



WHAT

DANCIN' LIKE NO ONE'S WATCHING
FAMILY, FAITH, EXERCISE,
READING, AND LEARNING



PILATES
LOVE & PEACE
BASKETBALL

GIVES



MY FRIENDS **MY BABY GIRL**
MY LORD AND SAVIOR



FAITH, FAMILY AND FRIENDS, GOOD FOOD AND MUSIC
GOD'S MERCY AND GRACE!

BELLY LAUGHS **MY FAMILY**
BEING A MOTHER AND GRANDMOTHER

EXERCISING **MY FAMILY AND MY JOB**





ONE'S WATCHING SUNSHINE SINGING!
WONDERFUL FRIENDS

YOU

JOY?



WAKING UP AND SEEING PEOPLE HAPPY!
DANCIN' MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD



WAKING UP EVERY MORNING TO SUNSHINE
SEEING MY FRIENDS
THE LOVE GOD
HAS FOR ME
HELPING OTHERS
STAYING HEALTHY
MY CHILDREN

COFFEE! READING

WHAT GIVES YOU JOY?
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LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

BY SUSAN SPARKS



“Is this going to take long?” I asked the nurse. I needed to know because I had wedged this terribly inconvenient medical test between two important meetings, and the time for the second was quickly approaching.

“I don’t think so,” she answered. The door then opened, and the doctor appeared with a pathologist in tow. Not a good sign.

“Ms. Sparks, I’m afraid the cells are cancerous,” the doctor said in a flat monotone while looking at the report. “We will need to schedule surgery, then talk about radiation and chemo.” They both gave me a look of “bummer” and quickly left the room.

I sat stunned with disbelief. A minute ago I was worried about a consulting gig for Goldman Sachs. Now, I had cancer?

After a few moments of silence, the well-meaning nurse turned to me and said, “Don’t you worry, honey. The Lord will take care.”

I’m sure I’ve said something similar to others in crisis, but right then it hit me wrong.

“Take care?” I snapped. “I think the Lord should have started a little earlier in taking care—like a couple of years ago when these cells started growing!”

She put her arm on my shoulder with this knowing look and said more forcefully, “Honey, he will take care.”

I rolled my eyes.

“He has never had breast cancer, so I seriously doubt that he has any idea of how to ‘take care’ of this!”

The nurse shook her head in disdain and walked out, leaving me alone with what were soon to become my two constant companions: cancer and sarcasm.

In the beginning it was simply too much to comprehend that I was now one of “those people” who had cancer. I had read that one of the best ways to come to grips with denial is to share the news with other people. Bad plan.

“You have cancer? Wow. Does it hurt?”

“I’m so sorry. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“My best friend had breast cancer. I miss her so.”

People can be so insensitive. The only alternative? Soften the blow through humor.

After a preliminary Google search on “cancer and humor,” I found myself immersed in a number of sites dedicated to funny cancer products.

Within days, I was drinking my morning coffee out of a mug that said, “My oncologist can beat up your oncologist.”

Then a new magnet appeared on my refrigerator: “Cancer—it’s not just an astrological sign anymore.”

At some point I bought a notepad that had a checklist at the top: “Buy milk, get gas, kick cancer’s butt.”

But my all-time favorite was a t-shirt with big red letters that said, “Save the Titties.”

Every time I saw that mug, magnet, or t-shirt, I started laughing. And you know what? I felt better.

At first, I thought I felt better because I was simply using humor to block the shock and pain. But then I

"THE LOVE GOD HAS FOR ME!"

—Brenda Campbell



started doing some reading about humor and healing and discovered that laughter actually brings on a natural high in the body. In a study at Stanford University, researchers showed that laughing stimulates the parts of our brain that use dopamine—a kind of “feel good” chemical messenger.

Fabulous! That meant that laughter falls into the same category as two of my favorite things: chocolate and chili peppers. All three produce a major boost of endorphins, nature's own “happy pill”: chili peppers through capsaicin, chocolate through serotonin, and laughter through the increased oxygen flow.

