

FROM HUMOR IN THE WORKPLACE  
TO HUMOR AS A MEANS OF HEALING FROM LOSS

A Synthesis Project Presented

By

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Critical and Creative Thinking Program

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my beautiful grandson, Cole  
who though he only lived on this earth for six short weeks  
did much to bring people together  
through his ability to provide joy and laughter into the lives of those around him  
and to ultimately leave a legacy of hope to all of us.

## ABSTRACT

### FROM HUMOR IN THE WORKPLACE TO HUMOR AS A MEANS OF HEALING FROM LOSS

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The role of humor in promoting a climate of creativity in organizations has been the focus of this synthesis. Developing a program to add humor to an organization's culture can open up and encourage people's creativity. In this environment of creativity, effective problem solving can occur and thus lead to needed positive change.

This paper explores lay and scholarly research findings on the role of humor in the workplace. There exists both anecdotal and empirical evidence to support the theory of humor's ability to be a tool for creative problem solving and stress reduction, as well as humor's positive effect in the workplace in dealing with management and leadership issues. To obtain a perspective that was not included in the research undertaken for this work, I also interviewed two very different leaders who successfully use humor every day in their organizations. This information corroborates research findings cited in this paper.

However, as referenced in the prologue and then fully explained in chapter four, due to a tragedy in my life, I took a new direction for my study of humor, turning primarily to humor as a means of coping with loss. This synthesis now represents the beginning of a new direction for my life. Using skills acquired in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program I will use the

power of gentle humor to develop a support group and workshops for families dealing with tragic loss in their lives. My eagerness to continue my work on this subject, especially meeting firsthand with groundbreakers and current practitioners in the field, does not preclude the desire to return to my original work on humor in the workplace at some time as well.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter .....	Page .....
PROLOGUE.....	1
1. INTRODUCTION .....	3
Humorous Paths to Creating Change in the Workplace .....	3
The Luck Factor.....	3
Overview of Chapters .....	5
Conclusion .....	6
2. LAY AND SCHOLARLY FINDINGS ON THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN THE WORKPLACE .....	8
The Role of Humor in the Workplace.....	9
Conditions that Promote Humor in the Workplace.....	11
Organizational Culture.....	11
Leadership.....	15
Creativity and Creative Problem Solving .....	16
Stress Reduction.....	19
Possible Negative Effects of Humor.....	21
Conclusion .....	21
3. HOW A RADIO STATION OWNER AND A RABBI USE HUMOR .....	23
Edward Perry .....	23
Interview on September 29, 2006 .....	24
Interview on March 6, 2007.....	25
Rabbi Jonathan Hausman.....	27
Interview on March 9, 2007.....	29
Conclusions.....	31
4. SIDSTHESIS .....	32
A Tragedy that Changed my Life .....	33
Background Information on SIDS .....	33
A New Direction for my Study of Humor .....	34
Humor and the Holocaust .....	37
Using Humor to Develop a Support Group for Coping with Loss .....	38
Groundbreakers in Use of Humor in Healing .....	39
Norman Cousins.....	39
Patch Adams, M.D.....	40
Connecting loss with Dr. Adams' work.....	42
Allen Klein.....	43
Empirical Evidence for Humor as a Coping Tool .....	48
From Humor in the Workplace to Humor as a Means of Healing from Loss .....	49

5.	CONCLUSION.....	51
	My Journey Thus Far.....	51
	Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor.....	52
	Concluding Thoughts.....	54
	REFERENCES .....	56
	ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	58

## PROLOGUE

*“Just because something doesn't do what you planned it to do doesn't mean it's useless.”*

-- Thomas A. Edison (1847 – 1931)

Developing a program to add humor to an organization's culture can unlock and affirm people's creativity. And in a climate of creativity, effective problem solving can occur and lead to needed positive change. Since the fall of 2005, the role of humor in promoting a climate of creativity in organizations has been the focus of my synthesis project. At the time, CCT 612, Seminar in Creativity, led by Professor Nina Greenwald, focused on the development of humor as a life skill. This course, which had a profound effect on my thinking, led to a deep interest in wanting to learn more about the power of humor to catalyze creativity.

Chapter one previews the content of each chapter of this synthesis. The introduction to this paper, and chapters two and three remain written as originally intended. However, chapter four is a departure from what was originally intended due to a tragic occurrence in my life. Prior to this, chapter four was to discuss the creation of a workshop for incorporating humor into organizational life as a means of sponsoring creative thinking to bring about needed positive change. Instead, chapter four now describes the tragic occurrence in my life and examines ways in which humor can contribute significantly to the healing process. Chapter five concludes with reflections on my synthesis process, along with speculation on future possibilities generated by the change in its direction. And finally, although the original plan for this synthesis was altered, my intent is to return to this unfinished work in the future.

I am grateful to have been supported throughout this shift in direction by Professors Nina Greenwald, Carol Smith, Arthur Millman, and Peter Taylor. As Peter Taylor said to me,

“Readers would completely understand the discontinuity – indeed, they would be moved by and challenged to reflect on the vulnerability of their own assumed continuities.” Consistent with this, taking a metacognitive approach in chapter four to reflect on the thought processes that led to changing its direction was suggested by Nina Greenwald. Most of all, it is my wish that the analyses and humor “prescriptives” pertaining to an extraordinarily difficult loss for me and my family will be helpful to others who have also suffered great losses.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: HUMOROUS PATHS TO CREATING CHANGE IN THE WORKPLACE

*“Humor is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place.”*

-- Mark Twain

Humor has the power to positively influence almost any situation. Especially, the power of humor as a coping mechanism and as a conduit for effective problem solving can't be overestimated. As an example, here is how humor altered the whole tone of a meeting in my own workplace that turned out to be one of the most productive I'd ever attended.

#### **The Luck Factor (Sometimes You Gotta Get “Lucky”!)**

A professional work experience, in October of 1997, brought to light the powerful use of humor as a positive change agent. I was working at the University of Massachusetts Boston, in the Institutional Advancement Office, as the Director of Annual Giving. At the time, Michael F. Luck was Vice Chancellor. A formidable leader, he stood tall with a commanding presence, an impeccable dresser, who sported a great moustache that framed his eye-glassed face. Michael was very supportive of his entire staff, empowering each of us to go forward every day to do whatever necessary to get our jobs done. If we wanted to try something different, he would support our creative ideas. For example, during weekly staff meetings Michael led the discussion but always deferred to anyone who had a point to make or was seeking assistance.

For a meeting scheduled on Halloween, we all decided to imitate Michael for the occasion by wearing Groucho Marx glasses. We assembled at the long conference table, donned our glasses replete with a large plastic nose and a furry moustache, and awaited Michael's arrival. We had shut the door to the conference room so he would not see us in passing. We

heard him coming and all looked up expectantly. The door flew open and Michael swept into the room fully attired as a vampire with a long silk cape pulled over his face!! As he pulled the cape down to show off his fangs and fake dripping blood, he saw all twenty of us sitting around the table in our Groucho glasses staring at him. Simultaneously, all of us burst out laughing. Some of my colleagues who were not known for their sense of humor even managed a laugh. Some of us were laughing so hard it brought tears to our eyes. This quite unexpected jubilant moment opened the way for the most productive meeting I had ever attended. Ideas and solutions for current problems flew across the table. Everyone was listening and taking part in the discussion. It seemed a miracle! Humor had been the agent for creative thinking, in turn leading to important needed change. In retrospect, I realize that we all wanted to do our best for a person who acknowledged our successes, minimized our failures and disappointments and made us feel confident and happy in every day work life. Michael F. Luck helped us each reach a potential well beyond what we thought possible.

At the other extreme, at one point in my career I had a boss who was a nightmare compared to the humanism and humor that characterized my former work environment. At our very first staff meeting, this individual harangued all of us about not working up to our potential and warned that each of us would be scrutinized for our weaknesses. The bottom line was “improve or suffer the consequences”. There was an absence of humor, plus an unending barrage of unrealistic demands which hardened all our hearts against this management style. Needless to say, our productivity plummeted and two valuable workers left, one of which was me. This experience launched my resolve to make the focus of this synthesis the use of humor to cultivate creative thinking as a vehicle for bringing about needed positive change in the workplace. Over the years, I have worked in a variety of environments and experienced the

squelching of creativity, often in the guise of “business as usual”. The “business as usual” approach meant we were to do things the same way they had always been done regardless of new thoughts and better ways to accomplish our goals. Often, I would find myself thinking that in a culture of critical and creative thinking, how much more likely it would be to find effective solutions to achieve the bottom line.

As so much of my day and of most people’s day is spent at work, it is important to find a place for humor in the everyday work situation. Our colleagues are our extended family. Just as the typical American family may be basically dysfunctional, so is the typical workplace. Finding ways to cope in the everyday workplace is a continuous challenge. As the work day for many of us becomes increasingly longer and more time on the job is expected, we must be able to take our responsibilities and commitments to our jobs and businesses with a certain “grain of salt.” After all, work is still just a part of life. As the old saying goes, “Some people work to live, while others live to work.” Either way, you must be able to find a balance to be happy and fulfilled.

