

Dying for a Good Laugh

by Ron Culberson

You cannot keep the birds of sorrow from flying over your head but you can keep them from building nests in your hair. – Chinese proverb

Death is fascinating. I don't particularly enjoy it but I'm fascinated by the way people in our society tend to act like it will go away if we ignore it. When people die, we whisk them off to the funeral home where they are out of sight. We bury them in new cemeteries where the ground level tombstones don't show. And we refer to those unfortunate people by saying they have "departed," "passed away," or "expired" rather than admitting they have simply "died!"

When I went to work as a social worker in hospice care, I expected to find this attitude in place. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find people who openly discussed death and patients, and continually inspired me with their courage and strength. Don't get me wrong. I still met the same resistance in the real world. At most social gatherings, I would explain my career and get one of two responses. People would either say, "You must be a very special person" or they'd just walk away. I don't consider myself special but I do find that my experiences show some of the most gallant uses of humor—in the face of death and loss.

Visiting Mary

In the fall of 1987, while working as a home care social worker for Hospice of Northern Virginia, I met an extraordinary patient named Mary. I had visited Mary in her

home and, although she was very ill, she was doing relatively well and had the support of a loving family. Two weeks later, however, she took a turn for the worse and was transferred to the hospice inpatient facility. I went to see her the day she arrived there.

The moment I walked into Mary's hospice room, I realized that her situation had changed dramatically. The color in her face was gone. Her listless body sank into the mattress as though she had no strength.

As I approached, a look of recognition warmed her face. I took her frail hand in mine and asked, "How are you doing?"

"Not good," she whispered.

"Are you getting what you need?"

"Oh, they're spoiling me," she said with a weak grin. "The nurses have been so nice—they seem to anticipate my every need."

Then Mary rose up on her elbows, took a look around the room, and announced, "This place is beautiful. I had heard so much about it, *I was dying to see it!*" I froze, not knowing how to respond.

Mary closed her eyes, fell back on her pillow, and let loose a burst of laughter.

"Can you believe I said that?" she bubbled. We laughed together while I marveled at her brave use of humor in the face of such daunting circumstances.

Six hours later, Mary died.

Mary had "it"—a special balance that allowed her to see both the seriousness of her situation *and* the humor in it. She knew she was dying, yet allowed herself to enjoy a moment of fun. She saw the humor when others would have been afraid to acknowledge it. Or they'd have been so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the adversity, they wouldn't have been able to see it.

Getting Back to Being Serious

Irish-born playwright and author George Bernard Shaw said, “Life does not cease to be funny when people die just as it does not cease to be serious when people laugh.” Most of us cannot live out this truth in life, much less in death. We continually say things like “I have to stop goofing off and get back to work” but we never say “I have to stop working and get back to goofing off!” A break from the seriousness of our lives can be just what we need to rejuvenate us.

When we face grief and loss, we may believe there’s no place for humor, that humor is offensive, disrespectful, or inappropriate. However, if used sensitively, humor can be a wonderful way not only to cope but also to balance the tragedies in our lives. Winston Churchill said, “It is my belief, you cannot deal with the most serious things in the world unless you understand the most amusing.” Humor is about the balance that exists in real life: joy and tragedy. We must experience both to truly appreciate the richness that life has to offer.

Here are suggestions on how to use three FUNdamental benefits of humor to make life’s unbearable moments better. They allow us to die laughing!

FUNdamental 1: Use humor to provide a *Balance* to stress.

In her book *Making Sense of Humor*, Lila Green said, “Time flies whether you’re having fun or not.” So far, we have a money-back guarantee that we will die. Realizing the end result, there is a wonderful argument for adding fun to our lives. Even in times of grief and loss, we can make this process more bearable by infusing humor.

The days following my seven-year-old nephew's death were a blur of activities. The busyness of making funeral arrangements, greeting friends, and sharing memories kept us conveniently distracted so that we wouldn't stumble into the pockets of grief scattered throughout our minds. We knew we'd spend enough time there in the months ahead, so we welcomed these distractions.

After two viewings, a memorial service, and a graveside service, our family gathered at my parents' home for a needed meal and some rest. We picked at our dinner, generously donated gifts of the usuals: casseroles, homemade rolls, and brownies. Then we slumped into our seats in the living room and let out a collective sigh. We looked like warriors who had just returned from battle, our faces showing the fatigue of defeat. Then, for the next two hours, we told jokes.

In retrospect, this seems crazy. It even hints of disrespect, yet no one protested. Was it disrespectful? Was it wrong? Were we teetering on the edge of sanity? Not at all. We were feeling the effects of grief overload and needed a break. Not a break that is disrespectful or cruel, but a healing break that would allow us to face our grief the next morning with renewed strength. We knew the days ahead would be full of feelings from the loss we'd experienced, but in that moment in my parents' living room, the laughter gave us the strength to go on.

At the comedian Henny Youngman's funeral, the rabbi leading the service said, "God, take Henny Youngman . . . please." This was a callback to the line Youngman used in much of his comedy routine, "Take my wife . . . please." It brilliantly captured the essence of both Henny Youngman's career and his death. Neither disrespectful nor silly, the humor allowed participants to experience an escape from the heaviness of the service.