Medical studies have even shown that laughing produces the same level of mood-altering endorphins as a good work out. In fact, according to some studies, 15 minutes of laughing can burn 80 calories, or a small chocolate brownie. Elliptical machine...or laughing? Not a hard call.

I felt better not because I was ignoring the pain, but because the humor took the edge off a little. It allowed me to turn directly into the ugly face of reality. Emily Dickenson wrote, “When giving me the truth, give it to me on the slant so I can bear it.” Humor was the “slant” that allowed me to see the truth, hear it, and ultimately bear it.

Joseph Richman, professor emeritus at Albert Einstein Medical Center in the Bronx, New York, explains that laughter also counteracts “feelings of alienation, a major factor in depression and suicide.” Humor is about shared experiences and a feeling of belonging. It improves our mood through social connections. And when we feel less alone, we feel stronger.

The first week after my diagnosis, I was sent to get a CAT scan. In addition to being scared out of my wits, I was also in a surly mood, thanks to all the mountains of tests and appointments. After I arrived, the technician informed me that one of the tests he was going to perform was a liver scan. Allowing my anger to get the best of me, I said with a sigh, “Well, I had two beers last night. Just take that into consideration.”

He looked at me with an exhausted glance, then left the room to administer the test.

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After a few minutes, he returned with a grave look on his face. “We’re not supposed to give test results on the spot.” He paused, looked at the floor, and shook his head. “But you clearly have the early stages of what appears to be ‘Bud Light’ syndrome.” Then he burst out laughing.

I stared at him in utter disbelief, then started laughing myself. As I walked home, I realized that I felt more relaxed and less angry. While a kind gesture, the technician’s humor may have played a more significant role in my recovery than just a simple joke.

“After you laugh, you go into a relaxed state,” explains John Morreall, Professor of Religious Studies at the College of William and Mary. “Your blood pressure and heart rate drop below normal, so you feel profoundly relaxed.”

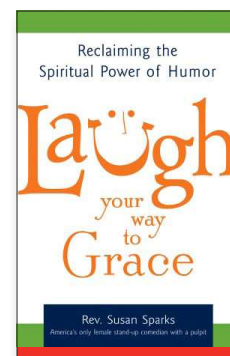
It is no secret that laughing is an amazing healer. Back in 1979, *The New England Journal of Medicine* published a report based on noted journalist and editor of the *Saturday Review*, Norman Cousins. In the 1960s Cousins had been diagnosed with a debilitating spinal disease and given a 1/500 chance of survival. Based on his belief in the importance of environment on healing, Cousins checked himself out of the hospital and into a hotel, where he took large doses of Vitamin C and watched continual episodes of *Candid Camera* and the Marx Brothers. He found, over time, that laughter stimulated chemicals in his body that allowed him several hours of pain-free sleep. He continued the treatment until, eventually, his disease went into remission, and he was able to return to work. The study became the basis for a best-selling book, *Anatomy*

of an Illness, as well as a television movie.

Since Cousins’s ground-breaking study, consistent evidence has shown that laughter, over time, offers significant medical benefits, including boosting the immune system, lowering blood pressure, improving heart and respiratory functions, even regulating blood sugar. As Dr. Lee Berk, a professor at Loma Linda University’s Schools of Medicine and Public Health put it, “If you took what we now know about the capability of laughter to manipulate the immune system, and bottled it, it would need FDA approval.”

Eight years after my diagnosis, I am cancer free. I am thankful for the medical care I was able to receive; but most of all I am thankful for the joyful attitude of the doctors, nurses, and caregivers with whom I was privileged to work. While the surgery and radiation certainly had a part, I am convinced that the encouragement I received to laugh was the most powerful treatment of all.

Rev. Susan Sparks is a standup comedian and the senior pastor of the historic Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City.