## **Overview of Chapters**

As mentioned, the CCT program humor course led to my interest in learning more about how humor can promote workplace productivity and physical and mental well being through creative thinking and problem solving. Chapter two of this synthesis discusses some of the theories and ideas of contributors to our understanding of the use of humor in the workplace. An objective of this review is to understand how theory translates into practice in the work environments of individuals I interviewed subsequently. As well, this review underscores the vital role of humor in the workplace, not only to overall productivity, but also to physical and mental well being.

For example, Romero, and Cruthirds (2006) explore humor as a “multifunctional management tool that can be used to achieve many objectives” in the Workplace. They have found that “...humor can foster *esprit de corps* ...spark innovation...increase the likelihood that unpleasant tasks will be accomplished... [and] relieve stress” (p. 58). Additional support for the importance of humor in the workplace is provided by Segel and La Croix (2004). In Laugh and Get Rich they emphasize that “The whole idea of brainstorming is to get the creative juices flowing to come up with an innovative solution. There are many books and workshops on the brainstorming process, but we are concentrating on humor power” (p. 21). Furthermore, Segel says that getting people to “think funny” is what gets them to think at all.

Chapter three describes my face-to-face interviews with Ed Perry, the owner of WATD radio station in Marshfield, and Rabbi Jonathan Hausman, spiritual leader of Ahavath Torah Congregation in Stoughton. As a next step, Chapter four was originally designed to discuss my concept for a humor workshop for organizations. Instead, this chapter has been re-directed to discuss the application of humor as a means of coping with tragedy. Chapter five concludes with reflections on the entire course of this synthesis and possible new directions for my own future work as a development officer and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

There are many examples of the creative use of humor in everyday work issues as well as ways humor can be added to the corporate culture. In my line of work as a development officer, we use the term “culture of philanthropy” to discuss people’s willingness to give to an organization and make a difference in the bottom line by furthering the mission of the institution. My original research was to delve into the concept of finding creative uses for the “culture of humor” in the business world. Instead, my research now focuses on cultivating a “culture of

humor” to promote health and healing. The proper use of appropriate and well intentioned humor as a creative force is a powerful tool for coping with loss and sadness. Humor can replace the dismal darkness of grief and return uplifting light to people’s lives.

## CHAPTER 2

### LAY AND SCHOLARLY FINDINGS ON THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN THE WORKPLACE

*“It has always surprised me how little attention philosophers have paid to humor since it is a more significant process of the mind than reason. Reason can only sort out perceptions, but the humor process is involved in changing them.”*

-- Edward de Bono

The thinking that comprises this chapter is taken from a variety of sources. First, findings from the research on humor are presented: for example, by psychologists who have done systematic studies on the impact of humor and professors of business who have reviewed scholarly studies pertaining to humor in the workplace. Next, this is juxtaposed with what business leaders, such as CEOs, report about the value of incorporating humor in the workplace. These comparisons illustrate important common denominators underlying scholarly and applied findings and shed light on how theory translates into practice. For example, what lay writers have expressed through anecdotal observation is also demonstrated in scholarly work through control group experiments that have been replicated. This literature establishes the importance of humor in the workplace as an essential tool for well being and employee productivity. At the same time, this literature identifies ways in which humor can backfire and create problems in the workplace when used inappropriately.

This chapter is arranged by the following topics: the role of humor in the workplace, conditions that promote humor in the workplace, which focuses on organizational culture and leadership, relationships between humor, creativity and creative problem solving, humor and stress reduction in the workplace, the effects of negative humor in the workplace, and the conclusion.

## **The Role of Humor in the Workplace**

Eric Romero and Kevin Cruthirds, a management consultant and a lecturer in the Department of Management at the University of Texas, explore ways in which managers can use humor to achieve a number of organizational outcomes in “*The Use of Humor in the Workplace*”(2006). They begin by stating that “Humor is more than just funny concepts; it represents a multifunctional tool that can be used to achieve many objectives” (p. 58). One of these objectives is to use humor to reduce stress. Another is to help with leadership issues. Properly used humor creates a comfort zone between employee and employer that lightens the work atmosphere and opens the door for more effective leadership. The authors discuss the role of humor in organizations as having the potential to counteract many problems in the workplace as well as help build healthy social relations. They cite studies that have shown that humor can build group cohesion, enhance communication (Meyer 1997), boost subordinate satisfaction (Decker 1987), contribute to higher productivity (Avolio et al., 1999), and increase creativity (Brotherton, 1996).

In discussing types of humor, Romero and Cruthirds introduce the concept of affiliative humor which is used as a “social lubricant” that facilitates interpersonal interaction that creates a positive environment. Under these circumstances people are brought closer together. An example of this type of humor would be inside jokes that pertain to a particular group and good natured practical jokes that are played on people during a social gathering. This type of non-hostile and affirming humor can lessen interpersonal tensions and aid in relationship building (Martin et al. 2003).

Rick Segel, a Certified Speaking Professional and seasoned retailer and Darren La Croix, a corporate comedian and a nationally known keynote speaker, agree with Romero and Cruthird

about the importance of affiliative humor. In Laugh and Get Rich (2004), they state that “Humor is the new common denominator in business, the oil that helps an engine run smoothly; it helps that polished business person make you feel comfortable. It makes awkward situations bearable” (p.11).

Another successful businessman, Mike Veeck, also echoes these ideas in his book Fun is Good (2005). Veeck oversees all his endeavors, which include managing six minor league baseball teams, based on the notion that “fun is good” which is also the title of his book. As for the role of humor, Veeck adheres to the “humorous path” philosophy in all his business dealings and has transformed his half a dozen losing baseball teams into a combined \$20 to \$30 million business. The local Brockton Rox team franchise owned by Veeck is an excellent example of this. While Veeck originally concentrated on building better teams, he now builds more fun parks. The Campanelli Stadium in Brockton hosts all kinds of events in addition to the games that are played there during the season. The Shaw’s Center, a large rental hall facility, is attached to the stadium. Attendees at the Shaw’s Center can come out next to the field and watch the baseball game in progress. Rox management frequently invites the bride and groom, the birthday person, or others holding an event at the Center, to come on to the field and throw out the first pitch. What could be more fun than that? The “Fun is Good” philosophy also works to create enjoyable, yet affordable evenings for everyone at Veeck’s ballparks across the country. The evening’s festivities, though centered on the baseball game, also include zany promotions, free give-aways, audience involvement in contests, pre-show activities, reasonably priced quality food, and many other attractions to keep the fans coming back for more. Veeck’s point is that the use of humor, especially playfulness, is a crucial element in promoting success in any organization, not just his own.

Psychologist Paul McGhee, who has published 11 books and many scientific articles on humor, also reviews research that supports the value of humor in the workplace. In Health, Healing and the Amuse System (1999) he emphasizes the benefits of adding humor and fun to the workplace, citing research that shows the use of humor is an increasingly widely accepted management strategy. For example, the Blumenfeld and Alpern (1994) study cited in McGhee on “Humor at Work” provides the following data:

In a recent survey of business executives and deans of business schools, 62% of the deans responding to the survey said they felt that humor contributed to executive success; and nearly all the CEOs who responded felt that humor has an important role to play in the conduct of business, helping to keep business healthy. (1999, p.7)

## **Conditions that Promote Humor in the Workplace**

### **Organizational Culture**

The nature of an organizational culture has significant bearing on whether humor can flourish in the workplace as a vehicle for positive change. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) cite the work of Clouse and Spurgeon (1995) whose findings support humor as an important component of organizational culture because it creates a positive environment in which knowledge and ideas are shared freely and interpersonal relationships can flourish. Both empirical (Avolio et al 1999) and anecdotal evidence (Caudron 1992) indicate that humor in the workplace is associated with superior performance. Examining examples of successful organizations that emphasize a culture of humor helps reveal some features of such cultures that may be particularly important.

One example Romero and Cruthirds give is Southwest Airlines, which is “...well known for its fun culture and witty employees as well as its consistent profitability and growth (p.62). Paul McGhee (1999) also cites Southwest Airlines as an example. McGhee describes Herb Kelleher, the CEO of Southwest Airlines, who insists on hiring employees with a good sense of humor. Kelleher discusses that in filling any position, the company’s number one priority is to

hire someone who already has a good sense of humor. As the leader, Kelleher uses humor to cope with all aspects of his business. For example, when Southwest achieved the best on time record in the airline industry, nudging out the last year's winner, the last year's winner continued to make a false claim that they were number one. Kelleher handled this with a full page ad in USA today which referenced the other airline's incorrect statement and said simply under that "Liar! Liar! Pants on Fire" (McGhee p. 38).

