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**HUMOUR AS A NARRATIVE OF DIFFERENCE  
IN RESPONDING TO CRISIS EVENTS  
IN MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS**

by

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**THESIS**

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IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY (PASTORAL COUNSELLING AND  
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY STUDIES)**

**1997**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Two concepts which have emerged out of Narrative and Solution Focused Therapies are the ideas of "externalizing the problem through the re-storying of events" and "discovering and building upon the story of difference" to create lasting change. By placing himself within the narrative tradition and drawing upon these two therapeutic concepts, the author seeks to show that **humorous stories are important narratives of difference which function to build intimacy within the marital relationship.**

The author begins with a Literature Review of works dealing with Humour and Psychology, Family Systems and Theology. He then examines 10 methodological challenges related to the study of humour. In order to achieve greater triangulation the author draws upon three qualitative methodologies -- a thematic approach, an events-based approach and a conversation analysis approach -- to examine the use of humour in the marriage relationship. The research field for the study was 20 couples who had been married from 10 to 60 years. Questionnaires and interviews were sent to these couples and from the data the author examined the process whereby couples come to reframe stories of crisis into stories of humour and hope. Two key terms are developed out of this process -- "reminiscing" and "referencing". Finally, the author examines issues related to the practice of pastoral care and marriage and family therapy and suggests changes in practice which would better support the important role which humour plays in the marriage relationship.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: "The Metaphor of Library"**

One of the insights of a literary approach to theology is that metaphors have great power to speak on a number of different levels at the same time. Metaphors are very textured. They are dynamic. They are able to bring meaning that is both precise and profound. Since metaphors have all of these wonderfully theological characteristics, I wish to begin with an extended metaphor which will be examined and elaborated upon throughout the course of the thesis. The metaphor I want to suggest is that of a library.

Imagine for a moment, an enormous library. It is filled with shelves as far as the eye can see. Each shelf runs from floor to ceiling and in order to reach the highest shelf one must climb ladders which are found throughout the library. Upon each of these shelves lie row upon row of books. Some of these are expensive with leather bound covers and titles embossed with gold print. Others are cheaper, more poorly made and of a lesser quality. Some of these books seem dry and dusty and appear as if they have rarely been opened. But others look as if they have been well used and show that the owner repeatedly returns to these favourite volumes. These special volumes appear as if they have often been taken down, read and reread, mulled over and reflected upon. When this occurs, additions and revisions are sometimes made to the text. No one gets upset for these special books are constantly being written and re-written. Each day new volumes are added to the stacks. These books are catalogued and shelved according to an elaborate system known only to the librarian. There are shelves for tragedy, others for mystery, still others for romance. The list goes on and on. Each book has its place and everything is always put back in its place. Everything is neat and orderly in this library. That is, except on those odd occasions, when the librarian, for entirely unknown reasons, files some of the books away on incorrect shelves. When this occurs very odd things happen within this library.

Where is this library? This library is found within our minds. The books on its shelves are the stories of our lives. Each day as new events occur in our lives, new stories are added to the shelves of our memories. Each of these memories is categorized according to emotion and theme. Sometimes these stories are filed away never to be remembered. At other times these stories are mulled over and over in our minds. As we reflect upon these stories of our lives, we sometimes see situations in new ways. An event that we had perhaps labelled mystery comes to be better understood as romance. An event that was thought to be non-fiction suddenly finds itself on the fiction shelves. Or an event that was first thought to be meaningless, upon later reflection becomes filled with meaning and relevance. The events of our lives which are narrated by the stories of our hearts are constantly changing and being reinterpreted. Of particular interest for this thesis are those times when an event that was first understood to be tragedy or crisis comes to be understood humorously. How is it that these stories change? How is it that stories that once were placed on the shelf for crisis events, now mysteriously find their way on to the shelf labelled humour? In this thesis I want to examine how married couples come to the point where they are able to laugh at the crisis events of their lives.

One of the characteristics which young couples consistently mention when asked the question "What makes for a good marriage?" is humour. Almost inherently couples know the value of humour within the marriage relationship. The ability to laugh with your partner suggests a closeness which extends far beyond mere words. It also suggests a positive attitude which is able to cope with hardship in creative ways. Finally it suggests a sharing that is intimate, playful and spiritually profound. Jesus alluded to marriage in terms of "two becoming one". Certainly this is the case when a husband and wife share a common secret with a knowing laugh.

But what exactly is humour? What is happening when one spouse laughs at a story or a joke told by the other? What is the precise meaning behind a simple word or a gesture that immediately causes a couple to burst into howls of laughter? What makes humour such an important element of life yet so difficult to describe or pin down? In this dissertation I want to examine how couples learn to laugh together. I want to examine the role of humour within the marriage relationship from a family systems perspective. I especially want to examine how couples learn to turn incidents of crisis into stories of humour.

It is my belief that the best way to examine how humour functions within the marriage relationship from a family systems perspective is through the lens of narrative therapy. Essentially humour is about meaning and how we construct meaning around a particular event. It is my belief that something very powerful is occurring when couples begin to laugh at their problems. By turning stories of crisis into stories of humour they are reframing incidents in new and creative ways. How is it that couples learn to make these narrative shifts? What is the process whereby couples decide to reframe events humorously? How is it that some couples are able to reframe stories of crisis into stories of humour easily, naturally and quickly while others are unable to let go of the old narratives even long after the event? I believe that if we can understand how couples reframe events using humour, these insights might then be applicable to the counselling setting.

The research question which I wish to examine through the course of this thesis therefore, is as follows:

**Are humorous stories important narratives of difference which function to build intimacy within the marital relationship?**

It is my thesis that:

**Humorous stories are important narratives of difference which function to build intimacy within the marital relationship.**

In order to answer this question and discover the process whereby couples learn how to reframe events humorously, it will be necessary to have couples tell their stories of crisis and then allow them the opportunity to reflect on these stories and the process whereby they came to reframe these narratives humorously. The research field upon which I will focus will be couples who have been married at least 10 years. The advantage of this group is that one might expect them to have a larger repertoire of stories to draw upon than couples who have been married a shorter period of time. I will be using a number of research methodologies in order to achieve triangulation. In Chapter 3 I will be discussing some principles of my research methodology, rationale and limitations to each approach. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 will deal with Thematic Results, Events-Based Results, and Results from Conversation Analysis. In Chapter 7 I discuss two key concepts coming out of my research -- "Reminiscing" and "Referencing". Finally in Chapter 8 I reflect theologically on some of my conclusions concerning the role of humour in the marriage relationship.

Before moving to the question of how couples learn to laugh, it is first necessary to examine a number of preliminary issues. The first and most obvious issue, is to try to answer the question "What exactly is humour?" Why do some stories make us laugh while others are met with blank stares? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to conduct a review of a large amount of literature.

## **2.1 INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE REVIEW**

Humour is a funny thing. Down through the ages philosophers, theologians, literary critics and psychologists have attempted to study and analyse this particularly human characteristic of laughter. Some have even suggested that in laughter one finds the essence of what it means to be human. As Haig writes: "A hallmark of homo sapiens is his (or her) ability to create and appreciate humour. To say of an individual that he never laughed may relegate him to the state of having never lived." (Haig, 1988, pg. 81). Perhaps it is no mistake that the English words for human, humility, humour all have similar roots which ultimately are all related to the ground (humous) of our being as persons.

This may go a long way to explaining why the study of humour has been so difficult over the years. Like the proverbial elephant being described by a committee of blind men, the study of humour has been approached from so many different directions but with little consensus on the how and the why of humour. Even coming up with a definition of humour has been frustratingly difficult for scholars. This does not mean that there have not been theories which deal with humour nor that there have been many attempts to systematize these various theories. Rather, it is that humour remains such a slippery subject to examine. As with dissecting a frog, one learns a great deal from a careful and thorough analysis; however something of its essence is lost when one cuts too deeply. So it is with humour.

In this Review of the Literature I have categorized the related books and articles into three broad headings: 1) Literature Related to Humour and Psychology; 2) Literature Related to Humour and Family Systems; and 3) Literature Related to Humour

and Theology. While there is certainly overlap in these various areas of literature, keeping them separate simplifies an already confusing area of research.

## **2.2 LITERATURE RELATED TO HUMOUR AND PSYCHOLOGY**

In an outstanding article written in 1972, Patricia Keith-Spiegel reviewed and systematized a massive amount of literature to come up with eight different theories of humour ("Early Conceptions of Humour: Varieties and Issues" , pp. 3 - 39 in Goldstein and McGhee, The Psychology of Humour, New York: The Academic Press, 1972).

Drawing upon nearly 200 articles and books throughout history she was able to classify the various theories of humour under the following headings: 1) Biological, Instinct and Evolution Theories; 2) Superiority Theories; 3) Incongruity Theories; 4) Surprise Theories; 5) Ambivalence Theories; 6) Release and Relief Theories; 7) Configuration Theories; and 8) Psychoanalytic Theories.

More recently (1988), Robin Andrew Haig attempted a chronological review of humour research beginning with the classical theories of Aristotle and Plato and ending with the behavioural research on humour and life stress conducted by Lefcourt and Martin in 1986. Haig writes:

Humour is a multifaceted phenomenon, so that no one theory satisfactorily explains or predicts all aspects. The pragmatic stance is to apply several theories to cover all eventualities. Over one hundred theories of humour exist and have been promulgated by philosophers, novelists, literary critics, psychologists, sociologists, artists, and humourists themselves. Humour is as complex a subject as sadness or grief, and in some ways may parallel it, in others mirror it. Theories of humour may for the purposes of simplicity be divided into five main groups, which emphasize incongruity, changes in effect or tension,



superiority, social communication, including control and modulation, and psychoanalytic approaches.

(Haig, 1988, pg. 9)

What exactly do these five theoretical groupings entail? The first of these are theories which deal with humour as incongruity. These theories view humour occurring when two disparate ideas, concepts, situations or gestalts are brought together into one picture in surprising or unexpected ways. The humour occurs with the flash of insight which sees both the paradox and the unity of the situation. As with a metaphor, the humour exists only when a critical distance is maintained. Either too disparate or too close will create a situation where the humour is lost. This incongruity approach to humour is usually traced to the works of Kant and Schopenhauer, although it was more fully elaborated by Koestler (1964) who coined the term "bisociation" to describe this coming together of opposites in surprising ways to produce humour. Developing out of this understanding of the humour process, O'Connell wrote that for an individual to be considered to have a sense of humour, one means that they are "skilled in this rapid perceptual-cognitive switches in frame of reference" (O'Connell, 1976, p. 327). In other words, they are particularly astute in bringing to the forefront both the incongruity and the connection of any event in such a way as to bring out the humour.

The second grouping of theories which Haig deals with are those theories which understand humour as primarily a release of affect or tension. The earliest of these theories was developed by Spencer who postulated that the function of laughter was to reduce tension through a release of "nervous energy" which was building up, for instance, in the nerves and muscles of the back, to the muscles of the face and respiratory system. When this nervous energy overflowed its banks then laughter was produced.

The third grouping of theories listed by Haig are those which understand humour in terms of superiority. These theories date back to Aristotle who concluded that humour arises primarily in response to weakness and ugliness (Lefcourt, 1986, pg. 11). Similarly, Hobbes (1651) suggested that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but some sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves; by comparison with the infirmity of others or with our own formerly" (quoted in Haig, 1988, pg. 15). Interestingly, Zillman (1983) pointed out that Aristotle's view differed significantly from Hobbes in that Aristotle thought that it was the powerful who laughed at the infirm. Hobbes, on the other hand, suggested that it was the unfortunate who laughed at others even more unfortunate than themselves as a way of enhancing their self respect and gaining superiority over them. Very different from these superiority theories are those which understand the function of humour as helping the individual to gain superiority over his or her problems. As Holland noted: "we can state the disproportion the other way around, calling the purpose of laughter not so much a glorifying of the self as a minimizing of the distresses menacing the self." (Holland, 1982, pg. 45). Levine (1977) suggested much the same thing when he wrote that one of the functions of laughter is to create a sense of "mastery" and "ego strength" over life's problems. Mishkinsky (1977) wrote that humour is better understood less as a defense mechanism than as a courage mechanism such that "with the expression of humour the sense of helplessness vanishes and is replaced by an attitude of defiance" (Mishkinsky, 1977, pg. 361).

The fourth grouping of theories are those related to a social analysis of humour. These theories focus on the function of humour as a means to produce social control, group cohesion, conflict and inter-group rivalries. Bergson's (1911) analysis examined the way humour functioned to break down the rigidity of customs and social life.

Laughter was the natural reaction to an incident, gesture or phrase which was "outside the norm". In a long but wonderfully descriptive quotation, Bergson writes:

The more a society improves, the more plastic is the adaptability it obtains from its members; while the greater the tendency towards increasing stability below, the more does it force to the surface the disturbing elements inseparable from so vast a bulk; and thus laughter performs a useful function by emphasizing the form of these significant undulations. Such is also the truceless warfare of the waves on the surface of the sea, whilst profound peace reigns in the depths below. The billows clash and collide with each other, as they strive to find their own level. A fringe of snow white foam, father and frolicsome, follows their changing outlines. From time to time, the receding wave leaves behind a remnant of foam on the sandy beach. The child, who plays hard by, picks up a handful, and, the next moment is astonished to find that nothing remains in his grasp, but a few drops of water, water that is far more brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought it. Laughter comes into being in the self same fashion. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing form of the disturbance. It, also, is a froth with a saline base. Like froth it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty and the after-taste bitter.

(Bergson, 1911, pg. 200)

The final grouping of theories are those related to psychoanalytic theories. With many similar elements to the above theories, psychoanalytic theories focus on humour as a means whereby repressions related to aggression, sexuality and other taboo subjects are lifted creating a release of psychic energy. Freud distinguished between three types of psychic energy which were released through laughter -- inhibitory, ideational and affective energy -- and related each to a different laughter response -- jokes, comedy, and humour. Inhibitory energy (joking) was that which is released when people were allowed to express aggressive or sexual impulses which normally would be repressed. Ideational energy (comedy) was that which was released when the unexpected occurred

such as the case of the ostentatious person slipping on a banana peel. Affective energy (humour) was released when a normally stressful situation was met not with sadness or tension but with humour and laughter. As Freud wrote:

The pleasure in jokes seems to us to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy of expenditure upon ideation (upon cathexis) and the pleasure in humour from an economy in expenditure upon feeling. In all three modes of working of our mental apparatus the pleasure is derived from an economy. All three are agreed in representing methods of regaining from mental activity a pleasure which has in fact been lost through the development of the activity. For the euphoria which we endeavour to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy -- the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our life.

(Freud, 1905, pg. 302)

Much of the research in the psychology of humour, therefore, can be categorized into one of these five theoretical groupings.

### **2.3 LITERATURE RELATED TO HUMOUR AND FAMILY THERAPY**

At first glance it would appear that humour has not been a significant area of research in the history of Family Therapy thinking. A review of the literature indicates that there has been no extended treatment on the subject. Yet as with many forms of humour, appearances can be deceiving with often the real significance lying just below the surface of discovery. In this respect, I believe the role of humour in Family Systems thinking can be seen in two key concepts -- that of paradox and reframing.

In the 1950's Milton Erickson was becoming known as a leading psychotherapist due to his work in hypnotherapy and the creative use of innovative interventions. As a person he was noted for his spontaneity, his quick and intuitive reading of a client's uniqueness, and his ability to use very persuasive communication which spoke to a client's situation on many levels at the same time (Goldenburg, 1985, pg. 111). These gifts meant that he was often open to the creative use of humour within the therapeutic session.

An example of Erickson's innovative techniques can be found in a paper he wrote in 1954 entitled "Indirect Hypnotic Therapy of an Enuretic Couple" (quoted in Madanes, 1987, pg. 242). Erickson describes a young couple who consulted him shortly after their wedding, after they had discovered that they were both life long enuretics. Erickson instructed them to deliberately and intentionally wet their bed and then sleep within it over a two week period. As a result of this intervention the bed wetting disappeared. "It is doubtful that this instruction appeared humorous to the couple at the time it was given, but Erickson writes that they were both amused when they came back to report the results" (Madanes, 1987, pg 243). Was it the intervention which created the change or the ability to laugh at the intervention which created the change? The question is a "chicken and egg" issue. For the couple the problem ceased to exist.

In 1973 Jay Haley published the book Uncommon Therapy: The Psychiatric Techniques of Milton Erickson (New York, Norton: 1973). In this book Haley examined some of the insights and techniques which Erickson had used in his therapeutic practice. Over the intervening years Haley and others had examined and elaborated upon many of these techniques at the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto, California. Out of this work developed what came to be known as the Strategic School of Therapy. One of the key interventions which Haley used was that of "paradoxical intention". Haley assumed

that with most families who come to therapy there is a great resistance to change. Rather than trying to overcome this resistance, Haley learned to use it to his advantage by suggesting that individuals continue their behaviour but pushed to a greater level. Therefore, domineering wives were instructed to to run everything in the family, a daughter refusing to attend school was instructed to always stay home, a couple who constantly fought were to become more intentional about scheduling their fights. Such interventions were paradoxical and often caused clients to laugh at the incongruity of the instructions. For Haley, the importance of therapeutic paradox lay in its ability to place the client(s) in a no-win situation whereby the power and control of an issue was given over to the therapist. In giving over control, clients often gave up the behaviours which were causing problems in their relationships. Haley noted that it was very important to suggest these interventions to clients with both seriousness and yet also playfulness. As with many paradoxes, moving too far in one direction or the other would cause the paradox to lose its power. In this respect it may be quite correct to say that clients, rather than give their power over to the therapist, gave it over to the paradox itself, and in doing so were able to laugh their way out of the situation.

The second concept which is related to humour in Family Systems thinking is that of reframing. First formulated at MRI by Don Jackson, Paul Watzlawick and others, this approach drew upon the language of constructivism in order to examine the process of change. They discovered that there are two kinds of change. First order change is that which occurs within a system without actually changing the system itself. Second order change is that which changes the system as well. Reframing is the ability to "change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts" of the same concrete situation equally as well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning"

(Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974, pg. 95). Reframing is an example of second order change because in reframing the entire system of our perceptions is changed. When the meaning changes, it makes it possible for the person's responses and behaviours to also change.

Interestingly, in a note at the bottom of the Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch book, they note that "Reframing plays an important role in humor, except that there the second frame, usually introduced by the punchline, is a *non sequitur* that unexpectedly gives the whole story a funny slant". (Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974, pg. 95). As we will see, this ability to reframe a situation and perceive things in a "new and unexpected way" is central to the power of humour in a crisis situation.

In a somewhat historical essay entitled "A Personal Retrospective of the Family Therapy Field: Then and Now" (Framo, 1996, pp. 289 - 316), James Framo writes:

"Probably the most valuable technique used by family therapists has been the reframe. Although it is not a new concept (an analytic interpretation is a reframe), nonetheless the reframe has been most usefully employed by family therapists and has, when used skillfully, been most effective in bringing about change. By relabelling noxious or even destructive behaviours as benign in intent, by offering a way of seeing events in a different light, and by recasting motives, fixed beliefs about one's self or others can undergo enduring transformation.

(Framo, 1996, pg. 302)

Two types of therapy that have drawn heavily upon the ideas of Watzlawick et al and the techniques of reframing are the Narrative Therapy Approach of Michael White and David Epstein and the Solution Focused Approach of Steve De Shazer.

As with Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, White and Epstein drew upon constructivism and especially the theories of Michel Foucault, to understand the therapeutic enterprise in terms of the analogy of a text. Constructivism would assert, first of all, that a text has no meaning in and of itself. It only has meaning according to that which it is given by its readers. Secondly, a text has the ability to take on different meanings according to its various readers. Thirdly, a text has the ability to change its meaning as a reader returns to a text at a different stage in their particular life. Using this understanding of texts, White and Epstein were able to propose that the events of our lives are very similar in nature to those of a text. We give meaning to the various events of our lives, meaning which can be very different from that which others give to an incident. Meaning therefore, has the ability to change and develop as we re-story the events of our lives.

White and Epstein have used these ideas to formulate the concept of "dominant stories" and "alternative stories". Dominant stories are the preferred stories which an individual tells in order to make meaning of their lives. Alternative stories are those incidents which naturally fall outside the "norm of experience" and are therefore understood as being "unique". The importance of alternative stories lies in their ability to "open up" an otherwise closed perception of the situation. White and Epstein noted that many clients came to counselling with a "problem-saturated" dominant story. By helping clients to discover unique outcomes, mapping the influence of those outcomes in their lives, and retelling the story of their lives in new and creative ways, White and Epstein noted that many clients were then able to make significant improvements in their life situations.

Related to this Narrative Approach of White and Epstein is the work of Solution Focused Therapy. In 1982 Steve De Shazer published his first book Patterns of Brief



Family Therapy (New York: Guilford Press) where he reviewed some of the work and the discoveries he and his colleagues were making at the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Unlike many other therapies of the time which dealt exclusively with clients and their problems, De Shazer and his colleagues were trying to develop ways of helping clients to discover, support and maintain solutions within their lives. It was their belief that much of family therapy had become problem oriented and saturated and that this focus on problems carried into the counselling session. By shifting the focus of both counsellor and client away from problems and towards solutions inherent within the family system, new patterns of family interaction could be supported and maintained. De Shazer's later books, Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy (New York: Guilford Press, 1985) and Clues: Investigating Solutions in Brief Therapy (New York: Norton, 1988) are suggestive of the development of what has come to be known as "solution-focused therapy".

While each of these books is very clinical in nature, in 1991 De Shazer published Putting Difference to Work (New York: Norton), a book which proved to be far more philosophical in nature. In this work De Shazer attempted to explain why solution focused therapy was so successful. In order to do this De Shazer drew upon the Wittgenstein's concept of "language games" and his understanding that all of language is a game whereby the meaning of the words is determined by the various participants within a specific context. According to De Shazer, therapy is a closed system involving client and therapist in an involved language game. The difference between solution focused therapy and other therapies is the way the game is played. As De Shazer writes:

The therapeutic relationship is a negotiated, consensual, and cooperative endeavour in which the solution-focused therapist and client jointly produce various language games focused on a) exceptions, b) goals, and c) solutions. All of these are

negotiated and produced as therapists and clients misunderstand together, make sense of, and give meaning to otherwise ambiguous events, feelings, and relationships. In doing so, therapists and clients jointly assign meaning to aspects of clients' lives and justify actions intended to develop a solution.

(De Shazer, 1991, p.74)

While other therapies attempt to play the language game by focusing on problems, solution focused therapy plays the language game by focusing on differences. This shift in focus is critical for it has the effect of changing the entire worldview of the client.

