

Working for the Cosmic Giggle, for Unity of Centralia, guest speaker Jusby the Clown, Aug 26, 2012

“There is a story about the Greek gods. They were bored, so they invented human beings, but they were still bored, so they invented love. Then they weren't bored any longer, so they decided to try love for themselves. And finally they invented laughter, so they could stand it.” – Charles Baxter “Feast of Love”

Once upon a time, about ten years ago, my mother said to me. “Son, you should watch this documentary on Laughter Yoga. You could do something like that.”

And so I did. I watched it; I did something like it, and then I did it.

The Laughing Club of India opens with workers beginning their shift at the machine shop. Before they start work, they have a laughing club meeting. It looks like rhythmic calisthenics and hysterical play acting.

The first club of five people had been formed by Dr. Madan Kataria in May of 1995. The documentary is shot several years later. By 2001 it is released as part of the Full Frame Documentary series. The documentary makes its way to the Oregon public library system.

Over the next decade, I mimicked what I saw in the documentary, making a personal adaptation to use with clowning. It was not a how-to video, however. This is the D.I.Y. (Do it Yourself) approach.

On days when the feeling was harder to find, and the laughs didn't come so freely, I started to believe that it would be worth attending a training to be actually certified as a laughter yoga leader.

In 2009, my wife Trish and I decided that we would both take the training, as she had experienced enough from the documentary and my improvised practice to believe in its value. We valued it so much so that we began to budget for the plane trip and hotel stay in Los Angeles... in July. It seemed like the nearest training, when suddenly a trainer listed a class in Portland. We could stay with my mother. Remember my mom and the documentary?

Here's the technique for making the twenty minutes of laughter pass so that it doesn't seem like work: identify types of laughs and string a dozen or so together like beads on a necklace.

Side note, the word 'bead' comes from the word for prayer. “Prayer Beads” is actually redundant.

Each session can be different. I like some continuity, so I will create a theme, but it doesn't matter. What matters is the sincere desire to be ready and to laugh some more until you are genuinely feeling satisfied approximately 20 to 30 minutes later.

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I followed the path where the phenomenon led. It led to nursing homes, rehab & care facilities, schools, jails, restaurants, airports, crowded and deserted places. Still there was laughter.

The basic idea in a nut shell is to get started and laugh at least twenty minutes, more or less solid, with deep yogic breaths to avoid a too light-headedness. Furthermore, the idea is to do that more than periodically. Not just on special occasions, but as a practice: a physical, mental, and/or spiritual practice.

From the documentary, we see a primarily Indian population. Exotic and foreign and peculiar. Hindu. The yoga aesthetic.

The practice however has grown across 60 countries, and there are over 6000 clubs now. Our club has an Olympia aesthetic.

I have introduced Laughter Yoga to dozens of groups now, sharing these techniques with friends, family, and strangers. I offered Laughter Yoga at Evergreen Nursing & Rehab, Community Youth Services, the Elma School District, at Occupy Olympia, and of course the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation where Bill found me. I also made it an integral part of Clown Camp.

The least favorable response came from, a grumpy old clown, a future ex-colleague. He said that he wouldn't want to do it on a regular basis because it went against his faith. I found this most peculiar and troubling. Perhaps I misspoke when I explained the idea in a nut shell.

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Oh.

I said, "Laugh like a chicken"

I did not say, "Reincarnation is real and you will be born again as a chicken."

I said, "Take a deep breath like you smell a flower"

I did NOT say, "The wheel of karma is infinite and god is blue with many arms".

And yet the yoga aesthetic came through, and he still felt this was beyond good American rhythmic calisthenics. It wasn't no hysterical play acting with his soul on the line.

They say that everyone laughs in the same language. Well, something was lost in translation. The word Yoga means 'Yoke'. Why did the sacred cow cross the road? Because he didn't like the yoke.

Laughter Yoga means being able to yoke or harness those out of control, chaotic, spasmodic emotions that go along with laughing.

