



FULL BELLY LAUGHTER

SOME HUMAN BEINGS ARE TOO HUNGRY TO BE LAUGHING

Think Globally, Laugh & FEED Locally

By Steve Wilson

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Easing hunger, nourishing bodies and souls, is a necessary part of leading the way to laughter and a better world. FULL BELLY LAUGHTER is the name selected for an initiative arrived at by a brainstorming process undertaken by Certified Laughter Leaders.

“The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.” JAMES BALDWIN from *Loneliness and Love*

“The best caregivers are those who come to work not out of guilt or professional necessity, but because they have been touched by the soul of another human being.” DANIEL WARNER, *Former Director, L.A. Shanti*

These days I cannot eat a meal without thinking of those who are going hungry. I cannot have a really good laugh without thinking of those who cannot laugh.

In a 2009 paper presenting hypotheses about laughter and cardiovascular functioning, MDs Michael Miller and William Fry, Jr., wrote, “Laughter is a complex human behavior, with inherent characteristics involving and reflecting participation of almost every functional element of the human organism. Laughter is ubiquitous in the human world population. No human group has been identified as being devoid of laughter.”(1) This generalization implies an assumption that merits further examination for deeper understanding. Abraham Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* will be helpful in this endeavor.(2) Here is a hypothesis worth testing. The

ability of an individual to laugh easily or readily is in proportion to the extent to which that person is able to meet and satisfy basic, and then higher and higher level, needs (per Maslow).

In fact, the act of laughter is not ever-present everywhere. It is more accurate to say that the *capacity or potential* for laughter is everywhere, but that potential can only be realized when the conditions are right. It would be more accurate to say that no human group has been identified as being devoid of laughter *when and if the conditions were right*.

Yes, there have been reports that some people seem to be able to sustain laughter in spite of circumstances even as horrible as imprisonment in a concentration camp and sometimes facing a bleak prognosis means “laugh anyway” is all there is. But that laughter is highly exceptional, often temporary and short-term. Perhaps we can learn something by understanding what motivates and sustains the exceptional. However, look at the bigger picture. Look at the images of people suffering from war, poverty, famine, disease, and genocide. Their central nervous systems may be wired for laughter but they are not laughing. *The conditions are not right*.

For now, for me, I am opting for encouraging that which is “actionable” toward removing the social/situational/economic barriers to laughter, and inviting my laughter buddies to join.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

To teach us life lessons, my father often told us proverbs that were brought over from “the old country”. One he repeated very often was, *“If a man has only two pennies, with one penny he should buy bread, and with the other penny he should buy flowers, because the soul needs nourishment.”*

He learned it from his father, a Russian Jew with no formal education but lots of common sense and practical experience, who supported his family with the skill of custom building brick baker’s ovens, which adds a note of irony to that particular proverb.

For more than twenty-five years, along with many colleagues, I have been immersed in activities that amount to a persistent advocacy for laughter and humor. We commend humor and admire humorists for so many reasons. We acclaim the joy and spirit of laughter, applauding that it might be *the best medicine*.

We cite a theory that laughter might have survival value.

Because laughter predates language in human existence by millions of years, it is possible that we laughed with each other before we knew how to talk to each other. We quote scientific evidence that suggests that 90 percent of our lifetime laughter is derived from the process of human bonding; we call it *social glue*.

We want to make the world a better place through laughter. When we “lead” people to laughter, when we gather to experience laughter, to embrace laughter, and to encourage laughter, we underscore lifting spirits as much as we commend the health benefits. I would say we are attempting to nourish our own souls as well as the souls of others.

A NEEDS-RELATED HYPOTHESIS OF LAUGHTER

As much as you could say we *love* laughter, it is extremely important to realize that human mirthful laughter is much more likely and possible under some conditions than others.

Generally, Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs*, is depicted as a pyramid consisting of five levels: the lowest level is associated with physiological needs, while the uppermost level is associated with self-actualization needs, particularly those related to identity and purpose. One cannot attend to higher level needs until lower level needs in the pyramid are met. In laughter terms, Duchenne, spontaneous, or mirthful laughter would be a higher need and could only be actualized (realized, manifested, achieved) after the more basic needs—food, safety, freedom from threats, etc.—have been met.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is shown above. The pyramid illustrates the five levels of human needs. The most basic are physiological and safety/security, shown at the base of the pyramid. As one moves to higher levels of the pyramid, the needs become more complex.

