



Nobody Helped

By Steve Wilson

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“The ability to shift perspective, the capacity to view one’s problems ‘from different angles,’ is nurtured by a supple quality of mind. The ultimate benefit of a supple mind is that it allows us to embrace all of life—to be fully alive and human.”

—Howard C. Cutler, M.D.

It is Thursday, July 1, 1999. The temperature at 8:00 a.m. is already 87 degrees. Three men stand on the small dusty plot of land somewhere outside of San Jose, California, where only moments ago they were marooned. Surrounded by a sea of asphalt, they mop their brows in the unseasonably hot morning sun. I am one of those men. The other two are Dr. Madan Kataria, the renowned laughter doctor, who has come to the United States on his first visit outside of India, and Arya Pathria, president of Laughaway and our host and driver for the trip today. We had anticipated hearing several research papers this morning, presented by scientists who had come to Oakland from around the world for the annual conference of the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS). Our happy anticipation of the day’s events is rapidly dissipating.

Dr. K and I, along with Karyn Buxman, a nurse from Hannibal, Missouri, are traveling across the USA as The World Laughter Tour, giving lectures and demonstrations of what one magazine calls “the hot new laughter workout.” We are supposed to meet up with Karyn at ISHS in Oakland, this morning to go over our plan for the laughter therapy workshop we are scheduled to present at 4:00 p.m. for the conference attendees. This is an important day. Several weeks and dozens of demonstrations across the USA have already given us a strong sense that Americans will love the laughter club exercises that have become so popular in India. But we feel it is important to pass muster with ISHS and its prestigious group of researchers and practitioners in the field of humor and laughter.

Great lessons about the *spirit of laughter* can be applied early in the morning on a hot summer day while stranded with a flat tire in the dusty median-strip of a California super-highway. The *spirit of laughter* is a concept that developed during the first few years of the laughter club movement in India. It means that laughter can be used for much more than its well-documented

physical benefits. Through laughter, you can acquire inner attitudinal benefits, and a supple mindedness that gives you a valuable flexibility of thinking. Laughter club members are encouraged to consider that much of the opportunity for benefit is missed if one merely engages in the physical act of the laughter exercises but does not also make the effort to engage in some mental and emotional practices.

Dr. Kataria relates the story of the woman who complained to him that her husband went every morning to do the laughter exercises, but then spent the rest of the day screaming at her and berating her. Dr. K realized that the man was missing *the spirit of laughter*, and that laughter clubs offer a wonderful opportunity for improving mental and emotional health as well as physical health. What evolved was the idea of special days, such as setting aside Mondays as the day for laughter club members to be a bit more mindful of being appreciative rather than criticizing, and setting aside Fridays for being a bit more mindful of being forgiving rather than holding grudges. This became incorporated into *the spirit of laughter* or *inner laughter*, which we three could use a dose of on the road to Oakland.

The three of us standing there were invisible to the thousands of cars whizzing by. Not one pulled over to ask if we needed help. But, we very deliberately chose not to take a narrow, self-centered, self-pitying stance. We chose to apply concepts from inner laughter, to see the situation as part of a larger scenario that would eventually play out to reveal something good, even something to laugh about. So, if it was because we were laughing that the passing drivers thought we had the situation well in hand, then in a sense, they were correct.

Getting out of the air-conditioned comfort of the car to assess the situation, we saw the left front tire shredded and completely cut away from the wheel rim. We unanimously agreed on three things: the day was already hot as blazes, we were going to be very late getting to the conference, and this was precisely the time to invoke the spirit of laughter. The spirit of laughter encourages the inner belief that "something good will come from this," shifting your perspective so that you believe there is good in what appears to be a bad situation, even before you know what that good will be. It leads to the ability to see humor when others can't find anything funny, laughing out loud for example, in the face of setbacks and disappointments.

Summoning the spirit of laughter is difficult when you are alone or haven't had much practice. It is easier when you are among like-minded people, even with one other person, and you've been practicing. For several months, during the making of the myriad arrangements required to set up the national lecture tour, there were many setbacks. Dr. K and I had made it a point to not allow feelings of disappointment to get us down. Instead we agreed that we would do our best to allow only two reactions: amazement or amusement. This worked well to keep up our enthusiasm and to stave off any feelings of discouragement, and it was practice that strengthened our roots in the spirit of laughter.

