

This is an excerpt from Indianapolis writer Diana J. Ensign's forthcoming book,
Traveling Spirit: Daily Tools for Your Life's Journey.

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Laughter Is the Best Medicine

by Diana J. Ensign

During holiday gatherings when I was young, my grandmother, aunts, and uncles used to gather around the dinner table and retell family stories until everyone was laughing so hard they cried or peed their pants. With my grandmother, the stories always told of tragedies. But with the 40-year gap in the telling, they sounded hilarious.

She would tell of the time my uncle accidentally set the house on fire and then, after they put the fire out, they lit it again because they were afraid the firefighters would show up and be angry if there wasn't a fire to put out. Or there was the time that the government gave my grandmother one school outfit per child. With no money, no husband, and five children, she lied and said someone stole all the clothes out of her car so she could get a second set of outfits for each child. Or the time they left their apartment in the middle of the night and moved into a vacant place across the street because they were behind on rent. The landlord moved new people into their old place and then, a few days later, the police came and evicted the new people. Or the time she sold a fur coat that she had gotten from the apartment of an evicted neighbor. She sold it for \$25 to a woman who lived nearby. The woman came back demanding a refund when she realized that the entire back was filled with moth holes. My grandmother kept the money. She had five children to feed.

They were living on cans of powdered milk and deliveries of chunks of cheese. All the kids developed rickets from malnourishment.

To hear my grandmother tell these stories, you would think this family had the funniest and most enjoyable life on the planet. As my mother explains, “We didn’t know we were poor. Everyone around us lived the same way.”

My grandmother always maintained an upbeat attitude. Later, when she remarried and had extra money, she treated cash like candy freely handed out at Halloween. She made no distinction between 50 dollars and 5 dollars. If she had extra, she gave it away. Throughout her life, the theme of her stories remained: “Remember how crazy we were. We sure survived!” Even through extreme hardships, which included the death of her youngest son and the deaths of four grandchildren, my grandmother mastered this tool. She felt terrible grief over those losses, but she never complained. She told stories. She remembered those who died and all the funny and crazy things they did while alive. She loved fully and kept people alive in her stories. She never closed off her heart. My grandmother laughed until she cried. Then she laughed some more because life is, after all, crazy.

A friend of mine, whose mother is of the Miami Nation of Indians, told me the story of how her mother healed herself of cancer through laughter. The doctors told her mother that she had cancer and would need surgery within six months. Her mother went home and proceeded to watch funny movies. She never told anyone what she was doing. Other people’s doubts and fears are not helpful when working on healing. When she went back to the doctors for her scheduled surgery, the cancer was gone. No one can explain it.

Rev. Susan Sparks, author of the book *Laugh Your Way to Grace: Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor* agrees. According to Rev Sparks, laughter is a spiritually healing tool used in ancient times. We should, she says, reclaim a God who has a sense of humor and enjoys playful exuberant joy. She also quotes Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, who says, “If in our daily life we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it.”

The next time your mood is low, rent a funny movie, enjoy a humorous book, or read the comics. Children’s books and children’s movies cheer me up when I’m feeling down. My daughters and I used to love reading Shel Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, and Dr. Seuss’ *The Cat in the Hat*. Funny books and movies can help us see the absurdity of the human condition. Use your mind to laugh at yourself and others, with love and tenderness. Remember funny stories and share them with others. Laughter is wonderful medicine for the spirit. Those people who bring levity and humor into our homes, workplaces, and communities should be thanked profusely for sharing that magnificent, healing gift.