Anthropologists say that laughter occurs when people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. And, that the more laughter there is, the more bonding occurs within the group. Developmentally laughter has long been a survival tactic that helps link us with other members of our tribe, our community. Laughter can turn aside a tense situation and it lets us know we were among friends. The purpose of laughter seems to be related to making and strengthening human connections.

Laughter breaks the ice. It brings warmth, closeness, and goodwill; it eases hostility and aggression. We often laugh when we want to reduce tension or say no to someone. We laugh to apologize. Laughter creates a bridge between people and promotes friendly behavior.

When life gets too intense, laughter can help give a new perspective and even deepen our understanding of what it means to be human. Laughter can help make whatever we have to face a little more bearable.

Laughter liberates us from our inhibitions, brings us into the present moment, and exercises non-verbal channels of communication. Although much of the research prompts subjects with humorous materials, it is the physical mechanism of laughing that does the heavy lifting in the equation. Of course, the brain has to consciously go along, but the body doesn't know the difference between artificially induced and natural laughter.

Laughter promotes circulation, reinforces our trust in each other, and ineffably bonds us with our laughter partners.

In a three week study of 200 IT call-center workers in Mumbai, India practiced Laughter Yoga. Their Systolic Blood Pressure was reduced about 6% and Diastolic almost 4% over a control group. Levels of the stress hormone Cortisol were also reduced. This is the same range that would be expected of starting a low-salt diet, losing 10 pounds or starting a blood pressure medication. You decide which is easier.

Laughter allows for vulnerability in the group, stretches our comfort zones, and provides safe opportunities for catharsis and epiphany.

Research by Dr. Lee Burk of Loma Linda University found that even *anticipating* laughter has a physical reaction, lowering stress hormones Cortisol by 39% and Epinephrine (Adrenaline) by 70% and increasing Beta-Endorphins by 27% and Human Growth Hormone by 87%.

Dr. John Gottman of the UW claims to predict the success of a marriage with a 94% accuracy rate. One of the significant factors he looks at is whether the couple laughs together.

Practitioners testify to the benefits of Laughter Yoga in their struggles with: Allergies, Alzheimer's, Anxiety, Cancer, Chronic Pain, Depression, Diabetes, Grief, High Blood Pressure, Insomnia, Migraines, Multiple Sclerosis, Osteoarthritis, Parkinson's, Rheumatism, Schizophrenia, Shingles, Smoking, Stroke, and Trauma... to name a few.

Levels of self-competency always improve with increased frequency and duration of laughter for laughers with or without any diagnosis of disease. It stands to reason. This is something the lay person can understand. Laughing feels good and the feeling sticks around after we stop laughing. All the physical hard science aside, the anecdotal evidence is overwhelming as to the emotional benefits. We do it when we feel good, and we feel good when we do it. We get a positive feedback loop when we adopt the laughter response to stressful situations.

Some laughter professionals have created similar practices while avoiding the potential negative prejudices against the word yoga. There are Certified Gelotherapists of the World Laughter Tour. There are certified Laughter Wellness Instructors of the American School of Laughter Yoga. There are certified Laughterize Leaders. There is the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor and Laughter. There are neo-charismatic “Third Wave” post-denominational Holy Laughter congregations.

It’s absurd. And life is absurd, so we laugh. We laugh every emotion. It’s beyond laugh until you cry and cry until you laugh. It’s every emotion. Angry. Embarrassed. Amorous. This is because laughter predates speech historically, genetically, cosmologically.

Almost all babies begin to laugh at around 3 months. Even blind babies. Even blind and deaf babies. Even blind, deaf babies with limited mobility.

We don’t have to accept the concept of chakras or meridians or polytheism or contortion to participate. However, the basic idea of breath as life is central to our lived experience, and many origin myths specifically mention breath, sound, and even laughter as part of creation.

Egypt: The creator burst out laughing and there was light.

Aborigines of South Australia: God created the first people from dung and tickled them to life.

