

May, 2007

Volume 7, No. 2

LOVE, LAUGHTER, HUMOR AND HEALING

Bernie Siegel, MD

Abstract

Humor and laughter have sustained me in my work and sustains and heals my patients on their path to healing from a variety of health challenges. Acting like a child helped me to see the world with joy and bring out the child in others. Despite our wounds we can still laugh. Live your life as if you are going to die and use the time of your life doing what feels good and makes you happy. You may be committing suicide Saturday night but what are you doing Friday night?

Key words: humor, healing, laughter, love

Love and laughter are required to build and hold our lives together.

For me, love makes up the bricks which we use to build our lives. Ask yourself what you are capable of loving and you will know what your life is about. But what holds that life and the bricks together? We need mortar, and the mortar of life is humor. For me this represents childlike humor that isn't offensive and doesn't hurt or upset anyone. Humor of this type heals lives.

One of the incidents that convinced me of the value of humor occurred on an evening when my wife and I were out lecturing. My wife Bobbie does stand-up one-liner comedy as part of our presentation. so people can feel the benefit of laughter and not just hear a lecture about how it alters our physiology. On this particular evening I did not take her seat in the audience, as I usually do, because of the set up of the stage. I sat behind her and watched the audience. The change in their physical appearance after laughing for 15-20 minutes was striking and made me a firm believer in the benefits of humor. Two of her straight lines are, "He who laughs lasts" and "Laughter is contagious. Be a carrier!" I agree.

On a personal level, what I mean by childlike humor is seeing the world through a child's eyes. If you see a sign, Wet Floor, go ahead and do it. On airline flights, I would come out of the lavatory looking worried and say, "I may have damaged the plane." Attendants would hurry over and I'd say, "I dropped something from Italy in the toilet and then I saw the sign, 'Don't throw foreign objects in the toilet.'" Now all the planes have signs that say, 'Don't throw solid objects in the toilet' because of crazy people like me.

Many years ago I fell off our roof when a ladder I was climbing broke. I announced to the audience I was telling the story, so I must have an angel – because I landed on my feet. This seemed physically impossible, considering the angle of the ladder etc. A man came up at the end of my talk and said, "You do have an angel, and I know his name."

"I said how do you know?"

"What did you say when the ladder broke?"

"Oh Shit!"

"That's your angel's name."

I laughed, but didn't realize what a gift he had given me. Now, whenever I get into difficult situations and blurt out, "Oh Shit" I start laughing because I know help is on the way. Feel free to make use of my angel when you are in need.

One other example of childlike behavior and humor is in the instructions you either read or hear from people. When it says, 'Sign in upon entering,' write, 'in' upon entering. When it says, 'Print your name,' print, 'your name.' When the sign says, 'Nobody allowed here,' go on in, and when they shout at you tell them you're a nobody. Most of the time they let you go, knowing if you're that stupid you are no danger. One guard stepped in front of me and said, "I'm making you somebody and you have to leave now." Another child appears, and I gave him a hug.

Here is a list of crazy things I do. - I can explain them all.

1. May I say who's calling? -Yes, you may.
2. PRINT YOUR NAME - I print YOUR NAME on form
3. Sign here - I write HERE
4. DEPRESSED DRAINS I go cheer them up
5. BABY CHANGING STATION - Never works. Kids are just as obnoxious after being on it
6. WILD BIRD SEED in pet store - I tell them I have tame birds
7. PRINT CLEARLY I print clearly...
8. WET FLOOR - I do
9. WET PAINT - I do
10. NO SANITARY FACILITIES - So they are unsanitary. Who cares?
11. SAFE SALE...I hope so
12. How can I reach Dr. Siegel? Where are you reaching from?
13. SEX - I write OCCASIONAL on form in doctor's office
14. Call me if you have any questions...
15. VIDEO TOLL BOOTH - I ask if I may sing for the recording
16. DRIVE THROUGH WINDOW - Try it!