Focusing on these exceptions rather than on the problem inverts the presumed hierarchy, making what is seemingly secondary into what is primary. That is, in this therapeutic conversation, times when he overcomes the urge are more important to constructing a solution than the times when he does not overcome the urge (de Shazer is commenting here on a case involving a man who came to therapy because of a problem with exposing himself in public). This seems to violate common sense and the traditional structuralist position that there is something at the root of the problem, something hidden that needs to be uncovered and worked on in order to solve the problem.

(De Shazer, 1991, pp. 85-6)

The significance of this apparently minor shift in focus lies in the fact that De Shazer is advocating a major departure away from structuralism as the basis of therapeutic hermeneutics to what he calls "interactional constructivism". Rather than listening to a client relate detail after detail concerning their specific problem(s) in order that the therapist can then try and decipher the "structure" of the problem and suggest appropriate interventions, De Shazer's interactional constructivist approach suggests that meaning and solutions are already present. There is nothing more. Nothing to discover. No hidden meanings. The success of solution focused therapy rests on the ability of the client and the therapist to play the language game in order that already present solutions rise to the forefront of the client's perceptions. Those stories and incidents which were

first perceived to be insignificant, now become critically important, because it is upon these differences, according to solution focused therapy, that the new is created.

Numerous other books and articles (see Bibliography) have been written which draw upon the insights of solution focused and narrative therapies. Unfortunately there has been little written in the area of the humorous story. It seems to me that humorous stories are extremely significant for they narrate a unique story of difference.

## **2.4 LITERATURE RELATED TO HUMOUR AND THEOLOGY**

What does theology have to say about humour? What insights do the Scriptures have on humour and Christian faith? What role has humour played in the history of the church and how does the use of humour affect the development of ones faith? In order to examine some of these questions and review the related literature, I divided the wide range of material into four related areas of theology: 1) humour in the Old Testament; 2) humour in the New Testament; 3) humour through the church's history; and 4) humour in more modern theology.

### **2.4a HUMOUR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

When one turns to the Old Testament it quickly becomes evident that there are many examples of crying and lamenting and wringing one's hands in sackcloth and ashes. But if one is searching for illustrations of humour, the examples at first appear to be few and far between. Only three times does the Bible make direct reference to God even having a sense of humour. In the Psalms we are asked:

"Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?  
The One Enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at  
them."  
(Psalm 2:1,4 NIV)

This same theme is repeated in the 37th Psalm where we are told:

"The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth  
at them; But the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows  
their day is coming."  
(Psalm 37:12-13 NIV)

Finally in Proverbs we read:

"But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave  
heed when I stretched out my hand. Since you ignored all  
my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will  
laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes  
you."  
(Proverbs 1:24-26)

From these three examples one might conclude that there is little humour in the Old Testament, and that which God does express is an angry humour designed to criticize and chastize. Yet such a conclusion would be a mistake, for the humour which is found in the Old Testament is far more subtle and thought provoking. It is a humour which weaves its way through the entire narrative structure of the Old Testament. This makes it more difficult to discover since it is a humour which is rarely "direct and up front", but it also makes for a humour which is far more profound in its depth and its ability to challenge the normal perception of events. A few examples will illustrate the depth of this humour and the way it is woven throughout the Old Testament narrative.

One of the first and most significant examples of God's humour is found right at the beginning of the Old Testament historical narrative when the one-hundred-year-old Abraham is informed by God that his ninety-year-old wife Sarah will give birth to a son. Immediately Abraham "fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be

born to a man who is a hundred years old?" (Gen. 17:17 NIV). Similarly Sarah, when she hears the news, reacts in the same way -- "So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure." (Gen. 18:12 NIV). Both of these parents-to-be laugh at the news which God brings. But everyone knows that "he who laughs last, laughs best" and the one with the real sense of humour is God who asks Abraham and Sarah teasingly: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" This elderly couple will have a son -- a son whom God commands them to call "Isaac" which in Hebrew means "God laughs". From these two parents a great nation will be born. Yet the real point of this narrative is to illustrate the way in which God often does that which is unexpected. Even in the midst of grief and depression, laughter can be found, for with God all things are possible.

Another humorous theme which is repeated over and over again throughout the Old Testament is the idea that God supports the underdog. One of the narrative incidents which illustrates this sense of God's humour is found in the story of Gideon where a force of 32,000 is marshalled to do battle against the Midianites. God informs Gideon that this is too large a force and so the number is reduced to 10,000. "Still too many" argues God. So a test is devised in order to reduce the numbers further. God instructs Gideon to take his men to the water's edge where "All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side." (Judges 6:5 NIV). Only 300 men are chosen through this test, yet it is this tiny band of soldiers which Gideon leads into battle and which ultimately proves to be victorious through the help of God. The image of these soldiers drinking water "like dogs" would have served to emphasize the humour of God to devise such a test. At the same time the passage again emphasizes God's power and his willingness to protect the "underdog".

A similar theme is found in the story of David and Goliath. The details of the narrative which tell us the great size of Goliath serve to create a humorous tension when we imagine the small shepherd boy David standing up to such a giant. Added to this is the secondary narrative where Saul clothes David with his armour. David's exclamation that "I can't even walk in these things" (1 Samuel 17:38) causes the reader to chuckle further. The narrative is humorous in its very incongruity.

One final narrative which is filled with humour is the story of Elijah and the priests of Baal. Elijah, the lone prophet of Yahweh, devises a contest against the 450 priests of Baal. A sacrifice is prepared and the side which is able to call down fire from their God will sway the heart and the mind of king Ahab. The priests of Baal go first, but nothing occurs. Elijah mocks them with the words: "Cry aloud! Surely he is a God; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened." (1 Kings 18:27 NIV). The mocking continues as Elijah prepares his sacrifice and then drenches the wood three times with water. Again readers would laugh at the humour behind such a contest.

Numerous other Old Testament stories contain elements of humour. Sometimes the humour is to catch the reader off guard as in the case of a double meaning to a word or a name. Sometimes the humour is to show the wisdom of the hero who is able to perform a trick against his enemies as in the story of Daniel and the priests of Bel. And sometimes the humour is to make the reader reflect theologically as in the opening narrative to the book of Job where God and Satan debate the faith of this poor man. Whatever the case, humour in the Old Testament is woven throughout many of the narratives and leads the reader to both a greater appreciation of the text and a new understanding of God's working within the world.

## 2.4b HUMOUR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When one turns to the New Testament, one finds a continuation of many of the same humorous themes and approaches found in the Old Testament. Sometimes it is hard for us in this day and age to hear the humour in Jesus' words but undoubtedly it would have been caught by his disciples and those who first penned the Gospels. Bob Parrott argues that "Neither cast ye your pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6), "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:25) and "Is a candle to be put under a bushel, or under a bed?" (Mark 4:21) are just a few examples of the phrases of hyperbole common to Jesus which would have undoubtedly evoked laughter from his contemporaries (Parrott, 1984: pp. 34 - 36).

As Elton Trueblood wrote in his book The Humor of Christ (1964):

Anyone who reads the Synoptic Gospels with a relative freedom from presuppositions might be expected to see that Christ laughed, and that he expected others to laugh but our capacity to miss this aspect of his life is phenomenal. We are so sure that he was deadly serious that we often twist his words in order to make them conform to our preconceived mold. A misguided piety has made us fear that acceptance of his obvious wit and humor would somehow be mildly blasphemous or sacrilegious.... The critics of Christ have, on the whole, been as blind to his humor as his admirers."  
(Trueblood, 1964, p. 21)

To appreciate Christ's humour one needs only to remember that it was the Pharisees that criticized him for "eating and drinking with sinners and publicans".

There is also humour to be found in the way the Gospel writers report various incidents. The story of the man who was born blind in John's Gospel is a case in point. The Pharisees are investigating one of Jesus' miracles and they call on this man to report to them twice. After the second time the man answers them: "I have told you already,

and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" (John 9: 27 NIV). Another example from the Book of Acts occurs when Peter is left standing at the door after being in prison.

"When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel." Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed." (Acts 12:13-16 NIV).

One has to laugh at the image of poor Peter freed from King Herod's prison but left standing behind locked gates by a servant woman.

Apart from these and other particular examples of humour in the New Testament, some scholars have come to understand the central elements of the Gospel as being essentially humorous. The fact that a king would be born in a stable is thought to be humorous. That he would eat with the poor and the sinful is an absurdity beyond the comprehension of the righteous and powerful. That God would send his only Son in the form of a human is sometimes seen in and of itself to be humorous. Indeed one of the "classical" understandings of the atonement drew upon such a humorous interpretation of God reeling Satan in with a fishing rod.

God approaches Satan with an offer. "You give me the souls of all human beings you've captured and in exchange I'll give you my only Son." Of course, the devil can't resist this. To have the soul of the very Son of God the Creator! What could be bigger and more powerful than that? So he can't resist the offer. He snatches it into his mouth. But no sooner has he swallowed the bait than he discovers there was a fishhook in the bait and he himself is being pulled up for the kill. This Son of God was much more powerful than all the souls of men taken together. So he can't hold Jesus. Jesus is the fishhook that God reels in with



Satan on it, and that's the end of Satan! So the joke is on Satan!  
 He's been "baited" just as Pharoah was baited in the time of Exodus.  
 (Benson, 1983, p.97)

From this humorous interpretation came the symbol of the fishhook as representative of the Christian faith. This theme of God working in unexpected and surprising ways continued to find its way in a number of humorous activities within the church.

#### 2.4c HUMOUR IN THE CHURCH'S HISTORY

Some of the more interesting examples of humour playing a significant role in the life of the the church can be found in three medieval festivals which occurred following Christmas: Holy Innocents Day, the Feast of Fools, and the Feast of Asses. On Holy Innocents Day the pomp and power of the bishop was suspended with the appointment of a "boy bishop" for a day. For a single day the authority of the church was replaced with the playful innocence of a child often leading to laughter and a turning upside down of the church's serious nature.

This theme was continued with the Feast of Fools where the offices and roles of superior clergy were burlesqued by inferior clergy. During Vespers when that portion of the Magnificat was read which says "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (Luke 1:52) a "fool's pope" was proclaimed with him taking over many of the vestments of the actual office. A day of revelling and ridiculing followed, undoubtedly, much to the chagrin of those in authority.

Finally the Feast of Asses became another opportunity for comic relief from the seriousness of the church's mission. This festival was to commemorate Mary's flight into Egypt and usually a young girl and infant were led into the sanctuary on a donkey. With

the ass and its riders beside the altar, a mass was then sung in a dog-Latin rhyme with the congregation joining in with braying sounds at the appropriate points (Hyers, 1981, p. 47).

While these festivals sometimes had more to do with ridicule than they did with good natured humour, many other examples of turning the world's values upside down through the use of humour do exist within the church. Perhaps the best is the work of the Franciscan Brothers who renounced all material riches, power and splendour to serve the poor and insignificant of the world. In this they came to be known as "the world's fools" (mundi moriones) and have been greatly respected through the centuries because of it.

In the early 1500's the church in Europe was ripe for criticism and reform. During this early part of the century, Erasmus became one of the most popular critics of the church and society using humour and satire to ridicule many of its excesses. As Chadwick writes:

Educated men were mumbling all these things about the clergy, about monks and popes, corruption and graft, popular superstition and idolatrous practices. Erasmus expressed, and brilliantly, what they were barely articulating; and educated Europe laughed. Kings and bishops, scholars and merchants, anyone with a claim to be educated, hailed him at first with amusement and then with serious approval. By 1517 he had become part of the accepted order. ... More than any other single man, he lowered the reputation of popes and clergy, monks and friars, and (above all) of the theologians. (Chadwick, 1964, pp. 32-33)

While we have become very familiar with humour and satire which is expressed at the expense of clergy and lawyers, popes and kings, in Erasmus' day this type of humour was both unique and dangerous. Of all of Erasmus' writings, his most famous was The Praise of Folly (1511). Along with criticizing the state of the church at the time The

Praise of Folly also dealt with some very important theological issues including the folly of God in saving the world through his son.

Erasmus worshipped a God who saved the world by an act of divine madness: the mission of his Son as the incarnate Christ. God incarnate also acted like a madman. So did his chief disciples. And so – according to Erasmus – do his true followers in all ages. One of the forms in which this madness is found is the bewildered, ecstatic amazement of those who, some time in their lives, either by special revelation or by the word of God transmitted in speech or writing, catch a glimpse of the face of their transfigured Lord. It is then that they see the glorious majesty hiding behind the cloak of the lunatic Man of Sorrows who was the manifestation of a God who had, as it were, given up hope of saving the world by wisdom, deciding to save it by an act of infinitely costly madness.

(Screech, 1980: p. xviii)

This desire to strip away all the excesses of the church in order that the average person might experience for themselves "the folly of God" led Erasmus to publish a translation of the Greek New Testament that he hoped would be fresher and void of all the layers of commentary that accompanied the Latin Vulgate. "He wanted everyone to be able to read the Bible in the vernacular, he wanted it to be circulated to the humblest. He wanted the Bible to come fresh to the human breast" so that the divine folly might be experienced anew (Chadwick, 1964: p. 38).

Many of the Protestant reformers, such as Calvin, Knox and Zwingli, were very stern and severe in their attempts to do away with anything that didn't lead to a serious inner appraisal of the faith. Luther on the other hand, had a wonderful sense of humour which was evident from both his life and his writings. Even in the critical days of the diet of Augsburg when Luther was hiding undercover, he was able to write: "The way to overcome boredom is not with argument and grim hostility, but with humour and scorn." (Berggrav, 1983, p. 209). Numerous other examples of Luther's sense of humour and

appreciation of laughter also exist. One of the things he greatly enjoyed doing was inviting seminarians and friends together for an evening meal where they would participate in theological debate mixed with a healthy dose of laughter. Jokes and stories were told about Catholics by Lutherans and about Lutherans by Catholics with each side joining in depending on their perspective. These stories were copied down and collected by Luther's students and eventually were published under the title of Luther's Table Talks. One such story which illustrates both Luther's humour and his humility, tells of one evening when he was putting his son to bed he exclaimed: "If you become a lawyer, I will hang you on the gallows. It is almost impossible for lawyers to be saved. It's difficult enough for theologians." Remembering that Luther studied law before entering the ministry adds to the humour. A final story took place when Luther lost his temper with a particularly overzealous former monk. "For heaven's sake," Luther told the monk, "why don't you go and sin a little? God deserves to have something to forgive you for!" (Camra, 1984, p. 133). Such a statement goes a long way to illustrate both Luther's humour and his theology.

Other branches of the Protestant Reformation have also been able to blend a sense of humour with a serious appreciation of dogma. Tom Mullen, in his book Laughing Out Loud and Other Religious Experiences writes about humour within his own Quaker denomination. He tells a favourite joke which made the round through the Society many years earlier about the Friend who was awakened in the middle of the night to discover a burglar in the house. Quietly he gets his hunting rifle off the wall and confronts the thief. "Friend robber", he says, "I would not harm thee for the world, but thou standest where I am about to shoot." Says Mullen:

"Religious people seldom laugh easily at their most deeply held convictions, because they do not want to demean these beliefs or deny their importance. The point, however, is this: an inability

to laugh about our concerns too often results in idolotry of the cause. True believers need the perspective humour provides. Otherwise, they become as self-righteous and unfunny as Luke's Pharisee."  
 (quoted in Samra, 1985, p. 144)

The ability to laugh while at the same time being extremely concerned and involved in the most difficult of social issues seems to be a unique quality of many of the radical reformation churches.

A story along similar lines is told of the impoverished country pastor who was invited to a banquet by Frederick the Great. The officials in the king's court decided to have some fun by teasing the pastor but they were unable to get a single word out of him. When asked to say the grace however, the pastor couldn't refuse. He prayed the Lord's Prayer but with a significant change. Instead of praying "give us this day our daily bread," he said "give us daily the kind of bread we are receiving today." The words silenced his tormentors and the story is remembered to this day as an example of humour in the face of power (Berggrav, 1983, p. 209).

#### 2.4d HUMOUR IN MORE MODERN THEOLOGY

One of the most interesting theologians to write on the relationship between humour and the divine was Soren Kierkegaard. In 1841 he published his first major work intitled The Concept of Irony. In 1846 his most important philosophical work, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments was published under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus whom he described in the work as being a "humourist". While prone to bouts of melancholy and depression, Kierkegaard recognized the relationship between humour and faith in that both were able to mediate what he called the "contradictions" or incongruities of life. The goal of faith is to bring

together and at the same time create a distance between the human and the divine. When the finite gets too close to the infinite or tries to collapse the infinite into itself, then both are lost. This was why Kierkegaard was so angry with theologians who had created elaborate systems in order to know with certainty the mind of God. By thinking of themselves as being so close to the divine, they would lose both their sense of self and their sense of the incongruities of life. Thus one of Kierkegaard's favourite expressions when debating a theologian or philosopher was "May I have the honour to ask with whom I have the honour to converse; is it a human being"? (Sutherland, 1986: p. 126). Out of this understanding of faith, contradiction and the "true self", Kierkegaard developed what he called "indirect communication". The purpose of communicating indirectly was to speak with neither authority nor finitude, but rather to gain distance between the true self and the words which are spoken in order to maintain this critical distance between the true self, others and God. For this reason Kierkegaard was drawn to the use of pseudonyms, contradicting previously expressed views, metaphors, parables and of course, humour. (Heuscher, 1993, p. 209).

Humour is the concluding stage of the immanent within the immanent; it is still essentially a retirement out of existence into the eternal by way of recollection, and only after humour do we come upon faith and the paradoxes. Humour is the last stage of existential inwardness before faith.

(Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony  
1841/1968, p.259)

Kierkegaard came to view the function of humour through what he called the three stages of existence -- the esthetic, ethic and religious. When living within the esthetic stage, a human being is lost in a world valued solely for its sensuous and intellectual elements. The individual lives from one moment to the next within a world that becomes too concrete, too rigid and too monotonous. Irony functions on this level to challenge this rigid and absolute view of the world. Irony makes us feel insecure and anxious so that

the experience of a deeper Self begins to emerge. This deeper sense of self marks the beginning of Kierkegaard's second "ethical stage".

The Self that emerges from the "no-thingness" provides human beings with a sense of continuity and freedom, leading us towards personal responsibilities, toward commitments, toward Kierkegaard's "ethical stage". One reaches this "ethical stage" not because one has chosen the good, but because one recognizes oneself as the chooser, and grasps the true meaning of the ever-present either/or.

(Heuscher, 1993, p. 214)

The power of irony in the first stage lies in its ability to undermine all structures forcing one to choose ethically. The power of irony within this second stage lies not in its ability to help one to choose ethically, but rather to create worlds that are new and creative. In this second stage a human being may be responsible ethically, but it is only once he/she moves to the third "religious" stage that he/she become a truly independent individual.

This third stage does not render obsolete the ethical stage any more than the latter makes obsolete the esthetics stage. In fact, the development of the higher stages integrates the lower ones in such a way that they gain in charm and significance. Humour indirectly conveys all this not so much by its content, which in fact may be offensively crude, primitively violent or erotic, and quite unsophisticated, but by its basic form and process. Its ability to unstructure and restructure our world makes us realize that we possess an ongoing, indestructible identity, a Self which is meaningful and creatively related to the world, but not determined by it.

(Heuscher, 1993: p. 215)

Kierkegaard believed that the spontaneous laughter which humour creates points forward to a heightened experience of individuality and individual creativity.

In 1949 Reinhold Niebuhr published an essay entitled Humour and Faith which took up at least some of these same themes as it examined the relationship between humour and faith. On the one hand, Niebuhr writes that humour and faith are intimately related because they "both deal with the incongruities of our existence". Humour is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life while faith deals with those which are more ultimate in nature. Echoing both Erasmus and Kierkegaard, Niebuhr writes that "The sense of humour is, in many respects, a more adequate resource for the incongruities of life than the spirit of philosophy." (Niebuhr, 1949: p. 125). But on the other hand, drawing upon his experience of the Second World War Niebuhr wrote:

But laughter alone never destroys a great seat of power and authority in history. Its efficacy is limited to preserving the self-respect of the slave against the master. It does not extend to the destruction of slavery. ...Not humour but the cross is the meeting point of justice and mercy, once both judgement and mercy have become explicit. Laughter can express both together, when neither is fully defined. But, when it becomes necessary to define each explicitly, laughter can no longer contain them both. Mercy is expelled and only bitterness remain.

(Niebuhr, 1947: p. 116-7)

Niebuhr then is critical of putting too much stock in humour. Yes it points to faith but is far less than faith.

A more modern theologian who has examined humour is Harvey Cox. In his book A Feast of Fools (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969) Cox draws upon the image of the Middle Age festival noted above in order to discover ways of creating a sense of religious festivity within a society that is increasingly technological and materialist. By reflecting upon and moving through a number of theological



movements including the "God is dead" phenomena, Cox discusses the relationship between playfulness and laughter, faith and hope. He writes:

If playfulness is the only way to deal with our past, laughter enables us to live with the future. Laughter of course can be strained, cruel, artificial, or merely habitual. It can mask our true feelings. But where it is real, laughter is the voice of faith. ...Laughter is hope's last weapon. Crowded on all sides with idiocy and ugliness, pushed to concede that the final apocalypse seems to be upon us, we seem nonetheless to nourish laughter as our only remaining defense. ...This sense of irrepressible radical hope remains alive and well, in the comic. Its Christ is the painted jester whose foolishness is wiser than wisdom.

(Cox, 1969, pp. 155 - 7)

Cox's reflections on humour are significant for they point to the way in which humour is related to hope.

Another theologian who takes up some of the same themes as those already dealt with under Family Systems Theory is Donald Capps. In 1990 Capps wrote the book Reframing: A New Method in Pastoral Care ( Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) where he attempted to reflect theologically and pastorally on the process of reframing. Of interest for our purposes was Capp's last chapter where he related three images of pastoral care -- the shepherd, the wounded healer, and the wise fool -- to three methods of pastoral care. Significantly, Capps concluded that "the art of reframing is most congenial to the wise fool approach to pastoral care" (Capps, 1990, pg. 169.) Drawing upon the work of Alistair Campbell, Capps examined three dimensions to the wise fool image and related these to the process of reframing. The first of these was simplicity. Simplicity is very different than simplification. Simplification sees no problem when there is one. Simplicity has the ability to recognize a problem to be

simpler than it first appears. This ability to simplify is a characteristic of the wise fool for he is able to cut through the obfuscations of the learned in order to get to the heart of the matter with a simple joke or pun. The art of reframing humourously belongs primarily to the wise fool.