LAUGHTER'S ARCH ENEMIES

Even when the physical apparatus for laughter is intact, the conditions most likely to block laughter are poor health (pain and illness), chaotic or distressed environments (war, poverty, trauma, e.g., PTSD), anything that contributes to failure-to-thrive syndrome in infants (deprivation of nurturing, cuddling, being loved), threats to safety, ambivalence (unpredictability, uncertainty), helplessness, pessimism (hopelessness, distrust, doubt, and gloom), ignorance (lack of accurate information, false beliefs), and hunger (privation).

Re-writing these conditions in the converse, we can construct a positive list of conditions that will support and enable the manifestation of mirthful laughter along with all of its advantages for health, happiness, and *survival*.

LAUGHTER'S BEST FRIENDS

We take as evidence that laughter is natural and unlearned by the fact that it shows up at about six weeks of age in infants who have sight and hearing (it's a bit later in those born blind and deaf). When the infant giggles in the crib, we don't say, "Gee! That kid has a great sense of humor!" In other words, the ability to laugh and smile is inborn, not acquired, and not dependent on humor. But, the likelihood of giggling and chuckling actually showing up in the

cradle or crib depends on the degree to which the conditions for laughing are present. Otherwise, laughing will be suppressed or extinguished.

These are laughter's best friends:

1. **Health:** Healthy babies laugh, sick babies do not laugh. It's difficult for sick adults to laugh, too. Pain and illness inhibit the inclination for laughter, humor, and playfulness; those activities are far more likely to happen under conditions of good health and well-being.
2. **Calm, Safety and Predictability:** Distressed or disturbed environments do not invite mirthful laughter. There is not likely to be mirthful laughter in a home where people are having angry, screaming arguments with each other, slamming doors, beating on each other, or are otherwise troubled. Active alcoholism, acting-out mental illness and high anxiety are a few of the conditions in a home that inhibit laughter. Bombs bursting in the backyard, or bullets whizzing overhead, snuff out the inclination for laughing. Playfulness and laughter are present in children only to the extent that there are adults around to protect them from predators and other threats to safety. Ambivalence, inconsistency, unpredictability erase the tendency for laughter, light-hearted play, and mirth.
3. **Comfort/love:** Children who are not hugged, stroked, cuddled or otherwise "loved" are less likely to feel like laughing than those who receive warm caresses, hear tender words, hear good-hearted laughter around them, and feel loved. Laughter is far easier for the baby with a fresh diaper than for one who has been lying in its own excrement with dermatological eruptions. Laughter flows more easily when parents are role models of gentle, kind-hearted laughter; when parents play laughing games with the kids; when words and actions tell children they are loved.
4. **Control:** The more you feel able to take action to remedy or improve your circumstances, the more likely you are to feel like laughing or responding to humor. The

more you feel like a victim of circumstances, the more your life is out of control, the less likely is laughter.

5. **Optimism:** Hopefulness, cheerfulness, and confidence, especially in the face of adversity, quicken the likelihood of laughter and mirth. Pessimism, hopelessness, distrust, doubt, and gloom destroy the probability of mirth and laughter.
6. **Education and information:** The more accurate information you have about the vital roles of humor & laughter, the more reasons you will have to laugh. Founded under the powerful influence of Puritan Protestantism, there is not inconsequential residue deep in the psyche of the America culture of the erroneous belief that work should be exalted while amusement is forbidden. Spinning off of this are beliefs that laughter is immature and humor is juvenile, often voiced as some variation of, "Get back to work! We're not here to have fun!" The facts about humor and laughter having survival value are becoming more and more undisputable. Robert Provine urges that even if the scientific evidence is not all in yet, "Get all the laughs you can."
7. **Adequate nourishment:** Hungry babies are not going to be laughing. This is especially true if the availability of the next meal is unreliable or unknown. In the extreme, there is a condition called failure to thrive (FTT), typically a term characterizing failure to meet developmental milestones for height and weight. FTT describes dietary and social insufficiencies that ultimately have permanent effects on mental development. Poverty and/or disturbed environments or dysfunctional parental interactions also play a prominent role, i.e., neglect due to distractions in the household. A full belly and a predictable next meal significantly increase the possibility of mirth and laughter.

FEED PEOPLE, FOSTER LAUGHTER

The two-pennies proverb makes the priorities clear. First, buy bread, then buy flowers. Hunger in the form of serious food deprivation, extinguishes laughter, and with it all of the accompanying physical, social and emotional benefits. Some people are too hungry too laugh. Individuals, families, communities and whole societies suffer the consequences. We must include them in our vision.

