



A series of brief papers in which I share what I have learned from years of looking for the deeper philosophical dynamics behind the myriad, multifaceted manifestations of laughter, and its sometimes mysterious meanings.

Part 1: A Sanctuary of Sanity

A laughter club is a sanctuary of sanity in a world that so often seems to be spinning senselessly.

What is a laughter club? There are many correct answers to this question because there are many variations in the applications of therapeutic laughter methods. References to the earliest prescriptions of laughter for health and a good life tied the idea to the spiritual practices of certain monks, shamans, Buddha's, and healers. Modern research in the biological, psychological, and social sciences continues to verify the wisdom of the ancient sages.

What is going on in these groups called laughter clubs? Why is there such a favorable response and growing demand for these programs as a therapeutic modality? As I continue my work with various laughter and humor therapy methods, which I started in 1984, and have experienced for myself, as well as receiving hundreds of reports of the results people achieve with it, deeper answers keep occurring to me. The method is revealing itself to me.

When the laughter club first appeared in India in 1995, it was a neighborly thing to do. Neighborhood people gathered to learn about a way that they could take responsibility for their own health and well-being. The altruistic spirit of helping one's fellows while also being part of the cause of world peace was, and remains, very attractive in India and around the world.

The World Laughter Tour curriculum prepares Certified Laughter Leaders to do the neighborly thing as well as to bring more formalized --but still very much fun-- programs into controlled environments such as nursing homes, schools, hospitals, workplaces, and prisons. Certified Laughter Leaders are finding warm welcomes in so many places because they are valued for their training, ethics, knowledge, and ability to organize and lead people in these methods. They have expanded the neighborly aspect to a multitude of health and social support groups including those for diabetes, multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, cancer patients and families, cardiac recovery and rehabilitation, exceptional family members, and military family support groups. In addition to the

original free laughter-club-for-the-public, the demand by specialized groups for these programs to be available on a fee basis is growing exponentially. In this series of papers I will address the question which begs for an answer: why?

Members come together to laugh and have a good time, of course. An important role for the leader is to help create the environment of "community" (temporary as it might be) in which everyone can contribute to help each other grow, relieve stress, find balance, gain a better outlook, have fun...whatever.

From time to time we hear about someone who attends laughter club sessions and complains, "I'm not getting anything out of this." That is a good opportunity to ask them, politely of course, "What are you putting into it?" Whenever we are part of any group there is an equation of mutuality and reciprocity: what you put into it greatly influences what you get out of it.

One of the keys to getting the most out of a group laughter activity program is for the members to all contribute. It is not enough for the Certified Laughter Leader to know his or her "stuff" and do a good job of leadership and encouragement, the whole group plays a part. Among the things that members can contribute are:

- Good-will
- Sincerity
- Encouragement
- Smiles
- Mutual respect
- Help with the room set up or clean up

Perhaps you can think of other ways that a member can contribute to the laughter club or laughter activity. Let me know.

Laughter clubs have deep roots, shallow roots, and some roots in-between. The deep roots go to ancient values and practices that are referenced in Tibetan Buddhism and the Old Testament. The shallow roots are in the newest growth areas of science such as Psychoneuroimmunology and the molecular biology of emotions and behavior. The in-between roots are in Positive Psychology and in yogic practices, which are gaining enormous popularity in contemporary Western society. Yoga refers to a variety of practices that help integrate and balance mind, body, and spirit in a healthy way. The structure, philosophy, format, and methods of World Laughter Tour laughter programs are designed to help achieve that balance.

A laughter activity program becomes a sanctuary of sanity when it gives members respite from the fast-paced stress-filled world of modern life. Stepping into the laughter club members leave behind the din and clamor that impinges on them from a thousand sources day and night. They enter a world filled with the sounds of mirth and laughter. They leave behind the world of jostling and jockeying, of competing and conniving, of rage and rejection, to enter a space that is friendly, welcoming, and nourishing. In other words: sane.

Upon leaving the laughter session, members take some of that sanity with them in the form of changed, i.e., improved biology, and a refreshed perspective. The bio-chemical changes may cause feelings of a certain euphoric kind of energy that lingers for several hours. Many members report feeling energized, relaxed, and in better spirits.