Segel and La Croix (2004) point out a similar organizational culture in Cape Air, the largest non affiliated regional airline in the United States. As of 2004, Cape Air serviced over 400,000 passengers per year. Cape Air's philosophy which is the basis for their organizational culture is "MOCHa HAGoTDI". While this sounds like an odd cup of coffee, it is an acronym for "Make Our Customers Happy-Have a Good Time Doing It". According to Daniel Wolf, President of Cape Air, this philosophy is a ... "breeding ground for spontaneity, creativity, and resourcefulness....it is a safe atmosphere to take a risk" (Segel and LaCroix p. 222). For example, Cape Air decided to bring art and culture to the community by choosing a local Cape Cod artist named Jurek, to use a plane as his canvas. Jurek drew turtles walking on the wings and a shark head on the nose of the plane as well as many other depictions representing the final destination of the plane in Key West. This certainly distinguishes the plane in a creative way, but Cape Air took a risk to try this. The passengers love to fly on this plane so it brought great marketing benefits as well.

Another example of a strong organizational culture devoted to humor and fun is Jordan's Furniture store. Segel and La Croix (2004) devote a chapter to Jordan's entitled, "Inside the Mind of an Entertainment Shopping King". It focuses on Barry Tatelman of Jordan's Furniture fame whom I met at the special opening of the Ikea store in Stoughton more than a year ago. I

asked him about his enormously successful furniture business and he replied it was all about people enjoying themselves. This same thought prefaces the chapter in the Segel and LaCroix book just referenced. Barry Tatelman said “People don’t want to go to a furniture store, they want to be entertained” (Segel and LaCroix p. 207). The secret of the store’s success was in developing a philosophy of fun in their stores, as this was the ticket to initially get people into the store and also to have customers in a good mood. This policy led to people being more open to purchases. Rick Segel further discusses the Tatelmans’ view on the consumer enjoying their shopping experience by giving this mode of thinking the name of the “Clown Concept.”

Practicing the clown concept is simply good business. The idea behind this is making people happy. If people are in a comfortable frame of mind, they are more open to buying a product. The shopping experience needs to be pleasant. If an organization succeeds in establishing an enjoyable environment including agreeable dealings with the staff and pleasant surroundings, then the overall purchase will be a satisfying encounter. Thus, you as the consumer will repeat this shopping experience repeatedly as well as inform your friends to come and be entertained and have the ability to buy quality products. This provides an effective marketing tool for any business. The Tatelmans are known for their humor as well as the bottom line in their organization. Over the years, they have received many accolades from those in the furniture industry including Retailer of the Year in the U.S. by the National Home Furnishings Association (out of 12,000 retailers) and Entrepreneur of the Year/Social Responsibility for their charity in giving back to the community. You can be successful, charitable, and have fun all together! Taking this thinking a step further, Segel and LaCroix refer to the Barry Tatelman interview during which he describes how Jordan’s hires their employees.

Jordan’s does not try to hire funny people. They hire good people, create an environment of fun, and encourage humor. The fun comes from assimilation. Employees see others

around them having fun so they have a natural tendency to want to have fun, too. Jordan's already created an environment in which fun is welcomed, and though new hires may not be used to that with previous employers. Fun becomes simply a natural occurrence. (p. 213)

Tatelman further discusses how humor and a fun atmosphere at work help both the employees and the customers. The employees are happier in their every day work life and thus are willing to work to the best of their ability. Moving forward with this thinking, Barry and his brother Elliot provided a fun relaxing day for all their Jordan's Furniture employees a few years ago. They closed their furniture stores for one day and chartered four passenger planes to bring all 1,400 employees to Bermuda for a an outing. Talk about joy at work! Such "surprise" "happenings should have a place in many businesses!

Segel and LaCroix (2004) also cite the Bose Corporation, which is the world's largest manufacturer of loud speakers and a leading innovator in sound reproduction. Bose prioritizes humor as a significant factor in their organizational culture. Sherwin Greenblatt, Chief Operating Officer of Bose, has the following quote hanging in his office: "There is no reason why you can't relax, laugh, and do the things that one considers play while you are working. I think that's the healthiest and best mixture. We certainly have enough stress that we can use some fun and play" (pp. 197-198). In reference to this Segel says: "Think about it and from whom it comes. Really think... Important concept. A worthwhile one to implement. You can be successful AND enjoy what you do on a daily basis" (pp.197 – 198).

Organizational culture is the proving ground for whether humor will be accepted as a tool for business success. A climate of happiness and joy promotes a win/win situation for both employees and the customers. An overall mood of well being perceived by the customer and the staff is a powerful enhancement to efficiency and productivity for any business. The use of various methods to produce this positive state can happen through: appreciation of art, such as in

Southwest's use of images on their planes; the playfulness of a day off from work spent on an island paradise, as in the case of Jordan's Furniture; the encouragement of a relaxing atmosphere, such as the case at BOSE; and open communication between all levels of employees of the business hierarchy. Humor is the tool to encourage all of this.

### **Leadership**

The initiative for incorporating humor into organizational culture originates with the leadership and flows from there to the rank and file. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) propose that "humor can be used to enhance leadership by securing a person's power in hierarchical relationships and reducing social distances between leaders and followers" (p.63). As emphasized, humor can open the way for mobilizing company productivity. Organizational leaders need to set the stage for this to happen through appropriate uses of humor. Especially in a participative leadership role, humor helps both the employer and the employee find common ground to work together and makes a comfortable yet productive atmosphere for both. Decker and Rotondo (in Romero and Cruthirds, 2006) find that humor can be used to set the stage for a collegial atmosphere between the employer and employee. Thus communication at all levels is enhanced as both administrators and staff can talk more comfortably with one another. Paul McGhee (1999) concurs, discussing how research has shown the value of humor and fun on the job as shown in the prior organizational culture section. In today's hectic business environment, leaders are called upon to be astute people managers by allowing individuals the opportunity to be self motivated on one hand and to also be team players and work well with others when necessary. All of this reinforces the importance of adding humor to the work day. The motivation factor comes from the employees themselves when they are enjoying their jobs. McGhee (1999) cites Hal Rosenbluth, a corporate CEO, who has the following to say:

It is almost inhumane if companies create a climate where people can't naturally have fun... Our role and responsibility as leaders and associates is to create a place where people can enjoy themselves, I know our company is doing well when I walk around and hear people laughing. (p. 3)

McGhee asserts that, "Leaders today must recognize the strong desire of an educated work force to have work that they enjoy doing." Dwight Eisenhower 34<sup>th</sup> President of the United States said, "A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done". Leadership is indeed an art and humor an important tool of skillful leaders as shown in this section.

### **Creativity and Creative Problem Solving**

Another important aspect to examine is the relationship between humor, creativity and creative problem solving as this relates to creating positive organizational change. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) make the link between humor and creativity, as have psychologists who have studied creativity. Humor generates new ideas, new thinking. People are more relaxed and open and less prone to criticize mistakes or new ideas which lead to risk taking which is the basis of creative thinking (Morreall 1991). An additional explanation for humor's positive effect on creativity is that a "humorous environment leads to increased creativity by instilling a contagious "fun mood" in which original ideas are likely to emerge" (Ziv 1983 p. 70).

Research has shown people in a humorous environment are more inclined to do creative problem solving. There are many organizations, including Google, Pixar Animation Studios and Southwest Airlines to name a few, who spend considerable time and energy developing a playful atmosphere that leads to well documented cases of creativity. For example, Southwest Airline uses its relaxed atmosphere to have you start enjoying your vacation or trip when you board the airplane instead of when you reach your destination. Flying can be stressful for many people. It's

a wise idea to differentiate the airline from all the others and get the consumer to choose Southwest over its competitors. Their relaxed atmosphere is apparent in the attire of their flight attendants and humorous way they make announcements that begin with music and silliness. This is consistent with McGhee's (1999) research on the creativity / humor connection in which he describes the intense pressure that abounds in most companies today. Employees are constantly multi- tasking and are expected to keep up with an enormous workload. This kind of pressure is stifling and doesn't auger well for a climate in which people can relax and humor can thrive. As McGhee views it, "Humor primes the pump and gets the creative juices flowing" (p.19). Furthermore, he says:

As the premium placed on creative thinking and innovative problem solving continues to rise, companies in the future may well adopt the tactic of training their employees how to think. Boosting their humor skills and creating a lighter work environment provides training in creative thinking at the same time it makes work more enjoyable (p. 21)

Related to this is the concept that humor is a way of taking your mind off the problem, even if just for a few moments, so you can smile and relax. This distancing allows your creativity to take hold. After a joke or other amusement and some time away from the problem, you are quite likely to have a creative solution develop in your mind. McGhee speaks of Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, M.D. and Nobel prize winner, who alludes to this in saying "Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different."

