

SPRING  
2016

# Families

WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

STORY FOR ALL AGES



HOW  
HUMOR  
HELPS

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## CLOWNING FOR JOY IN HAITI

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In the heat of the sun at the bottom of the hill, a group of kids starts to form around us. I look at them, look away, and quickly look back again with wide eyes. They smile. I do it again and they laugh. They watch me put together my trombone, piece by piece. Tim hangs his battered bucket drum around his neck. Suzanne has the bubble-making bear. We are off!

Today, we are going into Martissant, one of the most dangerous areas of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, rated by the UN as a “red zone” because their peace-keeping troops have so little control here. Over 100,000 people live here, Tim notes, in houses made of cement blocks, tarps, and rusty tin stacked up the hill as high as we can see. There are two water pumps for more than 100,000 people.

The high levels of poverty and violence here make it feel more important than ever that we do a

fantastic show today. These kids deserve a bang-up, hands-down hilarious show.

Kids pile around us as we parade up the hill. They pop out of doorways and join the crowd. Some women dance to the music as we go by. When I dance, they laugh. It seems important to look people in the eye and greet them as we go by, so that they feel a personal connection beyond just seeing a ragtag troop of weird, sweaty white people parading past. I alternate between playing the trombone, greeting people, dancing, singing, and catching my breath. We are climbing the hot hill in a tide of kids now. They attach themselves, holding onto my elbows and the sides and back of my skirt.

“Ou bouke? (oo boo-kay)” says a girl. I just learned this creole word yesterday. A common graffiti phrase

*(Continued on page 2)*

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(Continued from page 1)

on the walls of Port-au-Prince is “NOU BOUKE (new boo-kay).” It means “we are exhausted,” or “we are fed up.” The spray-painted words mean that Haitian people are fed up with the way things are, their ineffective government, the lack of food and water. This girl is asking me if I am tired from the climb.

I take a deep breath and look around. “No, m’pas bouke (I am not tired),” I say. “Nou bouke (new boo-kay)?” (Are you all tired?)

“No!” they say. We keep climbing. I start a new trombone riff to the beat of Tim’s bucket drum.

More kids join in as we climb. “Bon jou,” I greet them. “Bon jou!” they reply to the beat of Tim’s drum.

“Bon swa!” I say, which is the greeting for afternoon and evening, and the wrong one to say for the morning.

“Bon swa!”

“No, bon jou!” I shout.

“Bon swa!” they say.

“Bon swa?”

“Bon jou!”

One of brightest rays of hope that I see in this country is the way that people are so ready to laugh and to play. Maybe a lot of people in Haiti are bouke a lot of the time. But right now we are on our way up a hill to a show, and despite all odds we are not bouke at all.

*Sarah Liane Foster, a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, traveled as a professional clown with Clowns Without Borders to Haiti, Turkey, Colombia, Swaziland, and South Africa where children have experienced conflict and injustice. “Laughter is a critical way to heal trauma,” Sarah said. “And all kids deserve joy.” A longer version of this story appears in the Tapestry of Faith program, Heeding the Call.*

## EXPLORING TOGETHER

**What is it about laughter?** It can make us feel so good! Laughter can be strong medicine for hard times. It can break tension, affirm our relationships, and help us live longer, healthier lives. A good laugh can help someone who feels lost, sad, or alone re-connect to the ongoing whole of life. As Unitarian Universalists, we act in faith when we use humor to ease someone’s burdens or lift their spirits.

### The Jokes That Bind

**D**oes your family have an inside joke? Humor is one way a group like family or friends stays connected. A funny family story that’s been told again and again can get people cracking up as soon as someone starts to retell it. If someone new is in the group, let them in on it, too!

**You are 30 times more likely to laugh if you are with somebody else than if you’re alone.**

**Knock knock!**  
**Who’s there?**  
**Lettuce!**  
**Lettuce who?**  
**Let us tell you a few jokes!**



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### That’s Not Funny!

“I don’t get it.” When some find a joke funny, why are others not laughing? Some reasons might be: **Cultural differences.** A joke about rush hour makes little sense to a rural farmer. **Insults or put-downs.** Jokes about someone’s family, appearance, or actions can cause discomfort or hurt.

#### CHALLENGE

Think of a joke that people of any age, ethnicity, lifestyle, etc. can enjoy. Try out your joke! Hint: It may be easier to get laughs with a physical joke.