Perspectives change as members learn to take themselves less seriously, to laugh because life is sometimes just plain silly or ridiculous. They learn that one of the major purposes of laughter is the discharge of emotional tension, so they can laugh off fears and stress without guilt. And, by practicing the Good-Hearted Living part of the program, they can continue to prevent “hardening of the attitudes”. Members reduce stress and anxiety while inviting pleasant emotions and more laughter (sanity) into their lives.

Uninhibited, true mirthful laughter in a supportive environment, which is what the laughter club is, releases tension and strengthens new and better attitudes. When you are forming new habits, especially in the beginning of the process, it is best to spend time with like-minded people. Negative people who don’t believe in you will drain your energy and make you doubt your aims and your worth, making it much harder for you to grow into new patterns. Positive people will understand your goals and give you the time and encouragement that you need to achieve them. That’s what members find in a laughter club: friendly people who laugh with each other, not at each other.

Sanity is equated to having choices; the fewer options a person has the worse their mental health becomes. In laughter clubs, all members have choices, such as what exercises they do, or the extent to which they are comfortable participating. In fact, members are encouraged to request their favorite laughter exercises and to invent new ones. That creativity is a factor in good mental health, and it can strengthen problem-solving ability.

A simple system --not necessarily easy-- for laughing without jokes, for relaxing in good fun without a comedic performance, and for developing attitudes that open the way to laughter and peace, make our laughter activity programs an enormous aid for finding balance in an un-balanced world. I hope you laugh a lot today!

What is a Laughter Club?

Part 2: A Haven of Hope

In Part 1, we saw that a laughter club is a sanctuary of sanity. We can add that a laughter club is a haven of hope.

- Hope for better health.
- Hope for a happier life.

- Hope for a peaceful world.
- Hope for less stress.
- Hope for some amusement.
- Hope for a sense of community, even with strangers.

Laughter club programs inspire hope, and provide both the tools and the environment in which hope can blossom. Preliminary research shows that hope (expecting something good to happen) is healthful. Among the predictors of suicide, hopelessness is a more important factor than sadness. Desperation is a far more dangerous state of mind than depression, and more difficult to treat. The old saying, “Where there is life, there is hope” might better be stated, “Where there is hope, there is life.”

The laughter leader plays an important role in the hope aspect of laughter clubs. A well-known witticism reminds us, “You are unique, just like everyone else.” Although every laughter leader brings their own personality and history to the challenge of organizing and conducting the laughter sessions, the most effective leaders are found to be stimulating, dedicated, passionate & compassionate, persuasive, compelling, energetic, vibrant, full-of-life, animated, whole-hearted, accepting, optimistic, “encouragers”, and they have a pretty good sense of humor. Of course, the program itself has several elements that encourage hope, too.

The mission is optimistic: Together we can (not might or could or maybe) lead the world to health, happiness and peace through laughter. We make no claims of specific cures, but the science about the physiology of laughter shows that members can reasonably expect to gain some physical health benefits almost immediately from participation in the laughter club program. There is no evidence that you should expect to actually extend your life with laughter, but you can expect to live better.

Mental health benefits begin to happen fairly soon from participation in the sessions as well as from working on the Good-Hearted Living part of the program, or they may take a little longer depending on how consistently one attends sessions and how diligently one works the program. More or less gradually, members can expect to feel less of the adverse effects of stress and find themselves getting along better with others, as well as laughing more often

World peace may not be achieved in our lifetime, but we can feel a solid sense of contribution to it by training ourselves to have the inner spirit of laughter. Involvement in a cause that makes you feel good like that is very likely triggering healthful hormones. It also gives you a larger, more balanced perspective on your life, which makes you more resistant to the ill effects of stress and pressures, for example, at work.

The atmosphere in a laughter session is upbeat, supportive, and directly and indirectly providing encouragement by its non-judgmentalism. Members feel safe to try the exercises, some of which, like laughter meditation, can lead to discovery of one’s authenticity. The program aids members by directly encouraging breaking out inhibiting behavioral and thought patterns (sometimes known as being in a rut) by “acting as if” and

by “Tuesdays are for flexibility.” Acceptance is esteeming. The social support comes from “belonging” (it is a club); the leaders is glad to see the members (old and new) and the members are glad to see each other. Traditionally, the first laughter exercise is a greeting, symbolizing that all are welcome.