In Fun is Good, Veeck (2005) includes a chapter entitled *Lessons from Dad*, in which he refers to his father Bill, a legendary baseball establishment figure and model entrepreneur . In a passage entitled "Lesson 10: *Live a Life of Creativity*" Veeck has this to say about the creativity/humor connection:

A life of creativity involves bringing out the creativity in others and seeking their opinions. It involves lots of laughter, never taking yourself too seriously, and dealing with adversity with a smile. It involves reinventing yourself at 54, seeking out speaking

opportunities, and never missing the opportunity to learn about someone. (p. 104)

Veeck also talks about taking risks which is a hallmark of creative thinkers. As manager of six minor league baseball teams, Veeck takes risks every day and says we must ask ourselves, “why not?” We must be able to see the potential in doing things out of the ordinary with a spirit of fun in your heart.

Mike Kerr, humorist and consultant, lists “10 Creativity Commandments for an Effective Brainstorm” on his web site (<http://www.mikekerr.com> viewed 4/2/2007). One of his commandments is to meet in a relaxed, preferably fun location.

In a Training Magazine survey, 90% of respondents reported that location had a significant impact on their creativity and 40% said their own workplace was the least conducive for creativity. So remove any unwanted distractions, such as cell phones...replace them with fun distractions that might spark the group’s creative energy, like props, toys or music. The best choice for music, according to creativity experts, has no lyrics and limited mental demands on the listeners, such as classical, light jazz, or new age music. ([www.mikekerr.com](http://www.mikekerr.com)).

Kerr’s last commandment is to “have fun”. Instill a sense of “play, enthusiasm, and discovery in all of your brainstorming sessions. Get out of your seat and use your body to more fully engage your brain.”

John Morreall, professor of religion at the College of William and Mary, has been studying humor for more than 25 years. Morreall says that, “Humor promotes creative thinking, mental flexibility, the ability to cope with change...it helps us to get along with each other.” (<http://www.wm.edu/news/?id=3772> viewed 10/29/2006)

There is evidence both from anecdotal studies as well as empirical studies that confirms the use of humor as a vital tool in creative problem solving and creative thinking. Relaxed atmospheres in the work environment, brought about by the use of humor, is important to overall work place efficiency and creativity.

## **Stress Reduction**

There is much written on the powerful effect of humor on stress reduction. With job stress at epidemic levels, this is a crucial relationship to study. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) speak about the therapeutic value of joking about a stressful situation (e.g., a stressful business event, firings, layoffs) which can defuse its intensity and contribute to a sense of dominance and control over it. Furthermore, according to Romero and Cruthirds (2006), humor can also reduce stress in the military by “mocking the risk of death in marching songs and jokes” (p. 62). Humor engenders confidence and gives people a sense of control says Dixon (1980), which is incompatible with feeling stress. This method is used frequently in movies. For example, when facing what seems like certain death, James Bond jokes about the inevitable which somehow always results in his escaping a disastrous end. In the 1973 Bond movie, *Live and Let Die*, starring Roger Moore, James escapes certain death after being tossed into a lake with hundreds of alligators by running across their backs, miraculously escaping their jaws. He jumps off the last one and onto the shore while joking about the situation. He certainly shows no fear. The ridiculousness of the situation is evident to the viewer, but we buy the whole situation hook, line and sinker. Abel (2002) finds that people with a high sense of humor are likely to reframe stressful situations so that they are perceived as manageable.

In discussing stress management, Paul McGhee (1999) reports that “there exists a great deal of research documenting humor’s power as a stress management tool” (p.11). For example, a study of 36 female executives indicates that those who scored higher on a sense of humor test suffered less burnout on the job than their colleagues. Related to this is the idea that humor helps improve your resilience which in turn helps you cope with stress. The prevalence of stress is felt throughout corporate America. McGhee further states that “billions of dollars are lost every year

to absenteeism through stress related problems (p.12) and that the seriousness of this problem cannot be understated”. Job stress is caused by many factors including, keeping up with change, pressure to do more with less, a demand to do things faster, and information overload.

Historically, job stress has been a fact of life as this quote from Abraham Lincoln (during the Civil War) reflects: “Gentlemen, why don’t you laugh. With the fearful strain that is upon me day and night, if I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do.”

McGhee (1999) says that stress is an international problem. For example, “The Japanese had such high levels of stress in the 1980’s and 1990’s that they coined a new word ‘karoshi’ to describe cases of death from overwork” (1999). Sobering thoughts indeed.

The “Minnifield Principle of Humor” (in Segel and LaCroix, 2004) states that you cannot be stressed or angry when you are laughing. Basically, Dr. Minnifield developed a method that calls for you to grasp something as tightly as possible and then at the “maximum moment of stress and tension” you try to laugh. When you do indeed laugh, all the tension leaves your body. “Stress and laughter are two emotions that simply cannot occur in the human body at the same time” (p.13).

Karyn Buxman is a nationally recognized expert on therapeutic humor and sought after humor consultant. She advocates incorporating humor directly into management strategies for stress reduction purposes and warns about the following:

U.S. workers consume 15 tons of aspirin a day. One in four workers suffers from an anxiety related illness. Soon job stress may be the number one reason for worker’s compensation. “Terminal professionalism” seems to be a sign of the times. But taking oneself too seriously can have unpleasant side effects. (2005, p. 16)

Humor acts as a major coping mechanism by relieving anxiety and tension. A major concern for any business or organization needs to be that stress takes its toll on the employees and causes many problems at work. Humor is an effective, low cost solution to this growing problem.

## **Possible Negative Effects of Humor**

There can be a downside to the use of humor in the workplace environment. It must be used responsibly and in moderation to be effective. Some managers are opposed to the use of humor because of the possibility that it could be used inappropriately or indiscreetly. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) refer to humor as a “double-edged” sword because it can be perceived as humorous by one person yet be offensive to another. Inappropriate use of humor can cause problems in an organization. For example, derision, which is a type of aggressive humor, can alienate people from one another in organizations. Individuals who abuse the use of humor in the workplace can also lose their credibility with others. Attention must be given to differences in sense of humor. Negative humor should never be used in the workplace: for example, ethnic and sexist jokes, insults, humiliation, and ridicule. This type of negative humor might also result in lawsuits which can harm an organization on a number of levels.

## **Conclusion**

As Romero and Cruthirds (2006) remind us, the purpose of integrating humor into organizations is not to turn managers and employees into stand-up comedians, but to help organizations understand the power of humor in creating a synergistic, productive work place environment. Humor cannot exist in an organization unless it is supported from the top down. As shown through both lay and scholarly reading, the benefits to any organization from the addition of humor are immense. Humor should be used as a tool to encourage and welcome creative problem solving, increased collegiality and better productivity of employees working in an atmosphere of less stress. The physical and mental well being of employees are enhanced because of the uplifting atmosphere created by the gentle use of humor. This in turn provides an environment that is conducive to more efficient, resourceful, and effective work. The use of

proper humor is a crucial management strategy that must be encouraged at all times to increase the bottom line success for any business.

The next chapter continues my exploration of these issues and discusses what I learned from my interviews with two creative leaders: a business leader and owner of a local radio station and a rabbi in a local congregation who both utilize humor very effectively in their work.

## CHAPTER 3

### HOW A RADIO STATION OWNER AND A RABBI USE HUMOR

*“A leader without a sense of humor is apt to be like the grass mower at the cemetery-he has lots of people under him, but nobody is paying him any attention.”*

*--Bob Ross*

I interviewed two very different individuals who actively use humor in their work and life. Ed Perry is the owner of WATD-FM-95 Radio Station in Marshfield, MA and Rabbi Jonathan Hausman is spiritual leader of Ahavath Torah Congregation in Stoughton, MA.

I decided to interview these individuals, after reading through and researching much anecdotal as well as empirical evidence in the use of humor. I felt the need to discuss this firsthand for another perspective. These interviews confirm many of the findings from the literature cited in chapter two. They also provide an important means of understanding how theory translates into practice. I chose two very unique individuals in two very different work settings to see if there were any commonalities in both. I also was interested in finding out how they as the leaders actually created an organizational culture of humor. These interviews were a vehicle to find some perhaps subtle features in their operations that might not have been stated in the formal writings reviewed in chapter two.

#### **Edward Perry**

Ed is the owner of WATD-FM-95.9 Radio Station in Marshfield, MA. He and wife Carol work at the station full-time. “It’s a family operation”, Ed says, “and it’s not for sale. And it’s staffed by some of the best people in the business. And, even after 25 years, we’re still having fun.” Ed uses his humor to poke fun at himself in commenting, “I grew up in Natick, Massachusetts - the son of two very nice, well-degreed teachers who sensed almost immediately that I would become their academic black sheep. I did not disappoint my parents.” About his radio station, Ed has this to say:

Today, WATD is one of the most respected and honored stations in the state. For the past ten years, the Associated Press has given WATD the "Bay State Award" signifying the best local news operation in the state. We are one of the few radio stations ever to win five Edward R. Murrow Awards for national news excellence. WATD is a full service regional radio station, the way some of the old line Boston stations used to be. We offer excellent local and regional news, unmatched live coverage of local breaking stories, live high school sports coverage and we even have our own weatherman based in Hull and an award winning locally produced children's show. All of our announcers are 'Boston Quality' and our music is oriented toward an adult audience. However, WATD is also well known for our specialty shows including acoustic music in the evening, blues at night and a series of weekend shows featuring everything from financial news and restaurant reviews to oldies to Irish music.

