

# *If We Can Laugh at It, We can Live with It*

Brad Wilcox

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Some time ago I was a passenger on an airplane that was coming in for a landing. As we neared the airport, the other passengers and I started to realize that we were traveling much faster than normal. I could feel the anxiety level in the plane start to rise. Suddenly, the airplane hit the ground with great force and then began taxiing down the runway. Shaken, we passengers sat in stunned silence until the captain's voice came over the sound system: "Take that, you bad, bad runway!" We all erupted in laughter. With a humorous viewpoint and a shared laugh, an uncomfortable situation had become bearable.

Humor helps. Humor heals. In fact, many medical studies have linked laughter with better physical and mental health. Such studies confirm the scripture that states, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (Prov. 17:22). Humor allows us to view our lives in a more positive light, deal with personal conflicts and intolerance, and cope with trials and frustrations that might otherwise seem overwhelming. As we are told in Ecclesiastes, there is "a time to laugh" (Eccl. 3:4).

## **Humor Can Improve Our Perspective**

We can't always choose what we look at, but we can choose what we see. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, "Jesus found special joy and happiness in children and said all of us should be more like them—guileless and pure, quick to laugh." We are all going to find ourselves in situations we have not anticipated and are not sure how to handle. If we laugh, we may find that at least some of the handling takes care of itself.

After the Austin family had finished shopping for groceries, young Eli Austin was playing with the grocery cart and tipped the cart too far back: Eli, cart, and groceries crashed in an ungraceful heap in the middle of the parking lot. Did a lecture, sarcasm, or grounding follow? Eli said, "Most dads would get mad, but my dad just stood there for a minute and then started laughing

his head off.” Brother Austin knew the value of looking on the bright side, for anger doesn't repair smashed eggs and tomatoes.

### **Humor Can Strengthen Relationships**

Kellene Ricks Adams recalls a potentially tense growing-up moment when she and her brother were fighting. Overhearing their angry, raised voices, their father rushed into the room. “Where are the cats? Where are the cats?” he asked frantically. Surprised, the two combatants stared at their father. “Dad, there aren't any cats here!” Shaking his head, Brother Ricks turned and left the room, muttering, “I could have sworn I heard two cats fighting up there.” Sharing a laugh, the siblings recognized their foolishness.

President Spencer W. Kimball used humor as he related with others throughout his life. For instance, as a missionary he once glimpsed a new piano through an open door. He asked the family if they would like to hear their Kimball piano played by a Kimball and was immediately invited in.<sup>3</sup>

### **Humor Can Help Us Cope**

We all encounter things that seem ugly, inconvenient, even unbearable. We change what we can, but sometimes we simply have to accept and cope with unpleasant circumstances. Humor can be a helpful coping tool.

After Art E. Berg was thrown from an automobile during a rollover just five weeks before his wedding date, his neck was broken, and at the age of 21 he was left a quadriplegic. Although his body no longer serves him as it once did and he is confined to a wheelchair, Brother Berg is far from being helpless and depressed. He has learned to depend upon the Spirit of the Lord and draw upon his own incredible will to overcome. He now lives a life full of service, activity, and accomplishment. What got him through? Among other things, Brother Berg says peace came from learning to laugh again, particularly with his family. He writes, “I am not sure I would have survived the emotional trauma of my injuries and the complications of my new life if it hadn't been for the wit, chuckles, laughs, and good-natured humor of my wife and family.”<sup>4</sup>

Abraham Lincoln struggled with bouts of depression and used humor as therapy. His ability to laugh at himself was revealed during a political debate in which his opponent called him “two-faced.” Lincoln replied, “I leave it to my audience. If I had another face, do you think I'd wear this one?”<sup>5</sup>

President Hugh B. Brown (1883–1975), a counselor in the First Presidency, recognized the value of facing challenges with humor: “A wholesome sense of humor will be a safety valve that will enable you to apply the lighter touch to heavy problems and to learn some lessons in problem solving that ‘sweat and tears’ often fail to dissolve.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Avoid Hurtful Humor**

There are times, however, when not everyone is laughing. We must be careful to distinguish between genuine humor, which everyone can enjoy, and hurtful humor, which is at someone else's expense. For example, a speaker once quipped, “This stake has great youth—when they are asleep.”

A father teased, “My son's going to be a dynamic missionary—if he can get himself out of bed in the morning.”

A leader remarked, purposely within earshot of a group of young women, “There sure are some beautiful girls at this dance.” Another leader responded, “Where? Where?”

Even hasty “just kidding” doesn’t excuse put-downs and other rude forms of hurtful humor. People may play along with the joke, and even manage a little artificial laugh for the sake of the audience, but the resulting wounds go deep. Many remember hurtful comments for years, and relationships may be damaged or destroyed.

One Sunday morning a young man came to priesthood meeting dressed in his first suit, a hand-me-down passed to him from his older brothers. Although the suit was a little large for him, the high-schooler felt well dressed as he entered the foyer where other young people were gathering. A young man who had been in the presidencies of the deacons, teachers, and priests quorums greeted the new arrival in a sarcastic voice loud enough for all to hear: “Say, that’s a fine suit you have on, but didn’t they have one that fit you?” Everyone laughed.

