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LAUGHTER FOR LIFE

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A few days after 9/11, I was scheduled to give a presentation to 200 people. Everybody had been watching TV all week, and their heads were filled with those tragic images. People were depressed and shell shocked. There was no way to ignore it or talk around it. It was hanging over the room like Mount Doom in those Frodo movies.

To be honest, I wasn't sure exactly what to do, having never before given a talk immediately after a national tragedy. So I improvised and shared some thoughts about focusing on what we can and can't control, using some funny songs to illustrate that.

To this day, I have never had an audience laugh harder. The amount of emotion released was amazing. In our relief, we realized life would go on and we could still smile. Laughing together connected and supported us.

At one point, illustrating how we can take responsibility for our own lives, I asked the audience, "If I'm the problem in my life, I'm also... what?" Normally they all answer "The Solution." But this time, before anyone else could answer, one brilliant woman yelled, "The problem in everyone else's life!"

It got a huge laugh, so I've been using it ever since.

The truth is we control very little of what happens around us, but we can always choose how to respond. As the author Jessamyn West famously said, "A good time to laugh is when you can."

We all know that life is serious. If we forget, we can just turn on the news for five minutes and get reminded. But let me ask you, Are you like me? Have you ever had the particular gift or talent of making life even more serious than it already is?

As a kid I was a worrier. I'm still a worrier, but I've gotten better at it. I'm a more efficient worrier now; I do it in less time. So I wrote a song about that called "Writer's Block: The Long-Term Positive and Negative Effects of Worry."

It starts with me being worried about not writing, then realizing I'm worried and feeling ashamed about that. It hits me that I'm feeling ashamed about being worried, so I start to feel guilty. Then I get embarrassed that my shame could make me guilty. So I get angry at myself because I'm so immature as to be embarrassed. Then I remember how bad internalized anger is for my health, and I become fearful. As I get more afraid about what I'm doing to myself, I realize I'm getting depressed. Since all

this negative emotion will probably kill me, it gives me something new to worry about. Since I don't have long to live, I write it all down. But once I write it all down, I've got a new song! And everything is fine again. (This song is very popular with therapists.)

Humor is an antidote to worry. We hear a lot these days about the benefits of living in the present moment, about being in the "flow." Worry and certain other emotions keep us stuck in the past or future. The thing is, it's okay to look at the past or future. Just don't stare! One great benefit of humor and silliness is that they snap us back into "Now."

Humor is also a shock absorber for the sometimes rocky road of love.

Perhaps you've been romantically or sexually attracted to another person. Perhaps you've been "in love." The feeling is somewhat akin to many chemically induced states. Endorphins get released. A psychiatrist friend of mine calls it "the best drug in the world." When he said that, I thought, *Sure, it's a great drug, but they never tell you about the side effects.*

This led to a new song about the stages of relationship (kissing, making love, marriage, and even divorce), with each stage being like the need for a more powerful drug. At each level we listed all the side effects, just like the pharmaceutical commercials on TV. People get a kick out of this song because, like a lot of humor, it sets off their truth meter. There *are* side effects! Plus, they see themselves in these love progressions, and wonder if they've always jumped in for the right reasons. It also reminds us that real love is a deeper, more profound experience, and healthy relationships are based on that.

This song, "Common Side Effects Include," is popular with people who have found relationships to be a growth opportunity, including therapists. Relationships are such fertile ground that I write more amusing songs about them than any other subject. Before we can grow, we have to know there's a problem. Humor helps us admit the challenge and reframes it into a manageable chunk.

Real love makes a lot of room for humor. Being able to laugh at ourselves and the issues that come up in relationships is not only a survival tool, it's essential.

Humor is an attitude, like gratitude or compassion. It can be developed. It just takes a little willingness to shift attention from our "important grown-up stuff" for a while and have some fun. Like, for example, any or all of the following:

- Keep a humor journal of jokes and cartoons.
- Cultivate funny friends.
- Be a good laugher. A good laugh is contagious and people love to be around it.
- Read humor writers.
- Collect funny or embarrassing stories from your life and tell them.
- Regularly watch a couple of your favorite sitcoms.
- Rent funny movies. (Norman Cousins cured himself of a terminal illness by doing this.) - Buy silly gimmicks and toys from a toy store and inflict them on your friends.
- Be unpredictable. When people ask you how you're doing, say something outrageous, like "Parts of me are excellent!"
- Find ways to inject surprise into other people's lives.
- Honor silliness.
- Hang out with 4-year-olds. They'll remind you how spontaneous humor bubbles up from being playful.
- Play with your pets. Taking time for play is not only okay, it's suspiciously healthy.
- Listen to funny songwriters (!)

The songs in this article can be heard (for free) at
<http://gregtamblyn.com/listen.html>

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Greg Tamblyn, NCW (No Credentials Whatsoever) is a Humorist, Speaker, Singer, Songwriter, Author, and Musical Laugh-ologist. He performs for organizations of people ready for a healthy dose of music and laughter. His CDs and books are available at his website.

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