**Interview: September 29, 2006:**

This was the first of two interviews with Ed. The second one took place March 6, 2007.

Ed invited me to WATD to tour the station firsthand and then talk with him. From the outset, it was apparent that Ed lives his own philosophy of humor and fun every day at work. His office is filled to the brim with stuffed animals of all varieties, talking figures and magic balls, framed cartons and original artwork. Then there's the magic ball to which you ask questions and it gives you answers which Ed says he uses for decision-making and to relax people in his office.

Many impressive awards line the walls of Station WATD which is testimony that WATD is highly respected and one of the few remaining independent radio stations. Ed Perry's philosophy of business works well. He practices his humor and lightheartedness daily and his station remains vibrant in an era where privately owned family stations have become almost extinct. The entire staff follows Ed's lead in his use of humor in the workplace. Ed believes his philosophy is applicable to any business and can increase productivity and enjoyment in being in the workplace environment. One of the themes is how you perceive yourself. For example, Ed believes that you should not take yourself too seriously. In exercising this theme, Ed mentioned that the name of the Radio Station, WATD, has its origin in the letters that stand for "We're At The Dump" which refers to nearby land usage. A major tenet he lives by is "dare to dream".

Another is "don't get caught up in your own importance in the scheme of things." Ed's business cards list him as "Ringmaster" instead of President/Owner of the station. Ed also has no qualms about using self deprecating humor to win over others.

Another theme was about how you perceive and relate to others. Ed believes that you must think creatively and critically and daringly, without normal boundaries – which is his way of referring to being a risk-taker. He talks about the importance of engaging in dialogue with others and being open to whatever you learn, see, hear, think, believe and imagine. Ed feels you must be able to feel comfortable with your use of humor with others so they in return will be more relaxed and productive.

Very importantly, Ed stressed the need to keep your sense of humor alive and well at all times in the work environment. While this can be a challenge at times, nevertheless this needs to happen. And, in the process, be prepared to turn non- believers in humor in the workplace into believers by your actions as well as words. Ed ended the interview with the statement, "Life is a journey with many twists and turns and that the use of humor helps you navigate through this."

### **Second Interview: March 6, 2007**

This second interview took place in my office at Massasoit Community College. Ed was at the college for a meeting and offered to stop by to talk with me afterwards. During this time, he elaborated further on his philosophy of humor and its value in promoting an enjoyable, productive organizational climate. He also began to say more about the specific practices he used to create such a climate.

Ed says that you need to like what you are doing because it's tough to laugh when you do not like what you are doing and you wind up counting the moments to go home. Humor takes hold when you are having a good time. It's much easier to laugh when you are enjoying yourself.

Humor sets up a “feel good climate” about what you are doing. You realize that humor and laughter are good punctuation marks to any statement.

Ed also talked about the learning factor in appropriate humor. He said you learn quickly that you need to laugh with someone rather than at someone. He emphasized the need for the proper use of humor in a business setting through provocative analogy: if you owned the cure for cancer you could say anything you want. Otherwise you must be careful not to offend. You can never get laughs at the expense of a person or a particular group.

Ed’s favorite discussion centers on actual practices he uses in the workplace. He prefaces by saying that WATD has low turnover in employees, with everyone on a first name basis. A business relationship is similar to a family relationship. Small organizations experience the same resentments and difficulties as families. Ed’s wife Carol, who works closely with him, is in agreement.

Ed Perry is pleased that he has almost never had to fire any one. He’s always working on keeping the staff laughing and happy. On Friday evenings the staff goes out to neutral territory for a drink or something to eat. If anything has gone wrong during the work day it is forgotten. Ed’s philosophy is “Kill them or forgive them”. Obviously the latter prevails! He also believes strongly in acknowledging good work and using humor to mitigate failures. Ed recognizes staff for what they do on a positive level. He runs all kinds of contests and rewards people for their efforts. Because he enjoys what he does as the CEO, he transmits that laughter, happiness and smiles to others. To emphasize the point, Ed pulled out a harmonica and started to play “Oh Susannah” which brought an instant smile to my face!

In discussing the relationship between humor and creativity, Ed says that radio work is part of the entertainment business and in that regard you must make people feel good, make them

smile, through humor. In turn, this generates creativity in thought and action. For example, he mentioned adults who come in for business reasons and bring their children with them. To keep these children from becoming bored, Ed collects stuffed animals and toys for them to play with while he's conducting business with their parents. After a moment of reflection, Ed looked up and said, "Humor is more genteel than bullets. Humor is also a pain killer." A highly respected member of the business community, Ed Perry understands how to use humor effectively to remove barriers that can interfere with people being able to work together compatibly and collaboratively.

These interviews confirmed some of my research with respect to the benefits that come from creating an appropriate humor climate in the workplace, including the mind and body connection and how there is more collegiality when humor is used as a connection tool. The personal interview technique also adds the unique perspective of seeing firsthand how a leader can change the entire work environment with a strong commitment to a culture of humor. Hearing and seeing this in action is an exciting confirmation of theory.

### **Rabbi Jonathan Hausman**

Rabbi Hausman is the spiritual leader of Ahavath Torah Congregation in Stoughton MA. "Rabbi J", as he prefers to be called, has served as treasurer and president of the Stoughton Clergy Association and as a member of the Board of Directors for the Striar Jewish Community Center and South Area Solomon Schechter Day School. He is currently a Vice President of the Jewish Cemetery Association of Massachusetts and serves on the Board of Governors for the Va'ad HaKashruth. Rabbi J is a member of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis and the American Association of Rabbis.

As a member of Rabbi J's congregation, I have had many enjoyable opportunities to

experience his sense of humor. For example, in February 2007 a “roast” was held in his honor. The Rabbi arrived attired in a tuxedo jacket replete with a red rose in his lapel, black Lycra biking pants, sneakers and a scarf tied on his head! An avid bicyclist, he had recently completed a ride in Israel to raise money for a children’s cancer hospital. The three hour roast was filled with humorous stories people shared about this man. For example, the office assistant to the Rabbi shared stories about Rabbi J’s propensity for using colorful language peppered with words that one would not use in polite company. Two of the congregants did a skit on the Rabbi as a child. One of the men , quite diminutive in build, rode up to the front of the group on a huge tricycle while dressed in lycra as a mini version of the Rabbi. People were howling with laughter at this! Two of the Rabbi’s brothers shared growing up stories about the many jobs the Rabbi had through his formative years. They said that most of his jobs ended in disillusionment as the employers did not appreciate the Rabbi J’s sense of humor. Thus, Rabbi J decided to become self employed, went to law school and then became a practicing attorney before being bitten by the rabbinical bug. The Rabbi piped up that you had to have a sense of humor to survive as a lawyer.

Even the emails sent by the Congregational Roast Committee to promote the evening and consequent follow up were humorous: *The crowd will be large. We have over 250 reservations. We chose not to turn people away. The next time we do a roast, we will find a less popular Rabbi.* After the Rabbi was read some of these emails, he used a bit of self deprecating humor to say he thought he was a less popular Rabbi already as some people did not appreciate his sense of humor.

The entire Roast Committee was caught up in the fun of the event, as was the Rabbi who reveled in making ad lib responses! When the Rabbi’s brothers were roasting him, Rabbi J kept interrupting and saying that you can’t always believe a Hausman and that his brothers were

jealous because his mother always liked him the best. The Rabbi also kept saying that the only thing that keeps him on good behavior is his wife and daughter as he does not want to be on the receiving end of their humor.

**Interview: March 9, 2007**

Rabbi J was kind enough to fit me into a very hectic day as all his days are filled from early morning to quite late. In fact, he asked if he could multi task while I was interviewing him. The Rabbi was dealing with many of life's issues including being called to do a baby naming, and working on writing that certificate, filling in at a funeral later in the day, answering crucial calls as they came in, all while eating his breakfast, a prune hamentashen. I asked him if he would share some thoughts about how humor had influenced his profession. First, he emphasized the influence of his family on the development of his sense of humor. He said his father was the class clown. His brothers always played jokes on each other and their parents and his mother's side of the family was known for their dry wit and terrific sense of humor. Of course, he said, he had to follow in their footsteps. Rabbi J also mentioned Rabbi Jack Bloom as a significant influence in his life, by pointing out that he saw humor in many things.

These were some of the factors that led Rabbi J to decide to "be myself". In making the choice to become a spiritual leader, he understood the responsibility he would have for helping his congregants cope with life and death matters. He observed that people were able to cope better with difficult circumstances when they were more relaxed, recognizing the vital role that humor plays in bringing this about.

