

# If you don't laugh, you'll cry

by BROCK WEIR

As I approach my 40th birthday next month, I find myself becoming ? much to my own surprise ? a little more wrinkle-conscious than I have ever been before.

Don't get me wrong, I don't begrudge the ones I've accumulated so far. Much like the scar I sport dead-centre in my forehead after being mowed down by a rogue soapbox derby racer while covering an event for the Shelburne Free Press ten years ago, the lines tell a story ? no matter how unlikely that story might be!

Heck, I don't even mind the so-called laugh lines; even if that's just a more palatable label for a facial feature that denotes the passage of time, it's nice to be reminded of joy, good times, and, of course, laughter.

If I ever get hostile towards the laugh lines, should I send the bill to some of those who are responsible for them? Surely, Mel Brooks has bigger fish to fry at this stage of his life, but the estates of all four Golden Girls? No, that would smack of ingratitude for all the laughter they have provided, something of a medicine in and of itself.

Whether you laugh at a pratfall, a bit of slapstick, a witty remark, or even a meme, you're laughing and that's the important thing. We all feel better after a good laugh, and there's science behind it.

The Mayo Clinic, for instance, thoroughly outlines the benefits of a good chuckle both long-term and short-term. It increases your intake of oxygen, benefiting your heart, lungs, muscles, and endorphin production, stimulates your body's natural anti-stress response, and aids circulation to help soothe tension. Some of the longer-term benefits of laughter include triggering chemical reactions within that improve the immune system, the production of natural pain killers, and so much more.

Does it take a fair bit of effort to elicit laughter for you? Well, the Mayo Clinic has a few tips as well.

?Developing or refining your sense of humour may be easier than you think,? they say. ?Put humour on your horizon. Find a few simple items, such as photos, greeting cards or comic strips, that make you chuckle. Then hang them up at home or in your office, or collect them in a file or notebook. Keep funny movies, TV shows, books, magazines, or comedy videos on hand for when you need an added humour boost. Look online at joke websites or silly videos. Listen to humorous podcasts. Go to a comedy club.

?Laugh and the world laughs with you. Find a way to laugh about your own situations and watch your stress begin to fade away. Even if it feels forced at first, practice laughing. It does your body good?. Share a laugh ? make it a habit to spend time with friends who make you laugh. And then return the favour by sharing funny stories or jokes with those around you. Knock, knock ? browse through your local bookstore or library's selection of joke books and add a few jokes to your list that you can share with friends. Know what isn't funny ? don't laugh at the expense of others. Some forms of humour aren't appropriate. Use your best judgement to discern a good joke from a bad or hurtful one.?

That last point, in my view, speaks to the world we live in today; a time and a place where what's an appropriate bit of humour for one person can be wildly inappropriate to others in certain circumstances, or even simply inappropriate in general given the state of the world internationally. But laughter still important.

August is the time of year when my family takes its annual trip to Jamestown, NY, for its annual Lucille Ball Comedy Festival. It's been a tradition we've maintained more or less every year, sometimes twice a year, since 1999, and has always been a joy.

This year, however, was shaping up to be a slightly different story.

Given the ongoing disputes between our countries, it simply didn't feel right, no matter who was involved, to make the trek this year and unnecessarily pump revenue into an economy that is currently battling wits with our own. The friends we've made there along the way understood this perspective and there was disappointment all around, but such are the circumstances we're living in.

When I made the decision not to attend earlier this year, other circumstances were a bit different. In the intervening weeks and months, my family has found itself in a particularly stressful situation as a close family member has found themselves quite literally in the fight for their life. As our family navigates these challenging waters together, laughter has found renewed resonance in this household ? hey, if you don't laugh, you cry ? and my perspective shifted slightly.

In desperate need for a mental break, however brief, we struck a compromise and decided to do an overnight there on Friday, rather than the traditional five-day affair. Sealing the deal was the ability to attend a tribute to writer Bob Carroll, Jr., who is at least partially responsible for some of the biggest laughs in my life.

No matter how stress-relieving a gut-busting laugh is, however, I have to say the laugh mechanism had its work cut out for it over those 24-or-so-hours.

In addition to the stress of the border crossing and not knowing just what to expect (full disclosure: our crossing was smooth sailing, but it appeared the same could not be said for the vehicle in front of us), there was the fraught nature of comedy in the country to the south.

The Lucille Ball Comedy Festival came hot on the heels of Paramount's decision to axe the top-rated Late Night with Stephen Colbert for apparent political reasons, and while there were laughs aplenty at the Festival, it was a somewhat different experience.

Observational humour was the order of the day, for the most part, but when anything ? and I do mean ANYTHING ? political came out of the mouths of the assembled stand-ups, there was a new phenomenon: quite literally feeling the oxygen, such an important benefit of laughter, get sucked clear out of the room, whether the target of the joke was a Republican or Democrat.

Was it a matter of people simply sick of the political bombardment, or a matter of waiting for the next shoe to drop and brace for abuse from the audience, depending on their allegiance?

My sense was it was the latter and, for the comedians on stage, it was certainly a difficult tight-rope act.

While I returned after the brief visit feeling like my batteries were somewhat re-charged after reconnecting with friends and having my laughter mechanism thoroughly worked out, I couldn't help but feel more relaxed getting home, the vague sense of tension in the air down south now behind me.

While I don't foresee going back there any time soon given our current situation, at least sources of laughter can be found all around us, if you know where to look ? and that's nothing to sneeze at. Seek them out ? it will do all of us a world of good.