The second characteristic of the wise fool is loyalty. One of the problems that Campbell was concerned with was the issue of when humour is wisdom and when it is simply nonsense. The answer he came up with revolves around this second element of loyalty. Remaining loyal even in the midst of crisis makes it possible for one to laugh with integrity. Laughing at a situation while at the same time that one is fleeing from it, is very different than standing with humour beside a person in the midst of their crisis.

Because fools are not overinvested in the quest for meaning but content to let meaning arise where and when it will, they are free to invest in situations which may or may not have an identifiable purpose, logic or reason. Fools can remain faithful to their King Lear, no matter how crazy the situation becomes, as fools are not distressed because it makes so little sense. The situation is hopeless, but not serious.

(Capps, 1990, pg. 175)

The third characteristic of the wise fool is that of prophecy. Prophecy is that ability to challenge the accepted norms, conventions, and authorities within society. The way the wise fool does this is through the use of paradox.

Prophetic folly works through paradox. It involves inverting and thereby subverting the common-sense assumptions of the day. Thus, Jesus used paradox as he reverses the accepted religious values, making the humble tax collector more righteous than the law-abiding Pharisee, and the Samaritan more compassionate than the priest and Levite.

(Capps, 1990, pp. 177-8)

By holding up the world's values, taking them to their logical conclusion and showing them for what they are, the wise fool paradoxically inverts and tears down that which he holds up. Like Jesus' words "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's", in one simple phrase the authority of both the state and the religious establishment is brought down amidst the humour and laughter of the crowd. Jesus is able to be prophetic because he recognizes that God is often found in the midst of paradox. It is through simplicity, loyalty and prophecy that God often speaks, and when he does, he does so with laughter on his voice.

Finally, one last theologian whose works are insightful for any examination of humour is Sallie McFague (TeSelle). While McFague doesn't deal with humour directly in her book Speaking in Parables (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), her analysis of the structure of language, particularly around metaphor, is extremely interesting. She writes:

The meaning of the gospel is generated through metaphor, through words which we "know" but which are now put into a new context so that we see "what is" in the light of "what might be", through metaphor, to meaning; metaphor is a motion from here to there. ...Another way to say this is that metaphoric meaning is a process, not a momentary, static insight; it operates like a story, moving from here to there, from "what is" to "what might be." (McFague, pp. 32-33)

The significance of metaphor lies in its ability to create both a closeness and a distance between two images. This process of intellectually moving back and forth between the two images continues until one is able to grasp the meaning in something of an "ah ha" experience. The same is true with humour which often involves seeing the same thing in two different and even contradictory ways. One intellectually moves between the old and the new way of seeing until one "catches the punchline". This would suggest that humour and metaphors are related in that both involve a rather similar process.

McFague continues her analysis to conclude that the parable is an extended metaphor and because of the Biblical witness the primary form of Christian literary genre. Other literary forms which she examines include the poem and the story, but she maintains that the parable best represents a Christian perspective on the world. Poetry has lost much of its power to move individuals in this age and stories tend to be too orderly and neat.

For instance Beardslee maintains that the story with its ordered world (and theology based on the story) expresses faith in order and life. But our time as Beardslee admits, is not one of narrative order -- our novels lack plots, resolutions and developed characters. If one thinks of some of our most interesting novelists -- John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller -- one must admit that the ordered world of the story apparently does not seem possible to them. ... All this is not to say that the story is not central to Christianity -- it is at the centre of our tradition, as we have insisted all along. But it seems to me that a particular kind of story, the parabolic story, the kind of story which does not assume an ordered world but perceives order only indirectly, intermittently, and beneath the complexities of personal and social chaos, is the kind most pertinent to our times."

(McFague, 1975, pp.141)

While McFague's examination of metaphor and parable is extremely insightful and important for future efforts in narrative theology, I have to question her emphasis on parable. While it is certainly true that the easy solutions and resolutions of "story" no longer seem applicable for this period in our history, this does not inevitably mean that "parables" are a more appropriate form. Keeping in mind that McFague wrote this book 20 years ago, it would seem to me that she has placed too much hope in the role of the parabolic form for theological reflection within our society. Indeed it seems more plausible that with the incredible growth in popularity of television sitcoms and stand-up comedy clubs, it is not the parable which has taken over as the most appropriate genre for

reflection and theological insight in the present age, but rather the humorous story. In an age that is short on hope and easy answers, perhaps the best we can do is maintain a sense of humour.

What have we learned from this review of the literature? Very simply, we have learned from the Psychology of Humour that laughter is profoundly linked to our individual psyches. Our ability to laugh profoundly defines who we are as individuals. Secondly, from Family Systems Theory we have learned that humour has the profound ability to create change. To be able to laugh at a crisis is to be able to see it in a new way. Finally, from the Theology of Humour we have learned that humour is profoundly able to speak to the human condition. When we laugh, God laughs with us. With this as a basis for our research, let us turn now to issues of methodology.

### 3.1 **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN**

It is my thesis that **"humorous stories are important narratives of difference which function to build intimacy within the marital relationship"**. In order to prove this thesis it will be necessary to first develop a methodology which will allow me to examine this process of humorous reframing by couples. How is it that some couples are able to reframe their stories of crisis humorously while others are unable to perform such a narrative task? How is it that some couples use humour to build intimacy effectively and regularly within the couple relationship? In order to deal with these questions it is important to have a methodology that takes into account a number of significant issues related to humour. As the review of the literature has indicated, by its very nature humour is extremely difficult to analyze. Any methodology would have to take into account the following characteristics of humour:

1) Humour is psychologically subjective. Different people laugh at different things. Different people laugh in different ways. People appreciate humour and show their appreciation for humour in very psychologically subjective ways. All of us have had the experience of trying to tell a story or joke that strikes us as being enormously funny, while our audience fails to catch the humour. We wonder to ourselves what it means that we thought the story was so humorous while the person we told the story to barely smiled. The reasons for this disparity could be many, but certainly one of them has to do with the fact that humour is psychologically subjective. This immediately leads to a difficulty in developing an appropriate methodology. Most research methodologies strive to be "objective", yet how can one be objective when one of the major characteristics of the topic to be examined is by its nature so very subjective? The answer is to build a methodology that explicitly acknowledges and takes into account the psychologically subjective characteristic of humour.

2) Humour is emotional. The very fact of laughing means that humour is emotional. Again, one of the characteristics which researchers often strive for is rationality. But very often humour is entirely irrational. It makes no sense. If one asks a person "why they found a particular joke to be funny?", immediately the humour is lost and they are unable to explain why they laughed. For the researcher who strives to understand and make sense out of an event, this can prove very frustrating. The problem is that humour is first and foremost affective and only in rare circumstances does it become rational. This means that any methodology would have to accept the limits of rationality while being aware of the affect that humour often produces.

3) Humour is interpersonal. Some people are able to make others laugh. Their mannerisms, their speech, the way they move all combine to make people laugh. Similarly, others are entirely incapable of creating humour within an interpersonal situation. Again, most people have had the experience of hearing a joke within a room of friends. Because of the interpersonal dynamics people find the joke to be humorous. But tell the same joke within a different circle of friends and you are left laughing by yourself. This interpersonal characteristic of humour means that any research methodology would have to be very sensitive to the interpersonal dynamics of the couples to be studied.

4) Humour is spiritual. One of the elements our literature review discovered was the way spiritual issues were related to humour. It would seem that the ability to laugh is a profoundly spiritual trait. The difficulty arises within our secular society in the fact that most people do not have the language to speak in such spiritual terms. Indeed one could even say that the proper response to "holy laughter" is "reverential silence". Again, this

makes any study of humour very difficult, and any methodology should also take this important characteristic into consideration.

5) Humour is dynamic. Humour changes. What one finds humorous today ends up being not nearly as funny tomorrow. The experience of hearing the same joke over and over again begins to wear thin after the third or fourth telling. The effect that this has on a research methodology means that it may be very difficult to replicate results. For example, an interviewer that asks a couple to comment on a funny story may illicit howls of laughter the first time through. However, if the interviewer decides to return to the story later, either later in the week or even later in the same interview, it is entirely possible that the humour has been lost in that short passage of time. A methodology would have to take into account this dynamic aspect of humour as well.

6) Humour is contextual. A joke which is told within the context of a bar may be met with howls of laughter by the audience. The same joke told by a pastor on Sunday morning to his congregation is met with scowls of disapproval and the very real possibility of dismissal. Humour depends very much on the context in which it is found. For the researcher this adds another important variable to the equation. For instance, a couple may wish to tell a story which they find extremely humorous around the dinner table with the family present. Unfortunately, a large part of the humour may exist only when the story is told within this particular context. Since neither the couple nor the researcher can replicate the context, the humour may be lost in the telling. Does this mean that the humour no longer exists? No. Simply that it is inaccessible to the researcher because humour often depends on context.

7) Humour is historical. Just as humour often depends on the spatial context (a bar versus a church), humour also depends on its historical context. In the past a great



deal of humour consisted of sexist or racist jokes. There can be no doubt that within their historical context they were funny. But today, when there is a greater sensitivity to such issues, humour that is based on racism or sexism strikes many people as being hurtful. Another example of humour being historically bound is that of political jokes. A joke or a story in the midst of a political election can be well received. The same joke told after the election has been held, seems dated and old. Finally, many jokes or stories depend on the turning of a phrase. Since language and jargon change so quickly, a punchline that turns on such phraseology is often lost to the passing of time.

8) Humour is complex. Often one will find that the humour of a story is found only when background information is made clear. There is a very real sense that with many examples of humour one needs to be "on the inside" in order to understand the situation and "get" the humour. As an example, a couple may tell the researcher about an incident involving a situation that they found particularly funny. Unfortunately, the humour is dependent on knowing some background information about the husband's personality. For those who know the husband and all the complexities of his personality, the humour is quite evident. But for the researcher who is outside the family group, the humour is lost. Trying to explain the complexities of the situation may be helpful, but as with so many jokes the humour is lost in the explanation.

9) Humour is subtle. How many times has a person told a joke only to get the punchline wrong. At first they believe that they have told the story correctly. It is only on closer reflection that they realize that they misplaced a word or gave the wrong intonation to a phrase. Comedians work long and hard in the delivery of their routine because they know how subtle humour is. As many comedians note, "timing is everything". For the researcher trying to understand humour, the subtlety of humour

means that any methodology needs to be finely tuned to take into account these very subtle elements of humour.

10) Humour is paradoxical. One of the things our literature review pointed out was the degree to which humour is paradoxical. The Oxford dictionary (1993) defines a paradox as "two statements which are seemingly absurd or contradictory though still true." Often the meaning behind a paradox lies in the tension which is created when these two statements are brought a critical distance together. Obviously this proves problematic for the researcher who uses a methodology that attempts to collapse the truth of each statement into the other. Rather a more appropriate methodology would be one which is able to maintain the tension between two opposing positions without feeling the need to rationalize one side or the other away.

Where does all this leave us then in developing an appropriate methodology? Keeping in mind these 10 characteristics of humour, it seems possible to produce a methodology based on the following six operative principles:

### 3.3 PRINCIPLE ONE: A Qualitative rather than Quantitative Methodology

It would seem from the above 10 characteristics of humour that the use of a strictly quantitative approach would be limiting. The essence of quantitative research is measurement. In order to measure quantifiably the researcher needs to limit the analysis to a few variables which she then manipulates and measures. While it may be possible to develop a quantitative methodology that examines humour within the couple relationship, (and some have been attempted with mixed results, see Lefcourt: 1986), it would seem that a more qualitative approach would better take into account both the complexity and the depth of humour within the couple relationship. As a principle of my methodological design therefore, I will be using a qualitative approach.

### 3.4 PRINCIPLE TWO: Field Triangulation

A second principle of my methodological design is that of field triangulation. Triangulation is often defined as the "use of multiple lines of sight" when investigating a subject (Berg, 1989, pg. 4). The concept of triangulation comes from geographic and surveying practices of sighting two or more lines towards an unknown object and then locating the object at the point of intersection. For many researchers, triangulation is limited to the use of two or more data-gathering techniques in the investigation of a phenomenon. But in fact, triangulation refers not only to data gathering but also researcher triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation. The point is that the more lines of sight with which one approaches a subject, the better one is able to reach some conclusions about that subject. (For an extended discussion of triangulation see Thomas St. James O'Connor et al, "Quantitative and Qualitative Outcome Research on a Regional Basic Supervised SPE Program" in The Journal of Pastoral Care, Summer 1997, Vol. 51, No.2, pp. 195 - 206.) For the purposes of this paper I am striving for triangulation in three ways -- with the field, with the data, and with my methodological approach.

With respect to the field, triangulation will be achieved in two ways. To begin, the research field will consist of couples who have been married at least ten years. Couples who have been married for many years like to tell stories. They enjoy relating incidents that at one time were very difficult but which now evoke great laughter on the part of both husband and wife. In many ways these stories serve to affirm the strength and resilience of a marriage through tough times. The advantage therefore, to using such couples, is that generally one could expect them to have a large repertoire of humorous stories from which to draw. One would expect that couples that have only been married a few years would have a much smaller repertoire of stories from which to draw.

Therefore, by asking couples who have been married at least ten years to take part in the study, field triangulation will occur because couples will be drawing from a very large number of possible incidents.

The second way field triangulation occurs is by dealing with couples. By asking couples to relate one or two stories of humour from their marriage relationship I will have two points of view related to the same incident. Both husband and wife will have the opportunity to be interviewed. The advantage of this procedure is that I will be able to ask both husband and wife to elaborate on their story and in the process gain a better understanding of the humour behind the situation.

### 3.5 PRINCIPLE THREE: Data Triangulation

The other way triangulation can be achieved is through data triangulation. In my research procedure I asked couples to first of all fill out a questionnaire where they were asked to write down "a crisis event that they are now able to laugh about". They were then asked to comment on the event and the process whereby they are now able to laugh at the situation (see appendix 3). Once I had received back the couples' questionnaires they were interviewed and asked to tell in their own words the story of crisis which had now become a story of humour. The rationale for having the participants write down their stories of humour in a questionnaire format was that this allowed couples the opportunity to get the story straight in their minds. By its very nature a questionnaire is limiting. It forces couples to be brief and highlight only those words and themes which they would consider to be key to the story. By then returning to the couples and recording their stories on audiotape it provided the opportunity for the couple to elaborate on their stories. By interviewing them I was then able to obtain a greater degree of depth and subtlety which was lost with the questionnaire. By using both techniques to obtain data greater triangulation is produced.

### 3.6 PRINCIPLE FOUR: Analysis Triangulation

Finally, triangulation was obtained through the analysis of the data. In this respect I used three types of methodological analysis of the data: 1) a Thematic Approach; 2) an Events-based Approach; and 3) a Conversation Analysis approach.

One of the most common types of qualitative research is that of a Thematic Approach to content analysis. Essentially, content analysis is "any technique for making inferences by systematic and objective identification of special characteristics or messages" (Berg, 1989, pg 106). Manifest content analysis examines those elements that are physically present in the interview. Latent content analysis goes beyond this to an interpretive reading of the symbolism behind the physically present data. A Thematic Approach is a form of latent content analysis which looks for themes and subthemes in the research data. The significance of such an approach lies in its ability to discover "meaning" -- in this case the meaning that couples attribute to the crisis events of their lives. Therefore I will be looking for themes that are repeated by many of the participating couples. There will be no attempt to try and quantify or codify any of these themes. Rather I will include couple quotations in a case study fashion to illustrate the themes which the couples deem to be important.

The second methodological approach I intend to use is that of an Events-based Approach. Essentially, "events-based research involves the isolation and description of meaningful episodes in order to investigate how change occurs" (Greenberg et al, 1996, pg. 413). The significance of such an approach is that it is concerned primarily with process. Such a methodology begins by examining a "marker event" and ends with what is called "the resolution". For the researcher, the process involves "working backward from the end performance (the resolution) to the starting situation (the marker), by

identifying smaller and smaller performances until the event description that is generated is coherent and clinically meaningful (Greenberg et al, 1996, pg. 417). In the case of this paper, I will be striving to work backward from the story of humour to the story of crisis in order to develop an understanding of the process which couples go through in reframing these events.

Finally, the third methodological approach I will be using is a Conversation Analysis Approach. Conversational Analysis begins with the assumption that words are important for they "do things and are used by speakers to achieve particular results" (Gale, 1996, pg. 109). Words help us to construct meaning for our lives. Words therefore, are never merely words but rather deeply significant, not only in their larger meanings but also in the minutiae of how two people use such words. Some of the basic assumptions of Conversational Analysis therefore are that:

conversations are a meticulously co-orchestrated phenomena. An individual's action is not independent of the actions of others but is patterned in relationship to others' actions. Meanings are expressed and understood precisely because there are patterned structures to interactions. Second, simultaneously as speakers shape their utterances specifically for the intended recipient(s), their utterances also contribute to the continuation or closing of that context. Thus, every action both shapes the context and is constrained by the context. Third, CA examines the paralinguistic (and sometimes the nonverbal) features of talk as well as the structural sequencing of the various turn takings. Therefore all interactional features of the context are relevant to the analyst.

(Gale, 1996, pg. 109)

Like a dance between a husband and wife, CA attempts to examine the fine details of the dance itself -- how does he hold her, where are her eyes looking, etc. Each of these tiny details help to explain the conversational dance. Since the focus of this paper is couple

humour, it would seem that CA would be a particularly appropriate methodology to draw upon.

### 3.7 PRINCIPLE FIVE: Theological Sensitivity

The funny stories which couples tell are often dismissed as being little more than that -- funny stories with the ability to make people laugh. Yet as already noted, this is an incorrect interpretation of the role which these stories play in building and maintaining a couple relationship. When one considers two of the most significant rituals in the life of the couple relationship -- the wedding dinner and the anniversary party -- humour very often plays a significant role as speeches are made, toasts are given, and funny stories are repeated for everyone to acknowledge. This serves to illustrate just how important these stories are from a theological viewpoint. In many ways they could be considered to be "holy stories" because they speak about the trials and tribulations through which the couple has persevered in order to remain together. They are deeply significant in both content and in meaning. Indeed, I believe that it would be quite proper to say that many of these stories are so significant that they actually touch the "ground (humorous) of the couple's being". In hearing these stories, we need to be careful to take off our shoes for we truly are standing on holy ground.

Another way of theologically reflecting on these stories is to imagine that they are metaphors for the couple's relationship itself. Perhaps that is why they are so often told at Fiftieth Anniversary Parties -- they speak deeply of the relationship which people have gathered to celebrate. Like family photos which are highly treasured, so too are the family stories that speak of love and endurance.

Finally, one could understand these stories which couples tell to be similar to many of the Bible's parables with meaning that goes far beyond the words of the story.

One of the characteristics of many Biblical parables is that their meaning changes with the context of the situation and the viewpoint of both audience and story-teller. One never can say that they have understood everything there is to know about a parable. So much depends on the point of view one brings to the story. So it is with these humorous stories. How one approaches them influences the outcome.

The point of all this methodologically, is that any methodology that attempts to reflect on these stories theologically, needs to do so with the greatest degree of caution, honour and sensitivity. It would be a mistake to approach these stories with a rigid theological framework in the hopes that they can be bent to fit a particular bias. To do so would be inappropriately fundamentalist. Rather one needs to approach these stories as one approaches all holy text -- with openness, sensitivity and grace.

### 3.8 PRINCIPLE SIX: Ethical Issues

The focus of this chapter has been to develop methodological principles which will guide the research. One final issue is that related to the ethics of the research. The major ethical issue related to this research is the problem of confidentiality. It is important that all tapes and transcripts be secure throughout the study and destroyed once the research is completed. Secondly, it is important that identifying details in the research be changed in order to protect participants. Each of the participants were shown the materials related to their interview for their approval before the thesis was printed. Each of the volunteer couples had a number of opportunities to withdraw from the study or to have their material withdrawn from the study.

A final ethical issue is related to the need for participants to understand the purpose of the research. It would be unethical for the researcher to give any hint to the



participants that the research is "less than serious" or that the researcher is "laughing at" the stories which are being told. As noted above, it was very important for the researcher to be sensitive and respectful of the stories which he has been given for they were extremely intimate reflections by the couple on their relationship.

### 3.9 RESEARCH STUDY

With these six methodological principles in hand, it was now possible to begin the research study. Permission to begin the study was obtained from the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary Ethics Committee and the Official Boards of two rural/suburban congregations. Questionnaires were made available on a number of Sundays to members of these congregations who were willing to take part in a "study of humour in couple relationships". The purpose of the research and background information was provided in the Sunday bulletins. Couples were given the opportunity to take home a questionnaire packet with no obligation to take part in the study. Those couples that did wish to take part returned the answered questionnaires to me and were contacted about the timing of the subsequent interview. Twenty one couples agreed to take part in the research study. The couples ranged in age from their thirties through to their eighties. Most of the participants came from a rural/suburban background. One couple came from a more urban background. Economically the sample ranged from retired farmers and labourers through to both members of the couple working in professional careers. All of the participants were denominationally connected with the United Church of Canada although many of the participants grew up in or had attended other denominations.

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION TO THEMATIC RESULTS**

People like to tell stories. One of the interesting insights that has clearly come out through the course of this research is the willingness with which people will share their stories. Even though we are increasingly becoming a technological society, there is still a great grassroots tradition of story-telling which exists deep within our human nature.

In traditional cultures, stories were meant to be told with little analysis or reflection. The meaning lay inside the story. The best stories had many levels of meaning to them and with each telling different levels of meaning would rise to the forefront. Oftimes as well, the meaning of the story would change with the audience as the story teller put difference nuances on different elements of the story. Before I turn to my thematic results it is important to allow the stories to speak for themselves. Therefore, in order to get a flavour for the stories, I begin by relaying three stories as they were told to me in the interviews. These stories are characteristic of the many stories I received.

#### **4.2 STORY ONE: "Laughing through the dark times"**

Doug and Lynn are in their fifties. Their story was a crisis which came very close to leading to death for the entire family. (Throughout the course of this paper, when individuals are quoted the first letter of their name is used. "I" refers to the Interviewer. Names and identifying features have been changed.)

L It happened back in 85 or 86. I woke up in the night to go to the bathroom and I started coughing. I looked at the VCR to see what time it was. It has a clock on it that I can see in the night.

Well I couldn't see it. Everything looked kind of foggy. And that was the beginning of it.

I So then what did you do?

L I said "Doug! Get up! There is something wrong." And he jumped up. We got out of bed and went downstairs. We yelled to get our son up quick. Then Doug turned the light on.

D I shouldn't have turned the light on because we weren't sure what the problem was.

I But he turned it on. You could hardly see with the light on anyways.

D It just looked like a candle.

L Then out the door we went.