As a surgeon who has worked with thousands of people with life threatening illnesses, I have become aware of what is truly meaningful in our lives and what affects the process of healing. I had another experience that enlightened me. Several years ago I was selected to be an outside advisor to The Board of Directors of Heaven.

At the first session I attended, I noticed three plaques over God's desk. They read, "Don't feel personally, totally, eternally, irrevocably responsible for everything. That's my job." "If you go around

saying you have an awful life, I will show you what awful really is, and if you go around saying I have a wonderful life I will show you what wonderful really is." "Everything you forget I remember and everything you remember I forget."

I could see our Creator had a sense of humor but I still couldn't see why God didn't make a perfect world, free of problems so that we would all have an easier experience. I said to God one day, "I can't understand why you didn't make a perfect world."

"You are not God so you can't understand. But consider this: a perfect world would be a magic trick and meaningless. Creation is work. It is as if you are all attending school and by learning about the nature of life you can become complete like the animals. It is not an accident that after everything I created, I said, 'I saw that it was good.' But when I created man, I didn't say that. I want your actions to be meaningful. So when you share your love and create a sense of joy it means something to your fellow man. If the world were like the Garden of Eden, {then everything good in life] would all be expected and mean nothing. Yes, life has its dark side too, but every curse contains a blessing if you have the courage to seek it out."

"Another thing: tell your fellow man to stop wars and suicides because as you can see we have a housing problem too. And remember that when you give your report, the committee will know you are finished when you say, 'The beginning.' "

"Why say, 'The beginning' and not 'The end?' "

"Because life is a series of beginnings, and when you finish your report, we will begin to use the information. Just as graduations are not terminations but commencements, and the Bible ends in Revelation and not in a conclusion."

As I have continued to care for people, I have seen that too often religion, parenting and our education system leads to guilt, shame and blame. When used or interpreted improperly, they become unhealthy parts of our upbringing. We truly need to awaken to the feelings and wisdom of our hearts and not just what we think. Love and laughter are the great healers, but too often we do not make time for them until we have little time left and accept our mortality.

The love and humor I talk about are childlike in nature. We can learn to kill with kindness and torment with tenderness. It is no accident that we are told to *love*, not *like*, our enemies. Love is a powerful weapon and obliterates enemies. When I developed amnesia after a fall from my roof, it improved my marriage and relationships with our five children dramatically. When my memory returned, I needed counseling. The therapist presented me with Corinthians 1:13 as therapy.

Love is long suffering, love is kind, it is not jealous, love does not boast, it is not inflated.
It is not discourteous, it is not selfish, it is not irritable, it does not enumerate the evil. It does not rejoice over or keep score of wrongs, but rejoices in the truth
It covers all things, it has faith for all things, it hopes in all things, it endures in all things.
But now remains faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

She reminded me that love is blind to faults also, but to remain amnesic until I could behave as if I loved. With practice I have done very well though I am still working on it.

I learned that acting like a child helped me to see the world with joy and bring out the child in others. We are all wounded. When people ask me, "How are you?" I answer, "Depressed. Out of my antidepressant, and my doctor is away so I can't renew my prescription." Eighty percent of people answer, "I know how you feel." Others offer me their antidepressants and, more importantly, share their pain with a stranger because they know I will understand. So remember, in love's service only the wounded soldier can serve.

Despite our wounds we can still laugh. As you know when I see a sign, 'Wet Floor,' I wet the floor. When I receive a document with a sticker which says, Sign Here, I write Here on the paper. I always say, "How may I help you?" when I walk up to counters to confuse the clerks. Today I drove to the drive up window at our bank and gave the clerk a withdrawal slip for one dog biscuit. They give out biscuits at the bank and our dog enjoys them. Sometimes I ask, 'Is my order ready?' at the bank window. I could go on with my childlike behavior – but the greatest benefit to embarrassing your children when you eat out by ordering Italian food in a Chinese restaurant is that the children stop eating out with you and you save a fortune. You will also find that when your children grow up and do something considered out of line, people say, "Do you know who his father is?" This takes them off the hook and makes them happy to now have me for their father.