No doubt, there have been times when things have gone very wrong for you, and you and your friends said, “Years from now we are going to laugh about this.” The spirit of laughter invites you to ask, “Why wait years? Let’s start now!” That is exactly the decision the three of us made immediately, out on the highway. Our *Plan-A* became, “We will not be angry or discouraged at this apparent setback.” We agreed to laugh and wait to see what good or funny thing would come from this predicament. As it turned out, there would be more than one funny outcome.

Arya sprang into action with Plan B, opening the trunk lid and fishing out the tools for changing the tire while I started to record the scene for posterity, clicking photos with my trusty digital camera.

When the lug nuts were too tight for any of us to loosen with the tools at hand, we laughed, and implemented Plan C, my cellular telephone and the toll-free phone number for the Automobile Association’s roadside help-line.

When the toll-free number listed on my membership card for the American Automobile Association answered with a recorded message, “Out of service,” we laughed and went to Plan D, call Arya’s automobile insurance company.

Success! They would gladly arrange for a tow truck to come to our rescue. There would be a twenty-minute wait for the truck, so we shifted to Plan E, in which we passed the time entertaining ourselves by making abstract sculptures with balloons, giving funny names to the funny shapes.

Sure enough, twenty minutes later a big green tow truck pulled up behind us. We are saved!

A strong-built, gray-haired man about 60-years old, wearing a purple-plaid, short-sleeved shirt got out of the truck and came to the driver’s side of the car. At the same time we were all getting out to greet him, or help, or do whatever was needed so we could get on our way. I noticed that the man was wearing a large hard-to-miss plastic name badge above his shirt pocket. I had to read the name a few times before it registered with me. He saw that I was having difficulty getting it. Using the index finger & thumb of his right hand for emphasis and to help me see it more clearly, he proudly pointed to the badge. There was no mistaking it, the name engraved on his badge in large block letters was, “A. NOBODY”.



I started to laugh and shouted to the others, "Hey, Arya! Dr. K! Look at this! Nobody came to help us!" I pointed to his name badge so they all would read it for themselves. We broke into peals of laughter. "Wonderful," said Arya, "Nobody is here to help us!" Getting the joke, Dr. K's eyes twinkled as he chimed in, "And, look, Nobody has a tow truck!"

In short order, Mr. Nobody and his helper brought tools from the truck, jacked up the car and, amid our boisterous banter about Nobody helping us, exchanged the ruined tire for the small spare called "the donut." By that time we had realized that the spirit of laughter was proving itself. Our episode with a flat tire was going to be a very funny story in the retelling.

We had a flat tire and Nobody helped us. Arya's tools were not strong enough for us to be able to change the tire, but Nobody had better tools. In fact, Nobody had a tow truck, Nobody had a helper, and Nobody had a great sense of humor. Nobody knew where to find us on the highway. Nobody knew the name of the next town and exactly where we could get a new tire. And, Nobody carefully helped us maneuver safely off the highway. When we were on our way to buy a new tire and then on to the conference, we had Nobody to thank!

To top it all, when the tire had been changed and Dr. K and I were climbing into the car, Arya walked back to the truck to show Nobody the flyer announcing our laughter seminar for the following night. When he got back to the car, Arya could hardly contain his own giggles as he slid into the driver's seat cheerfully announcing, "Guess what? Nobody's coming to the seminar tomorrow night!" We all had another good laugh.

That day we had been given an object lesson in the spirit of laughter. Under the circumstances of an unexpected delay in getting to an important appointment, we might have been frustrated, disappointed, angry, resentful, and worried. Instead, we inspired each other to laugh and save ourselves aggravation and high blood pressure. Our history of allowing ourselves to be only amazed or amused at such a turn of events, stood us in good stead. And so we saw that one of the funniest things about being stranded on a hot, muggy day with a flat tire and no way to repair it, was that, eventually, it all worked out just fine because Nobody helped.

Steve Wilson is an internationally known, speaker and consultant who helps people and organizations get the absolute most out of themselves while they love every minute of it. He is a co-founder of The World Laughter Tour and USA Laughter Clubs. For more information about his books and services, call 1-800-669-5233, and go to web sites www.stevewilson.com, or www.worldlaughtertour.com.