Stunned by the experience, the boy turned and quickly left the chapel. Hurt, angry, and embarrassed, he vowed he would never go back. Happily, despite his vow, this teenager did return to church. In fact, he now serves as Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, but President Boyd K. Packer still remembers the thoughtless words and mocking laughter.<sup>7</sup>

It is wise to use humor sparingly in Church settings, in talks, lessons, and so forth, and only humor of unquestionable good taste. We ought to measure in our minds whether a comment would be helpful or hurtful, especially when we want the Spirit present. The scriptures instruct us to strengthen one another in all our conversations (see D&C 109:7). Humor should be used to build and uplift. Jokes are more fun when they help people feel good about themselves, not embarrassed.

### **Lightheartedness Does Not Mean Light-Mindedness**

As we develop our sense of humor, we must keep in mind the critical difference between lightheartedness and light-mindedness. Light-mindedness is deliberate irreverence that trivializes the sacred and at worst becomes sacrilege and blasphemy. Perhaps this is the “excess of laughter” and “light speeches” about which scripture warns us (see D&C 88:69, 121; 59:15). Clearly, Church doctrines, ordinances, and temple ceremonies are not to be objects of humor. We must “trifle not with sacred things” (D&C 6:12; see also 8:10).

Lightheartedness, on the other hand, refers to the zestful joy found in wholesome gospel living. Just as scriptures warn against the inappropriate, they also teach us to worship “with a glad heart and a cheerful countenance” (D&C 59:15).

Spirituality does not always equate with solemnity. For example, the Prophet Joseph Smith valued “careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts”<sup>8</sup> but also described himself as “playful and cheerful.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, President Heber C. Kimball (1801–68), a counselor in the First Presidency, taught that God “is a cheerful, pleasant, lively, and good-natured being.”<sup>10</sup>

### **A Sense of Humor Can Be Developed**

It is comforting to realize a sense of humor can be discovered and nurtured at any age. My friend Barbara Barrington Jones confirmed, “Believe it or not, humor can be developed. I am living proof of that fact.”

Soon after her baptism into the Church, Sister Jones was invited to present workshops for teenagers at a youth conference. She openly admits that her first attempts were disastrous, and she seemed unable to relate with her young audience—until she learned to laugh at herself and

share personal experiences. Now, in part because of the sense of humor she has acquired, she relates beautifully with the young people she addresses.

For those who wish to improve their sense of humor, Sister Jones suggests recording in a notebook the funny things they experience or hear. She herself has made this a habit. For example, during a general conference session she jotted down an anecdote related by President Thomas S. Monson. President Monson read from a letter President Ezra Taft Benson received after undergoing heart surgery: “Dear President Benson, I know that you will be blessed for this surgery because in the Bible it says ‘blessed are the pacemakers.’”

On another occasion Sister Jones learned of a General Authority who had received a handmade get-well card while recovering from bypass surgery. On the front of the card, the child, a second-grader, had drawn a rectangular black box representing a coffin, with a flower poking out of the center. Inside he had printed in big letters, “Hope you get well soon, but if not, have fun.” After a hearty laugh, Sister Jones wrote down that account as well.

Thanks to her notebook, Sister Jones has collected a number of stories and anecdotes to use in talks and at the same time has sharpened her ability to recognize and use humor.<sup>11</sup>

President Gordon B. Hinckley affirmed the value of humor for all: “We’ve got to have a little humor in our lives. You had better take seriously that which should be taken seriously, but at the same time, we can bring in a touch of humor now and again. If the time ever comes when we can’t smile at ourselves, it will be a sad time.”<sup>12</sup>

Humor improves our attitude, strengthens our relationship skills, and helps us successfully cope with challenges. Whether we are experiencing an anxious moment on an airplane, trying to get around sibling rivalry, or just trying to handle the trials of everyday living, humor can be a constructive and beneficial part of our lives. If we can appropriately laugh at it, we can live with it. So go ahead and laugh—it’s good for you!

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#### NOTES

1. See, for example, David S. Sobel and Robert Ornstein, *The Healthy Mind, Healthy Body Handbook* (1996), 50-51.
2. “‘This Do in Remembrance of Me,’” *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 68–69.
3. See Francis M. Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball: Resolute Disciple, Prophet of God* (1995), 100.
4. *Finding Peace in Troubled Waters* (1995), 100.
5. Quoted in Russell Freedman, *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (1987), 1, 4.
6. In Conference Report, Apr. 1968, 100.
7. See Lucile C. Tate, *Boyd K. Packer: A Watchman on the Tower* (1995), 40–41.
8. *History of the Church*, 3:295.
9. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (1976), 307.
10. *Deseret News*, 25 Feb. 1857.
11. See Barbara Barrington Jones, *The Confident You* (1992), 139–45.
12. *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (1997), 432.