Through love and laughter one maintains a sense of connection despite the difficulties of life, and out of that a sense of self-esteem and self-worth are developed. People who own pets will smoke outdoors to protect their pets but not their children. They will kill themselves but not do anything to hurt their beloved pet. By middle age, of those children who described their parents as loving, only twenty five percent had suffered a major illness. While of those who said their parents were not loving, almost one hundred percent had suffered a major illness. As Maimonides said centuries ago, "If we would treat ourselves as kindly as we treat our animals we would suffer fewer illnesses."

A woman was in a panic pre-op, and as we wheeled her in to the operating room, she said, "Thank God, all these wonderful people will be taking care of me." I said, "I know them. They are not wonderful people to work with." She burst into laughter and the fear and panic were gone in an instant.

On other occasions, I'd play Frank Sinatra, singing, "Why not take all of me?" in the OR, and Amazing Grace. People would comment and laugh and ask if everything was okay.

Life is uncertain. Eat dessert first. Hope, love and a sense of humor are vital to survival in the face of uncertainty. Volunteers and optimists live longer, healthier lives. People with spiritual support also are healthier. I have had patients who had so-called incurable diseases disappear when they 'left their troubles to God' or went home to 'make the world beautiful' before they died. Do not try to not die. It doesn't work. In Heaven the bitterest people are the vegetarian, meditating joggers who wish they had slept late and tasted a lobster or steak.

Live your life as if you are going to die and use your time in life doing what feels good and makes you happy. The byproduct will be a longer healthier life. Remember information is not what changes people but inspiration does. Just as God breathed life into Adam's nostrils, so are we to inspire ourselves and others. Whenever you have a decision to make, pay attention to how your body feels and what makes you happy. Then decide.

Sit down and listen and the word will come to you and enlighten you. Remember, words used improperly can become wordswordswords, swords. We are all like blank canvases upon which we create a work of art. Like Jeremiah observed while watching the potter, we are works in progress. There are no mistakes. Like the seasons, there are reasons for the path we take and lessons to be learned. So keep reworking the clay until you get it right.

God also wanted me to remind you that the number ten is His way of reminding us of the nature of life. We have ten fingers and toes, refer to a good looking woman as a ten, base the computer on the 0 and the 1, save a city if ten good people live there, etc. So remember out of the undifferentiated potential, called nothing because it is indescribable, comes the one, and creation begins. But to truly create we need more than one or again there is no comparison. One times one or divided by one is still one. But add one and life progresses. When all the relationships of our Creator to ourselves, including animal and plant life, are combined we have $1+2+3+4=10$.

So remain in awe of the nature and wisdom of life and enhance it by bringing love and joy into your

life. Our beliefs become our biology and alter the chemistry of the body. An actor in a comedy has low stress hormone levels and excellent immune function, but the same performer in a tragedy can be made sick because his immune function is altered by the role he or she is playing.

Therein lies the secret of life. If you never want to grow old, do something you love to do so you lose track of time. If you lose track of time, you can't age. This is the healthiest state you can be in. So live your chocolate ice cream. To help you to do this, I will tell you how I have accomplished it. On my wrist I wear a bracelet that says, WWLD. What do you think that means?

Think about it for a minute. It relates to who my role model is: "What Would Lassie Do?" So whenever I have a decision, I ask myself, "What would Lassie do?" and I do it. You can get over depression by asking, "What would Lucy do?" and doing it. Find the correct role model and rehearse until you are Mother Teresa or whomever you model yourself after. Remember, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice."

