

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Laughter a gift from the gods, a re-set button.

Laughing Out Loud

A lot of people showed up for the Irish patriarch's funeral Mass. His five middle-aged children sat up front in their Sunday best, solemn and sad. Everything went according to plan until, mid-service, it all skittered off course. No one remembers what started it, but something the monseigneur said tickled the funny bone of Patrick, the 50-year-old son. He began to try not to laugh. We know how that goes! Especially when you're not supposed to laugh! Especially in a serious place. Like school or, heaven forbid, church! Not to mention the front row at your father's funeral! But that just made Patrick laugh harder.

It was time for the Kiss of Peace—for standing up and shaking hands, sharing condolences with the people around you. Still chuckling as he turned to his sister in the pew behind him and leaned in for a hug, she jabbed him hard with her elbow: “Knock it off, Pat!”

Well, that did it. He erupted in laughter. Yelped. Couldn't hold it in. He sat back down, trying to pull himself together. But he couldn't stop. Rocking back and forth, head in hands, he appeared, to the unsuspecting mourner, overcome with grief—his body shaking, head jerking up and down, voice loud and raw. It didn't let up either, because that's how it goes. Then—horror of horrors, out the corner of the eye he saw the priest coming toward him. This was even funnier, and more unbelievable, and worse! All he could do was keep his head down and try to catch his breath. He about exploded when he felt the priest's comforting hand on his shoulder. Lordy, it was an endless service.

By the time the siblings piled into the limo to go to the gravesite, they were all in hysterics. The driver must have wondered about this family who laughed all the way to cemetery.

Ah, but there's nothing better than a good laugh and nothing harder than holding it in, especially on solemn occasions. Like that sweet moment of silence in our Thanksgiving Bread ritual last year. You may remember when everyone was holding a piece of bread and we were all about to partake together, when a wisecracker shouted out, “Hey, where's the butter?” Thanks for that! It put me to the test—the minister can't be cracking up in the middle of a ritual! Of course that happened here—here at UUFES, where humor came up as the #1 thing people wanted to bring to their Thanksgiving table....

A long laugh is good for our health. Moreover, it's worthy of note Sunday morning because laughing is good for the *soul*. You can invite it with laughter therapy, laughter yoga, laughter clubs, but the best laughter just happens. I once knew a young mother determined to lift the dispositions of her serious family by constantly reminding everyone to smile all the time—that didn't last long.

I've been reading up on laughter, and you can thank me for sparing you a report on the research, because it turns out that research about laughing—and there's tons of it—is not at all funny, and we're here today to laugh...because laughter is given and because it's good for us.

A fit of laughing creates and consumes huge energy—it's like a workout. Hardly stopping to breathe, we gulp in air and hurl it back out wild and loud—roaring, hooting, howling. When we can't stop, like Patrick at the funeral, we sit down and clutch our aching belly. And how to put this? When laughing really gets out of control, a change of clothes may be in order, too....

After a laughing jag, we feel spent, as if we've run a marathon. We feel good, too. Not only have our stress hormone levels decreased, not only has our heart rate come down—but the energetic release of laughing hard is like a cleansing. A blowing out of the pipes. It puts us in a new state, changed. Our mind clear. Troubles at a distance. However we felt before, we feel good. Happy. Optimistic. Our energy bright.

Is this the state that Japanese Zen teacher and artist Hakuin pointed to when he wrote about sitting in meditation in the 1600s? "That," he said, "is something which *must* include fits of ecstatic blissful laughter—braying that will make you slump to the ground clutching your belly, and even after that passes and you struggle to your feet, will make you fall anew in further contortions of side-splitting mirth." We've been there, right?

And out of this state—purified, somehow—we then re-enter our lives. We start over, the laughter like a re-set button.

Sometimes we need to hunker down, but we need re-set buttons, too. Healthy ones. Re-set buttons that clear the mind and leave us peaceful and positive. Not staying up late on the computer or giving in to unhealthy habits. We don't need distractions that deplete our energy and chafe at our well-being. No, we need re-set buttons that are good for the soul.

Meditating is a re-set button. A way to quiet the constant swirl of thoughts and details and worries and invite in a clear state of wakefulness. How many people here meditate, now and then or regularly? Meditating can re-set our system—it's been shown to lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of disease. It relieves stress, too and helps us cultivate inner peace. When we meditate, we intentionally put our active minds and bodies on pause.

At the end of a long life, a mother frets about her grown son. She says he's like his father who was a workaholic, up every night, working 'til 2. She, a life-long church person, thinks that's what he needs. "But," she says, "he thinks he doesn't have the time for church." She may be right that attending a worship service somewhere would help her son, but perhaps he doesn't need sermons or prayers as much as he needs to put everything down. His projects, responsibilities, his worries. Perhaps her son needs to rest his mind and his body, to breathe and just be. Who doesn't need that in today's complicated times?

Gathering here, as we do, can be just that—a time to recalibrate and put things in perspective. This, here, is a re-set button. A time we can count on to put it all down and reflect, go "somewhere else" for an hour.

You might say that we're lucky at UUFES, too, in that once or twice a month a guest stands here. Guest speakers come in many flavors. A lofty intellectual might give your brain a high-powered workout—some people love that. A guest with a passion for justice might expand your horizons

and take you down a road you've never travelled—some people love that. A mystical guest might utterly confuse you in the moment, but the message might resonate for days. And your own minister might tell a story that helps you see something in a new light. However Sunday morning at UUFES unfolds, it's a chance to wipe the slate clean and start again. So that “next time,” as the poem Margaret read goes¹—tomorrow, the next day and the day after that—we're more intentional and clear.

Who remembers the Etch A Sketch? A plastic toy that came in different sized screens. You draw pictures on it with the knobs on the bottom, one goes back and forth, the other up and down. To clean the screen and start again, you turn it over and shake it. A re-set button, like the “refresh” icon on our iPads and phones today. Or turning a computer off and then on again when it gets muddled—an elegant fix that often does the trick.

Let us appreciate the re-set button and remember that part of our story—our spiritual story, that is—is finding what, for us, delivers that fine feeling of a clean slate. What does it take to turn our own Etch A Sketch over and shake it clear, so that we can pick up where we left off and start again, fresh and unfettered? Where do you find that clean slate? Watching the birds? Going for a hike? Taking a nap? You might meditate, practice mindfulness, play your flute or garden and lose track of the time.

Meanwhile, every now and then when we least expect it, the world hands us a re-set button in a big long laugh—“fits of ecstatic blissful laughter...[that make us] fall...in contortions of side-splitting mirth.” Laughter is given. A high form of grace! Thank goodness we don't outgrow it.

We laugh 'til we cry. We've received a gift from the gods, and we give thanks.

Blessed be.

¹ Joyce Sutphen, "Next Time" from *After Words*. Red Wing, MN: Red Dragonfly Press, 2013.