

Laugh early and often

by BROCK WEIR

It was hard to settle into my seat after a particularly active, hectic day ? and one that had a bit of excitement in the air ? but from the sound of the first flaming arrow leaving its bow with a swoosh and a thwack, I sat transfixed.

It was an active and heavy day, sure, but not for any special reason. The excitement, however, was a bit of a different story.

I can't remember which day of the week it was, but it was a pretty typical one during this particular chapter of my life. It was a time of significant upheaval and challenges from a very personal standpoint. Mornings were sometimes more difficult than the rest of the day as the flurry of activity getting ready for whatever the day had in store, could exacerbate existing tensions, sometimes leading to some verbal sparring that nobody really enjoyed, a few tears here and there, depending on the circumstances ? hardly the best way to start the day.

And certainly not the way to start it if you like your mornings to set the tone for the rest of what follows before bed.

But, such was the case when I was about seven-years-old.

School was out for the summer and my daytime hours were spent at day camps as my parents worked during the day and the idea of overnight camp didn't appeal to me in the slightest at the time.

It was a summer where my family was still adjusting to divorce and navigating all the choppy waters that roll in with that was, of course, sometimes difficult for a youngster, particularly when emotions were running high at home.

More than once I arrived to start the day at camp my eyes red from tears. The precise details of what made me upset on that particular day are now lost to me, so they mustn't have been too consequential in the grand scheme of things, but they had their impact ? so much so that two of the counsellors involved in the camp took me under their wing.

They went out of their way to comfort me on those challenging moments, helping me settle into the prescribed routine of the camp, and, after more than a few challenging days, they took it upon themselves to go above and beyond their counsellor duties and invited me to join them at the movies one night.

As a seven-year-old, the prospect of a movie outing ?with the grownups? made me feel great and to say I was excited for the evening veers dangerously close to understatement. But, once we got to a long-since-gone Newmarket movie theatre to see Mel Brooks' then-new comedy Robin Hood: Men in Tights back in 1993, it became a complete experience.

Looking back, it might not seem like the most ground-breaking of films to have such a profound and lasting impact ? after all, a spoof of all the previous cinematic depictions of Robin Hood, including Kevin Costner's Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, which was all the rage at that point ? but, in the right circumstances, it's just as easy to appreciate a doodle from someone you love as it is a Rembrandt.

These were just such circumstances.

From the first thwack of the arrow to the last rap laid down by the film's chorus, it was cinematic love at first sight. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed so hard at a movie and, truth be told, it still makes me laugh just as uproariously today. More important, however, was its ability to transport me away, at least for a little while, away from what was on my mind at the time and, afterwards, I felt recharged, renewed, and better equipped to process all that was going on.

I can only imagine it was a secret well-known to the two counsellors in question, but it really underscored how healing laughter can be for us all.

It's certainly not a secret lost to Mel Brooks.

The comedy icon celebrated his 100th Birthday earlier this summer and, as his remarkable milestone approached, he shared some insights on what laughter means to him.

'I think laughing keeps you healthy,' he told People Magazine. 'It's an amazing sound, people laughing at something I created. Making comedy is a great job. It keeps you sane and happy. It gives you reason to live.'

Riffing on this theme, NBC's Today Show looked at the phenomenon deeper, particularly the impact a good guffaw can have on laugh-makers and laugh-consumers alike.

'Research has shown that laughter is, indeed, among the best medicines,' they wrote. 'In a 2016 longitudinal study published by the journal Psychosomatic Medicine, Norwegian researchers found that women who scored highly on the cognitive component of sense of humor, or the ability to detect humor, were associated with 48% less risk of death from all causes. Mortality due to cardiovascular diseases in particular, the study said, was 'significantly lower,' in women with high scores on the cognitive component.'

'A separate 2023 study also showed that spontaneous laughter is associated with a greater reduction in cortisol levels. The study suggested that laughter could be a potential supplementary medical therapy to improve wellbeing. Laughter isn't just important for physical health. It's beneficial for mental well-being, too. 'If a patient can have a moment of levity in the face of crisis, I think it helps them better cope and better deal with the uncertainties of their problems,' Edward T. Creagan, a Mayo Clinic expert and oncologist, said in 2024.'

'Hopefully this means that Brooks has many years ahead of him. But he's previously said he doesn't really think about death. 'I gave up after 60 thinking about it because if I did, I'd be thinking about it all the time. So I don't think about it much. When and if it happens it's going to be a sad day 'for everybody but me,' Brooks told the Associated Press in 2021. 'I enjoy living,' he told the outlet. 'I'd like to do it as long as I can.'

And we can all be grateful for these efforts.

This weekend, my family and I are taking our annual trip to Jamestown, NY, to attend the Lucille Ball Comedy Festival, an event that has never failed to bring joy to all of us, make us forget our troubles, and reconnect with life-long friends.

Among the features of this year's festival is an array of original artefacts donated by Brooks himself to the city's National Comedy Center.

'I've always been proud to say that I make people laugh for a living, so knowing that my work will have a home at comedy's national archive and continue making people laugh leaves me with a deep sense of pride,' said Brooks earlier this year.

Seeing the raw materials that resulted in films, shows, and so much more that have brought people so much joy over the years, including myself, will be something of a full circle moment this weekend.

I'm certain it will also serve as a reminder that no matter how challenging our world can seem these days, an era where fewer and fewer things seem like laughing matters, it's so important to find humour in just about everything, not take ourselves too seriously, and be able to point our respective energies in the right direction.

We can all do to remind ourselves of that.

And often.