D I couldn't see any fire anywhere. So I went down into the basement and took the flashlight and went down there. Put the lights on but it was so dark. I tried to get to the oil tanks to shut the oil off. There wasn't any fire. But I guess the furnace kind of blew up. It was all backed up and pushing smoke out into the house.

L We were all covered with soot and smoke. We had black, black faces. All you could see was the whites of our eyes. I was furious at him. He went back inside and he seen what we looked like. So he stopped and washed it off his face. He washed before we went anywhere and there we were off to the neighbours and looking a real sight. And there he was cleaned up a bit (laughter).

I Where did you go?

L Across to the neighbours. It wasn't funny at the time. But when we stopped to look at each other it was funny (laughter).

I So what happened next?

L Well everything had to be replaced. Our bedroom. We had just done the carpeting maybe four or five months before.

D The black soot was just hanging on the walls. Any cobwebs were just filled with black soot along the ceiling.

L I was embarrassed by the cobwebs. I wanted to clean them up before the insurance came (laughter).

I So when were you able to laugh at it?

D It wasn't funny at the time because we thought the place was on fire.

I And you were so close to the whole family being asphyxiated.

L Yes. Right by our son's bed. The register is right beside it. All around it it was black as the ace of spades.

D He was right beside it. It was very close.

I What happened next?

D Well I called the insurance adjuster in the morning. A cleaning crew came right out. They cleaned the basement with a pressure hose. I guess we had to move out for two weeks. And then they had three or four people cleaning here for three weeks after we moved back in.

L One of the things we really found funny. This fellow had his crew down in Doug's work room washing all the nuts and bolts and the nails. (laughter) Seriously. One of the crew came up and asked where we wanted the clean nuts and bolts put and I said "what?" She said the boss told them to wash everything. Well I said "You're not washing nuts and bolts." If the boss says anything he can talk to me. (laughter). There's a lot of little things like that. That we laugh at now.

D The chesterfield. They washed it three times and it was still a few shades darker. It was new though. We had just bought it.

L We could have new carpeting or a new kitchen floor. But it had all just been done. I guess it cost over \$6,000 to get everything cleaned up again.

I When did the two of you start laughing about the whole situation.

D I started to laugh when everyone else started to laugh at the doorway when we went next door. They saw these two black people with their white eyes. (laughter)

I So you were both able to laugh at each other then with your black faces and soot everywhere.

D Well I am not sure she was able to laugh. (laughter)

I How long before you were able to laugh?

L It didn't take long. A couple days.

D After she got done 25 washing loads of stuff. (laughter). It was funny on the one hand, but on the other side it wasn't funny either. If she hadn't got up we probably wouldn't have got up.

I What about now. Do you think about it now? I know in our house whenever we say a word we both laugh because it is like a shortform for the humour.

L Well whenever one of us says pancakes we both laugh. But I won't go into it now. (laughter). Just don't ask our kids.

I The last question I ask in the questionnaire is "How important is laughter in a marriage?"

D I think it is very important. If you can't laugh in marriage ...

L Or all of life in general. If you can't laugh together, then are you going to be able to talk over the real serious things? That's the way I see it.

Undoubtedly, this story is a crisis which very nearly became a tragedy. The thing that struck me about this interview was the way Doug and Lynn were able to laugh at the small elements of the situation. They were able to laugh at their appearance standing outside with black soot all over their faces. They were able to laugh at the way the soot hung from cobwebs or blanketed various places in the house. They were able to laugh at the workers cleaning the nut and bolts in the basement. Over and over again, these little events which they found to be humorous, helped them to laugh at the whole situation.

Perhaps therein lies a significant theme -- "seeing the humour in little things helps you to reframe the whole event humorously."

#### 4.3 **STORY TWO: "Tearing down and building up"**

Les and Mary have been married 35 years. Recently they had been doing some renovating work at the house. As everyone knows, renovations often bring out the worst in people. Indeed home renovations have sometimes been called the "greatest cause of marriage strife". In this story we hear about renovations that go horribly wrong.

I So tell me your funny story.

L Well I guess the one that was related originally that Les seemed to think was rather humorous was about our bathroom. (laughter). We bought some wallpaper in an effort to redecorate the walls and we got some new carpet for the floor. We had taken some samples of the tile with us to pick this out and we got the wallpaper on, and to be truthful it looked like hell. (laughter)

M I said to one of the girls it was the quickest we had ever got anything done. I painted the ceiling and the baseboards on the Saturday night. Les papered it on Sunday. I thought I can't believe it, usually it drags on for months. (laughter)

I Renovating a bathroom goes on forever.

L So anyhow, we sort of decided that we had better do something different. The wallpaper was on the wall so we can't take it back. (laughter) Anyway we had discussed the bathtub at various times and how tough looking it was getting. Thirty five, thirty six years. Anyways when I was doing the papering I took the tank off the toilet, because you know, you can't get in behind. To work in there I had taken the tank off and the back of the toilet tank was absolutely black with mold. And it was an old, old tank toilet. Not insulated. We decided that we don't need that mold there now or

again or ever. So we decided to put in a new toilet. So anyway the discussion about the toilet led to the tub.

M When we were going to bed. (laughing)

L And to the wall as well which was ceramic and it had to be changed too because it was the part that didn't really match. It was the tile on the wall.

M But he didn't say anything about it till we were going to bed and I saw him in there measuring. And I said, "What are you thinking about getting a new tub too?" Well he was thinking about it. But he had to take the wall out of the bedroom in order to get this tub out. (laughter). But anyhow we had to do something to the bedroom too because the grandchildren keep coming and we have no place for them to sleep. So we had to get this room made bigger. It isn't finished but the bathroom is pretty well done.

I So in this whole process how did you feel when you put the wallpaper up and you realized that this wasn't going to work?

L (laughing) I wasn't impressed. (Laughter everyone)

M That wasn't the word.

I Was it a little bit blue? (laughter)

L I don't know if it got to that stage or not but it probably was on the verge of it anyway.

M (Laughter) He said it looks like hell. (laughter)

(The conversation continues as Mary and Les explain the renovating problems.)

I How long did it take before you were able to laugh at it? You did it on the weekend.

M We kind of laughed at it right away.

L Probably fairly soon.

I Within a few minutes?

L No. No.

I Half an hour?

M Probably when we talked to our son in law. (laughter)

L Or when a friend was here. It got kind of funny when we talked about it a little bit. We hadn't really laughed about it between ourselves prior to talking to someone else about it. You get thinking about it and how ridiculous it all got to be. It went from a frustrating situation to a "okay lets get at it".

I That's interesting. Maybe having the opportunity to talk to someone else ..... sort of a third point of view ..... someone to say ... boy this really is stupid (laughter). It is funny. But maybe the two of you weren't able to laugh yet.

L I suppose. I don't think we laughed about it until we talked to someone else.

I What about the son in law?

M He's a real character. He'll say anything. He is a real teaser.

I What did he say?

M I don't remember now. He kind of made fun of us (laughter).

I You don't remember what he said.

M I don't really know. But he just always says things to L. Getting him going. (laughter) But then L does to him too.

I Who was the first to laugh about it?

L I think I probably was likely. Because I was the one who talked to both B and G.

I And how long before you started to laugh?

L I think probably when I related our conversations to her she started to laugh. We could see the humour.

L What about now. Does it still seem funny?



M It does kind of seem funny. (laughter) Probably funnier now than it was at the time.

I Is it going to be one of those stories that you tell ten years down the road?

M Possibly (laughter).

L I am sure it will carry on for a period of time. I wouldn't know whether it will be a never ending story. It will go for a while.

M I imagine if we ever go to do anything else in the house it will come up. Our son-in-law will remind us of what happened.

L He will bring up the wallpaper that ended up costing us thousands of dollars. (laughter)

One of the elements that many couples mention when they talk about the crises of their lives is their "never ending nature". Often couples relate that their problems seem to go "on and on forever" with "simply one darn thing after another". Such was the case with this story. One small renovation leads to another which in turn led to another. Interestingly, this situation is almost a metaphor for many couple relationships where one element of the marriage is torn down after another. The question of course, is at what point do you stop the process of tearing down? At what point do you stand back from the crisis and say "enough"? At what point do you laugh at the situation and instead of tearing down begin the process of rebuilding and creating anew from the rubble of the crisis?

#### **4.4 INTERVIEW THREE: "Don't lock me out"**

Phylis and Wilbur are in their 80's. They have been married for over 60 years. Both of them are "down-to-earth" farming people. Life hasn't been easy for Phylis and Wilbur

but it has been very, very good. They have countless memories and stories which they are willing to share with humour and grace.

P I have a good one. He's always going hunting eh. And he was a way up moose hunting. I think it was moose. And uhh, when he's away I have the Yale lock on the door (Wilbur laughs) and I always shut this lock and you couldn't open it from the outside. So he come home one night earlier than I was looking for him, so the door was locked and he couldn't get in. And they just dropped him off. It was late.

W It was a way on to midnight. (P laughs) The fall of the year.

P They just dropped him off and he couldn't get in. (P laughs harder)

W I was just in shirt sleeves. Never took a coat or nothing.

P And of course I was sound asleep and I never heard him. He rapped and rapped. And each time he rapped I think he was getting a little bit madder (Both Phylis and Wilbur laugh harder). So finally he come to the bedroom window and I did hear him then. So I got up and I went out and I said to him "Is this the first time you rapped?" "NO." So I knew better than to say anymore. (Much laughter).

W Somebody went back to bed quick. (Much laughter)

P That was one he was a few days getting over. But he finally he got over it.

I How long would that have been?

W Oh thirty years.

P No. Not that long.

I Quite a while.

P No. Not that long I don't think.

W Well there was Dick and I. There was Dick who dropped me off.

P Yeah. Yeah. (thinking)

W Long time ago. Well, the dates won't be on the pictures. But we've got the moose pictures to prove it. (laughter).

P Yeah but there was nothing on the pictures for that.

I You don't have a picture of him knocking on the door? (laughter)

W It will be 25. That's for sure.

I 25 years or more. So when you were standing out there knocking on the door, how did you feel?

W I was getting colder (laughter) by the minute. (Everyone laughs) And Dick left and he said, "You might as well come in with me and sleep on the couch. Because he says ..."

P This was at his place.

W At Dick's. Because he says, "we got to be in Owen Sound to get that moose again by 7:30 tomorrow morning. Oh I says, I'll scoot on off here. You just drop me off at home and I'll be back in the morning. I was beginning to wonder if I was going to have to turn around and walk back to his place ( everyone laughs).

I So how long did you stand out there knocking? Do you know?

W Boy I didn't time myself.

I Half an hour?

W I was going to say 20 minutes. (laughter). I'll say 20 minutes because I had to circle all the way around the house. (laughter) And then to top it all off, the neighbours found this out. And they said look it. "Phylis never sleeps worth a hoot all the time you are away. She worries about you all the time you are away." I says yeah. To heck with you, she's worrying. (laughter) You can't wake her up with a sledge hammer. (laughter)

I So you said it took what, two or three days before you were able to laugh about it?

P Yes.

I Before he was able to laugh about it?

P Yes.

W Yes. Once I got the moose cut up and got warmed up and thawed out. (Laughter)

P I'd say the biggest part of a week before he was rightly over it.

W Well it took a long time to get thawed out mother. (laughter)

P Then some of the other neighbours told him "I couldn't come because I had to get the other fellows out the front door while he was knocking on the back." (laughter). That's the story that got around.

W Oh there was yarns gallore. (laughter)

I Within about a week you were able to laugh about it?

P and W Oh yeah. Yeah. Yes.

I Who laughed first? Were you laughing all this time?

P Oh yes I was laughing but just to myself. Not out loud. (laughter)

W She wouldn't go out in front of me and laugh. (laughter)

I What would have happened if you had of laughed?

P (laughter) I don't like to say. I would have had a calling down. (laughter) For being so nasty at being able to laugh at him.

W Like the lock you see. Normally you can lock the door and there is a key outside all the time. But not when you punch that button inside after you lock it. So that fixed it (laughter). You had to get it open from the inside.

P I made sure no one else got in. (laughter)

I I can think of one other question. That story, how often do you tell it? Or remember it?

W Oh it's got so old now I think everybody's heard it. (laughter)

I All you have to do is mention moose hunting and you start laughing.

P and W Yes. (laughter)

I Is that right?

W Yes it is just about true.

I So did you go hunting this year? Was the door locked this time?

W (Laughter)

P He got a key that will fit all the doors. (laughter)

W If I can't get in that one I can get in the front door now.  
(laughter)

In many of the interviews there was a significant symbol or metaphor which spoke to the entire situation. In the case of this story, the significant metaphor is that of being "locked out". For many couples, finding themselves in a situation of crisis can often lead to a sense of being locked out. Often there is anger and frustration. Sometimes nasty words are shouted at each other. Either that, or couples drift into solitary silence. Whichever occurs, in the face of a crisis situation many people feel locked out – locked out of the other person's feelings. Locked out of the other person's understanding. Locked out of the other person's life. The ability to see the humour in a situation and laugh with that person about the crisis event is a way to reopen the doors to communication. Often couples who find themselves in the midst of a crisis will turn to each other with tears of grief and laughter, hugging each other with affection and caring once the doors have been unlocked.

#### 4.6 **SIGNIFICANT THEMES**

The above interviews give a flavour for the type of stories which couples related to me. After transcribing and examining these interviews I was able to draw out six significant themes.

##### 4.6a **THEME 1: The Importance of Humour**

One of the themes that was mentioned by all of the couples was the importance of humour in the marriage relationship. In the questionnaire all of the couples (20 out of 20) noted that they thought humour was very important to their marriage. While it could have been anticipated that many of the couples would have thought humour was important to their marriages, the significant element lies in the degree to which these couples thought it was "very important".

One of the couples said: "Humour is the most important part. It hands down stories to the next generations. It teaches your children there are two sides to most events. It makes you want to be with each other."

Another couple said: "Laughter was very important because it eases tension and it brings the marriage closer together where you can share. It helps you cope."

"I think humour is perhaps the most important thing in our marriage. As long as you can laugh about things, you can't stay mad for very long".

Finally, one couple answered: "We think laughter is most important in marriage. It would be a very dull marriage if laughter was not a part of life. We also believe that

laughter is good medicine for stress. Today as we think back over the years of our marriage, the children being born and the grandchildren coming along, we as a family have had many good laughs together."

Some of the couples used religious language to talk about laughter. "It is a blessing from God that helps us cope." "I believe laughter really is a gift from God". "There have been lots of ups and downs over these 48 years, but with laughter and God's help we have been able to smooth out the bumps."

While undoubtedly humour was seen as being very important for all of these couples, its significance lay in the way in which it helped couples to cope with their various crisis situations. All the couples seemed to accept the fact that events happen throughout marriage which are no person's fault, that never could have been predicted, and that neither one of them could have done very much to change. Under such a situation, the best that one can do is laugh.

#### 4.6b THEME TWO: The Importance of Gaining Distance

One of the key themes that almost all of the couples mentioned (18 of 20 couples) when speaking about the shift from crisis to humour was the importance of gaining distance from the event. Distance can be understood in many ways -- distance in respect to time, distance in respect to place, distance in respect to emotionality. It would seem that for many couples, in order for them to be able to laugh, a certain critical distance in one or more of these categories had to be reached first.

Many comedians have commented that "in comedy, timing is everything". Rodney Dangerfield's well known phrase "Take my wife, please" illustrates the importance of timing with humour. Similarly, timing was very important for many of the couples. A few of the couples (6 of the 20 couples) stated that they were able to laugh at the crisis event, almost in the midst of the crisis itself. Doug and Lynn were able to laugh at each other as they stood outside their smokey house. "It wasn't funny at the time. But when we stopped to look at each other it was funny."

Another couple said they were immediately struck by the humour of the situation "And laughed because we simply couldn't help ourselves." Still another couple stated that they "were able to laugh about it even in the midst of the event."

For other couples it took a bit longer before they were able to laugh. Perhaps an hour or so of reflecting on the crisis before the laughter began. Perhaps a few days or a week before the humour of the situation struck them. "We were able to laugh about this episode by the next day." "We were probably laughing about it the next day." "It was a few days before the humour in the situation came out after talking".

Six of the couples interviewed said they were able to laugh at the situation "within the midst of it or shortly thereafter". Another four couples said that it took them between "a day or two" before they were laughing at the situation. Six couples said it took them "about a week or so" before they were able to laugh at the event. Two couples stated that it took much longer before they were able to laugh (a few weeks to six months). The remaining two couples didn't state how long it took them before they were laughing at the situation. The point remains that for essentially all of the couples a critical distance with respect to time had to be reached before they were able to laugh.



The second element of timing revolves around the fact that couples may see the humour in a situation at different times. One wife noted how this was the case with their particular crisis. While she saw the humour almost immediately, she realized that he did not see anything funny about the situation at all. She stated that "she had to bite her tongue and muffle her laughter a few times" because she knew that if she laughed at the situation, he would perceive it as laughing at him. This would only make the entire crisis worse. Thus she waited until he had "cooled off" a bit before openly laughing and helping him to share the laughter with her. This is an example where a couple's timing is different and the one has to wait for the other to "catch up".

Much the same thing happened with Phylis and Wilbur. When asked the question of how long it took before they were able to laugh, Phylis said that shortly after the event "I was laughing but just to myself .... But I'd say the biggest part of a week before he was rightly over it".

Again it seems clear that each couple is different and each situation has its own particular characteristics. Laughing too soon or laughing too late can serve to create distance in a relationship. Laughing at the right time however, can help couples to feel closer as they move through their particular crisis. When that critical distance is reached for both members of the couple then they are able to laugh together and in laughing build intimacy.

The second type of distancing that many couples either mentioned or alluded to was that of physical place (12 of 20 couples). For instance, a crisis occurs in a particular place in the home. When the couple is in that room together, the emotions associated with that crisis event are strong. It is almost as if they cling to the walls and the ceiling influencing everyone's ability to laugh. But as soon as either one or both members of the

couple leave the room, the emotionality is decreased and laughter becomes possible. Return to the room and the emotionality increases and the humour evaporates. With humour, place matters a great deal.

One couple told the following story:

My wife and I had been married for approximately two years when the following happened all within a two week time span:

- 1) Two major assignments were due before Christmas break when I was working on my university degree.
- 2) I developed a terrible toothache and eventually had to have a root canal.
- 3) My grandmother died and the funeral was two hours after the root canal.
- 4) My wife's great aunt died during the Christmas break.
- 5) A skunk moved under our rented home and decided to let off its "perfume" regularly. Everything in our home stank -- clothes, clothes, furniture. It was very embarrassing going to school and work smelling like a skunk.
- 6) Since it was impossible to get the skunk out and we couldn't take it any more, we also moved to a new house.

How long did it take before this couple was able to laugh at this episode? "We were able to laugh at the entire experience six months later -- after we moved!" Distancing in terms of physical place certainly made the difference with this couple.

Similarly, with the story of Don and Lynn, once they had left the smoking house they found it possible to laugh. Laughter would hardly have been appropriate if their son had still to be rescued from the house.

A third story illustrates the importance of distance in respect to place.

"Jim went on a tour of the Bacardi rum plant. I was to pick him up in a mall parking lot. After waiting over two hours, I finally went home. Jim was already at home. He stood on the landing of the stairs, naked and extremely drunk.

As I yelled at him about being inconsiderate and irresponsible, I kept slamming our sliding closet door. The harder I slammed it, the more it bounced open, so I kept yelling and slamming the door. I was convinced that Jim was too irresponsible to ever have children, if he could leave me waiting somewhere for two hours."

After discussing the situation the next day, this couple was able to find the humour in the crisis. However it seems unlikely that they would have discovered the humour in the situation if they had attempted to discuss it in either the parking lot or in the car.

In my own relationship with my wife, Linda, it seems that many of our crisis situations take place in the kitchen. Spilling this or dropping that or arguments over schedules all seem to occur in the kitchen. Once we leave the kitchen, however, the humour of the situation becomes more readily apparent. Return to the kitchen and the mess remains even a long time after it has been washed away. Other couples also noted a number of crises which had occurred in the kitchen. Once they had left the kitchen however, the crisis seemed to dissipate. I recall my mother often stating that she would never have an open-air kitchen. She liked to be able to "close the door on the arguments and not have them seep out into the whole house".

Similarly, driving through particular areas where a crisis has occurred often makes it difficult to laugh at an event which has happened previously. I know personally I can laugh at a crisis which had occurred in my marriage while we were on vacation on the east coast of Canada. We had long planned a three week camping trip to Prince Edward Island. It took three days to travel through Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick. Finally we arrived in P.E.I., found a camping location and phoned home to tell my parents that we had arrived safely. Unfortunately we discovered that over those three days my father had a heart attack and was in hospital clinging to life support. We quickly

took down the tent, raced to the ferry and began the long journey back home. As it turned out, we made it back home in a day and a half. Fortunately I was able to spend a couple of days with my father before he suffered another heart attack and passed away. Reflecting on the event now, there is sadness mixed with laughter for both my wife and myself as we remember back to the "vacation that wasn't". I may not be quite so willing to laugh if we happened to return to Prince Edward Island where the memories surrounding the crisis would be closer to the surface.

Again, the point is that physical distance makes a difference. Whether it be the kitchen, the car or the bedroom, physical place makes a difference. Leave the location and the humour is more likely to be perceived. Return and the laughter is gone. The importance of locale shouldn't really surprise us. Many comedians note that one routine that works in one locale absolutely bombs in another location. Physical space matters.

Finally, distance matters with respect to emotionality. Simply being able to arrive at the point where one is able to gain some control over one's emotions is important in moving from crisis to humour. Often this involves distancing through time and location, but it also involves processing the emotions that lie before you. A number of the couples (5 of 20 couples) noted how important it was to get away and think about what had happened. This "cooling off" period provided the opportunity to emotionally distance oneself from the situation.

One couple told the following story related to their children.

"In the spring of early 1980's we were cutting wood near the highway. Our young daughters were with us. After working a while we noticed the girls were not with us. We searched the bush area, looked for prints, yelled their names, and generally panicked. I drove to the cottage to call the police for help to

find them. When I got back to the cottage the girls were there. I was so relieved to see them I hugged them instead of scolding them. I dashed back to the bush to tell my wife. The incident was definitely not funny at the time -- but after I reached her it started to seem funny."

The opportunity to withdraw from the situation often creates an emotional distance whereby the humour of a situation begins to emerge. In the next chapter where I deal with the process of humour I will return to this particular element of distancing.

#### 4.6c THEME THREE: The Importance of Perspective

A third theme that five couples explicitly mentioned was perspective. Different than distancing, perspective is the ability to see the present crisis from the view point of the big picture. It would seem that couples who have successfully negotiated their way through a number of big crises with humour and grace are more likely to find themselves laughing through the smaller crises that crop up in life. Ironically the corollary may also be true. Couples who find themselves laughing through the smaller crises of life are more likely to find the humour in the larger crises as well.