Sometimes the jokes and laughter are on me. At the hospital I loved walking into the O.R. and asking, is my patient here yet, when I had no case on the schedule and was really there to get a cup of coffee in the doctor's lounge. The staff would run around checking their papers and calling the E.R. and then tell me they couldn't find my patient. Then I would share that I was just kidding. One morning at 7AM I walked into the OR at Yale and asked, is my patient here today. Everyone answered yes. So I get into my scrub suit and then come back to the desk where everyone asked me what I was doing. I said I am ready to operate and they said I had no case there that day. They were right. I had gone to the wrong hospital. My patient was across town in another OR. So they all roared with laughter and felt they had evened the score.

Another day I walked into a hospital room and pulled the curtains back around the bed and there was a naked woman whom I didn't know, who started screaming at this guy in street clothes staring at her naked body. I said, "It's okay. I'm a doctor." and ran out of her room. It turned out my patient was in another room. The next morning, I walked on the floor and all the women were in the doorways of their rooms waving handkerchiefs and saying, "Yoo-hool Are you coming in today?"

My coat was missing from the doctor's lounge. Someone had taken mine and left theirs. So I left a note about it. Next day, someone hung a sign saying: "Maybe if you love more, your coat will be returned." This was about all the teasing I got discussing the power of love to heal. Well, three days later my coat showed up, so I left a sign about how my love brought the coat back: Scientific evidence of its benefits.

At a catholic hospital in the old days, nuns would get up as doctors came on the floor and say good morning Doctor Siegel, or whoever it was. Years and many changes of habits and customs later, I would always get off the elevator at the Hospital of St. Raphael and announce, "Don't get up. It's okay." No one really ever had any intention of getting up, and they always looked at me like I was nuts. One morning, I came out of the elevator and the entire staff had gathered and rose in unison to say, "Good morning, Doctor Siegel." We all had a great laugh.

Enough already! i could go on forever.

The last point I would make is that the world is filled with pain. Why add to it? Why not help heal it? The majority of people feel the world is unfair. It isn't. It is just difficult. So make it easier for yourself and others. As Woody Allen wrote about two guys talking: One is very depressed about the darkness and misery of life. The other asks, "What are you doing Saturday night?"
"Committing suicide."

"How about Friday night?"

So live your Fridays, enjoy your life time, accept your mortality and eliminate death from your thoughts and life.

Be a healer and spread joy through humor and laughter. The world is a human comedy if we but see it that way. Yes, it is a tragic comedy at times but he who laughs, lasts. Remember it is not healthy to be serious and normal. Trying to be normal is only for those who feel inadequate. So be a carrier and spread joy and healing. If you embarrass your children regularly, they will thank you later in their life. Our children come home and say, "Thanks, Dad." When I ask why they are thanking me, they say they either did something crazy at work or school and instead of their being criticized, they heard people say, "Well, you know who his father is."

My final prescription for you is to see the movie Harold and Maude. It gets the message across about how to live, knowing you are mortal, but not thinking about or fearing death.

Report from Susan King, treated by Bernie Siegel, MD

My name is Susan King and I have been working with Bernie for about 5 years now. Without sounding too dramatic, he helped me save my life. It's really that simple in my mind. I fell into a deep depression after my diagnosis and he helped me to focus on the light at the end of the tunnel. I have now learned that there is no end of the tunnel and the light needs to shine on us every day we live our life.

Humor is a huge part of working with Bernie. In our groups, you would never know that these are all people fighting cancer...we laugh a lot. Bernie tells stories all the time that keeps us in stitches which obviously makes us live in the moment. He is a character and I am blessed to have him in my life.

I still have leukemia but it is not who I am and will never be.

Susan King

<http://www.berniesiegelmd.com>



TERMS OF USE

The International Journal of Healing and Caring On Line is distributed electronically. You may choose to print your downloaded copy for relaxed reading.

We encourage you to share this article with friends and colleagues.

The International Journal of Healing and Caring – On Line

P.O. Box 502, Medford, NJ 08055

Phone (866) 823-4214 (609) 714-1885

Email: center@ijhc.org Website: <http://www.ijhc.org>

Copyright © 2007 IJHC. All rights reserved.