

What are you laughing at?

by BROCK WEIR

Who doesn't love a good guffaw?

There's no doubt laughter can make you feel good, but every now and then a giggle or two can get you into a spot of bother.

I'm easy to laugh, and the nuances of laughter was a lesson I learned fairly early on.

As a child, for example, I accompanied members of my family to the funeral of a distant great uncle I had never actually met. At that young age, not having known the man, I wasn't quite emotionally invested in the proceedings of the second funeral I'd attended up to that point, but was struck by the solemnity of the occasion.

Until I wasn't.

Sitting in one of the pews further back from the more immediate members of the family, we found ourselves behind a group of very well-dressed men and women who I imagined had some sort of business connection to the man of the hour.

All was well, and, as mentioned above, solemn, until I heard a familiar noise.

The man directly in front of me, during a particularly quiet and calm part of the service, broke wind. Evidently, it was something of a dam break as, a short time later, a lengthy chorus of ratta-tatt-tatts began, gaining momentum to such an extent that the tails of his suit jacket were subtly flapping in the breeze.

Why people flashed my eight-year-old self several choice dirty looks for giggling rather than directing their ire at the elderly man attempting to recreate The Flight of the Bumblebee in a way that can only be described as organic was beyond me then ? the volume was just about the same ? and it's beyond me still!

Fast forward a few years to a Grade 11 Business class when, during a time when our paired-off groups were tasked with quietly reading a portion of our textbook, I turned the page and found a perfectly, well, perfect hand-written photo caption on the next page that sent both my seatmate and I over the top ? one of those bursts of laughter that are almost impossible to stop before they build to a wheeze ? that we both had to leave the classroom to collect ourselves. (Thankfully, our teacher saw the humour in the caption as well, but had a far stronger cackle constitution)

Those were pretty harmless instances, but it's not always the case.

Taking in Canada Day celebrations on Parliament Hill in 2011, it was a particularly sweltering day from the time my mission started at about 4 a.m. that morning. When all was said and done, I was ultimately on the ground, unsheltered, for 20 solid hours, minus an hour for food and rehydration in the afternoon. When I got back to my bed, the moment I sat down the near-delirious laughter ? thanks, heat stroke! ? began and evidently I laughed myself to sleep. Well, if anything, it beats crying one's self to sleep, if only to spare a pillow case!

In situations like these, you just have to roll with it and not take yourself too seriously ? and, dare I say, laugh it off?

As I've been following the U.S. Presidential election, another trip to the polls where the stakes are higher than they have ever been before, I have to say I've found the joy brought to the campaign trail by now-confirmed Democrat nominee Kamala Harris and her newly-minted running mate, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, particularly refreshing.

Perhaps it's a factor that can be attributed to the aforementioned sky-high political stakes, but it's been so heartening, policy aside, to have individuals in the race who, while very serious about their goals, don't take themselves too seriously are all too happy to laugh, clearly revelling in connecting with the people and getting their message out.

It has been a stark reminder of a political process of days gone by, an era that doesn't lie all that far into our past, when politicians had a sense of humour, knew when and when not to take themselves seriously, and to underscore the joy of service.

So, it has been telling that, again, policy aside, one of the biggest sources of attacks from her political opponents, is Harris' confidence to not hide her light, her sense of humour, and that aforementioned joy that comes with said service.

If that's the worst they've got, that's also particularly telling.

I write this while still basking in the glow of the annual Lucille Ball Comedy Festival, the annual party held in the redhead's hometown of Jamestown, NY, to celebrate her August 6 birthday.

While the United States might be divided, it was, as always, an occasion where people put political differences aside to simply laugh and have fun.

The trek has always served not only as our annual family trip, but a time to catch up with old friends ? some of whom I have known for close to 30 years, some of whom I consider my closest friends, all brought together through a common love of Ball and the legacy of laughter she has left behind. What a remarkable legacy for anyone to rest upon!

The laughter she inspired has helped all of us get through tough times and enabled us to form strong, unbreakable bonds, despite geographic barriers and, in some cases, differences in our outlooks on life.

Early on in the festival's existence, a mantra from organizers highlighted what they described as ?the healing power of laughter? and I have no doubt that there is more than a few grains of truth in that.

?Whether you're guffawing at a sitcom on TV or quietly giggling at a newspaper cartoon, laughing does you good,? says the Mayo Clinic. ?Laughter is a great form of stress relief and that's no joke. A good sense of humour can't cure all ailments, but data is mounting about the positive things laughter can do. A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn't just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body.

?Laughter can: Stimulate many organs. Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases endorphins that are released by your brain; Activate and relieve your stress response ? a rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response, and it can increase and then decrease your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling; Sooth tension ? laughter can also stimulate circulation and aid muscle relaxation, both of which can help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.?

Longer-term effects, they add, include improvements to the immune system, pain relief, an elevated mood, and an increased sense of personal satisfaction, particularly in coping with difficult situations and fostering connections with others.

So, there you have it.

If people are quick to laughter, instead of judging, why not join in? If the situation is appropriate, don't bottle it up ? let rip! Well, maybe a funeral is not the best place to let rip, but everybody grieves differently. Who am I to judge?