

Punch lines: Habits of friendship and community

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

Laughter was a hallmark of my family's life as I grew up. Our family dinner table was so often marked by jokes and storytelling that we were the embodiment of those old canards about communities that know the jokes so well that all you have to do is call out the numbers and everyone laughs.

Even my paternal grandmother, a "stern schoolmarm" type with whom we were always on our best behavior, would occasionally join in the repartee. One day when I was about 12, I was shocked when my grandmother told our family that she had a "naughty joke" to share. She said a kindergarten teacher asked her pupil Johnny, "What is $2 + 2$?" Johnny thought about it a moment and then answered, "4." The teacher replied, "That's pretty good, Johnny," to which Johnny replied, "Pretty good? Hell, that's perfect." As disappointed as I was to learn that "naughty" consisted of only one slightly off-color word, I was nonetheless reassured that even my stern grandmother enjoyed making others laugh.

As I grew older, I also learned that not everyone can tell jokes and funny stories. What was even more surprising was finding out that a lot of people don't appreciate jokes. I didn't enjoy these people as much as those with a rich sense of humor, but I tended to attribute the differences to a matter of style: an appreciation for jokes, I decided, was like an appreciation for music. It was a matter of personal taste.

In more recent years, however, I have become convinced that a sense of humor is not only an asset for leaders, but also critically important for effective leadership. As I remember my parents' relationships with other church leaders over the years, I realize that much of their time together was spent swapping stories, telling jokes over shared meals, and laughing about the challenges and absurdities that occurred in their ministries.

Leaders need a sense of humor to be able to understand, cope and live through disappointments, failures and surprises. Sometimes the things we most plan for and

anticipate have quite unexpected outcomes—and all we can do is laugh at the strangeness of it all. Other times we need to be able to laugh at foibles and inconsistencies—our own as well others’. Sometimes we need to laugh at surprises that we could not have anticipated—including those from God. After all, when the surprising word came from God, Sarah laughed. And, as Terry Lindvall reminds us in *The Mother of All Laughter*, Sarah’s descendants have continued to laugh through the years.

Laughter is an important outlet for the pressures, pain and frustrations of leadership. Ronald Heifetz describes leadership as “walking on a razor’s edge,” meaning that it is extremely easy to get cut, and that the bleeding wounds hurt. I thought of this image recently as I listened to the words of an African leader who has embodied a profound commitment to reconciliation in the midst of tribal conflict and division: “To be a leader in this place, one has to get used to loneliness and betrayal.”

Unfortunately, in the midst of loneliness and betrayal, as a leader begins to feel the cuts from the razor’s edge, it is all too easy to lose one’s sense of humor. A leader focused on the pain may spiral downward into self-destruction. As another leader commented, “You sustain so many body blows and shots over time that eventually you begin to leak. And when you leak, you do the things that get you in trouble. You’ve got to stop the leaking.” Laughter is a primary vehicle for renewing the leader’s soul and life.

Laughter provides perspective and humility, reminding us that even with the best strategic planning and most effective consensus building efforts, we are not in control. For Jews and Christians, among others, it is a salutary reminder that we are not God.

Laughter also restores a sense of joy, the kind of joy that Paul commends in Philippians 4. It is a joy that can be sustained in the midst of suffering, a joy that is discovered in the goodness of God—even amidst the travails of daily life. “From frowning saints,” St. Teresa of Avila is reported to have said, “Good Lord, deliver us.” And from frowning sinners too!

Perhaps most importantly, laughter cultivates relationships and community. We long to laugh with others, not to laugh alone. Indeed, it is disappointing to hear a great joke and then to have nobody with whom to share it. Great jokes and stories, funny and even absurdly silly videos, all make the rounds on the Internet because we want

to be able to laugh well together. If loneliness and betrayal are dangers of leadership, then laughter is a powerful antidote.

Of course, it all depends on whether we know how to laugh with others more than we laugh at the expense of others. There are destructive jokes and stories that tear apart the fabric of community, and it is all too easy to scapegoat others through stereotypes perpetuated by bad jokes.

There is an art to having and conveying a sense of humor. It is crucial that we learn when to laugh, why to laugh, what to laugh at, and with whom we are invited to laugh. That is why I still treasure my memories of dinner-table conversations with my parents as I was growing up, and why my wife and I have sought to cultivate similar conversations with our own kids. Laughter cultivates habits of friendship and community, and gives us all a sense of perspective and joy.