One couple mentioned a crisis surrounding their daughter's living arrangements at university. They had taken their daughter for orientation and decided that the residence was suitable.

"Later we moved her in with everything necessary for the first term and only then did we realize that the units of six students were made up of boys and girls. Coming from a small community we were not aware that this was standard practice and felt it was very much a crisis. After several weeks we learned through our daughter about the living arrangements and were able to put everything into perspective.... We learned to laugh and avoid being too serious."

Gaining a sense of perspective on the situation helped to minimize the many fears which these parents felt for their daughter. Out of this new sense of perspective they were able to see the whole situation in a new light.

Another situation which illustrates this idea of gaining perspective was the couple who mentioned the time when the wife had suffered from a stroke. The husband had called the doctor and was trying to get his wife to the hospital. However due to the effects of the stroke she was "very miserable, hard to get along with, and would not agree to go to the hospital". "I was even nasty with the doctor swearing at him and my husband". Fortunately the effects of the stroke were not very severe and the wife returned to her old self. "I felt awful and apologized to the doctor. Now we look back on that episode and have many laughs about it."

A final couple wrote out the following very touching story in their questionnaire which illustrates well this idea of perspective:

"We were married May 27, 1961 in a small country church. In January of 64 we had our first child - a girl. In those days we didn't have much money, but our family was important to us. We farmed on a small scale, milking cows for income. Then in December we had our second daughter and it was a busy time with two in diapers.

Christmas 1964 money was not plentiful so we decided that we would only buy gifts for the girls and not exchange gifts between ourselves. We thought it was a crisis at the time, but after some thinking and some talking we realized that we had our family and our love. What more did we need?"

By reflecting on the big picture and taking into account those values and elements of life which are truly important -- family, friends, faith -- many crises shrink in size and the door swings open for humour to enter in.

Perspective then, is in many ways related to the twin issues of faith and history. The crisis of today is put into a new perspective when seen with the eyes of history and faith. Perhaps this might explain why so many of the great comedians come from a Jewish background. They come from a tradition with a long sense of history and a deep sense of faith. Reflection on the many enormous crises which the Jews have experienced down through the years would certainly have the effect of creating a new and humorous perspective on the relatively minor crises of our individual lives.

#### 4.6d THEME FOUR: The Importance of Humility and a Sense of Humour

Undoubtedly there are many personal traits which have an effect on a couple's ability to see humour in the midst of crisis. Two of the more important ones which couples mentioned were "simply having a sense of humour" and "being humble enough to laugh at oneself".

Five of the couples mentioned that one of the reasons why they were able to laugh through their hard times was because one of the partners had a real sense of humour. One of the couples mentioned that this was one of the things that first attracted them to this person -- "Their sense of humour and their ability to make me laugh". As they mentioned:

"This morning I was rushing around, making pies and jotting things down to pack and take to Florida. I felt very stressed and bothered. I'd stuck a pencil behind my ear as I scurried around in a nervous way. My husband came over to kiss me good-bye and seeing the pencil, he said "For autographs?" Tensions left my body as I broke into laughter."

This pattern of one person within the couple seeing the humour and helping the other to laugh was important because it makes for a familiar response to a crisis situation. Like a ladder where one person moves up the ladder and then reaches behind to help the other up, humour was used to move the couple up and over the crisis together. Because it was a familiar pattern of relating, there was often a sense of expectation on the part of both partners to find the humour. Even when the partner who was characterized as the one "with the sense of humour" found himself/herself unable to see the humour in the situation, he or she would often laugh or make jokes about the crisis simply because it was a familiar pattern. This "imaginary humour" would often lead to "real humour" as new possibilities of seeing the crisis opened up before them.

The other theme which was alluded to by couples in both the interviews and the questionnaires was the importance of humility or "being able to laugh at oneself." This didn't mean being humble to the point of either foolishness or being self-deprecating. Rather, humility was that quality where both partners were secure enough in themselves and in their relationship to be able to laugh at their mistakes and their foibles with themselves and their spouse. One couple stated:

"We feel that although some arguments are over serious matters most are over trivial things and one of us must put aside pride and break the silence."

Another couple said:

"We were able to laugh about it later the same day. I think I laughed about it first. We got over our feelings of stupidity and knew it could happen to anyone."



Everyone makes mistakes and individuals who were able to laugh at their own mistakes found great relief in laughing together with a sympathetic spouse. As one individual stated: "In any situation take your responsibility or your job seriously, but never take yourself seriously".

#### 4.5d THEME FIVE: The Importance of laughing at the small things.

An interesting theme which a significant number of couples mentioned (6 of 20 couples) in their interviews was the importance of laughing at small things first. If you recall the interview with Don and Lynn who found their house filled with smoke, the time when they first laughed was when they saw each other standing with the soot on their faces. Then at different points through the next few days they found themselves laughing at the way the soot had coated the cob webs, how it had coated the walls, and how the cleaners were left to "clean the place up". At different points through the whole crisis of the fire and the clean-up there were humorous incidents that helped them to get through the entire situation. The significance of "laughing at the small things" lies in the ability to see even the tiniest amount of humour in a situation and then allowing that humour to grow.

A very similar incident occurred with another couple, Carl and Elizabeth. They wrote in their questionnaire:

"It was a dull, dreary morning this so called first day of spring. As usual I went downstairs to the cold room for something but didn't quite make it. I looked down at the bottom steps and it was covered with 5 to 6 inches of nice cold clean water. I yelled for Carl and he ran downstairs in his pyjamas and bare feet still half asleep. He soon yelled as he touched the cold water.

I laughed as soon as he stepped in the water because he looked so cute with his P.J.s rolled up only half awake wondering what had happened to him. Later in the day our grandkids came over. The four year old decided to go fishing. So with grandpa's pole we tied a plastic fish to the end of it. He thought it was a big joke, We often laugh at it now."

Often when we are faced with a crisis, especially a crisis as monumental as those mentioned by the two couples above, we feel overwhelmed. The problem is too large. The emotions are too overwhelming. The issues that need to be dealt with are too enormous, that even trying to laugh at the situation seems inconceivable. But if it was possible to find even a small amount of humour in the crisis, as these two couples were able to, then this "little bit of humour" has the potential to grow to a point where increasingly the crisis is understood as humorous.

This is related to the insights of solution focussed therapy where therapists attempt to discover the "story of difference" and "do more of it". Similarly, if couples find themselves laughing at the small aspects of a crisis situation, and do more of it, then potentially the entire crisis will be reframed humorously. The story of humour will come to take precedence over the story of crisis.

#### 4.5e THEME SIX: The Importance of Humour and the Third Person

An unexpected theme that came up in seven of the interviews was the importance of the third person. Related to both the idea of distance and perspective, very often a third person entering into a crisis situation will see things in a new way. If this person is able to see the crisis humorously and then shares his perspective with the couple who are primarily involved, this can often have the effect of turning the whole situation around.

A good example of the importance of the third person is found in the following interview with Mel and Pat. Both Mel and Pat are in their 50's. They have been married for over 30 years. Over the years Mel has had a number of health problems including open heart surgery. They also have a son, Tom, who is mentally handicapped and lives at home with them. From my interactions with both Mel and Pat it would seem that humour is a very important part of their marriage. Mel and Pat related two stories to me beginning with an incident that occurred on their honeymoon. In the first situation the "third persons" were the neighbours. In the second situation the "third person" was their son Tom. I have included a large section of their interview because of the way it illustrates over and over again the importance of the "third person".

P There wasn't anything funny about me being in the hospital. But whenever Mel had anything happen it was funny (laughter).

I You had mentioned about Mel then. What happened there?

P About going in the hospital on our honeymoon? His appendix almost broke and we had no indication. Come home from our honeymoon and he went right in.

M We went to my brother's first.

P Yeah and then came home.

M And she fed us strawberries or raspberries.

P Yeah. Yeah.

M Well that brought it on with a vengeance.

P So we had to go. And we had bought an old house that had no locks on any of the doors or windows which had had it and it was scary and it wasn't in the best part of town either. He was in the

hospital and I was alone at this house with all these noises and monsters in the basement and everything.

M (Laughter) And she called her mother.

P I talked to mom. The neighbours really got a good laugh about that. I phoned his work to tell them he wouldn't be in. Well jeez, if they didn't give me a lot of flack.

M Yeah. (laughter)

P "What do you mean he won't be in?" "What did you do to that poor man?" Yeah. And then when he came home from the hospital he didn't know why there was a hammer in the bed.

M (Laughter)

P (Laughter) If anybody got in that window I was going to hit him with that hammer.

M (Laughter) I guess I just wasn't up to marriage. (laughter)

P No he wasn't.

I How long ago was that?

P We've been married 37 years.

M Married in 59.

P So we still talk about that because mom keeps saying about the neighbours, how they kept asking "why is Pat back?" They've only been married two weeks. (Laughter) She had to go around and tell everybody that Mel's in the hospital..

I That they really are okay. That she didn't kill him.

P No, no. And then of course you are in for a week with appendix. It isn't like now, like an overnight job.

M The first time we went in to the house, well we bought it, I was carrying a yard stick and there was a crack in the kitchen floor. It happened to hit there and I let go of it and it fell right down to the basement.

P (laughter)

M We had to put all new floors down.

P It was nice when we finished it.

I How did you feel at the time -- other than sick?

M I can't remember. I knew I was going to get ribbed when I got home and back to work. And I did.

I So you thought I am going to get ribbed about this. So a little bit embarrassed maybe?

M Yeah, embarrassed.

I What about you Pat? How about you?

P It was all over then. We told all the neighbours. He came home and "Why's the hammer in this bed?" (laughter) It was quite a thing though. Just being married for two weeks and having him, you know, carrying on. And wondering what was wrong.

M I phoned your mother and asked her if she was going to stay.

P Hah, hah.

I It sounds like it is one of those things that you now laugh about? And tell?

P Yeah. The parts of it. Like he doesn't remember being in that much pain anymore, do you?

M No. I was on my hands and knees I guess.

P I think I got you to the hospital.

M Not as much pain as the gall bladder. I'll never forget that.

P It was just a few little things that we laughed about. After.

M Hers wasn't as funny. The doctor told me he just about lost her. (Seriously). That morning ... took you to the hospital ....

I That was a crisis but nothing to laugh about.

M She wasn't there. She was out.

P See it is only funny when it happens to Mel. (everyone laughs)

I Tell me about the other one -- about your heart.

P Yeah. When he had his bypass. It was in the 70's when Mel had a number of heart attacks. And finally he had a five way bypass.

M In 79. The funny part about all that was that Tom used to go around telling everybody they are going to cut him right down here.

P Yeah and then he would say to Mel. "They are going to take your heart right out." "Quit saying that. (laughter). And his teacher phoned and said what is going on? "What is wrong with Mel?" "Is his heart going to come out?" (laughter) Tom keeps telling me. I don't know where he picked it up. And Mel kept saying "don't say that".

M They didn't tell me that until afterwards that they took it out and put it on the table.

I Is that what happened?

M They have to stop it from beating. Put you on a heart monitor and then they take it out.

P I don't think they take it right out. They just lift on to your chest. (laughter)

I Needless to say at the time the two of you were concerned and worried.

P Very scared. Yeah. Because they didn't give him much of a chance. They weren't even going to operate were they? It was quite a while. They wouldn't do it until they were sure that he would survive the operation.

M They told me one night that he had been over the photos that I was at 91%. There's not much I can do for you. You have about 3 years. He came back in the next morning and said "I'm going over those things again and he said you are at 92.5% so I will operate." He said it was up to you. So I said I will sign.

I How old were you?

P In your forties. He had had heart attacks since he was 35. And they wouldn't send him down from up here. You're not bad enough. Finally they sent him down and they said, "my God you should have been down here years ago."

(More talk about operations)

P Then mom had a gift certificate for supper and there he is up in the hospital eating jello (laughter). He has never let me forget it. "I'm there suffering and you're out eating steak and everything." (laughter)

I When were you able to start laughing about the operation?

P It wasn't much after was it? It was quite soon. Because you started on us about going out for dinner and you were still in the hospital. But then, it was a little while I guess till you started talking about it. You wanted to make sure he was better. He came home from the hospital. I had to get groceries because we were away for so long. I left him at home. I went into town. I come back and I get to the door. "Mel" No answer. Oh my God, he's died. He's dead ..... I knew he was dead on the kitchen floor. I sneak around looking because I am not going to find him. No where. He walked across the road to friends to visit. I could have killed him. (laughter)

M If the operation hadn't killed me she would have. (laughter)

I So what was it that Tom said.

P They're going to take his heart right out. (laughter)

M They are going to open him up right there. Right down there.

I This is before the operation.

P Yes this is before. I guess we had just been talking about it.

(more hospital talk, other surgeries)

I I was thinking about Tom. And him talking about taking the heart and putting it out on the table. He was sort of able to relieve the stress?

P Yeah. It was like he was saying it all the time. And Mel would say "don't say that". (Laughter)

Clearly this was a crisis situation. With the reality of open heart surgery being performed on Mel within a few weeks, undoubtedly the stress which this couple was experiencing was enormous. Fortunately, Tom was able to remove at least some of the stress by his comments. As well, Tom was able to remove some of the stress related to telling others about Mel's upcoming surgery. Since he "blurted it out to everyone he met", the entire situation became tinged with humour. Because of this third person and his ability to create laughter, the stress level in this couple's relationship was reduced and in all likelihood Mel was able to undergo the surgery far more successfully because of the laughter they experienced prior to his hospitalization. In this case, laughter may not have been the best medicine, but surely it must have helped in Mel's recovery..

This idea of the third person helping the couple to laugh was also found in Les and Mary's renovation story where the son-in-law was able to create humour around the whole situation. Similarly the story of Carl and Elizabeth where the two were able to laugh at the antics of their grandchildren in their "indoor swimming pool" can also be seen as a third person intervention. Finally one of the couples noted:

"Not only is it enjoyable to marry someone who enjoys a similar sense of humour but it is also important to find friends who can share humour."

It would seem that this final theme of the third person helping to bring laughter to a situation is indeed very important. Undoubtedly many couples would agree that their



children or grandchildren have brought a great deal of laughter to their marriage -- laughter which they were unable as a couple to recognize.

#### **4.6 CONCLUSION**

Many aspects of couple relationships are unique. Husbands and wives have their own unique ways of relating and communicating with each other. Crisis situations occur that are unique to individual couples and the ways in which these couples choose to react to these events are also often unique. On top of all that, how couples frame and reframe events, and how they decide to tell these stories to an interviewer, are all situational. At the same time that all of these difficult variables have an effect on any research, significant themes do repeat themselves. In the course of examining the questionnaires and conducting the interviews that made up the sample for this study, the above six themes arose enough times to convince me that they were broadly representative of how humour played a role in many marital relationships. In chapter 7 I will return to these thematic results as I attempt to draw some conclusions about the place of humour in the marital relationship.

## **5.1 INTRODUCTION TO EVENT-BASED RESULTS**

What is the process whereby some couples are able to laugh at the various crises that occur in their marriage while other couples find such laughter difficult? The best way to examine such a question is through an Events-Based methodology. Recalling our previous discussions concerning methodology, an Events-Based methodology seeks "to work backward from the end performance (the resolution) to the starting situation (the marker), by identifying smaller and smaller performances until the event description that is generated is coherent and clinically meaningful" (Greenberg et al, 1996, pg. 417). The idea essentially is that if a therapist is able to move backward from a successful resolution to a marker crisis with a client, then this creates something of a roadmap for the client and therapist to follow in the future in order to negotiate a similar pathway from crisis to resolution.

In the case of examining humour in the marriage relationship, the resolution events are those times when couples are able to create stories which produce a genuine sense of laughter within the relationship. The marker events are those events which initially could be called "crisis events" because they are emotionally upsetting. By asking couples to reflect on a crisis event which they are now able to laugh about, and working with the couples to try to discover the process whereby they are now able to laugh, it should be theoretically possible to create something of a flow chart that explains the movement from crisis to humour. While it may be true that every "crisis event" in the life of a marriage is different from the next one with each producing their own unique emotional reactions from a wide range of possibilities, at the same time one should expect that this process of moving from crisis to humour is at least similar in case after case.

One of the problems that I immediately faced in striving to discover this "roadmap from crisis to humour" is that couples found it very difficult to remember how they made the movement from point A to B. Oftimes the stories which they were relating to me had occurred many years earlier making it difficult for the couples to remember the various emotions and events that they had passed through in their journey. Secondly, even with those couples that could remember the events that occurred "as if it happened yesterday", there was a sense that the humour of the situation arose spontaneously and almost magically. This is one of the characteristics of humour which makes the use of an Events-Based methodology challenging. In case after case when I asked couples to try and remember the process whereby they came to the point where they were able to laugh at the crisis I was met with blank stares. They simply could not remember or had no awareness of the process. Fortunately, one of the couples I interviewed chose to tell me a story about an event that had occurred within the past 24 hours. Because of its "freshness" in their memories we were able to discover the process where at least one couple moved from crisis to humour. I was then able to compare this process to the data that the other couples gave me in their individual interviews looking for information that would hint at a similar process occurring within all the couples' relationships.

## **5.2 ANALYSIS OF EVENTS BASED RESULTS**

The couple who chose to share with me a recent story were Roger and Fae. Roger and Fae are in their sixties. They are recently retired due to a number of very serious health related problems. At the same time they have a very positive attitude that seems to carry over into their marriage relationship. When they were asked to relate a story of crisis that they were now able to laugh at, they immediately thought of a recent event that had taken place at their home. While they were afraid that it might not have

been "serious enough", I assured them that I thought it would be a wonderful story. As it turned out, perhaps because of the freshness of the incident, this story and their subsequent reactions to it very accurately model what I will call The Humour Process.

R Tell him about the mustard. Actually you started it. (giggle)

F Well I took and wanted to put mustard on our sandwiches for lunch at noon. Roger was outside working. So I took the mustard thing and shook it and it wouldn't go on. So I thought it needs cleaning out so I took the top off it and I took it over to the sink and I washed it all out. And I squirted it till the water was going through. So I put the top back on real tight so that it wouldn't go. Then I shook it but it wouldn't come out. And it wouldn't come out and it wouldn't come out. So I thought it is clean. So I gave it a real good squeeze. A real hard squeeze and the top flew off and it went all over the window. All over the wall. All over me. All over the toaster (giggle). All over the bread box.

R All over the glasses. She couldn't see. (laughter)

F So instead of doing something about it, I went to the door and opened it. Roger was outside and I called "Roger!!!". (laughter) He looked up and there I am all covered in mustard. "Well what do you want me to do about it?" he said. (laughter)

R Well she didn't exactly say that. She said "I have had an accident." Well I thought "Oh my God no." What did you do? (Fae laughing) Did you cut your hand off or a finger or what. Instead, there she is with mustard all over everything. And I mean everything. (laughter)

F So he came in and he helped me and we cleaned up. We cleaned everything all up. And he said, "well what were you doing?" Well, I told him how I had done it and how I had cleaned everything. "Well you mustn't have done it right". "Well I did do it right." So anyway, he decided "You go in and get cleaned up". So I changed into a clean top. And he said I am going to find out what is wrong with it. I said "throw it in the garbage" And he said "Well there must be something that you are doing wrong". I said "I wasn't doing anything wrong!" Well he took it over to the sink and decided that he could fix it you see. Well he took the top off and cleaned it all out and he did everything like I had done. He then put the top back on

and he gave it a squeeze and of course it wouldn't come out. Then he did it again. And then he gave it a real good squeeze and out came (laughter) the mustard (laughter) all over everything. All over the light. All over the picture. All over everything. All over my clean top. (uncontrolled laughter). It wasn't funny.

R The only thing was it wasn't quite as thick as it was the first time. (laughter) It was watery.

F Anyway he took and threw it in the garbage. (laughter)

R End of story.

This is a wonderful story and one that most people can relate to. Who has not at one time or another spilt something in the kitchen or had mustard drip down the front of a clean shirt. The thing that makes this story so special however, is the way that it illustrates the process of moving from crisis to humour.

It is quite evident from this story that the first thing that happens to Fae once the crisis has occurred is emotional flooding. By its very definition a "crisis" is an emotional event. Normally once a crisis has occurred there are a wide range of emotions that rise up in people. Shock, confusion, disbelief, anger and fear are but a few of the possible emotions which follow a crisis event. Taking a closer look at the story, it seems apparent that Fae's first emotion is surprise followed closely by shock. She had expected the mustard container to work properly, especially after going through all the time and effort to clean it out. When instead of working as she expected, it burst in front of her sending mustard throughout the kitchen, one can imagine both the surprise and the shock that must have immediately arisen within her. Out of this sense of shock there also arose a sense of helplessness as Fae noted that the first thing she did was "go to the door to call for Roger".

Confronted with a shouting wife, Roger also quickly became flooded with emotion. In this case the first thing he felt was fear and concern and he thought "My God, what did she do?" This changed to a mild anger as he asked "What do you want me to do?" and continued as he "muttered" to himself while cleaning the kitchen.

Underneath all the emotions and the flooding which surrounds this crisis, there is an unspoken issue and that is related to stupidity. Fae feels stupid because she caused the mustard bottle to explode, but she also feels stupid simply because she is standing in the kitchen covered with mustard itself. It is hard to look dignified with mustard dripping off your glasses and down your shirt. Roger, on the other hand, wonders to himself why it is that "Fae is so stupid that she can't fix a mustard container." The issue of stupidity hangs on the kitchen walls in the same way that the mustard hangs on the kitchen walls. The only difference is that the mustard is up front and visible. The issue of stupidity lies below the surface.

One can easily imagine a situation where this silent issue of stupidity could rise to the forefront. It is entirely conceivable that with many other couples with different histories and different relationships, one or the other would immediately fly into a rage. "Why did you do something so stupid?" "Why did you buy such a stupid mustard container in the first place?" "Whose stupid idea was it to have sandwiches this afternoon anyway?" Such a situation could easily lead to name calling, the drawing up of past issues, and ultimately a major conflict between the couple. This wasn't the case with Roger and Fae.

Instead of getting into an argument, Roger and Fae do something very significant. Roger invites Fae to go and get changed while he begins the process of cleaning up the kitchen. While this action certainly shows a high degree of caring, it also provides an

opportunity for Fae to distance herself from the immediate crisis. This distancing provides her with the opportunity for emotional deflation. She has an opportunity now to cool off a bit and get herself "emotionally cleaned up". Secondly, this distancing provides both Fae and Roger the opportunity for reflection. Inevitably Fae will go to the bedroom with many feelings but also with many questions. "How did it happen?" "Why did it happen to me?" "How could I have been so stupid?" Similarly, Roger has the opportunity as he cleans the kitchen floor, to ask himself many of the same questions.