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SERIOUSLY FUNNY SPIRITUALITY

Q&A with

The Colbert Report's official chaplain, Fr. James Martin

BY STACY SMITH



Father James Martin is best known as the official chaplain of the Colbert Nation, a virtual country inhabited by fans of Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, the satirical late-night news show hosted by Stephen Colbert. But while Fr. Jim is funny, this Jesuit is no joke. He's the editor-at-large of *America Magazine* and the author of several best sellers, including the seriously fun *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life*. Stacy Smith spoke with Fr. Jim about funny saints, joyous grief, and why a TV comedy show needs a priest.

Why a book on joy, humor and laughter as the heart of spiritual life?

First, when I was traveling the country giving talks on the saints, what really seemed to strike people in the audience were the stories about the saints' humor. They were shocked by it, and kept asking for more and more information. It dawned on me there might be some need for a book on the topic. Second, as a professionally religious person, I run into professionally religious people who themselves seem to be a little joy-challenged. That goes for all denominations! There are grumpy Catholic priests, morose Protestant pastors, and unhappy rabbis. It seemed time to explore how joy and laughter are essential parts of the spiritual life.

Thinking about health and healing, why is laughter important in both physical and spiritual healing?

Physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists know that laughter helps the human body physically. It increases blood circulation and it reduces the stress hormone known as cortisol, so when you are laughing you are actually healing yourself. It also gives you some perspective when you are in the midst of difficult times. It doesn't take away the pain, but it does give you some perspective, and it gives people a little break from time to time, even in a terrible tragedy. You can't always be serious and keep up such intensity throughout a crisis. You need a break.



Fr. Jim Martin on *The Colbert Report*.

I recall Ambassador Andrew Young talking about his time with Martin Luther King during the civil rights movement. Young said that when a member of a group would become fearful about his own death, MLK would give a rousing fake eulogy in which he would list off all the surreptitious, scandalous things this person had done, just to lighten the mood in an otherwise tense atmosphere.

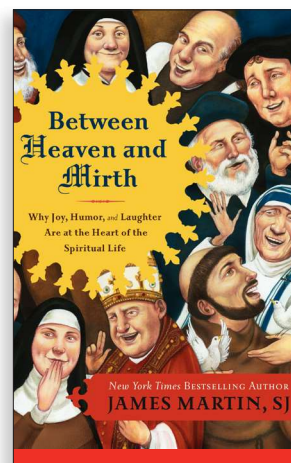
That's terrific! It shows that one of the great religious leaders of our time had a great sense of humor. In particular, a self-deprecating sense of humor reminds us that we are not the center of things and that we are human, fallible and flawed, but that God is in charge of us. That reminds me of a joke: There is good news, and there is better news. The good news is that there is a Messiah, and the better news is that it is not you.

You say there is good humor and bad humor, or humor that can build up and humor that can tear down. I imagine that can be external, directed towards others, but it can also be internal. How can we have a healthy humor about ourselves?

As in all elements of a Christian life, you need to strike a balance. Yes, there is good humor that builds people up, nourishes the soul and supports the community. There is also bad humor that is terribly shaming or mocking. Having good humor about ourselves means not taking ourselves too seriously. It means realizing that we are not perfect, that we depend on God, and that we may be wrong from time to time. Internally, there is a lighthearted way of laughing at the things you do wrong. Being able to laugh at yourself encourages a positive spirit, which ultimately aligns with God.

EXCERPT FROM "BETWEEN HEAVEN AND MIRTH"

On Good Humor and Bad Humor



Karl-Josef Kuschel's short book *Laughter: A Theological Essay* is helpful when we look at humor from a spiritual vantage point. There is humor that builds up and humor that tears down, a humor that exposes cant and hypocrisy and a humor that belittles the defenseless and marginalized. Good humor and bad humor.

Of course most secular observers would agree with this—there is a morality to humor. But religious observers see these two sides of humor slightly differently, for they see the two in the light of God's desires for humanity. "Good" and "bad" depends not only on a moral sense, but on how the humor deepens or cheapens the relationship with God. [page 23]