Because there are certain conditions, many with societal implications, that are advantageous or conducive –perhaps required-- for human laughter, we “foot-soldiers in the laughing army”(3) should be taking on an important project starting right now. With mindfulness and conscious intention we can have a positive effect on at least one of the conditions that make laughter achievable: adequate nourishment.

To the extent that we ease a person’s hunger, we lay a foundation for laughter for them.

Hunger warrants the attention of those of us who advocate for laughter because it is a condition that makes laughter difficult if not impossible. It is also a condition that lends itself to remedial action that can be accomplished locally. Everything that helps to end hunger helps to make laughter and its magnificent bounty of benefits more accessible.

There are many sources of information about the staggering extent of hunger in the United States. A few facts: (4)

1. Soup kitchen workers are seeing new faces in line and charities are taking more calls for help as the recession makes for a less-than-bountiful Thanksgiving.
2. As we approach the holiday season, we all have grave concerns about how these difficult times are generating unprecedented need for life’s basic necessities: food, clothing, shelter
3. More than one in seven households struggled to put enough food on the table in 2008 — the highest rate since the agency began tracking food security in 1995. That’s about 49 million people, or 14.6 percent of U.S. households counted as lacking the food for an active, healthy life.
4. The Catholic Charities office in Youngstown, Ohio, is getting 70 calls a day for help with food and utilities — up from 100 a month last year.

FULL BELLY LAUGHTER

FULL BELLY LAUGHTER is the name selected for this initiative. It was arrived at by a brainstorming process undertaken by Certified Laughter Leaders, which gave rise to these additional possible slogans and catch-phrases:

Think Globally, Laugh & Feed Locally

Heaps of Holiday Helpings and Ha Ha's

I CAN laugh

Hunger is no laughing matter

Body and Soul

Heart and Soul

In the Mood for Good Food

Food for a Good Mood

Happy Helpings

Will Laugh for Food Program

Eat, Drink, and Be Merry!

Bread and Laughter: A Global Recipe

Food Blessings For Your Belly Project

CANNED LAUGHTER

LAUGHTER CLUBS: HAPPILY HELPING WITH FOOD FOR THE TUMMY & SOUL!

Eat, drink and be merry

Certified Laughter Feeders

This is a challenge and invitation to every “foot-soldier in the laughing army” to help fight hunger. The equation is straightforward: less hunger means more laughter. Everyone who appreciates the value and pleasure of laughing needs to understand that there is something they can do to help get the whole world laughing. Everyone who runs laughter club sessions or demonstrations, or gives talks, seminars, or workshops on related topics; everyone who does research about laughter & humor, or is in any way about getting people to laugh, should to figure out how to contribute to ending hunger.

Here are some suggestions:

1. There will be a FULL BELLY LAUGHTER page on the Laughter Arts and Sciences Foundation website (www.laughterfoundation.org). The program will be explained there, active participation will be encouraged, and tax-deductible donations can be made online, earmarked for it.
2. Designate 1% of your budget (energy, financial & other resources) for activities that could remove the barriers to laughter. That would make a difference. That's the Ben & Jerry's formula. It works for them; why not for us?
3. Include one can of food in the price of admission. Then donate that food to a local food bank. We can all add food to the price of admission and each turn it over to a local food bank for distribution. An added benefit is that we will create many opportunities for teachable moments in laughter clubs, talks, etc., to explain the eight conditions that make laughter possible, including how-and-why hunger and laughter are incompatible, and what we are doing about both! AND/OR...
4. Contact a local food bank and offer to use a laughter club, class, or similar program to help them raise donations of food and cash. AND/OR...
5. Write them a personal check. AND/OR...
6. Host a FULL BELLY LAUGHTER event in your home. AND/OR...
7. Forward this challenge and re-post it to your social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) AND/OR...
8. WHAT ELSE? You are creative! Send your ideas to info@lasf.org .

Easing hunger, nourishing bodies and souls, is necessary to leading the way to laughter and a better world.

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- (1) Michael Miller and William Fry, Jr., *The effect of mirthful laughter on the human cardiovascular system*, Medical Hypotheses, 73, (2009) 636-639.
- (2) A theory in psychology, proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*

- (3) This term was used affectionately several years ago by a humorist describing the members of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, www.aath.org.
- (4) <http://www.bandmonline.com/u-s-hungry-at-thanksgiving-1.2097998>