The third thing which occurs following out of this questioning is the process of framing what has occurred in order to try and make sense out of it. Essentially, all of the above questions that Fae asks herself are meaning-making questions. By our very nature humans are meaning-making creatures and that is especially true when we find ourselves faced with a crisis. An element of this framing process involves what I call "filing". Meaning does not arise out of thin air. Meaning is created when we are able to take the present and place it into a coherent system drawn from the past. Using the analogy of filing, when an event occurs we immediately recall similar incidents that have occurred in the past. Related files are drawn from the past and the new file is inserted in a coherent and meaningful way. If Fae had a habit of spilling mustard or having troubles in the kitchen, undoubtedly many of these memories would have come flooding back to her. This present crisis would be inserted beside all of the other similar crisis situations and she would have concluded that this was "just another example of being clumsy in the kitchen." On the other hand, other possible frames could have been created -- "the mustard jar was defective", "Roger put in on wrong", "this was my unlucky day". It appears that at this early stage of the crisis both Fae and Roger are still unsure of how to make meaning out of the situation. Roger decides to try to fix it himself. Fae is content to throw the whole thing in the garbage.

This leads to the second mustard incident, this time involving Roger. Roger isn't content with leaving things as they were. He still wants to investigate the mustard container in order to answer the question "why". On the one hand he begins to blame Fae by saying "You must have done something wrong", on the other he is willing to admit that the problem could be with the container. It is interesting how Roger makes meaning out of the event by trying to "fix" the mustard container. Perhaps things are not fixed in men's minds until things are fixed in the concrete. Fae on the other hand is still emotionally flooded. She just wants to see the bottle thrown out. Fixing it is no longer important. Roger begins to work on the bottle repeating many of the steps Fae has already gone through. Much to his surprise the bottle explodes again this time sending mustard on him, on the kitchen walls, and on Fae and her clean blouse. Many of the same emotions repeat themselves. There is shock and surprise. Roger said he felt both "disgusted" and "stupid". With this second incident Roger is caught in the same emotional place that Fae found herself a few moments earlier.

The significant thing is what happens next. Fae begins to laugh. The sight of Roger with mustard flying everywhere, even if some lands on her clean shirt, is such that laughter immediately rises to the forefront. She now feels redeemed. No longer is she "the only stupid one". With Fae's laughter, Roger also sees the humour in the situation and he too begins to laugh. Perhaps not immediately but after a while of reflecting, framing and filing he too is able to laugh.

The question that is critical in examining this whole process is why did Fae laugh? Why was she able to see the humour in the situation as she stood there staring at Roger covered in mustard? I believe that the critical reason was that in seeing Roger covered with mustard, this gave her a new perspective on the image of herself covered in mustard. She was able to see Roger and herself in the same situation and thereby laugh



at both situations. Similarly, Roger was eventually able to see the two situations, the parallelism of both of them, and the humour which existed between them. This ability to draw up two memories at the same time and allow the humour of the one to spread to the other is critical for the process of moving from crisis to humour.

### **5.3 THE PROCESS OF HUMOROUS REFRAMING**

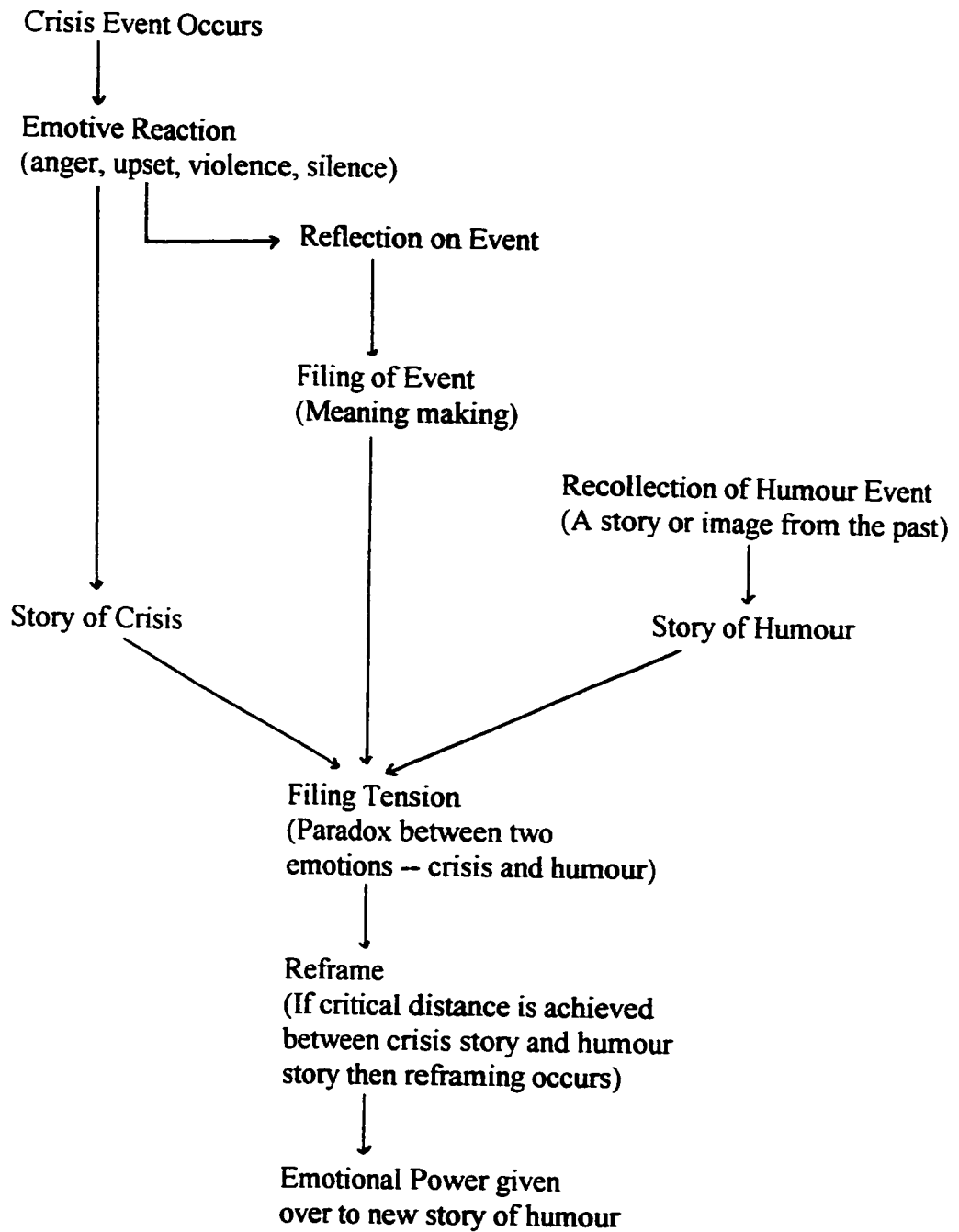
As mentioned in the literature review, one of the major theories around the process of humour is that of incongruity theory. According to this theory, humour arises when two disparate ideas, concepts, situations or gestalts are brought together into one picture in surprising or unexpected ways. Often this process occurs so quickly that people are unaware of the reason for the humour. They simply know that it is funny. I believe that what often occurs in the process of moving from crisis to humour is that individuals in their attempt to frame a situation of crisis are reminded of a similar situation which at one time they found to be humorous. Suddenly they are confronted with a paradox. Is this event a crisis or is it humorous? As with all paradoxes, much depends on the critical distance between the two events. They must be neither too close nor too distant for a truly paradoxical situation to occur. Similarly in this situation, the events must be close enough on the one hand yet distant enough on the other for a humorous reframe of the crisis event to occur.

In the example of Fae and Roger, Roger is very serious. He wants to fix the mustard. He wants to discover how Fae could do such a stupid thing. He is very serious and "in control of the situation". To suddenly see him covered with mustard is paradoxical in the extreme. Immediately the humour of the situation is perceived by Fae. She giggles and laughs at Roger under her breath. But the humour can't be contained.

She sees herself in the same picture also covered with mustard. This image now becomes humorous. Fae begins to laugh not only at Roger but also at herself. Roger also sees the humour and before too long the whole situation becomes humorous. Humour arises where there is paradox in the filing of crisis stories with humorous stories.

#### **5.4 THE HUMOUR DIAGRAM**

On the following page there is a flowchart diagram which attempts to explain this complicated process of moving from crisis to humour. As with all such diagrams, they point to what is occurring rather than attempting to entirely describe it.



To begin with, on the far left one sees the Crisis Event. Following out of the event is the emotional reaction. These emotions can range from anger, to shock, to surprise, to dismay, or a whole host of other possible emotions. These emotions can continue on in their intensity or change in both colour and type over the course of time. Out of both the crisis event itself and the emotions that are a part of the event, there follows reflection. We reflect on the events of our lives as a way of making meaning out of them. In many ways this meaning-making process can be likened to trying to "file the event" in an appropriate fashion. The critical element of the process which I believe occurs at this point, is a recollection of a significant event that is somehow related to what has occurred, but which has already been interpreted humorously. This recollection can be a memory of a situation which has already occurred in your life. It can be the memory of something that has occurred in your family of origin. It can be the memory of an event that occurred in the media such as in television or in film. It can be the memory of an event that has become a part of mass cultural. The significant element is that it is a humorous situation that rises unconsciously as you attempt to file the present crisis. This new memory creates a new paradoxical situation as you are confronted with a "filing tension". If a critical distance is achieved between this crisis event and the humorous recollection, then humour occurs. The present situation now seems funny. There is laughter. A new reframe is created. Rather than only be framed as a crisis, the event can now also be framed as a humorous situation. The emotional power which had been created by the crisis has the possibility of being given over to the humour. Instead of tears of grief, tears of laughter follow. The crisis is filed under humour where it can be retrieved later.

Rarely does it occur that the whole crisis event suddenly becomes reframed humorously. Rather what seems to occur is that one element of the event suddenly is understood to be humorous. As with most stories, there are many different elements that

make up the whole. When one of those elements produces laughter, the humour begins to affect the other elements of the story. In the case of Roger and Fae, Fae saw nothing funny about the mustard on the floor or on the refrigerator, but seeing the mustard on Roger produced laughter. The humour of seeing Roger covered in mustard then drifted into the various other elements of the story and both Roger and Fae could then begin to laugh at the mustard "up the walls and on the ceiling".

The major conclusion that arises out of this diagram is the suggestion that "humour builds on humour". The first way that this occurs is with the individual person. People who laugh a great deal or are able to see the humour in almost any situation are able to do so not only because of a personality characteristic which gives them a sense of humour. Rather they are able to laugh because they have a larger repertoire of humorous incidents to recall and build upon. They immediately see the humour of a situation because they have a large file of similar stories from which to draw. When confronted with a crisis their memories of past humorous events quickly rise to the forefront and they are able to reframe the story of crisis into a story of humour. In this way they have another story of humour to build upon somewhere down the road and thus humour continues to build upon humour.

The second way that "humour builds on humour" is the way a small element of humour can affect the whole situation. Often when a situation of crisis occurs the feelings associated with the event are enormous. Because of their enormity it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Couples in the midst of a crisis often feel emotionally overwhelmed as they struggle to understand and frame a multi-layered event. However because every event is always multi-layered, it is often possible to find a small opening for humour. Once this small amount of humour is recognized the door is opened for the person's

entire frame of the event to be changed. Thus, humour builds on humour when couples are able to laugh at a small element of the crisis.

Thirdly, "humour builds on humour" in the sense that as a couple works together to understand and frame a crisis situation, often the humour that one spouse begins to see in the event will drift over to the other spouse's interpretation of the event. A small chuckle by the wife will open the doorway for the husband to laugh out loud. This in turn will lead to a larger sense of laughter from the wife and the process continues until the crisis event has been largely reframed humorously. Again, a critical distance must be achieved in order to set this process in motion. Too much laughter on the part of one spouse can cause irritation in the other. Not enough laughter and the humour is missed. However if the critical amount of laughter is found then the reframing can begin in earnest.

If this Humour Diagram accurately describes the process whereby couples move from crisis to humour then one would expect the three ways that "humour builds on humour" to also be found with many of the other couples that took part in the study. In examining the interviews and questionnaires for hints of this process it was discovered that this idea of "humour building on humour" was found in almost all of the interviews (18 of 20 couples).

To begin with, the idea that "humour builds on humour" through a process whereby couples with a large repertoire of humorous stories build upon these stories when confronted by a crisis seemed to be the case with at least six of the couples I interviewed. In each of these cases, either one or the other of the spouses could be considered to be "real story tellers". They all had huge numbers of stories which they would have liked to tell me if we had had the time. One individual said "I have enough

stories to tell you it could fill a book". Two individuals had the habit of saying "That reminds me of another story" which they would then begin to relate to me. A fourth individual was well known for his sense of humour and his ability to tell a joke. All of these individuals said something like "I always try to see the humorous side of any situation" in their interviews. Because these individuals have such a large repertoire of humorous stories immediately at their grasp, it seems likely that whenever a crisis situation arises in their lives a humorous reframe is not far on the horizon. When faced with the choice between a crisis frame or a humorous frame for the event, they chose the story of humour almost every time. With these six individuals "humour builds on humour" because the ability to laugh is such a large part of their lives.

Secondly, if humour builds on humour in the sense that couples often laugh at small elements of a crisis before they are able to laugh at the entire crisis, then one would expect to see elements of this with the couples interviewed. In 13 of the interviews, individuals mentioned a particular element of the crisis that struck them as being humorous which then had the effect of changing their frame of the entire event. In one interview a husband talked about a situation that had occurred during their honeymoon. They had travelled west to visit with some of his family, and in a gathering with his family the new bride had a little too much to drink.

Lunch was to be served in the usual style. A lot of cold meat, bread, mustard, pickles, etc. She chose to have a sandwich of cold cuts and mustard. The bread slices were separated and the cold meat found, but no matter how hard she tried the knife would not fit in the jar. First she reached for the farside of the jar, then the nearside. Finally the knife found the opening and was immersed completely. How embarrassing. At times the tale is told with many "tee-hees and guffaws".

While the overall situation was embarrassing to both members of the newlywed couple, the ability to see the humour in the mustard jar situation helped in the process to reframe the entire event humorously.

Similarly, in the story of the flooded basement and the story of the fire in the house, the ability to laugh at one small element of the crisis served in the process of reframing the entire crisis humorously. In both of these stories the couples emphasized that the situation they found themselves in was enormous, yet they couldn't help laughing because one element of the event struck them as being so overwhelmingly funny. The blackened faces, then the soot on the cobwebs, and then finally the absurdity of washing nuts and bolts meant that small moments of laughter kept breaking into the event helping to relieve the stress and create a new frame for the entire situation. In the same way, in the second story the wife said that she laughed when her husband hit the water running because "he looked so cute with his P.J.s rolled up only half awake". Again, this humorous image made it possible to laugh at other elements of the crisis (the children fishing, the boxes floating) and thereby helping in the process of reframing the entire event. Thus the process of "humour building on humour" seems to occur when couples find themselves laughing at a small element of the situation which then spreads to encompass the entire event.

Finally, the third way that "humour builds on humour" is the process whereby one spouse helps another spouse to reinterpret the crisis humourously. In 12 of the interviews couples either mentioned or alluded to the fact that one of them had seen the humour in the event and then shared that humour with the other. "He started laughing and that got me laughing". "I started to chuckle right away and that got him laughing too." "As soon as the mess got cleaned up he started laughing -- it took me longer but I soon started



laughing too". Again it would seem that the process of "humour building on humour" occurs as couples begin to share their reframes of the crisis situation.

## **5.5 CONCLUSION**

The purpose of an Events-Based methodology is to discover process – the movement from point A to point B. The concept that "humour builds on humour" seems to be a significant insight that could be used with couples who find themselves in the midst of a crisis. The problem with any research into process is that few things ever travel in a straight line. There are always sideroads, detours and one way streets that one must travel down. While it would be naive to believe that the above discussions on the process of humour are complete, I do believe that they provide an interesting starting point for reflection on the use of humour in family therapy. In particular, the conclusion that humour builds upon humour ties in well with the insight from solution focused therapy of finding the story of difference and then "doing more of it". By doing more of it, the solution focused therapist tries to get their clients to find a small opening for difference upon which they can then build an entirely new reframe. Significantly, couples who use humour in their marriages already do this as they build humour upon humour in the creation of their particular life stories.

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION TO CONVERSATION ANALYSIS RESULTS

Imagine for a moment that you have been invited to a wedding ceremony. The vows have been shared and the service is over. You have made your way through the receiving line and met all the members of the wedding party. The meal has been finished and the wedding cake cut and served. All the toasts, the speeches and the funny stories about the bride and the groom have been told. All that remains is the first dance -- a quiet and romantic waltz between a new husband and a new wife. The band begins to play and the first dance of many begins. How does he hold her? How does she hold him? What do the two of them look at as they wind their way across the dance floor? How much intimacy -- not simply physical intimacy but also emotional and spiritual intimacy -- does this couple share at this beginning point in their marriage? If one is able to look very closely, this wedding dance says a great deal about this couple at this stage in their marriage relationship.

Now move ahead fifty years. The couple is celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. Once again their family has gathered around them and once again they are about to share a very special dance together. This time around the dance floor they move slower. The passing of many years is beginning to show in their health and in their movements. Where do they hold each other now after fifty years of closeness? What do they look at as they revolve around the dance floor? Do they still look at each other or does their gaze now shift to their children and grandchildren? What does this dance say about their marriage relationship and the past fifty years?

The picture of a husband and wife dancing together is a wonderful metaphor for the intimacy which can exist within a couple relationship. One of the places where this intimacy becomes most readily apparent is in the telling of humorous stories. In this

chapter I want to examine this dance of intimacy and the power which it holds when a couple begins to tell their stories of crisis and humour. In order to do this I have used the methodology of Conversation Analysis. Recalling my discussion in chapter 3, Conversation Analysis asserts that "conversations are a meticulously co-orchestrated phenomena" (Gale, 1996, pg. 109). Where I use the metaphor of the dance, Gale uses the metaphor of the orchestra. Without mixing metaphors, she would say that in order to examine a relationship from this perspective, one must break down the musical score into its individual parts taking special notice of each note and rest, the timing and syncopation of each bar, and of course the mood that each instrument is called upon to create. Only once the conductor has a complete musical score is she then able to say that they truly understand. In order to do this I wish to return to a section of the "Don't lock me out" interview between Phylis and Wilbur.

## 6.2 INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

This was a very special interview, largely because of the intimacy which this couple shared in the telling of the story. Recalling that Phylis and Wilbur are in their eighties and have been married for over 60 years adds to this idea of the dance of intimacy. Below is the first section taken from the interview:

P I have a good one. He's always going hunting eh. And he was a way up moose hunting. I think it was moose. And uhh, when he's away I have the Yale lock on the door (Wilbur laughs) and I always shut this lock and you couldn't open it from the outside. So he come home one night earlier than I was looking for him, so the door was locked and he couldn't get in. And they just dropped him off. It was late.

W It was a way on to midnight. (P laughs) The fall of the year.

P They just dropped him off and he couldn't get in. (P laughs harder)

W I was just in shirt sleeves. Never took a coat or nothing.

P And of course I was sound asleep and I never heard him. He rapped and rapped. And each time he rapped I think he was getting a little bit madder (Both Phylis and Wilbur laugh harder). So finally he come to the bedroom window and I did hear him then. So I got up and I went out and I said to him "Is this the first time you rapped?" "NO." So I knew better than to say anymore. (Much laughter).

W Somebody went back to bed quick. (Much laughter)

P That was one he was a few days getting over. But he finally he got over it.

(Section of interview deleted)

I So how long did you stand out there knocking? Do you know?

W Boy I didn't time myself.

I Half an hour?

W I was going to say 20 minutes. (laughter). I'll say 20 minutes because I had to circle all the way around the house. (laughter) And then to top it all off, the neighbours found this out. And they said look it. "Phylis never sleeps worth a hoot all the time you are away. She worries about you all the time you are away." I says yeah. To heck with you, she's worrying. (laughter) You can't wake her up with a sledge hammer. (laughter)

I So you said it took what, two or three days before you were able to laugh about it?

P Yes.

I Before he was able to laugh about it?

P Yes.

W Yes. Once I got the moose cut up and got warmed up and thawed out. (Laughter)

P I'd say the biggest part of a week before he was rightly over it.

W Well it took a long time to get thawed out mother. (laughter)

P Then some of the other neighbours told him "I couldn't come because I had to get the other fellows out the front door while he was knocking on the back." (laughter). That's the story that got around.

W Oh there was yarns gallore. (laughter)

### 6.3 CODING OF THE TRANSCRIPT

In order to examine a transcript through the use of Conversation Analysis, one must create a coding format to note the tenor and the meta-communications that are part of the conversation. Since I am looking primarily for elements of intimacy, I will be looking for the following:

#### a) PERMISSION GIVING / PERMISSION REFUSING

"Permission giving" is found at the beginning of most conversations that involve couples speaking to a third person. The purpose of permission giving is to subtly receive from or give to your spouse permission to begin speaking about a particular topic with this third person. Many of us have had the experience of talking to a third person in the presence of our spouse, only to discover later that they were embarrassed or upset that "we even brought the topic up". Often in those situations the spouse will subtly refuse permission by turning away, changing the topic, or coughing unobtrusively. Sometimes the spouse will refuse permission in less subtle ways such as a "kick under the table". Permission granting, on the other hand, is usually given very quietly with either a nod of the head or eye contact that says "go ahead and tell that story."

Most of the couples I met with had already discussed which stories to tell me. They had jointly agreed as to what was and was not an acceptable story. In a few cases, individuals decided to tell another story to me. In those cases permission granting occurred at the beginning of the story. In one case, a husband began to tell a story which the wife decided was either too revealing or too embarrassing. In seeking her permission she decided to refuse giving it to him, and he was put into the position of having to back track and move the conversation into a new direction.

b) REMEMBERING /FORGETTING

Remembering is a way of creating unity with a person. By being able to share memories, even in a non-verbal way, closeness is created. On the other hand, a blank stare where it is obvious that the other person does not remember the incident, speaks volumes about the interaction between these two people. In its simplest form then, this affirmation is a way of saying non-verbally, "Yes, I remember".

