

Laughing with God
By Rev. Doug McCusker

There once was a king who presided over a vast kingdom. Throughout the course of his reign, he and his armies had conquered neighboring lands thousands of miles away. He had millions of subjects. People feared his might and were in awe of his power.

But with all these conquests came tremendous responsibility for the welfare of his people. People came to him every day with their problems. There was always one part of the kingdom that was in drought while another was being flooded by the monsoon rains.

All along the border were skirmishes and battles with other kingdoms who wanted to take back the land they had lost. Inside the royal court everyone jockeyed for the King's favor. The internal politics was exhausting.

The King had everything he desired, but he was extremely unhappy. Nothing pleased him. He hadn't laughed in so many years that he forgot what it felt like.

One day during a deep depression, he called in his court jester and demanded that he make him laugh. The jester told jokes about all the people in the court and all their petty problems. The King didn't laugh. All it did was remind him of how exhausted he was with their issues. He dismissed the jester and decreed "Off with his head!"

The next day he asked for the puppeteers to come and make him laugh. They heard about the jester's plight so they were nervous. They opened with a skit that made fun of a village in the kingdom that was well known for being simple and poor. The King didn't laugh. It reminded him of all the people who wanted him to solve their problems and give them things. After the puppet show he shouted "Off with their heads!"

The next day he called for the actors who were performing in the city square to come and make him laugh. By now they were petrified, but they had no choice. They put on their most famous play that made fun of the King's enemies. The King didn't laugh. It reminded him that his borders were constantly under attack and that he was never safe. He hated his enemies, so all it did was make him angry. He called the guards and said "Off with their heads!"

The kingdom was in a panic. Everyone was afraid that they might be next one called to make the King laugh. A huge depression settled over the entire realm.

One day, the King and his entourage were traveling through the countryside on their way to a royal hunting trip. As they passed by a village, a flock of sheep crossed the road and caused the King's carriage to come to a halt. As he sat there waiting for the sheep to pass, a group of children were playing kickball near the road.

Just as the King peered out his window to see what was causing the holdup, a ball came flying through the window and knocked off his crown.

The guards were in shock. They all feared the King. They knew that someone was going to have to pay for this huge breach of security. As they pointed fingers at each other, they didn't notice that a little girl had walked up to the carriage window.

She looked at the king and pointed to her ball. The King looked in her eyes and realized that she didn't know who he was and didn't really care. All she wanted to do was play. There he was with no crown on his head, just some rich dude in a fancy carriage holding a ball in his hand.

He started to smile. This made the little girl smile even more. She even started to laugh about how the ball had knocked off the funny hat that the man wore. As he looked into the little girl's eyes he felt a rumble in his stomach as if he was hungry. And then air started to build up in his lungs. His throat loosened and his mouth opened wide. There was nothing he could do to stop it. A great big laugh came tumbling out.

He couldn't stop laughing. The nervous guards started laughing too. Everyone's pent up anxiety instantly transformed from fear to uncontrollable laughter. The King stepped out of the carriage and handed the ball to the little girl. He even put the crown on her head. He was sporting a great big smile.

The King told the coachman that he wanted to sit up front with him so he could enjoy the view all around him. As the king and his entourage pulled away, the children shrugged and went back to their game.

The King in this story reminds me of a boss that I used to have who would give me vague instructions whenever he assigned me a project, and then he would criticize everything I did as not being what he wanted. In our office we used to refer to his behavior as "Bring me a rock; no not that rock, bring me another rock." The problem was that he didn't know what he wanted until he discovered it.

For most of us, that resembles our spiritual journeys. We are seeking truth and meaning but we haven't the slightest idea what that means. Like the King, we treat this quest as a consumer. Truth and meaning are shiny rocks buried somewhere. All we have to do is dig in the right place, read the right books, know the right people, do the right deed and it will come to us. We'll know it when we see it. But will we?

In Deepak Chopra's book, *Why is God Laughing? The Path to Joy and Spiritual Optimism* he makes the point that we too often live on the surface of a reality that we have created out of our own egos. The real world, the universal unfolding of nature and energy, in which everyone and everything is connected, lies all around us. But we can't see it when we are blinded by fear.

If you put a 2 by 4 a foot off the ground, you can probably walk the length of the board without falling off. But if you place it between 2 five story buildings, all of sudden fear makes it almost impossible to even try. Our reality shifts entirely to what might happen if we fall or if the board cracks. Nothing has changed except in our heads.

The world, our place in it and our connection with others is safe just as it is. But fear crept in to our perceptions of the world as we navigated through our first disappointments, rejections, traumas and losses. Little by little we saw ourselves as disconnected and separate. Flung out in the world to fend against obstacles alone.

