

Excerpt from Laughing Pilgrims
By Howard R. Macy

From Chapter 1, "Humor Alert"

Let's talk about laughing. Better yet, let's talk about laughter and the spiritual journey. Right away that sounds odd, I know, like an oxymoron: jumbo shrimp, affordable health insurance, laughing spirituality. Perhaps it would help to remember that the spiritual journey has to do with all of life, not just with consecrated chunks set off in a corner. So if Brother Lawrence could experience God fully while peeling potatoes, perhaps we can learn to love God amid peals of laughter.

On the one hand, we rightly think of the spiritual journey as serious business. The language of the journey is often fervent, deadly earnest. Images persist of hair shirts; long days of fasting; on your knees crawling miles to the altar, in the snow, uphill, both ways. We can remember the excesses of the ancient "pillar saints" (though I'd guess that, both now and then, awe may not be the only response of pilgrims seeing Simon Stylites sitting on a column, covered with vermin).

For many people even "joy" is serious business, a placid serenity undisturbed by grins, giggles, or guffaws. We've been helped by some writers. Richard Foster speaks of the "celebration" of discipline; Doris Donnelly writes about laughing as a "spiritual exercise." Yet instruction about spirituality generally neglects humor entirely.

One friend of mine grew up in a congregation that fiercely guarded the sacred rule, "Never laugh in church." So they didn't. Not even during the painfully long morning when a Christian drama troupe, whose main repertoire was humorous sketches, led worship. Happily, my friend was delivered from such grimness and has become the queen of post-it notes, sending messages such as "what if the hokey-pokey is really what it's all about."

On the other hand, we have humor. We think of laughter as fun, frivolous, usually entertaining. We enjoy it as a way of breaking out that you don't have to put salve on. However, we often see humor as merely frivolous. We've learned well that when you're doing something important you simply don't play around: no jokes, no wisecracks, no teasing. Surely this is one reason why children laugh twenty times more often than most adults. Life is serious, after all, and you'd better keep a straight face when you're talking about ultimate things.

The truth is that humor is fun, but it's not merely fun. It's a powerful form of communication and insight, not merely entertainment. Now I'm not turning killjoy here: "Settle down and wipe that smile off your face! Let's get serious about humor!" We can enjoy thinking about this. But we know, for example, that advertisers, full of good will as they may be, don't spend millions just to amuse us. And we've all endured personal attacks disguised as humor, followed by the stinger, "What's the matter, can't you take a joke?!" or, "Just kidding."

In a nutshell, I've become convinced that the exaggerated contrast between spirituality as somber and humor as frivolous shortchanges us. In fact, there is a wonderful interplay between humor and our spiritual journey. How we use and respond to humor tells us a lot about who we are and how we see the world. (A vital faith also shapes how we see the world and may improve our humor.) Humor even helps us see what's important and to discover fresh directions for living. It touches our relationships and shapes our personal growth. For example, humor can help us discover whether we are complete idiots or really kings and queens disguised as klutzes. It can help us sort out whether other folks are really out to get us or just bumbling, under-socialized aliens. When today's adversity crashes in on us, it can help us discern whether this is the end of the world or merely a preview of coming attractions. If the sky really is falling, humor may even serve as a hard hat to help us through.