Rabbi J gave a powerful example of the use of humor in a serious setting. Comedian Mel Brooks was getting a lot of guff from the public at first with his play, "The Producers", which ridicules Hitler. In the Rabbi's view, "What better way to deal with an EVIL Man, than through

humor? Humor brought Hitler down in this play, showed him to be an idiot. One of the main song and dance numbers, Springtime for Hitler, ridiculed the man and what he stood for.

In revisiting the theme of “being himself”, the Rabbi spoke of the risk in doing so and that a downside of his use of humor is that some people have actually left the congregation because they did not appreciate his humor. Nevertheless, he chooses to overlook this and does not look back. He believes in the importance of using humor in his role as spiritual leader and sees no valid reason for changing this approach. Rabbi J also uses his sense of humor for self protection. He mentioned some congregants who are “clergy killers” and give him a hard time about everything. He deals with them with a sense of humor as well.

As he often does, the Rabbi discussed the Talmud, the record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish laws, ethics, customs and history. He said that the Talmud is replete with humor lessons underlying its teachings. He believes that humor is about finding the balance. A lot of hurt calls for a lot of humor and that there is a time and a place for everything. When humor works it is great. However, humor can also be a sword so it must be used carefully. Unlike his brothers’ use of ribald humor, which is not appropriate for a Rabbi, he tends to use self deprecating humor. “Humor teaches you that life is not black and white” which is how he ended our interview.

Highly respected by his congregants and the whole community, Rabbi J. always reaches out to others, many times as leader of the interfaith council in the town of Stoughton. I was reminded of a very sad occasion where the Rabbi was officiating at the funeral of a dear friend of mine who passed away last year at the age of 59 after a long and painful battle with pancreatic cancer. As we assembled at the grave for the burial service, it started to rain. The Rabbi remarked that it would have appealed to the deceased to see us all get wet on his behalf. The

reasoning behind this we all knew was that the deceased always worked in the parking lot through any kind of weather on the High Holidays and very often got soaked from a rain shower. All the assembled mourners smiled and some of us laughed and for a moment we were removed from the pain of grief.

## **Conclusions**

Both of these interviews provided unique perspectives as to the reasons why these leaders emphasized humor in their every day work life. Interestingly enough, both Ed Perry and Rabbi J spoke extensively about their own perceptions of themselves through their use of humor. Both of these leaders were adamant about being true to their own judgments and not being too concerned as to how others perceived them. Strong leaders are willing to take a stand and lead by example. I found their philosophies similar to some of the lay and scholarly research in Chapter 2. Much of what Ed Perry and Rabbi J had to say echoed the thoughts and action of Mike Veeck and Segal and LaCroix on the lay side and affirmed the research of Romero and Cruthirds on the scholarly side. For example, Veeck's humorous path philosophy is consistent with the philosophy of both the interviewees. Mike Veeck, Ed Perry, and Rabbi J all conduct their everyday business lives with a heavy dose of humor and the ability to keep the work atmosphere light and open to allow for creativity in problem solving. On the scholarly side, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) section on effective leadership and organizational culture reflects the actual best practices that Ed Perry and Rabbi J employ daily.

## CHAPTER 4

### SIDSTHESIS

*“Dear Friend,*

*Please be patient with me; I need to grieve in my own way and in my own time. Please don't take away my grief or try to fix my pain. The best thing you can do is listen to me and let me cry on your shoulder. Don't be afraid to cry with me. Your tears will tell me how much you care.*

*Please forgive me if I seem insensitive to your problems. I feel depleted and drained, like an empty vessel, with nothing left to give.*

*Please let me express my feelings and talk about my memories. Feel free to share your own stories of my loved one with me. I need to hear them.*

*Please understand why I must turn a deaf ear to criticism or tired clichés. I can't handle another person telling me that time heals all wounds.*

*Please don't try to find the "right" words to say to me. There's nothing you can say to take away the hurt. What I need are hugs, not words.*

*Please don't push me to do things I'm not ready to do, or feel hurt if I seem withdrawn. This is a necessary part of my recovery.*

*Please don't stop calling me. You might think you're respecting my privacy, but to me it feels like abandonment. Please don't expect me to be the same as I was before. I've been through a traumatic experience and I'm a different person.*

*Please accept me for who I am today.”*

*-- Margaret Brownley*

As first mentioned in the Prologue, this chapter evolved into something entirely different from the original plan. As stated in chapter one, my belief is that humor has the power to positively impact almost any situation. However, some of life's twists and turns highly challenge the viewpoints we hold so dearly. In the original plan, chapter four was to be entitled, “Knowing Where to Hit-A Humor Workshop Proposal” to include illustrative visuals and handouts. As of April 11, 2007, the following chapters had been written: chapter one, “Humorous Paths to Creating Change in the Workplace; chapter two, the literature review, comprised of lay and scholarly findings on the role of humor in the workplace; and chapter three, the interviews conducted with two leaders who use humor in their everyday work life. These chapters remain

as originally written, with my intent to continue this initial work in the future.

### **A Tragedy that Changed my Life**

Nothing will ever be the same in my life again. In the early morning hours of April 12, 2007, I received tragic news from my daughter that her six week old son, Cole, had just passed away from causes unknown. After hanging up the phone, I was overcome by nausea and disbelief. How could my beloved grandson, whom I had just held in my arms and cooed with days earlier, possibly be dead? How could this happen? Cole had his six week check up with the pediatrician the day before and was developing remarkably well, gaining weight and the picture of health. My daughter and son-in-law were ideal parents, taking great care of their baby who was so wanted by them and the entire family. Why does an apparently healthy child die for no reason? This was the question that catapulted me into an intensive learning process about the unfathomable tragedy known as SIDS.

### **Background Information on SIDS**

Before moving on to a new direction for my work, I feel it is crucial to have an understanding of what is known currently about SIDS. I initially knew little about this tragedy. As it is too difficult for me presently to discuss this in my own words, I am including information from the website that I originally turned to for my own edification.

SIDS is an acronym for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. According to information supplied on the web site for the CJ Foundation (the CJ Foundation was founded in 1994 by Joel and Susan Hollander in memory of their daughter, Carly Jenna, who died from SIDS in 1993)

(<http://www.cjsids.com/>):

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is one of the leading causes of death among infants one month through one year of age in the United States. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) defines SIDS as the sudden death of an infant under one year of age which remains unexplained after a thorough case

investigation, including performance of a complete autopsy, examination of the death scene and review of the clinical history. SIDS is therefore a diagnosis of exclusion, affixed only once all known and possible causes of death have been ruled out.

The CJ web site provides valuable information about the syndrome itself, but just as important it discusses what the experience is like for the families involved including why it is so psychologically difficult. The CJ Foundation web site states the following:

The death of a child is truly one of life's most tragic experiences. The death of a child due to SIDS is unimaginable. Parents are forced to deal with a death that is unexpected and unexplained, not preventable or predictable and leaves no time for goodbye... The death of a baby from SIDS disrupts the natural order and is a traumatic event that affects the family for the rest of their lives. The sudden, unexpected death of a child threatens parents' safety and security and forces them to confront their own mortality. The lack of a discernible cause, the suddenness of the tragedy and the involvement of the legal system make a SIDS death especially difficult, leaving a great sense of loss and a need for understanding.

The death of a child from SIDS can be more emotionally devastating than the death of a child from other causes, for many reasons as further described on the CJ web site. The following information on the CJ web site had a profound effect on me as I was having such a difficult time accepting what had happened to my family.

The impact of SIDS is extensive and affects a myriad of people from parents, siblings, and grandparents to extended family, friends, babysitters, and co-workers. Families are directly helped through information and support services to alleviate their guilt and aid in understanding this devastating syndrome... The lack of a definitive cause of death, even after autopsy, does little to alleviate any feelings of guilt the parents may have about their responsibility for the death. They often blame themselves. The "if onlys" plague parents who wonder if there was something in the baby's behavior or health they may have missed. A generally uninformed public, including family members and health care professionals, can add to the grief and guilt of the family by voicing incorrect assumptions. Parents have been accused of neglecting or abusing their child because of mistaken information. They need to know that they did not cause, nor could they have prevented, the death. It is not their fault.

### **A New Direction for my Study of Humor**

For me, trying to cope with the tragedy was fraught with pain, uncertainty, and heartache at the lack of information available. At first, I could not even find a support network that was so

needed by the entire family. Grief stricken, it seemed impossible to think clearly at first. However, after giving myself some time for emotional recovery, I was able to call upon my CCT training and formulate plans for identifying what needs to be learned about SIDS and how to cope with and make better sense out of this tragedy. This was to become an especially challenging process. As the CJ Foundation SIDS web site indicates, there is a lack of education among the public that contributes to people asking insensitive questions. There is also only a small group of health care professional who can provide information and answer questions about very current SIDS research.