Many of the couples I met with enjoyed meeting with me to talk about their particular situations because it provided them with the opportunity to reminisce together. By sharing these stories and these memories with me, they were able to once again share them with each other.

c) AFFIRMING/NEGATING

In many ways, affirming is very similar to permission giving and remembering. At the same time, affirming is something that anyone can do while permission giving and remembering can only be done by a spouse. At its simplest, affirming is the subtle clues given by the listener to the speaker which say "keep going, I am with you". A simple nod of the head, a smile, a laugh at the correct place in the story are all very affirming. A puzzled look or down turned eyes are a very simple way to negate the words which are

being spoken and to send the message that I do not understand where this conversation is going.

All of us have had the frustrating experience of speaking to someone who is negating -- they appear not be listening and it feels as if your words simply are not getting through. Just as disconcerting is the person who is too affirming. They seem to hang on every word you say and have a way of making you feel very nervous as you begin to question each word and phrase you speak. In the course of my interviews I was searching for signs of affirmation between couples that were positive and supportive but not affirming to the extreme.

d) ELABORATING/ DIMINISHING

One way to be affirming that is open to couples is the use of elaboration. Oftimes one spouse would begin a sentence which the other spouse would finish. When this occurs in a positive fashion it is elaboration. When it occurs in a negative fashion it is diminishing. Elaboration adds to the conversation and the sense of closeness. Diminishing takes away from the conversation and decreases the sense of closeness.

With many of the couples I interviewed elaboration occurred time and time again as each member of the couple wanted to be sure that I understood the full impact of the story. Since I was searching for positive humour one would expect a great deal of elaboration to take place. If I had been searching for negative humour, one might have expected far more instances of diminishing where one member tried to cut short the story-telling of the other.

e) GIVING SPACE/ TAKING SPACE

In any conversation there are times when the movement flows back and forth between husband and wife. Couples that have a high degree of intimacy are comfortable with this flow and it comes naturally. During these times space is given for the other to reflect or to "add his or her two cents worth". There is a natural turning over of the script which allows the other person to take over. On the other hand, couples that interrupt each other or speak at the same time in order to get their point across have difficulty giving up space and turning over the script to their spouses.

f) LAUGHTER AT/ LAUGHING WITH

Finally, one of the obvious yet most significant interactions that I looked for in my interviews was that of laughter by the couple. Laughter can be found in two essential forms. Either we laugh at someone or we laugh with someone. Laughing at another person creates tension and disharmony. Laughing with another person creates a sense of intimacy and closeness as they share in the same joke. As well, laughter can also be rated on a scale beginning with a mild smile, through chuckling, to a hearty good natured "belly laugh" that comes from deep within the soul. While it may not be true in all cases, one can still suppose that the larger the laugh the greater the intimacy, the deeper the laugh the deeper the intimacy, and the more the couple laughs together the more intimate they are likely to be.

With these codes established, let me turn back to a portion of the interview with Phylis and Wilbur that has been coded.

- P I have a good one. (Permission giving -- Phylis laughs)  
 He's always going hunting eh. And he was a way up moose hunting. I think it was moose. (Remembering)  
 And uhh, (Remembering) when he's away I have the Yale lock on the door (Wilbur laughs -- Remembering -- Affirming)



and I always shut this lock and you couldn't open it from the outside. So he come home one night earlier than I was looking for him, so the door was locked and he couldn't get in. (Phylis laughs)  
And they just dropped him off. It was late.

- W It was a way on to midnight. (Elaborating) (Phylis laughs)  
The fall of the year.
- P They just dropped him off and he couldn't get in. (Phylis laughs harder).
- W I was just in shirt sleeves. Never took a coat or nothing. (Elaborating -- Wilbur laughs)
- P And of course I was sound asleep and I never heard him. He rapped and rapped. And each time he rapped I think he was getting a little bit madder (Phylis and Wilbur laugh harder). So finally he come to the bedroom window and I did hear him then. So I got up and I went out and I said to him "Is this the first time you rapped?" "NO." (Phylis laughs)  
So I knew better than to say anymore. (Phylis laughs much harder -- Gives Space) (Wilbur laughs hard)
- W Somebody went back to bed quick. (Elaborating -- Both laugh hard)
- This stage of the interview is hard to make out. Both talk and laugh at the same time. (Reminiscing -- both have deep laughs.)
- P That was one he was a few days getting over. But he finally he got over it. (Both laugh)

In this short section of interview one is struck by the number of times that remembering, elaborating and laughing is going on. This pattern of building the story up and supporting each other in the building up of the story is repeated later in the interview. In many ways this is a "scripted story" where both Phylis and Wilbur know each of the parts and both of them enjoy supporting the other in the story's re-telling. It is neither Phylis' story nor is it Wilbur's story. In the deepest sense of the word, it is "their story". It

speaks of caring and intimacy and love. It also speaks of the sharing of two lives lived together over 60 years of marriage.

Another story that was told to me was from Bob and Lynnette. Both Bob and Lynnette enjoy the outdoors and they relayed a number of stories to me about their experiences of camping and fishing in Northern Ontario. The following story is coded in a similar fashion.

- I I remember you saying that you had enough stories you could write a book. Is that true?
- B Yeah. Oh yeah. Lot's of experiences.
- L Lot's of experiences. Just like this. We had one up the bush one day. (L laughs, Permission giving). On Saturday nights, Bob, that was his time off.
- B I worked until five o'clock. (Permission giving)
- L I had the truck packed and ready to go out to the bush. I'd meet him out there and we'd take off. It was just after I had surgery. And I wasn't able to do very much. But I thought, "I can go camping". So we took off. We just wanted to get fishing so bad. We never even went into camp. We just took off fishing. (Remembering)
- B At that time we had to cross the river with a canoe. (Elaborating)
- L Yeah. With a canoe. (Remembering)
- B I had an old truck in there. (Elaborating)
- L Got in the truck and away we went. So we stopped beside the lake and went fishing. I imagine we got some trout. We always did. It was just dark. Do you think that truck would go? (Remembering)
- B We just left enough daylight to get back to camp. (Elaborating)
- L And we were eight miles from camp. (Elaborating) I couldn't walk. So there we were. There was a little knoll and we tried to push it up it. He couldn't push it alone and I couldn't after my surgery.

There as a hub on the side of the wheel. I don't know what you had it for? (Giving Space)

B To hook cables in to get it out of mudholes.

L Oh okay. Well anyway he got an old rope.

B It was a an old cable strap. (Elaborating)

L He pushed and I stood on that thing. (Laughter) Took it up that hill. Then gave it this wee push down and it started. So then we started back to camp.

B By this time it was getting on 10:30 (Elaborating)

L The bush road was rough.

B Just a trail.

L I often thought there was somebody looking out for us. (Laughter) Because I'd say "There's a corner" because I could look up through the trees and see the sky up above. "Turn here". (Laughter) We didn't even set our camp up. We stayed in a friend's tent that was set up there.

B He had his tent set up. So we stayed in there.

L Well Bob crawled into our friend's sleeping bag. I guess I had grabbed mine. Well his had been there for a while and I guess there were sand flies in it. Ohhh.

B I crawled into that sleeping bag dead tired. Just dropped out like a light. I woke up an hour later and swore the whole tent was on fire. I was just covered. (Laughter)

L So up we get and get a pail of water and get washed (Laughter). Oh, we had some wild times.

As with the story of Phylis and Wilbur, this story that Bob and Lynette retell is in many ways a scripted story. Each of them remembers the incident and they are able to tell it with humour and love. On an interesting note, Bob has a hearing problem and

often finds it difficult to hear people including Lynette. This proves very frustrating at times for both of them. Often in the course of a normal conversation Bob will have to interrupt Lynette by saying "pardon" or "Say that again" because he missed what she said the first time. In the course of this entire interview Bob never once appears to miss hearing the conversation but rather joined in appropriately and seemed to be following it very well. This serves to emphasize that these humorous stories truly have been "scripted" after many years of telling and retelling.

#### **6.4 THE DANCE OF INTIMACY**

In each of the other interviews I conducted, the same coding patterns appeared time and time again. At the beginning of the story telling couples gave permission to each other in subtle ways. A giggle, a laugh, a nod of the head were all indications that the story was acceptable to tell. Remembering and affirming were found throughout the interviews as couples joined in the telling of the story. The very common expression "uh ha" or smile affirmed that the partner who wasn't speaking was still following right along with the story telling. Elaboration and giving space were two elements that showed themselves in very interesting ways. Sometimes a partner would miss an element of the story and the other partner would want to jump in and elaborate "what really happened" from his or her point of view. In each of these cases the elaboration was affirming in nature rather than diminishing. The elaboration brought humour to the story rather than being diminishing in the sense that "no that's not how it happened". Finally as one would expect, in all of the stories there was a great deal of laughter. Even in the most embarrassing stories there was a real sense that the couples were "laughing with" each other than "laughing at" one another.

I have already alluded to the metaphor of a couple dancing together. As I listened to each of these couples and coded their interviews, it struck me that what I was watching in case after case was a well rehearsed dance. Each of them knew the steps. Each of them was comfortable with the other person. The intimacy with which these couples shared with me was almost palpable. It became apparent that all of these stories were illustrations of how couples shared four very significant elements of their lives. In the telling of these stories, couples share:

- a) the same memories
- b) the same words and phraseology
- c) the same laughter
- d) and the same meanings.

The stories they tell speak to them in the same way. For these four reasons, these humorous stories were very powerful expressions of their intimacy.

#### **6.4 CONCLUSION: "THE POWER OF HUMOUR"**

Humour is extremely powerful. A sincere laugh between husband and wife has the power to speak volumes about the intimacy which the couple share. Where couples that have been married for many years may no longer have the energy or the physical ability to step on to the dance floor and waltz together, those couples with a high degree of intimacy still dance together through the telling and re-telling of their marriage stories. This ability to remember, to elaborate, and to laugh together, speaks volumes about the couple's relationship and the process of moving from crisis to humour.

## 7.1 COMPARISON OF RESEARCH RESULTS

The thesis statement that has framed all of the previous research was that **"Humorous stories are important narratives of difference which function to build intimacy within the marital relationship"**. In chapter three I examined ten characteristics of humour which make it extremely difficult to analyse. I stated that "any methodology would have to take these into account". Because of these characteristic difficulties I decided to employ three separate research methodologies in order to create a greater sense of triangulation and therefore a clearer picture of the way couples use humour in their relationships .

In chapter four, through the use of a thematic approach, I discovered six themes that arose to varying degrees in the questionnaires and interviews. The most significant of these was the fact that 100% of the participants believed that humour was very important in their marriages. Of somewhat lesser importance numerically yet still of great importance to the couples who mentioned them, were the remaining five themes:

- 2) Gaining Distance,
- 3) Perspective,
- 4) Humility and Humour,
- 5) Small Things First, and
- 6) The Third Person.

One of the methodological principles that framed this research was the use of a qualitative over a quantitative methodology. Therefore not too much should be read into the numerical values associated with each of these themes. For instance, while the last theme, the importance of the third person, was only mentioned by 7 of the 20 couples, my guess is that this theme, especially as it relates to children, would be much more

frequent since children often bring humour to a stressful situation in which the parents may find themselves.

In chapter five I examined couple humour through the use of an events based methodology. Unfortunately an events based methodology is best used in a situation that is recent and therefore more easily remembered by the participant and analysed by the researcher. As circumstances would have it, only one of my participant couples chose to tell a story which was recent in nature. While this was a very small sample, analysis of this interview did lead to some interesting insights around process and the insight that "humour builds on humour". Examining the other interviews from this perspective of "humour building on humour" seems to suggest that it is an accurate conclusion that at least in part describes the process of humour within the marital relationship.

Finally in chapter six I used a conversation analysis methodology which pointed out the tremendous power which humour has to build intimacy within a marital relationship. In case after case the stories which these couples told to me and the way in which they were told spoke of great love and caring. To paraphrase a well used quote, it would seem that "Couples who laugh together, stick together".

Keeping in mind the concept of triangulation, the two questions that immediately arise are first of all, are the results from these three chapters consistent with each other, and secondly, do they support the thesis that humorous stories are important narratives of difference which function to create intimacy within the marital relationship? Obviously, I believe that the answer to both these questions is yes.

To begin with, there can be little doubt that these humorous stories were very important for the couple relationship. This was strongly affirmed by each of the three

methodologies. Repeatedly couples spoke about humour as an important theme in their marriage. Similarly as a process of creating and building up their stories of humour couples affirmed the importance of humour in their relationship. Finally, as they told their various stories it was apparent through a close examination of the conversation itself that humour held a great deal of power for these couples. Couples liked their humorous stories and they enjoyed telling them to me. They were important expressions of their relationship and their ability to move through difficult situations with love.

Secondly, it was also apparent from each of the methodological approaches that humorous stories functioned as narratives of difference in the way they were created and in how they were used by the couple in their relationship. When faced with a crisis situation, couples often felt overwhelmed by a multitude of feelings. Anger, hurt, fear and other emotions were common expressions of the feelings which arose when confronted with the crisis. Immediately they would begin to frame the event using the language of crisis, problem, and difficulty. However into the storying of this crisis event an alternate story would begin to arise. This is the story of difference which at first is rather small but then begins to grow in magnitude and importance. One of the partners laughs at a small element of the crisis. Something about the event causes him or her to recall a previous situation which then strikes him or her as being funny. They share this tiny bit of humour with their spouse and together they begin to laugh about the situation. Out of this small narrative of difference a new reframe for the entire situation is made possible. As time goes by the narrative of difference becomes written and rewritten in the minds of the couple until it becomes what is called a scripted story. Now it is no longer a story of difference but rather a humorous story that is remembered and shared often by the couple.



Finally, each of the three methodologies strongly affirmed the fact that humorous stories created intimacy between the couple. As a theme, laughter created a sense of perspective on the event which served to bring the couple closer together as they worked their way through the crisis together. As a process, the ability of one of the spouses to laugh served to create intimacy as together they built a humorous reframe of the event. With respect to the interviews themselves it was clear that these stories were very intimate expressions of the couples relationship as they laughed and giggled together in their telling.

Returning to the thesis statement that "**Humorous stories are important narratives of difference which function to build intimacy within the marital relationship**", I believe that the above analysis has proved the veracity of this statement. The question which we now need to examine is to what extent is this statement of importance to the practice of marriage and family therapy and pastoral care? Before turning to this question in chapter 8, I wish to discuss two other significant concepts that arose in the course of this research.

## **7.2 TWO KEY CONCEPTS: REMINISCING AND REFERENCING**

We have seen in the previous three chapters that stories of crisis that have been reframed into stories of humour hold a great deal of power for married couples. They speak to both husband and wife a word of triumph, a word of strength, a word of hope. These stories serve to create a bond of intimacy and love within the couple relationship. They give meaning to the "ups and downs" of life. But what happens once the crisis is over? What happens once the stories have been reframed humorously? What happens after the couple has learned to laugh at the crisis situation? During the course of my

research with couples I began to discover two interesting things which seemed to occur over and over again as the couples related their stories to me. As I listened and reflected on the interviews it became apparent that two important yet very different concepts related to the telling of these humorous stories were beginning to emerge. The first concept was what I came to refer to as "reminiscing". The second concept is what I have termed "referencing". Both of these concepts fit well with the narrative approach to couple counselling and research.

"Reminiscing" is the process whereby couples tell and retell the story of crisis humorously with only themselves or with other people. Different than remembering, which has to do primarily with the facts around the event, reminiscing has more to do with the feelings surrounding the event. Reminiscing is about sharing the feelings once again. Reminiscing is about writing and rewriting a script that both husband and wife are comfortable with because it honestly takes both individual's feelings into account. More importantly, it is a script that says "we are together in this", "we are still together because of this", "we have triumphed over this". The process of reminiscing continues to build intimacy long after the crisis or the humour around the crisis is over. In many ways then, reminiscing is about scripting the story into a final form in order to set it clearly within the couple's memory.

All of us have had the experience of listening to a couple tell a humorous story about their marriage as they sit around the kitchen table sharing a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. The story is told. Each person will have their own lines and will know exactly how to react as the story builds. Some stories will call for the husband to begin the telling with the wife quickly joining in. Other stories may be told primarily by one partner with the other adding emphasis and pretending to be angry or upset. Back and forth the script will go with each telling of the story it becoming larger and larger and

more perfected in the telling. With most reminiscing there is elaboration as various elements are highlighted and brought to the forefront. Eventually the story winds its way to the punchline. In all reminiscing the punchline remains essentially the same -- "we made it through this crisis". Most of the interviews that I had were reminiscing in nature.

Reminiscing therefore is expressive, it is expansive, and it is reflective. It is expressive because it not only shares the couple's feelings during the crisis and after the crisis once the humour has been released, but it also is expressive because it shares the couple's present day feelings of intimacy and strength. Secondly, reminiscing is expansive because the story takes on a life of its own. It grows with detail, phraseology and meaning. Finally, reminiscing is reflective because it brings the past into the present, but always in a way that reflects the present situation. Couples don't reminisce in the midst of an argument. Reminiscing occurs only when the present situation reflects a sense of intimacy and a desire to tell others "we made it through this crisis".

The second concept is what I refer to as "referencing". Referencing is very different than reminiscing. The term referencing comes from comedy writing and in particular the writing of situation comedies for television. A highly developed writing style, referencing is the technique whereby the past is brought into the present in a "shortform" fashion, in order to create a new situation of humour and intimacy. An example of referencing in television writing might be where a lead actor mentions a simple phrase such as "your red coat". The phrase may seem out of context for the average person watching the show. For those who are very familiar with the show, they know that the phrase refers back to an incident that occurred in one of the first episodes. With that knowledge the phrase "your red coat" is humorous. Without it the phrase is unintelligible. The purpose of referencing within this setting of television writing is threefold. First of all, referencing creates humour and therefore audience appeal. Seeing

the present situation in the light of a humorous situation from the past opens the doorway to create a new and deeper sense of humour. Secondly, referencing attempts to create a sense of intimacy with the audience. You laugh because you are "in the know". You understand the short form phrase. You understand the reference and the situation that lies behind it. Thirdly, and very important for television writers, comedians and producers, referencing creates a sense of loyalty with the audience. You don't want to miss an episode because you know that if you do you will miss out on the many references in a later episode. Humour, intimacy and loyalty are all created through the use of referenced material.

In the course of my interviews I began to discover couples using a process very similar to that of television referencing. They would refer back to a previous situation by using a short form phrase or word. As soon as one of them mentioned the referenced word, smiles would creep across their faces and they would begin to laugh. Obviously I was on the outside and did not understand the meaning behind these references. When asked, sometimes the couples were willing to explain the story. At other times they decided that it was a story that they would rather not share. The point is, these references seem to serve the same purposes that they do for television writing. They were expressions of humour, intimacy and loyalty within the couple relationship.

The significance of the referencing process lies in the way couples use it in the midst of a present situation. Oftimes when a situation of crisis looms, one or the other member of the couple will offer up the referenced phrase in order that together they can remember and laugh. Referencing then serves three functions. First it is a short form way of saying "we got through that situation back then -- we can get through this situation right now". It therefore provides a sense of strength, hope and loyalty in the midst of the crisis. Secondly, it is a stress reducer by providing an easy bit of humour in the midst of

another crisis. The hope of course, is that some of the past humour will rub off onto the present crisis, thereby reducing the stress surrounding the crisis. Finally, referencing provides a sense of intimacy and togetherness. "We got through that situation back then together – we can get through this situation together as well". Since the reference is known only by the other member of the couple, inherently there is a sense of togetherness when it is used.

### **7.3 A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON REFERENCING**

As I reflected on this process of referencing I came to examine the way my wife and I use referencing in our own marriage. One of the references that we use a great deal is "I'll check the life history". This reference is used not only by my wife and me, but rather it was first used by my in-laws. Many years ago when my in-laws were first married, my mother-in-law decided to keep something of a diary or journal of each day's activities. This "life history" became an important document that recorded the events leading up to the birth of their children and their subsequent growing up years. On my in-laws fortieth wedding anniversary my mother-in-law presented her four children with typed copies of this "life history" as a record of their life together. The humour behind the phrase "life history" lies in the many arguments that arise from time to time within the family over individual memories of the past. Someone will mention "We visited that museum in 1963." Someone else will reply, "I am sure it was 64". Before too long an argument arises over who is correct. Finally someone says the phrase "I'll check the life history". No one ever does check the exact date. The importance lies with the reference "life history" itself, for it brings humour, intimacy and loyalty to the conversation in such a way that the disagreement no longer seems very important.

In our own marriage, the phrase is used in the same way -- even though no life history was ever written. "You said you would pick me up at eight o'clock. Why were you late?" "I am sure I said that it would be after eight -- but I'll check the life history just to be sure". Again the phrase brings a sense of humour to the minor conflicts that arise in married life.

One of the interesting elements of this phrase is the way that the reference continues to be passed down through the generations. All of my wife's siblings immediately know to what the phrase "life history" refers. Similarly our children also use the phrase when they get into a disagreement with either parents or siblings. "I told you three times to clean your room." "You only told me twice and I'll check the life history to prove it." Again the reference brings humour to an otherwise conflictual crisis situation. It becomes especially humorous when the phrase is used by a grandchild to a grandparent. In such cases literally the words of the grandfather are found upon the lips of the children. As we will see in the next chapter, the lifting up and examination of these references in the counselling room may have significance for the practice of marriage and family therapy.

## **8.0 HUMOUR AND THE PRACTICE OF PASTORAL CARE**

We have seen that the humorous stories which couples tell are far more important than mere anecdotes about past events. These stories speak deeply about the couple's relationship and their love for each other. It would seem therefore, that this insight should have an effect on the practice of pastoral care by ministers serving within a church setting and on family therapists doing marriage and family therapy within a counselling setting. In the following chapter I will deal with five areas where these insights might have an effect on the practice of pastoral care and counselling and suggest future areas of research.

### **8.1 PASTORAL VISITATION**

One of the duties which is expected of most pastors is regular pastoral visitation. In some congregations the expectation on the part of the laity is that the minister should visit "at least once a year". Usually these visits are friendly in nature and serve to "catch the minister up" on the lives of his or her parishioners. Usually the minister listens patiently to the family he is visiting as they retell the events of the past year or so. Sometimes, especially if the minister is visiting an elderly person, the stories that are told will often go back many years. Unfortunately for many ministers, this type of regular pastoral visitation is seen to be extremely time consuming and of little value. Many ministers would much prefer to do the serious work of crisis counselling or visiting with families only when a particular need has arisen.

I believe that this is a mistake for often the information that couples tell during these simple visits speak volumes about their lives and their relationships. The reason

for this is that very often the stories which are told are humorous reminiscences that speak of the couple's triumph through periods of crisis in their lives. The minister who listens to these stories intently and supportively is affirming the couple's abilities and strength to laugh even in the midst of a crisis. As has been often affirmed in the pastoral care movement, these stories are holy stories because they speak about the ground of the person's very being. Since these stories are so important for the people who tell them, as ministers our pastoral duty involves affirming them and raising them up in their telling.