Although the findings preliminary, recent reports by Lee Berk, researching the biology of hope, point to the possibility that waking up and looking forward to a laughter club session later in the day can reduce stress hormone levels. Berk uses the phrase “positive expectation” as a way of operationally defining hope. Small-scale studies point to lower stress hormone levels and higher levels of good (immune) hormones in subjects who expected to have a good time viewing a comedy presentation. If the same holds true for positive anticipation of a laughter club session then it will have a double or triple health benefit: (1) looking forward to it, (2) participating in the laughter exercises, and (3) through Good-Hearted Living training the mind and emotions to lower and less frequent stress reactions all day every day.

Some people wait for things to happen, some people make things happen, and some people ask, “What happened?” Wishing for something to happen, yearning for a particular outcome, and simply guessing at what’s coming next but not taking action is dis-empowering because there is very little sense of having any control over outcomes.

Lenore is a friend of mine who is a superb family counselor with a mantra about how some people approach the need for change. She maintains, not so delicately, “Wishing screws you.” What she means is something akin to the biblical notion of faith with action being empty. It is the difference between wanting and willing. Are you willing to do what it takes to get what you want? My grandmother would say, “There is nobody going door to door finding out what people want and then handing it over to them.” When I was a kid growing up in Philadelphia, one of the local banks promoted thrifty behaviors with the slogan, “Wishing won’t do it, saving will!” Nike urges us to “Just do it.” World Laughter Tour provides a program that, if followed, even at a slow pace, will bring about desirable results. Laughter club members are not merely “sittin’ and wishin’” for things to get better, they are doing something positive and constructive; and, taking action is empowering.

Proverbs tell the story of how a person might go about making the world a better place. If you would seek to improve the world, start with your own country; if you would improve your own country start with your own city; to improve your city, start with your own neighborhood; to improve your neighborhood start with your own household; to improve your household start with yourself. Similarly, the spirit of laughter is a concept that holds that the first motivation by which people are drawn to the laughter club is to do some good for themselves (health, attitude, stress, distraction, amusement) and second, to share the method and ideas with others (contributing to something larger than themselves; less ego; relationship with a supportive group; involvement in a cause). Leaders have access to continuous education, the latest research; creativity and innovation is

encouraged among leaders as well as members (inventing new laughter exercises, theme formats, and finding new applications).

The hopefulness of the laughter club is actually like a modern weather prediction. It has long been observed that some people wait for things to happen, some people make things happen, and some people ask, “What happened?” Wishing for something to happen, yearning for a particular outcome, and simply guessing at what’s coming next are disempowering because there is very little sense of having any control over outcomes. How much of your ultimate destiny can you control? Even if you believe that the long-term outcomes in your life are pre-ordained, fate, karma, luck, channeling, kismet, or beshert (Yiddish, means “meant to be”), you are still faced with a myriad of daily choices. In the largest, long-range sense, it is best to train yourself to hope for the best, expect for the worst, prepare to go with the flow, and in each ‘next moment’ take responsibility for the decisions and choices you make. Balancing mind, body and spirit through the systematic laughter club program is a conscious choice.

Luck is always in life’s equation but it is not all of the equation. The hopefulness of the laughter club comes like the confidence one feels about weather forecast (compared to gazing into a crystal ball or reading tea leaves). The science behind it and the accumulated experience of it improves the probability that the eventual reality will closely correspond to the forecast (health, happiness, peace). Much more like a weather prediction than a superstition, it is probabilistic and better than a chance occurrence. The methods we use, the steps we take, constitute a formula with a track record.

Optimism, it has been said, is after all, the only realistic attitude. Whether or not you agree, optimism and hope make you a lot more cheerful and good humored, and make life a lot more pleasant and, perhaps, amusing. It is no wonder then that laughter clubs are so attractive. In times when it might be easy to slip in cynicism, scorn or despair over the fate of humankind, laughter clubs nourish hope.

[NOTE: The terms laughter club, laughter club program, and laughter session are used throughout in a general way, referring to any number of therapeutic laughter activities, so it includes the social laughter club that meets in a neighborhood and is open to the public, the workplace laughter club for employees of a particular business, and the one-time public demonstration of the laughter club. It also includes the therapeutic laughter programs that might be conducted in controlled environments such as nursing homes, jails, schools, private retirement communities, or the like; and, too, laughter meditation or other laughter activities that one might do either alone or with a small group of friends.]

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