

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

26. The Queen of Mirth

24 August 2014

It has been clear to me since I was a child that humor takes the sting out of a lot of life's wounds. The more absurd or precarious a situation, the more that humor can help. Laughter aids in many physiological responses. But the real value in humor lies in its ability to help us take ourselves and others less seriously and thereby forget, at least temporarily, our suffering. Seeing the funny side of all situations is a gift, and it has never served me better than during my stay in the hospital. Just like many bad things in a hospital, humor is infectious, but, unlike the microbes, humor serves the purpose of healing. It is medicine of a very powerful sort.

Many of my physical therapy sessions devolved into hysterical laughter for the whole gym room, especially when I would misunderstand, whether purposefully or not, the therapist's directions. When asked to lift my left leg behind me at the knee, I lifted my right leg. The therapist chuckled. "No," she said, gently. Realizing my mistake, I said, "Oh, you mean the other left." As old and lame as that remark may have been, the whole therapy gym erupted with laughter. The patients and therapists worked very hard in that room and a little light-heartedness benefitted everyone. I tried to leaven the sessions with humor whenever I could, and it never seemed misplaced or inappropriate.

One fellow who, after a spinal operation, was told he would likely never walk again, pushed himself with more determination than anyone I had ever met. John was already scooting along with a walker, but he wanted to be ready for any situation he might face at home in the real world, such as falling outside. His therapist took him through the steps required to right his walker and pull himself erect on it. It was a tough session for both John and his therapist, Catherine, and, indeed, for anyone in the room who paid attention and witnessed this feat. There was a good deal of tension in the air.

I remarked to the therapist that for his next session John would like to be taken through the necessary steps for tornado preparedness in the event he is blown across the street and his walker goes up in the whirlwind. Catherine cautioned, "Don't give him any ideas." The entire gym, about fifteen people, again saw the humor in this exchange and laughed loudly for some time.

On another occasion when this same patient had struggled for nearly the entire hour-long session to pull himself up a short wooden staircase almost entirely by the strength of his upper body, his T-shirt became thoroughly drenched with sweat. One of the young African PCAs (personal care assistant) said, in her characteristic sing-song jive voice, "What? Is it rainin' in here?" I and many others laughed until our sides ached.

When I reached the therapy floor after being in Intensive Care for five days, many of the activities and protocols were arranged on a fairly rigid schedule. I had roommates who were weighed daily, but I was weighed only weekly, and always around six in the morning on Monday. I sat at the edge of my bed waiting for the customary PCA, Daniel, to enter. Once I was more mobile, I offered to come out to the hallway so Daniel would not have to lug the cumbersome scale into the equipment-crowded room. He said it would help and I haltingly stepped outside my room. As I got myself up to the weighing platform in the busy hallway, he grabbed hold of my hospital gown and pulled it shut. “Your whole ass is hanging out,” he said. “If I don’t see it, I don’t worry about it,” I remarked. The corridor echoed with Daniel’s deep laughter. I also sincerely believe it is good for anyone of a certain age not to be too concerned with appearances. A hospital is certainly no place for vanity, either.

Another roommate was having his stomach feeding tube flushed and, as the nurse, Joel (pronounced Jo-EL), was bending over him, the patient’s wife recited the nursery rhyme beginning, “I see London, I see France,” referring to the couple of inches of the nurse’s underwear that were revealed above his scrubs. That merited a few chuckles from all of us in the room, including Joel. Then I added, “There are NO secrets in the hospital, even for staff,” which engendered still more laughter.

There is in my mind absolutely no question about the therapeutic value of laughter. It defuses awkward situations, puts everyone at his ease, and enables us to thumb our noses at disaster and difficulty. It doesn’t hurt that it gives our lungs a little burst of oxygen, making our heads, and what they carry, a little lighter.

I am reminded of a Stephen Foster tune I learned in first grade called “Some Folks.”¹

“Some folks fret and scold,
Some folks do, some folks do;
They’ll soon be dead and cold,
But that’s not me nor you.
Chorus:

Some folks get gray hairs,
Some folks do, Some folks do;
Brooding o’er their cares,
But that’s not me nor you.
Chorus:

Chorus:
Long live the merry, merry heart
That laughs by night and day,

¹These and additional stanzas published by Firth, Pond & Co., N.Y., 1855.

*Like the Queen of Mirth,
No matter what some folks say.*

I think it remarkable that, despite my stroke, I can still recall the words and the tune after so long a time, nearly sixty years. It is an idea and a way of living I was fortunate to have learned early on. It has abided with me throughout my life and served me very well. It is one healing benefit I intend to pass along as long as I may. It can be transferred as easily as sharing a good joke or a witty observation, and doing so costs nothing. Laughter is one of the few things that is beneficially infectious.