound of freedom. With it, the insecurity becomes a joke and the tragedy becomes a comedy. In other words, the play goes on. As ??? says, "tragedy is just a comedy that hasn't ended yet." Comedy is the resilience of life over time, to laugh and come back into balance.

Laughter topples hierarchies, restores our humanity, dispels demons and levels the playing field. It makes us fluid, like the Greek root for Humors, returning us to the fluidity of our own existence in bodies that snort and hiss, bleed, cry, laugh, and sweat, and eventually die, like every other living thing. We're vulnerable when we laugh, undefended, out of control, and still utterly safe because we're holding hands and laughing with the whole of creation and with the angels that are always protecting us. If we can be in a funk for no reason, then we can also laugh for no reason. It's our choice. And when we do, we return to the flow of life that carries us past our fears and insecurities back into our deepest joyful true nature.