In hospice and palliative care, the focus is on quality of life, not quantity. Hospice workers often refer to the "*life in your days*" rather than the "*days in your life*." This captures the

essence of the balance that humor offers. It's vital if we're going to get to the end of our lives with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

At the hospice where I worked, a volunteer named Kathy always searched the obituaries to find individuals who had designated our hospice as the recipient of donations. She would pass these on to our staff so that proper acknowledgments could be made to donating families. But Kathy also searched for funny obituaries that she'd pass on to me!

One obituary said that a man had "gone to be with Jesus in his home in Palmyra." I'm surprised this didn't cause a sudden hoard of bus tours to the "new" holy land in Palmyra!

Another appeared on April 14 but said that the woman died in her sleep on "April 17." We thought we should warn her!

My favorite was about a woman described this way: "She was known for her graciousness and sense of humor. Toward the end, her respirations assisted but breathing with difficulty, she said, 'Is there any oxygen loose in the room that I'm not getting? Perhaps there is some trapped in the bedclothes!'" How great is that? A woman who is near death but can still share a bit of humor. This is a gift with which we should all be blessed.

FUNDamental 2: Use humor to *Connect* with others.

Going through loss is such an isolating experience. We feel disconnected from the living world because we're experiencing this lonely sense of grief. We turn to humor as a powerful way to connect with others, thus keeping us from feeling even more isolated.

After giving a presentation to the American Cancer Society, I was approached by a woman who said, "I have to tell you what happened to me." She explained that while she was going through her own cancer treatment—not a particularly funny experience, mind you—she

lost all her hair. Though she wasn't embarrassed by her head, she could tell that others were. So, on most days, she wore a scarf to cover it.

When invited to a Halloween costume party, she couldn't decide on a costume that worked well with her scarf. So she painted her head black and then painted a giant white "8" on the back of her head! Yes, she went as one of those magic eight balls that uses the floating triangle to answer your ponderous questions with ridiculously mysterious answers like "Maybe yes" or "It's possible." Then, on several pieces of paper, she wrote out "answers," put tape on the back, and kept them in her hand. All night long, she would go up to people and say, "Ask me a question." When they'd ask her a question, she'd shake her head and slap an answer on her forehead. Although her bald head had been a barrier to others, she turned a disadvantage into a distinct advantage by allowing others to laugh with her about her unusual "head" case.

One day, while at the hospice to visit Mr. Smith, I walked into his bedroom and asked my typical introductory question, "How are you feeling today?" Considering that I worked with terminally ill people, that question might seem a bit odd. Nonetheless, it always got the conversation started. Mr. Smith responded, "I feel like I have one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel!"

As a hospice patient, the fact that Mr. Smith just made a humorous reference to death was uncommon. In fact, it was so uncommon, I was sure it wasn't intended to be humorous. Risking a blatant misinterpretation, I said, "That's funny."

"I know," Mr. Smith replied. "I used to be the jokester in my family. I was always sharing jokes at dinner, bringing home funny movies, and generally just joking around. Ever since I've been sick, my family treats me as if I'm already dead."

Later during that visit, I asked Mr. Smith’s family to join us and took a moment to explain his perspective. They had no idea how he felt about humor and regretted how the intensity of their emotions had prevented them from realizing this. That day, they vowed to change the situation. I found out later that they rented five comedy videos and watched them together over the next few days. From that point on, humor was going to be a part of *their* lives—and *his* death.

I saw Mr. Smith a few weeks after that visit and, though his illness had progressed, he looked very much alive. His family had given him back his soul; the humor had reconnected them all.

FUNDamental 3: Use humor to see a new *Perspective*.

The problem with adversity, especially death, is that we tend to only see one perspective—a negative one. The nature of humor, however, is that it creates a new perspective. In fact, the actual mechanics of a joke takes us down one contextual path and then changes directions. It’s this new perspective that makes us laugh!

Here’s an example. A three-legged dog walked into an Old West Saloon and said, “I’m looking for the man who shot my paw.” Some of you will get that later! You see the word paw takes on two meanings (pa for father and paw for foot) and it is those two meanings that make the joke funny...for some of us!

In Kirk Douglas’s book *A Stroke of Luck*, Douglas describes his experiences after having a stroke. Feeling frustrated during the rehabilitation process, he considered suicide and actually had a loaded gun in his mouth – until it bumped against a sore tooth. He reacted with laughter because he realized that a sore tooth had delayed his suicide! The

experience prevented him from following through and he realized the importance humor had played in the process.

Kirk Douglas knew that humor led him to a new perspective. It allowed him to see the absurdity in an otherwise desperate situation. Once he had changed his viewpoint, he found new energy with which to cope.

Viktor Frankl survived the atrocities of concentration camps in World War II. While in Auschwitz and two other camps, he realized he needed to view his circumstances in a way that would lead to survival, not death. While many other prisoners gave up and died, he was determined to live. By hoping for a better outcome and finding humor in the most unusual circumstances, Frankl discovered that “the last of the human freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” He knew that his perspective was the key to his survival. In fact, he became so good at seeing the humor in the day-to-day tragedies of that environment, he trained a fellow prisoner to find one funny story each day.

Someone once said, “There is nothing wrong with getting older. It’s when you stop getting older that the trouble starts.” Whether telling jokes to balance stress, sharing humor to connect us with loved ones, or using the power of humor to create a new perspective, humor helps us maneuver the most challenging time in our lives—our deaths.

We can’t determine what happens to us in this world but we can determine how we respond. If we allow ourselves to embrace humor as a way to respond to the joyful *and* tragic times in life, our lives will be rich and balanced. As author Robert Louis Stevenson said, “The man is a success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much.”