On this basis, an important first step for me was to locate someone who had suffered the same tragedy, could identify with what I was going through, and would willingly share what they had learned about SIDS. At the same time, my main concern was to help my daughter and son-in-law get through the initial period of mourning. We had an enormous outpouring of support from friends and family who wanted to do something to help which led to finally being able to speak with someone who had gone through a similar tragedy 20 years ago. In addition to speaking with my daughter and me, this woman also contacted the Massachusetts Center for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at Boston Medical to relay the circumstances. In turn, this led to a phone call from the nurse there who is responsible for coordinating services to bereaved families throughout the state. Packets of information and brochures addressing various aspects of the bereavement process were sent to us, as well as referrals to various support groups. Subsequently, my family attended a session at Boston Children's Hospital to help us cope with the situation. Unfortunately, this very somber, emotional meeting left us more drained than ever and no better prepared to cope with the circumstances. Having gone from one of the happiest

moments in life by becoming a grandparent, to the lowest point in life from loss and grief that swept through the entire family was, more than ever, unbearable.

Still searching for ways to cope, I revisited my synthesis focus on using humor as a tool to catalyze creativity and bring about positive change in a business setting. The idea of the use of humor to “bring about positive change” triggered the “aha” and recognition of a related, vitally important new direction for my synthesis that could aid the healing process so desperately sought by myself and my family. The power of humor as a coping mechanism, as a life raft for making sense out of tragedy had been right in front of my eyes, but I hadn’t seen it! This was reminiscent of the Patch Adams (1998) movie in which the troubled Patch commits himself to a mental institution. He encounters a man running around holding up four fingers and asking people “How many fingers do I have up?” When people answer “four” the man becomes agitated and starts to rant and rave saying, “Why can’t people see what is in front of them?” Puzzled by this, Patch approaches the man again who tells him to stop focusing on the fingers and look beyond them at the man in front of him, who is holding his hand up. When you refocus, your eyes play a visual trick on you. It appears the man is holding up eight fingers, as you see double by changing the shift in your eyes. It is all about point of view.

I had stopped working on my original thesis because it was no longer relevant to how I was feeling. My grief was so strong it was overshadowing my project on humor in the workplace as a tool for creative change, which I had been so passionately involved in for over a year. I was to finish the synthesis in May 2007 and achieve my dream of earning my masters degree. With the support and advice of my CCT mentors, Nina Greenwald, Carol Smith, Peter Taylor, and Arthur Millman, I decided to take the summer off to reflect on where to go and how to get there.

This hiatus allowed time to incubate ideas and reframe my thinking. I needed to regroup and view the use of humor from a different perspective. How might it help me and my family cope with our loss? While this turning point in thinking provoked some concern about the discontinuity with my original work, some of the literature I reviewed focused on the use of humor as a coping mechanism.

### **Humor and the Holocaust**

For the humor course, I had read about the use of humor by victims of the Holocaust and thinking how unimaginable this seemed. Paul E. McGhee (1999), in Health, Healing and the Amuse System, discusses the use of humor as a natural stress remedy for mental and emotional health. In reference to the concentration and POW Camps there is a quote from psychiatrist Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, who authored, Man's Search for Meaning (1946). During his time in the camps Frankl says, "I would never have made it if I could not have laughed. Laughing lifted me momentarily...out of this horrible situation, just enough to make it livable...survivable" (p.80). Furthermore, he says that "Humor, more than anything else in the human makeup, affords aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation even if only for a few seconds" (p. 81). Frankl and another prisoner tried to come up with at least one humorous story or joke every day as part of their survival. The following is an example: "A prisoner points towards a Capo (a prisoner who also acted as a guard) and says, 'Imagine, I knew him when he was only the president of the bank'" (p. 81).

To be able to joke in such horrific circumstances lessens the tension, even if only briefly, and lifts the human spirit. Another often told story involves a prisoner who accidentally bumps into a Nazi guard who turns and shouts, "Schwein!" which translates into "pig" in German. The prisoner bows and says "Cohen, pleased to meet you." In this case, humor helps defuse the

desperation of the situation where the prisoner has no control yet is acting in a civilized manner in contrast to the degradation that existed in the camps. If the power of humor could help people live through the horror of the Holocaust, the power of humor can help me and others go on in life after experiencing the tragedy of sudden loss of a loved one.

### **Using Humor to Develop a Support Group for Coping with Loss**

Instead of developing a workshop for using humor in the workplace, humor would be the basis of a workshop for coping with loss. The power of humor could return a sense of emotional stability and hopefulness to people. Interestingly, one of my CCT classmates brought in a book titled, Spinning Gold out of Straw, How Stories Heal, (2001) by Diane Rooks. Ms. Rooks writes about how stories helped her heal from the death of her son who at age twenty-nine died from an allergic reaction to an insect sting. One part of the book is entitled, “Laughing pain away”, in which the author refers to Robert Fulghum’s (1989) book, All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten. In the introduction there is this Storyteller’s Creed: “I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge, That myth is more potent than history, That dreams are more powerful than facts, That hope always triumphs over experience, That laughter is the only cure for grief, And I believe that love is stronger than death.” Rooks continues by saying that “One line that continued to jump out at me is ‘that laughter is the only cure for grief’...Laughter has a powerful healing effect on all our systems, based on studies, our personal experiences, and the writings of others, such as Norman Cousins’ Anatomy of an Illness... Laughter provides a break, even if only temporary, from whatever is bothering us. Laughter through our tears helps us realize that happiness and joy are still possible.” (p. 217).

Rooks refers to the following passage from Patch Adams’s (1998) book, Gesundheit! “After his mother’s leg was amputated, he used his gift of humor to help her adjust to her loss.

As his mother awoke following her surgery, the first thing she saw was Patch with his red clown nose looming over her. He said, ‘Well I guess you know what it’s like to have one foot in the grave!’ His mother laughed and continued for years to tell the story to others with glee. It could not bring her limb back, but it did spark her hope for continued enjoyment of life. In addition to the obvious medical benefits, Dr. Adams is convinced that humor is vital in healing the problems of individuals, communities, and societies” (p. 218).

Rooks also mentions finding comic relief when her cousin’s two young daughters visited her soon after her son’s death and decided to tell her a story to cheer her up. They mixed up all the lines in the story and Rooks and her cousin had “tears of laughter” running down their cheeks. Even though she was in mourning, she was able to relax through the power of laughter. Likewise, my daughter and I experienced initial relief from sorrow when we were able to smile through our tears by recalling something humorous in our lives.

## **Groundbreakers in the Use of Humor in Healing**

### **Norman Cousins**

Humor saved Norman Cousins’ life. In Anatomy of an Illness (1979), he describes how he literally laughed his way out of the crippling connective tissue disease, ankylosing spondylitis, that doctors believed was irreversible. Cousins says that “It was easy enough to hope and love and have faith, but what about laughter? Nothing is less funny than being flat on your back with all the bones in your spine and joints hurting” (p. 43).

Cousins added humor to his treatments by watching funny movies including Marx Brothers films and the series, “Candid Camera.” He was amazed to find that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give him at least two hours of pain free sleep. Inspired by this, Cousins added humorous books to his regimen, gaining still more relief

from pain. His next step was to see if there was any scientific evidence to corroborate his feeling better. His doctor took sedimentation rate readings before and after laughter episodes and there was a definite improvement in these. Interestingly, hospital administrators complained that Cousin's laughter was bothering other patients, so he moved himself to a hotel for further treatment. He also started to take large doses of Vitamin C. Further follow up with sedimentation rates showed the combination of laughter and vitamin C was helping slow the progression of his disease, cutting heavily into whatever poison was attacking his connective tissue. His fever was receding and his pulse was returning to normal. Cousins commented that his laughter routine was in full force, and that he stopped taking drugs and sleeping pills. His recovery was slow but steady.

Cousins refers to others who have used humor for health and healing purposes including Dr. Albert Schweitzer who employed humor through stories at his hospitals to help heal both the patients and the staff to continue on with their essential work. Sigmund Freud also was fascinated with the use of wit and humor as ways of overcoming nervous tension. In the course of treating his disease through humor, Cousins says that three things that figured into his recovery, "...a well developed will to live, laughter, and large intravenous doses of sodium ascorbate" (p. 139). Something important to take away from his writings is that the power of humor and laughter has a rippling effect on many aspects of coping, whether it is with an illness, a setback in your life, or the tragedy of a loss.

### **Patch Adams, M.D.**

Earlier in this chapter, reference is made to the Patch Adams movie. Examples are also given by Diane Rooks about Dr. Adams' trademark form of healing through laughter and joy. Dr. Adams has written his own book, Gesundheit! (1998), which literally translates into "Good

Health". This book is about his vision for a "free, silly hospital" (p. 65) that treats all who need care through a loving and fun atmosphere. Dr. Adams has been working on making this model and vision a reality for over 37 years. Worldwide, he has been promoting the concept of "humanitarian clowning". Adams speaks of how clowning allows people to bring love close with humor and play and how to "heal" in a non -technological setting. "Wearing a rubber nose wherever I go has changed my life. Humor has made my life joyous and fun. It can do the same for you" (p. 67).

