

A Laughing Matter

Caryn Hacker-Buechel explores the positive power of laughter.

I was always able to make my mother laugh. It was (and still remains) one of my favorite personal attributes. It was much more enjoyable to induce a hearty laugh that escaped, unexpected, like an unladylike burp in the midst of supper, than to endure the serious dinner intellectual, conversational droning. It was not uncommon in my childhood to be quizzed (by my professor-father) from the monthly *Reader's Digest* vocabulary test or asked to really talk about "our day at school." At an early age, I became the family gatekeeper, whose job it was

(by unspoken order of my middle child status) to alter the flow of conversation or behavior when things became boring or tense. My "swing gate" of choice was a natural ability to see humor in the absurdities of daily life and then to share those thoughts in order to invoke laughter in myself and those around me.

It was, therefore, not uncommon for a young Caryn to spend many a meal in a timeout (of sorts), with my plate in hand in the yellow-tiled bathroom; my witty comments causing my mother

to throw her head back in laughter just prior to my requested exile. My father would frown and roll his eyes, and in his stern, professor voice order me, once again, to the confines of the bathroom. Apparently, my parents thought that eating in my bedroom would be too grandiose and luxurious or maybe I was just messy. Ultimately, I began to feel a sense of comfortable isolation, as I would sit in the small white vanity chair, smile into the L-shaped mirror and transform myself into an unknown but fabulous TV celebrity, selling my



beautifully plated tomato or hunk of browned brisket in Martha Stewart style, years before she splashed her way into the 'It's a Good Thing' market. Humor and laughter have been my life-long companions.

The awareness of the importance of laughter has been written about and studied by some of the finest minds. Even the Bible states that "A merry heart doeth good: like a medicine" (Proverbs 17:22) and Charles Darwin (1872) likened humor to the "tickling of the mind" demonstrating his early awareness that laughter could stimulate neural changes in the brain. Studies have shown that early hominids laughed, as did Koko the signing gorilla, and that even rats squeak when tickled.

In his most recent book, "Power Up Your Brain: The Neuroscience of Enlightenment," Naples' resident, neurologist and frequent TV medical expert, Dr. David Perlmutter, states that infants react positively to the laughter of their mothers, even prior to birth. We also know that infants begin to laugh at 2-3 months of age and that the energy from laughing can influence others to spontaneously join in. Laughter is a powerful medium indeed.

Studies from John Hopkins University show evidence that humor and laughter affect both psychological and physiological aspects of human behavior. They demonstrated that a professor's use of humor during test-taking reduced students' anxiety, tension and stress and increased positive score results. It is theorized that the use of humor in the testing situation allowed students to produce a cognitive shift in perception, permitting them to distance themselves from their immediate perceived threat (the test) and reduce their sense of fear and worry. It has also been shown that humor reduces feelings of anger and that the benefits of laughter are statistically shown to be good for the heart.

According to the American Association of Therapeutic Humor (www.aath.org), laughter creates an 'internal pharmacy' as the 'jogging of organs' from a hearty laugh can clear lungs and airways, assist in the creation of relaxation and lower blood pressure. Watching a comedy or enjoying a good joke may also have an analgesic effect, in that studies show that 10 minutes of genuine belly laughing can cause a lessening of pain in cancer patients that may continue for hours.

Naples' resident entertainer and comedian, Jimmy Keys (www.jimmykeys.com) first realized his natural comedic abilities at the young age of 13. While still living in his native England, Keyes began to slowly blend his tremendous musical talent with his unique and witty humorous manner which resulted in the creation of an original and entertaining performance style. "When people come up to me after a show and say, 'Thank you for making me laugh again after a very long and difficult time,'" offered Mr. Keyes, "I am extremely moved and it makes all the hard work very worthwhile. I know I made a difference in their life." The ability to create laughter in others is a gift to be shared with many.

So if you want to live a happier, healthier and longer life, learn to laugh often and with gusto. Whether chuckling while reading a chapter in Tina Fey's book, "Bossypants," chortling while watching an old Saturday Night Live episode or giggling with your kids for no reason at all, let your laughter bubble to the surface, change your energy and positively alter the world around you.

Caryn Hacker-Buechel, ACSW, DCSW, began writing books and articles for growing minds during her 30-year career as a psychotherapist and motivational speaker. She is the author of the children's book: "A Bully Grows Up: Erik Meets the Wizard."