**Q. Why was I so scared?**  
**A. Because 7 8 9!**

**Q. What’s a rabbit’s favorite kind of music?**  
**A. Hip hop!**

**Q. What can you never eat for breakfast?**  
**A. Dinner!**

**Q. Why do dragons sleep all day?**  
**A. So they can fight knights!**

**Q.**  
**Knock, knock**  
**Who’s there?**  
**Broken pencil**  
**Broken pencil who?**  
**Never mind, it’s pointless.**

## Excuse Me, Do I Know You?

You think you see a friend in a crowded room. You excitedly rush over to get their attention. When you get there, you discover you made a mistake and the person is a total stranger.

**Answer:**

- ☐ I would not find it funny.
- ☐ I would be amused, but not show it.
- ☐ I would smile.
- ☐ I would laugh.
- ☐ I would laugh heartily.

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A question like this was given to people who had suffered heart attacks or other cardiac problems and to people without heart disease. People with no heart disease were 40 percent more likely to report laughing.

In other words, being able to laugh at your own day-to-day mistakes may be a sign of cardiac health. Would you conclude that a life that lacks humor may be shorter?

## Darling, If You Love Me...

...is a group game. The first "Darling" has to get someone else to smile or laugh.

Approach a person and say, "Darling, if you love me, won't you please, please smile." You can make a funny face, use a silly voice—do anything but physically touch them. If the person can say back, without a smile or laugh, "I am sorry, darling, I love you, but I just can't smile," then you must try a different person. The first one you can make smile or laugh becomes the new Darling.



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**Like a welcome summer rain,  
humor may suddenly cleanse and  
cool the earth, the air, and you.**

— Langston Hughes

## Family Comedy Night

**M**ake a date to set aside worries or stress and exercise your laughter muscles together.

What a great gift to give one another! You could read a funny book by Beverly Cleary, James Marshall, Shel Silverstein, or Mo Willems. Try Louis Sachar's Wayside School books. Or, play charades.

Is there a movie you watch over and over because it makes everyone laugh? Some enjoy the slapstick humor of the Three Stooges, the Marx Brothers, or Looney Tunes cartoons. For contemporary animation,



try *Inside Out* (2015), *Shrek* (2001, PG) or *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). Older youth through adults may chuckle at the cheesy horror film *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). Beware, it is R-rated due to zombie violence. Those who like comedic dramas with ridiculous plots, mishaps, and misunderstandings may

like *Yours, Mine and Ours* (2005; original, 1968); *The Parent Trap* (1998; original, 1961); *Elf* (2003); *Good Burger* (1997); *Groundhog Day* (1998); *Sister Act* (1992); or *Home Alone* (1990). Check reviews to make sure a film is suitable for everyone.

# Powerful Stuff – Use with Caution!

By Erik Wikstrom

It's often been said that "laughter is the best medicine," but that's not true when our laughter comes at the expense of someone else's dignity and self-worth. There are fat jokes, and sexist jokes, and racist jokes. There are jokes about various ethnic groups and people with differing abilities. When we laugh at someone, it's the opposite of healing.

This kind of "humor" so pervades our society that negative stereotypes can seem to be the foundation on which much of our comedy is built. Because it is so prevalent, we may miss opportunities to say something when people around us are laughing at one of these jokes. We may even awkwardly join in the laughter to avoid being called a killjoy or, worse, being laughed at ourselves. Maybe we only notice the cruelty of a joke



**Taking time to help our children put themselves in the place of the person or group being made fun of can be a great way to teach compassion while encouraging children's courage to stand up for what is right.**



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down. Still developing empathy, young children may not recognize the harm a mean joke can cause. Taking time to help our children put themselves in the place of the person or group being made fun of can be a great way to teach compassion while encouraging children's courage to stand up for what is right.

Laughter and humor can be a tremendous balm, soothing difficult situations and melting away tension, anxiety, and anger. The poet (and Unitarian!) e.e. cummings wrote, "the most wasted of all days is one without laughter." Yet it's important to resist the kind that harms.

*Rev. Erik Wikstrom serves Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church in Charlottesville, N.C., as lead minister. He has also worked as a juggler, magician, and clown.*

when it is aimed at a group we identify with.

If it is hard for us as adults to resist joining in hurtful laughter, imagine how much harder it might be for our children. In many instances they do

not even fully understand the underlying meanings of the "joke." They may laugh to feel included; they may laugh to prevent being classed with whoever or whatever the joke puts

## FAMILIES: WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

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## FIND OUT MORE

- Download a free guide to Laughter Yoga, including the "top 10 laughter exercises," from the website [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org)
- Sophie Scott, a cognitive neuroscientist and a stand-up comic, gave an April 2015 TED Talk on why and how we laugh. Read the transcript on [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com) or watch on YouTube (and hear laughter that will make you giggle along).
- The Tapestry of Faith programs Faithful Journeys, Heeding the Call, and Toolbox of Faith provided material for these pages.