I'll let you in on a secret. Sometimes I'm mortally afraid that I'm not going to have anything to say come Sunday. I'll stare at my computer for hours waiting for inspiration, all the while worried that I will fail. I talked to a retired Minister whose career spanned 50 years. He said he never got over the fear because one time early in his career, he was wandering around the streets of Washington D.C. at 2:00 AM on Sunday with absolutely no clue about what he was going to preach later that morning.

Sometimes I succumb to the fear that no one will like what I have to say, or my jokes will fall flat, or my singing will be off key. It's amazing what runs through our heads when we think we aren't good enough. This is our ego looking for a victim to save.

Last week, our guest speaker, Andrea Spencer-Linzie talked about how our egos build fortresses around us to protect us against our imaginary dangers. We hunker down behind the ramparts; cut off from the real source of inspiration – our souls.

My ego tells me that all I have to do is start earlier in the week, research more material, work harder and all will be well. But ego's game is like a leaky boat. You're only floating if you bail faster than the boat is sinking. The problem with that approach is that I start to delude myself into thinking that the message is my message, straight from my wonderful brain.

But I never come up with anything in a vacuum. Anything and everything I utter is a compilation of stuff that passes through me from all the people and experiences I've ever known.

You don't want to hear what I, Rev. Doug McCusker has to say, you want to hear what the world has to say through me. And I want to hear what the world has to say through you. Not your egos, but you, the real you, the soul you.

If we live in fear, the world becomes a threat. The joy of our own souls becomes distant and foreign. Chopra says that the most basic principle for transformation at any level is to respond to life with laughter. Laughter is the antidote of fear and sorrow. It is the voice of joy from deep within us. It is the outpouring of our soul in the present moment.

In the description of this service, I wrote that researchers tell us that on average, children laugh 400 times a day, and adults only laugh 18 times a day. That's cause for pause, if it were true. I got that from a Unitarian Universalist discussion packet on Laughter. Later, I realized that I made the mistake of just repeating a statistic without checking it out.

So I did a little research on the Internet, which in itself is suspect. Quite a few Psychology blogs and websites referred to that statistic as urban legend. Apparently someone said it during a panel at an international psychology conference in 1998 and journalists attributed it to the panel moderator Dr. Michael Titze, a German Psychotherapist and pioneer in the world of therapeutic humor. He disavowed the statistic, but it somehow stuck.

There really aren't any definitive or peer reviewed studies that identify how many times children or adults laugh in the course of the day. However, according to the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor there is abundant evidence that laughter occurs much more often when people are engaged in social interactions with others than when they are alone.

Robert Provine at the University of Maryland did a study in 1989 that found that people are 30 times more likely to laugh when they are with others than when they are alone. He concluded that laughter is essentially a social behavior, a form of nonverbal communication.

We laugh at jokes or situations when we connect with others. Humor is profoundly contextual. For a joke to work it requires a common outlook on the world and shared feelings. Take for instance the song that I sang for the prelude. I was poking fun at us Unitarian Universalists and the crazy stuff that happens in the course of a typical worship service.

I apologize to our visitors who didn't understand the inside jokes. But as you've gathered by now, we are a little looser than other religions when it comes to ritual. We

pride ourselves on not prioritizing the ritual over the message, beliefs over actions. We think of ourselves as happy heretics who never met a doctrine that at least some of us don't question or flat out disagree with.

Thomas Starr King, a minister in the 19th century who was both a Unitarian and a Universalist long before the 2 denominations merged once said:

“The Universalists believe that God is too good to damn humanity, while the Unitarians believe that humanity is too good to be damned by God.”

When we laugh together we experience the satisfaction of a deep human longing, the realization of a desperate hope that we are enough like each other to sense one another, to be able to live together.

We laugh at that which defies our ability to make sense of events in our lives. According to Ted Cohen, laughter is an expression of our humanity, our finite capacity, our ability to live with that which we cannot understand or subdue. We laugh at the absurdity of the mystery we call life.

Laughter happens when we face the world with joy rather than control. Whenever we take ourselves too seriously, we are ripe for a bit of laughter to bring us back to the fundamental reality of the world as it is. Laughing with someone, not at someone, co-locates us in the present like a child at play.

In our parable, the King couldn't resist the innocence of a child who didn't know him from Adam. Through her eyes, he could step out of his role as the king and recapture his place as a soul inhabiting the person. After that, sitting all by himself, looking at the world through a little window just didn't make sense anymore. The unadulterated joy of the child was the connection he had been missing.

Think about the role you are playing. What would it feel like to be seen as you, the soul behind the mask? That's what laughter, joy and play does. It liberates us from our solitary parts and connects us to the greater story. Behind the noise is silence, and behind the silence is laughter. That is the voice of God. Listen to the laughter in all that you do, and may you be filled with the joy that breaks down the walls between us. Blessed Be!