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Finding Light in the Darkness: The Role of Humor

By

Edward F. Ansello, PhD

“There are only two or three human stories, “ said writer Willa Cather, “and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.” Confronting darkness of varying hues is one of these human stories. How one responds to it creates the repeated variations of this human tale.

We are in a period of darkness around most of the world. The novel coronavirus COVID-19 is striking fear in hearts. It is the latest darkness so many of us are confronting. We are told to maintain “social distancing,” to hunker down, and to stock up on supplies.

I’m of an age where all this reminds me a bit of the bomb shelter mentality of the early Cold War. Then, the dark threat was nuclear warfare with the Soviets. Today, it’s a deadly virus. During the Cold War some answered the threat with withdrawal; some transferred their fear, transforming it into something alien but palpable, hence the splurge of science fiction movies with creatures who personalized the unseen threat of nuclear destruction or the spread of communism. Others responded with humor. One of the most popular movies of the time was *Dr. Strangelove*, which treated America’s enemies with absurd, off the wall, humanizing levity. The film’s full title is *Dr. Strangelove, Or How I learned to Love the Bomb and Stop Worrying*.

Cultivating a sense of humor has been, and can be, a lifeline in times of darkness. It doesn’t dismiss the darkness but helps us to respond.

Our contemporary coronavirus crisis is only one of many darkneses that we will face in our lives. Some of us have dealt or are dealing with cancer, debilitating illnesses, loneliness, substance abuse, death of loved ones, chronic caregiving or other serious challenges. Again, it’s one of the enduring human stories. Being able to escape and be distracted is supportive.

There are many theories of the value and meaning of humor and laughter. Plato and Aristotle saw them negatively, equating them with scorn of others. Similarly, the Puritans discouraged them, favoring firm, sober living. More recently, philosophers and non-philosophers alike have come to see humor and laughter as a type of safety valve releasing built up tension, producing relief.

We’ve previously discussed some of the benefits of “Laughter and Well-Being as We Age” in our Summer 2017 editorial where we noted that laughter, even simulated or forced laughter, what some researchers call self-initiated laughter, produced measurable, healthful results, such as reduced anxiety and increased positive affect or mood.

Other research on the benefits of humor and laughter extends the findings, showing benefits in a surprisingly wide array of contexts. For instance, Eshg and team (2017) showed the effect of humor therapy in lowering blood pressure of patients undergoing hemodialysis; Feingold and

colleagues (2011) found that patients with COPD with a sense of humor reported less depression; and Ryu and co-authors (2015) described how laughter therapy increased immune responses in postpartum women. Still other studies have shared findings indicating that humor and laughing can serve as a muscle relaxant, help boost one's immune system, dilate the inner lining of blood vessels, and expand the lung's alveoli, allowing greater oxygen exchange.

Mark Twain called humor "mankind's greatest blessing." It can be a helpful aid in times of darkness, though admittedly difficult to find in adverse times. In crisis, one can be riveted to the crisis itself. Perhaps we should force ourselves to think outside the particular crisis box we find ourselves within.

So, if we are, or someone we care for is, dealing with darkness, COVID-19 or otherwise, consider these lifelines.

If you are of Social Security age, you will likely recognize and remember the following suggested outlets for experiencing humor and laughter. If you are a mid-life caregiver, there may be some sources new to you that you can enjoy, as well as some others more recent with which you are already familiar. The following are usually available on the Internet and some can be borrowed as CDs or e-materials from the local library.

For older adults and for those younger who are caring for them, there are many resources that bring alive the humor of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

Old Time Radio (www.otr.net). As it says on its website: "The OTR Network Library is a free resource for Old Time Radio (OTR) fans. We have over 12,000 OTR shows available for instant listening." There's also Old Radio World (<https://www.olderadioworld.com/>). Both give free access to thousands of hours of radio broadcasts, including hundreds with real audiences laughing and enjoying inevitably clean humor. Programs include episodes from Abbott and Costello, The Jack Benny Show, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, The Bing Crosby Show, The Bob Hope Show, George Burns and Gracie Allen, and much more.

Steve Allen, author, comic, music composer, and host of his own television show was a communications genius in his era and appeared in various media from the 1950s to the 1990s. Search online for his "Man in the Street" interviews, which feature a recurring cast of comedians Louis Nye, Don Knotts, and Tom Poston; you'll find a vinyl record released in 1959 and some episodes on YouTube. All are G-rated for family viewing.

The Marx Brothers have been called pioneers, for they launched the prototype for comic film-making, with extraordinarily clever repartee, inventive plays on words, and fast paced visual antics. Here's Groucho Marx: "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I will never know." And another: "Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."

For outrageous conniving, look up Sgt. Bilko, played by Phil Silvers; it's also listed as The Phil Silvers Show. Over the 142 half-hour episodes, and multiple Emmy awards for best comedy series, he plays the scheming conman with a memorable cast in his Army motor pool, including

Pvt. Doberman, Cpl. Barbella, and Cpl. Henshaw, all under the command of the clueless Col. Hall.

For Baby Boomers who are in darkness or are caring for others in such situations, we can add the British group Monty Python, who had years of somewhat Marx Brothers-like inventive humor in their television series and several movies. They may not be everyone's cup of tea but are certainly a prime example of absurd comedy. Their episodes, movies, and "best quotes" are readily available on the Internet.

Then, of course, there's Mel Brooks, one of Hollywood's most creative comedic geniuses. Even segments of *Young Frankenstein*, *The Producers*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Spaceballs*, or *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* can lighten the darkness.

We should also mention stand-up comedians who put real thought into their humor, such as Bob Newhart, whose imagined two-way telephone conversations with others displayed hilarious predicaments and depth of irony; look up the King Kong story or Sir Walter Raleigh's call to Queen Elizabeth. Also, Jerry Seinfeld who made a successful television series out of "stories about nothing." And the cerebral Stephen Wright who observed, "Sponges grow in the ocean. That just kills me. I wonder how much deeper the ocean would be if that didn't happen."

The human story of confrontations with darkness can be lightened with the aid of humor and laughter. We are not trivializing real crises in our lives but encourage looking for support available around us. And, after all, the Latin root of the word "levity" is *levitas*, meaning lightness.