Polynesia: The first couple saw each other’s naked bodies and could not stop laughing.

Apache: When humankind learned to laugh the creator said, “Now you are fit to live.”

A faith congregation that is conservative with its emotion will be conservative with its laughter. Any group, anybody, that is conservative with its emotion will be conservative with its laughter. Laughter gives away your emotions. It gives the emotion to others.

This community can be liberal with its emotions and its laughter.

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Let's take a few moments now to experience some of these physical, mental, and/or spiritual laughter exercises.

The Cell Phone. We can use this technique when we need a laugh and want to save face in public. Pull out your actual phone or just pretend by holding your hand to your ear and laugh like you just heard the funniest wrong number ever.

Very good, very good, yay.

Next, using some paired sets helps us have balance in our lives. We can realize that laughter can attend either side of a perspective. For instance, while laughter can be used in a hurtful way, let's tone it down to a simple admonishing argument, a finger-wagging gentle laugh AT your neighbors.

Now switch it to the humble admission of error, an apologetic laugh.

Very good, very good, yay.

If you still haven't joined in, this one is for you. The shy laugh. You can cover your mouth. A demure, polite party laugh. It could be a little flirty or embarrassed.

Now give the big, gregarious and energetic laugh. You need to get those lungs exhaling their full capacity with this one. Try the Ho-ho sound for a slightly deeper tone.

Very good, very good, yay.

Just a few more now. You can think of the offering with this one. Or the surprising bills that arrive. The no money laugh.

Of course, we have to switch to sudden abundance like you just won the lottery.

Very good, very good, yay.

And we'll conclude with a Laughter Meditation. We start in stillness and continue into silliness. Let the laugh spread and grow as naturally as you can. At the conclusion we'll switch to a hum.

Greeting/ Namaste

Snake

Lion

Dove

Santa

Solfege/ Scales/ Beautiful Round Notes/ Opera

Silent/ Stifled

Heart Butterfly

Coffee/ Tea/ Cocoa\*

Flower\* (Rose, Lilly, Lotus)

Give yourself permission to use the flimsiest excuse, the slightest veneer of funniness to laugh, and laugh to the greatest volume, frequency and duration that you can possibly stand.

I use Laughter Yoga as a tool, a strategy for spirituality, exercises that prepare me to make better choices when life's ridiculous reversals catch me in an unguarded moment.

As a culture we are craving novelty, comedy, humor, amusement, wittiness, clever turns of phrase and visual puns, "viral internet memes" that create new archetypes from pop culture characters or anthropomorphize our pets. From the lolcats that were simply captioned "I Can Haz Cheeseburger" the lolspeak language, a kitty pidgin if you will, has evolved so much that we can quote the crowd sourced LolCat Bible

Proverbs 17:22 "If you is happee you feel bettah, but if yous is not then you wil feel sick."

We might recognize it from King James as "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones" which is often quoted when attempting to make the case for laughter as the best medicine.

The thing about the humor of the internet, however, is that we don't actually Laugh Out Loud as much as we type LOL, let alone Roll on the Floor Laughing. It's not a bad thing if it makes us "happee", but it's better to do it in person.

Sharing laughter with one another is powerful social glue. In the midst of forces that tear apart social fabric laughter strengthens social bonds within communities, our community, that allows us to create the change we see needed.

Laughter opens up creativity. Laughter breaks the constraints of our rigid thinking. Meetings in which laughter and humor shine most also have the most creative outcomes.

In the struggles we face maybe laughter seems disconnected from reality, too simple, even a mechanism of denial or avoidance. Yet in the face of the work toward fulfilling our mission laughter, and sharing laughter, strengthens our ability to stay engaged.

May this church, this congregation, this community ever be a place where you can share unashamedly both your laughter and your tears and never question whether one is any less important than the other.

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Using the traditional closing for a session of Laughter Yoga, join us in the following affirmation:

I am incredible!

You are incredible!

We are incredible!

Blessed Be!