## **8.2 WEDDINGS AND ANNIVERSARIES**

Weddings and anniversary celebrations are extremely important rituals in the lives of most people. In this age of the mobile family, weddings and anniversary celebrations are one of the few times when extended families get together to support one another and share in a common memory. One of the elements which make up a major part of both of these celebrations is story telling. Oftimes the speeches which are given at these events are silly and immemorable. Sometimes however, they are extremely moving and significant. More often than not the thing which makes these speeches memorable is the ability of the story teller to speak deeply of the couple's love and triumph with a sense of humour. Again, the most memorable of these stories are reminiscences that are holy to the couple and their family.

In today's society where many of the traditions associated with weddings are being changed, it still remains a very common courtesy of the bride's family to invite the presiding minister to the reception following a wedding. Often the minister is seated with the parents of the couple as a sign of respect and honour. Similarly, ministers are often invited to 50th or 60th anniversary celebrations as a way of affirming the "holiness"



of the day. For many ministers these seemingly unimportant duties are perceived as being just one more chore to fill up an already too busy weekend schedule. And if one is honest, oftimes those perceptions are quite correct. But sometimes the celebrations and the stories associated with the event are pastorally significant. Sometimes a pastor can learn more about a family in the course of a few hours at a wedding reception than he or she could learn after many months of intensive pastoral counselling. The astute pastor who listens to the stories which are being told around him or her with an inquiring ear can place a particular pastoral situation into the context of the wider family or even arrive at an entirely new understanding of the family. Again the significance lies in affirming and lifting up the reminiscences as significant stories of difference.

### **8.3 AGING AND ALZHEIMERS**

One of the most difficult situations a couple will share over the course of their marriage is the physical or mental decline of one or both of its members. The decisions surrounding the aging process and how best to provide for future needs is an extremely challenging one for most couples. Perhaps the most difficult trial a couple may face is the decision to place one half of the couple in a nursing home due to an inability to provide care and safety in the couple's normal environment. For many couples, especially where one of the members suffers from Alzheimers, this decision literally tears the couple apart.

For couples facing the many problems of aging, the ability to reminisce and tell humorous stories about the past brings great comfort. These memories bring humour to what many would consider to be a humourless situation. They bring hope to what many

would consider was a hopeless situation. They bring strength to a situation that is tiring, frustrating and oftentimes seemingly endless.

Again, one of the duties which many pastors spend a great deal of time involved in is the visitation of those members who are elderly or in nursing homes. During these visits it is common for the couple to reminisce about the past events of their lives with a real sense of humour. For the minister to listen to these stories affirms once again their holy nature.

With respect to persons suffering from Alzheimers, it would be interesting to know whether or not the use of humour helps such persons to better remember past events. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with such questions, my guess would be that because these humorous stories are very powerful, meaningful and scripted, they may hold some of the last memories which the Alzheimer patient retains. Affirming and remembering these stories would bring great comfort to both partners in such a situation.

#### **8.4 FUNERALS**

The final event over the course of a marriage is the funeral of one member of the couple. The marriage vows which first brought these individuals together as a couple many years earlier also acknowledge the final act which will bring an end to the couple's union at the time of death. The words "Until death do us part" or some variation still remain in most traditional and non-traditional wedding vows. While there are many elements to the funeral service and the pastoral needs which it attempts to meet,

undoubtedly one of its goals is to affirm the strength and the love which the couple shared over their years together.

One of the ways to affirm this love is through the telling of humorous stories as part of either the funeral eulogy or sermon. Obviously these stories need to be chosen carefully and used with good taste. However many spouses and families have told me after a funeral service that the opportunity to laugh as they remembered a favourite story about the couple and their love brought great comfort and relief to all involved. "Uncle Charlie always loved to tell that story and he would be glad that you told it at his funeral" is a common phrase often heard after funerals.

Ministers therefore should feel comfortable listening to the humorous reminiscences they are told at the funeral home about a loved one who has died. Similarly, ministers should listen carefully when they hear a phrase that appears to be a reference for often these inside stories will be very meaningful to the family and will help in explaining the character and relationships of the deceased. At the same time, the minister should be aware that he or she may be breaking a confidence if he repeats such a story as part of the funeral service. Again, these humorous stories are very intimate and may not be meant to be shared in such a public place as a funeral. One of the ways to solve this pastoral dilemma is to ask the family to tell you any humorous stories that might speak of the deceased and their life and love, and then ask permission to repeat these stories as part of the funeral service.

## **8.5 MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY**

One of the techniques which is widely used by marriage and family therapists to help couples discover the themes and threads of their marriage is genograms. Genograms are simple ways to map out the patterns that fall down through the generations within a family. Usually when we create a genogram with a couple we ask for stories that describe the particular relationships within the family. Often the stories we are told are stories of crisis -- deaths, divorces, cut-offs and tragedies. Sometimes, the astute therapist will also ask about stories of strength -- times when the family pulled together to overcome a crisis. Rarely however do we as family therapists ask for stories of humour when we do a genogram. Rarely do we ask for the funny stories that were passed down from generation to generation as reminiscences. Rarely do we ask for the references that parents or grandparents regularly drew upon. I would suggest that we need to draw these humorous stories out of our clients. We need to listen to them and value them for they may hold the key to helping couples move through their present crisis.

Secondly, often when we meet with couples, they will give a reference to a past event and the couple will smile or chuckle as they move on to the next question. I believe that as marriage and family therapists we need to be more attune to these references. They too can be stories of difference that could serve to unlock and reframe the present situation of crisis.

Finally, many therapists have had the experience where a couple is telling a story of misery and hopelessness that immediately strikes the therapist as being very funny. Usually we stifle our laughter feeling that it would be highly inappropriate to laugh at this couple's crisis. Often such laughter on the part of the therapist would appear

inappropriate and uncaring. However sometimes, if the situation is truly funny and there is a high degree of trust between therapist and client, I believe that it does become appropriate to point out to the couple the humour in their story. Doing so may give them the permission they need to laugh, even in the midst of their tears. Even if the couple fails to see the humour in their situation once the therapist has noted it, the fact that the therapist is willing to share her perceptions in a caring way should help in the modelling which is occurring within the session.

In this chapter I have tried to examine the insight that humorous stories are important narratives of difference which function to create intimacy within the marital relationship as it relates to the practice of pastoral care and marriage and family therapy. Undoubtedly there are other applications of this insight ranging from its use in premarriage counselling right through to the final stages of divorce counselling. The significance for pastors and marriage counsellors alike lies in our ability to listen to these humorous stories with astute ears.

## **8.1 THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION**

Words hold great power. In Genesis all God needs to do in order to create is "say the word", and it is done. In the Gospels Jesus' words have the power to heal, the power to draw great crowds, the power to raise a friend from the dead. In the New Testament James uses the metaphor of the ship when he writes: "Take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body." (James 3:4-5a). Truly words do have great power.

Coming from a Reformed Protestant tradition, I remember the great emphasis which my church placed on words and the ability to study and understand the Word of God. I recall as a child going to Sunday School and being expected to have memorized great passages of Scripture over the past week. Each child was given a small booklet that they were to keep by their bedside. The booklet contained important verses to memorize each week. At the beginning of the year you began with page one and by the end of the year you were expected to know all 52 passages. I recall that my booklet had very few gold stars (meaning "perfect") beside each week's passage, and far more red stars indicating "needs improvement".

Not only being able to memorize the Word was of importance, but also to be able to speak it clearly and succinctly was an important part of my reformed upbringing. I recall an important event in my life was the Sunday that I was asked at the age of ten to deliver the message as part of a Sunday School pageant. I remember being too short to be able to see over the pulpit so a wooden crate had to be brought in for me to stand upon. Finally after much preparation Sunday arrived and I remember being told afterward that everyone within the congregation strained to hear what they fully expected

was to be a small boy with a small voice deliver a very small message. They didn't need to. My voice was strong and even those at the back of the church were surprised by the volume and clarity with which I spoke. The message was well prepared, and for a child, relevant and insightful. I recall afterward the minister coming forward after the service and indicating that he was sure that someday I would become a preacher. Again, words hold great power.

While words hold great power, not all words are equal. Some words have more power than others. It seems to me that three types of words hold more than their fair share of power. The first of these would be intimate words -- words that are spoken between two people who know each other very well. Nowhere do these intimate words hold greater power than when they are spoken between a husband and a wife. As pastoral counsellors and marriage and family therapists we often see the power words have with the couples we meet in our offices. In many cases words have the power to bring couples together. They also have the power to drive couples apart. All marriage counsellors have seen the terrible damage a few words spoken in anger can do to a marriage relationship. "I don't love him." "I wish I had never married her." "I'm having an affair." Words such as these can cause incredible pain to a marriage relationship. But intimate words, words that speak deeply of a caring and forgiving heart, also have the power to heal such fractures in a relationship. They have the power to bring a new sense of strength to the relationship. They have the power to help a couple through a difficult issue with love and affection. It seems to me that "intimate words" are "holy words" because they speak from the depth of one's soul. They are "God inspired". They have a spiritual power that far exceeds that of words used in normal conversation.

The second type of words which hold great power are stories. Stories are meaning-making words. Stories are a way of making sense out of the past. They put the

past into a form where there is structure. Without a sense of structure and completeness there can be no story. Recently my nine year old son has been writing many stories for his grade four teacher. Often he gets frustrated because his stories become rambling and hard to grasp. He understands well the difference between a noun, a verb and an adjective. His sentences have the required structure to be grammatically correct. Unfortunately his stories lack the necessary sense of plot, of character development and conclusion. He understands well the structure of a sentence yet he has still to grasp the structure of story.

Because stories have structure, the simple act of telling a story affirms that life has structure as well. Life has movement -- a beginning, a middle and an end. Life is linear. Life is historically bound by time and space. Stories therefore have great power because they are meaning-making. They help to make sense out of our lives. They help to give us a sense of history and our place in history. They give our lives a sense of structure and purpose. Telling a child a story, even if the ending isn't "And they all lived happily ever after", still gives a sense of structure, meaning and direction to the child's life. Theologians have long grappled with the structure of the Scriptures. The fact that the Bible begins with the book of Genesis and ends with a book such as Revelation gives parameters to the structures of our faith. There is a beginning and an end to life. Stories have a great deal of power because they too uphold the structure of life.

Finally, the third type of words that hold great power are humorous words. Where stories give a sense of structure and meaning to life, humorous words hold the power to tear down structures and give new and surprising meanings to life. When we laugh we do so because we have seen things in a new and unexpected way. The structures that we have come to expect are suddenly seen from a new perspective and the tension between the old and the new creates laughter. Humorous words therefore hold



power because of their ability to confront the structures by which we give our lives meaning with a sense of their inherent limitations. No structure is perfect. No meaning-making story can ever perfectly encapsulate all of life. Humour allows us to be surprised with the power of new and unexpected words. Humorous words are "God inspired" if they serve the purpose of showing us the inadequacies of all human points of view. They open our perceptions to the new, the creative and the "God-inspired" because they point to a reality which lies beyond ourselves.

If words then hold great power, and these three types of words -- intimate words, story-telling words and humorous words -- hold even greater amounts of power, then one would expect that when these three types of words are combined the amount of power which is created should be enormous. I believe that it is. I believe that I have shown that the humorous stories which couples share with one another and with others are extremely powerful indicators of a relationship. Furthermore, from a theological point of view, couples that have the ability to share humorous stories in a deep and intimate fashion show evidence of a relationship that is holy and special. Indeed, I believe that one could even say that such marriages are "God-inspired" because of the depth of sharing and the willingness to triumph over crisis which permeates the relationship between husband and wife.

Along with being a marriage and family therapist, I also serve a congregation as an ordained minister. One of my pastoral duties is to meet with couples who wish to be married to discuss the details of the wedding service and to provide a few brief sessions of pre-marriage counselling. As part of those meetings I help couples to work together in the creation of their marriage vows. While many couples still wish to use the traditional vows as part of their wedding ceremonies, increasingly couples are choosing to include in

their vows a statement concerning the importance of laughter. One such marriage vow states:

"In the presence of God and before these witnesses,  
I take \_\_\_ to be my husband/wife,  
To laugh with you in joy,  
to grieve with you in sorrow,  
to grow with you in love,  
and to be faithful to you alone,  
as long as we both shall live."

Obviously one hopes that each of these newlywed couples learn to laugh together in the midst of joy. But perhaps more important is their ability to laugh as a couple in the midst of crisis.

As we have seen throughout the course of this dissertation, when couples are able to reframe their stories of crisis into stories of humour a new sense of intimacy and caring is created within the relationship. Where once there was emotional flooding, now there is love as couples share together the pleasure of a humorous story. Out of these intimate stories meaning is created as couples build a precious library of memories and reminiscences. It is to this library that couples return time and time again as the years go by. For couples know that these stories hold great power even long after the event. Truly these stories of humour are "holy" in the best sense of the word.

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**10.1 ADDENDUM 1: Request to Interview Letter**

**REV. G. PAUL STEMPEL**  
**Tara, Ontario NOH 2N0**  
**(519) 934-2961**

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September 1, 1996

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you very much for considering taking part in this research project. I am a doctoral candidate at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary/Wilfred Laurier University working towards a Doctor of Ministry Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy. My faculty advisor is Dr. Peter VanKatwyk (519-884-1970).

It has often been said that "humour is the best medicine". The purpose of my research project therefore, is to examine how couples use humour as a form of communication within their marriage. In particular, I am interested in the process whereby couples come to laugh at incidents in their marriage which at one time they might have considered to be "a crisis event", but which now they are able to talk about with laughter, humour and closeness. It seems to me, that if I am able to come to some understanding of how this process operates, it should be possible to transfer some of these insights to couples in marriage counselling in order to help them to move forward from crisis to humour.

If you decide to take part in this research project, I am asking that you and your spouse take a few moments to fill out the attached questionnaire and return it to me. In the questionnaire you will be asked to remember and write briefly about a "crisis event" which you are now able to laugh at together. You are then asked to write your reflections on how it was that you were able to move from crisis to humour.

Secondly, I would like the opportunity to meet with you and your spouse for approximately 1/2 hour to talk about the questionnaire and discuss any further insights you might have around the use of humour in marriage. To facilitate the keeping of notes, I would appreciate it if I could tape this meeting. After the meeting, portions of the tape will be transcribed. The tape will then be erased. After completion of the research project all questionnaires and transcriptions will be destroyed.

It is important that your confidentiality, privacy and anonymity be maintained throughout the course of the research and in the writing of the final paper. All notes, tapes and questionnaires will be stored safely. In the writing of the research paper, names and identifying details will be changed in order to maintain anonymity. Before the paper is released a draft copy with the pertinent information from the questionnaire and interview will be sent to you for your final approval. If you would like a complete copy of the research paper at the end of the study this can also be provided.

If at any time you wish to be removed from the study or have your information deleted from the study, prior to the final approval, please contact me at the number above. Agreement to be a part of the study is entirely on a voluntary basis and you maintain the right to withdraw or omit questions at any time.

Thank you very much for your time in considering this research project. If you are still interested in being part of this study, please take some time with your spouse to carefully reflect on and fill out the accompanying questionnaire. Please also fill out and sign the attached consent form. An envelope is provided for you to return both these forms to me. I will contact you within a week in order to set up a time for an interview.

Once again, thank you very much for your time and consideration of this project.

Sincerely,

Rev. G. Paul Stemp.

**10.2 ADDENDUM 2 : INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM**

**WATERLOO LUTHERAN SEMINARY  
WATERLOO, ONTARIO  
N2L 3C5  
(519) 884-1970**

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**INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM****RESEARCHER: Rev. G. Paul Stemp (519-943-2961)****PROGRAM: Doctor of Ministry (Marriage and Family Therapy)****FACULTY ADVISOR: Dr. Peter VanKatwyk (519-884-1970)****RESEARCH PROJECT: Humour as a Narrative of Difference in Marital Relationships**

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You are being asked to participate in a research project examining how couples use humour as a form of communication within their marriage. In particular, the researcher is examining the process whereby "crisis events" become "humorous events" within the marriage relationship.

The purpose of this project is to better understand this process in the hope that insights can then be used within the marriage counselling setting to "help couples in crisis to laugh again".

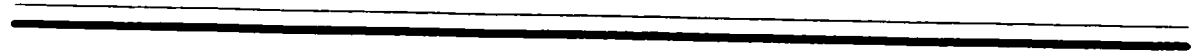
The research will be conducted by Rev. Paul Stemp under the supervision of Dr. Peter VanKatwyk. This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary.

All material in the questionnaire and in the interview is confidential except for those areas mandated by law (ie. child abuse). The interview will be audio taped and then transcribed. Names and other identifying features (including those of third parties or organizations) will be changed to protect confidentiality. The audiotape/transcription/questionnaire will be erased/destroyed once the final research paper is written.

Any person being interviewed has the right to refuse to answer any questions and can stop the interview at any point.

(page 1 of 2)

If you have any questions you may contact the researcher or the advisor at the above numbers.



I, \_\_\_\_\_ (please print)

and \_\_\_\_\_

give permission to Paul Stemp to use the questionnaire and audiotape in the above research project: "Humour as a Narrative of Difference in Marital Therapy". This permission is based on the above qualifying statements. I reserve the right to edit any pertinent information from the final paper which I feel might compromise confidentiality.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

(page 2 of 2)

**10.3 ADDENDUM 3: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE****RESEARCH PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE  
HUMOUR AS A NARRATIVE OF DIFFERENCE  
IN MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS****G. PAUL STEMP (519-934-2961)**

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**Take some time with your spouse to think back over your marriage in order to remember an event which both of you would consider a "crisis event" that you are now able to laugh at. The event may have been large ("the time the barn burned down") or it may be small ("the time the roast was burnt"). The important thing is that it felt like a crisis at the time, but you now are able to laugh about it.**

**QUESTION ONE**

**In the space below, briefly write what the "crisis event" was about? What happened? Why was it a crisis? What did you say to each other? How did both of you feel at the time?**

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**QUESTION THREE**

**How important do you think laughter is in marriage? Why?**

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**Thank you very much for taking the time to answer this questionnaire. If you have other comments, please feel free to write them on the reverse.**



**10.4 ADDENDUM 4: FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS****RESEARCH PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS****HUMOUR AS A NARRATIVE OF DIFFERENCE  
IN MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS****G. PAUL STEMPE (519-934-2961)**

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**THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW IS TO DRAW OUT THE ANSWERS THE COUPLES GAVE IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE. THEREFORE THE QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED ARE AS FOLLOWS:**

**QUESTION ONE**

**I have read through what you wrote about the "crisis event". I wonder if you could tell me again what happened – and feel free to elaborate. When did it happen? How did you feel at the time? Do you remember what you said to each other at the time?**

**QUESTION TWO**

**How long did this event feel like a crisis? Were you able to talk about the crisis? When did you begin to laugh about it? Who was the first to laugh? Did it take a long time before both of you were able to laugh together about it. How often do you remember this event? Is it one of those "anniversary stories"?**

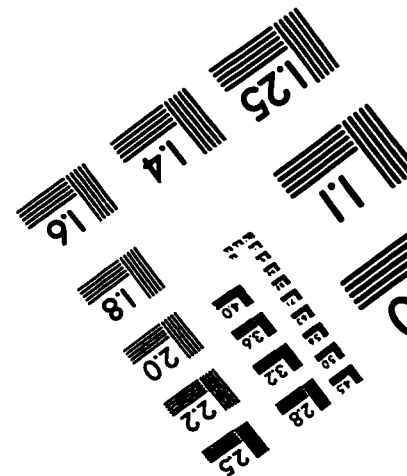
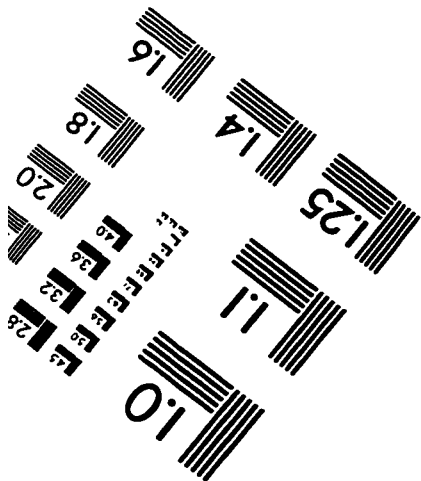
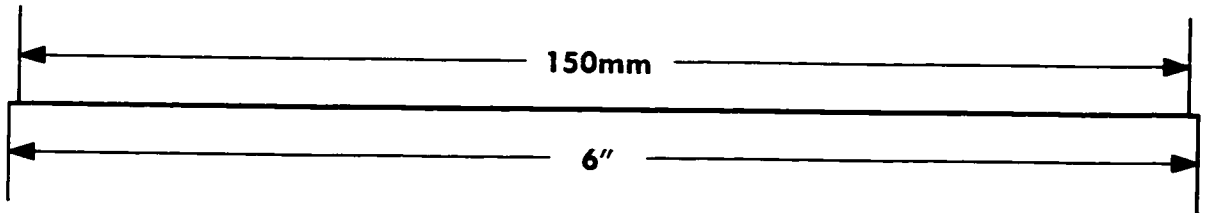
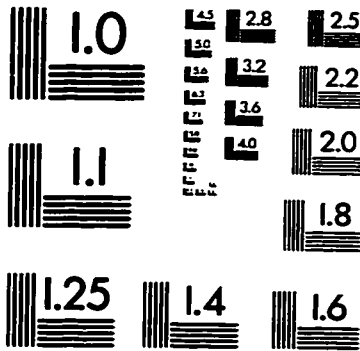
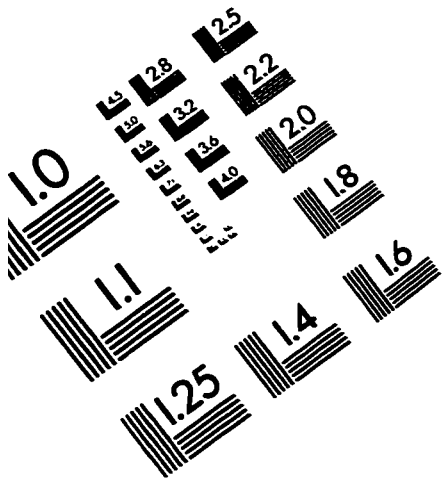
**QUESTION THREE**

**How is it that you were able to laugh about the crisis? What changed in order to make that possible?**

**QUESTION FOUR**

**You thought laughter was very important in a marriage. What advice would you give younger couples to get them "laughing again"?**

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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