Dr. Adams summarizes his philosophy in saying, "I have reached the conclusion that humor is vital in healing the problems of individuals, communities, and societies." His work in this regard has transformed care throughout the world. A clown is indeed a universal symbol of joy. How can one not smile when you encounter a clown? Dr. Adams brings boxes of rubber noses wherever he travels to give as a symbol of fun and humor that will help in healing. "The most revolutionary act anyone can commit is to be happy. I refer not to a moment of joy during one of life's peak experiences but to a basic pattern of enduring happiness. It takes no greater effort to be happy every day than to be miserable... We can choose a paradigm of happiness in which all our thoughts, feelings, and actions are infused with joy... When we live our lives from a baseline of happiness, negative events still may happen...(but) ...sadness and unhappy feelings will occur in the larger context of a great and happy life" (pp. 93-94).

Patch Adams is ready to take risks to promote his philosophy. In medical school he was appalled by the treatment of patients as numbers rather than human beings. He fought against the system of training doctors to look dispassionately at their patients by concentrating on the disease and not the person. Even though he was nearly at the top of his class in medical school, Adams was almost dismissed from the program for being a non- conformist. One of the Deans

of the Medical School repeatedly told Patch that he did not belong there. This same administrator wrote in school records that Patch was “excessively happy” - as if this was a negative trait!

Patch Adams brought laughter and joy to all his patients by clowning around with them and trying to meet their needs from their viewpoint. Dr. Adams uses props of all sorts such as rubber noses, balloons and costumes. He says that the turning point in his career was when he discovered that all he really wanted to do is to help people. Humor has been his main weapon in his assault on the medical system and its shortcomings.

Dr. Adams true legacy is that many doctors, nurses and other health care practitioners now use humor as an important tool in their treatment of patients, in addition to using humor for themselves to go on after particularly trying life and death experiences. Norman Cousins’ work focused on the patient taking responsibility for his own healing through humor and joy. Patch Adams takes this a step further by insisting that doctors are the role models for the patients with their use of humor, laughter, and joy.

Dr. Adams’ website (<http://www.patchadams.org/campaign/campaign>) announced that in October of 2007, The Gesundheit Board unveiled its campaign to raise \$1 million dollars towards building a Teaching Center and Clinic on its land in West Virginia. The Center and Clinic will enable Gesundheit doctors to see patients and to teach health care design. Dr. Adams is still working to make the next phase of The Gesundheit Institute a reality. His persistence and passion for his work goes on...

### **Connecting Loss with Dr. Adams’ Work**

Patch Adams’ work on humor and healing is important to those who have suffered a loss of a loved one as well. His infusion of humor helps keep the human spirit going, providing joy

in living. He states, “Laughter is the white noise of happiness...Comic relief is a major way for happy folk to dissipate pain. In a healthier world, humor would be a way of life. People would be funny as a rule, not an exception” (p. 97).

Dr. Adams has a chapter on “Rebuilding Self, Family, and Community” in his book. This brings to mind my own situation where he writes, “I do not choose to trivialize sadness or anxiety, but simply to say that we choose these ways of life. People who feel sad tend to blame external events over which they have no control....Yes, the terrible things that happen are painful. Choosing to give up, however, is what makes these experiences continue to wound” (p. 98). I choose to move away from sadness to healing and to help others to do this as well.

### **Allen Klein**

The Healing Power of Humor (1989) by Allen Klein was frequently referenced in the literature I reviewed. Klein turned his whole life around after losing his wife to a long illness at the age of 34. “My wife’s death was an incalculable loss. But once the pain subsided and I started to accept it, my life changed dramatically...I knew I no longer wanted to continue with the work I was doing for a living (silk screening), but I did not know in which direction to go” (xviii).

Klein’s search for a meaningful life after a tragic loss led him to learn more about the healing power of humor. He was bothered by the lack of acknowledgement of humor as an important coping tool “because it instantly removes us from our pain”(xx). Klein’s work was another important “aha” for me – the still more direct connection between humor and coping with loss that I was searching for in writing this chapter. Klein says there is a big difference between pain and suffering. “Our pain may not cease, but humor can minimize our suffering by giving us power in what appears to be a powerless situation” (xxi). He recognizes that humor is

not the only answer, but that it is very important in giving you a fresh new perspective that can help you deal with difficult circumstances.

Klein's book is organized into three parts, Part I, *Learning to Laugh*, Part II, *Techniques for Getting through Trying Times*, and Part III, *The Last Laugh*. Part II is especially useful for the purpose of this chapter-- our lives. As mentioned, Klein's work discusses humor as a way of keeping us in balance when our world seems to be falling apart. Humor gives us power to rise above our despair, fears and discouragements. Early on in his book, Klein says that it is crucial to understand humor as a tool for well being. "Humor is risky business. In matters of humor, what is appealing to one person is appalling to another." The point is that everyone's kind of humor is different. What's funny to one person may not be to another. There is risk involved in telling a joke, setting up a humorous skit, wearing a funny nose or using any prop for that matter.

Humor must be used properly in order for it to be an effective tool. For example, laughing at someone is never acceptable, but laughing with another person can be both compassionate and connecting. As Klein states, "If our attempt is gentle and from the heart, the risks are minimal; we cannot fail." A crucial point he makes is that "jokes are only a small part of humor." Klein cautions that most people cannot tell a joke effectively and that some jokes are offensive. This is the segue for Part II of his book which describes nonjoke ways of adding humor to your life to assist you in difficult situations. Klein lists fourteen user-friendly techniques and says that if this were a diet book it might have been called Two Weeks to a Lighter You. If you follow the suggestions every day for two weeks, you would have touched on all fourteen of them. He concludes each technique with a "Learn to Laugh" exercise.

Here are some examples of Klein's hands-on-methods for getting through trying times that seem particularly pertinent. "Spotting Life's Set Ups "is about a shift in focus and a punch

line that takes us down a different path than first thought. An example is the administrator who had her budget proposal rejected five times and was feeling quite frustrated. She finally took her unacceptable budget to the copy machine and made it the size of a postage stamp. She then turned in her “reduced” budget to her boss.

“Joke-Jitsu” is about taking an upsetting situation and turning it into an advantage by giving the situation a twist with humor. Klein suggests a reversal of the standard joke set-up on “good news, bad news” by stating your bad news first and then turning it into good news. For example, “The bad news is that my husband ran off with my best friend. The good news is that I now have two fewer people to buy Christmas presents for” (p. 53).

“Exaggerate!!” is about reframing a difficulty or disappointment so they hurt less and we are able to start to see their absurdity, get a new perspective, laugh and let go. Klein suggests trying to “Have a bad day.” If you are having a bad day as you exaggerate your circumstances it will hopefully make you laugh and realize that tomorrow is another day.

“Laugh While the Irony is Hot” is about using humor to imagine the complete opposite of what you expect by looking at absurdities in everyday occurrences and seeing if you can laugh about them. Klein says the news media is filled with irony. An example he gives is “A Florida school board distributes fliers to fight illiteracy, urging everyone to ‘overcome literacy.’” His exercise recommends looking at absurdities in everyday occurrences and seeing if you can laugh about them.

“Attitude: Whistle a Happy Tune” is about choosing to see what happens to us in a positive light. An example of this would be your perception of a day as partially sunny or partially cloudy. How we view our circumstances influences all we do in life.

“Reminders: Prop Power” is about the use of humorous reminders, decorations, and amusing props that help point you in a happier direction. As soon as I read this I immediately thought of my visit to Ed Perry’s office at WATD Radio Station. Ed’s office was crammed with stuffed animals, puppets, and toys and oddities of every description. He even had a “magic ball” that helped him with decision making. It would give answers like: “not now, yes, no, maybe, “in the future, etc.” He also had a figure that seemed to speak spontaneously, but he could control it from underneath his desk. No matter what mood you were in when you stepped into Ed’s office you had to smile. Another example would be the use of clown noses, Groucho glasses, and other props that make people smile.

“Let a Smile Be Your Umbrella” is about smiling every day even if you do not feel like it as the act of smiling lifts your spirits and can help you recall happier times even if you are not experiencing them at the moment.

Finally, “Let Go”, is about how to stop struggling with our circumstances by letting go of them and accepting what we have been given. I found this last technique to speak directly to the core of my pain from the loss of my grandson. It is important for healing to not let anger take a hold on your life, but to “let go” and move on in order to move forward. In the Learn to Laugh exercise in this technique, Klein suggests you “write your irritations, upsets, etc. on a piece of paper, tie it to a helium balloon, and the release the whole things” (p.133). I like this imagery in seeing your problems float away. All of the techniques mentioned here are important tools to add humor to your life to help deal with losses.

In Part III, “The Last Laugh”, Klein opens with, “Sometimes we do not see the importance of laughter in our dark times because we are so blinded by tears.” I saw myself in this image. I choose not to be blinded by tears anymore. Klein discusses Dr. Bernie Siegel

stating, “You can grieve for a loss, yet still keep yourself from losing all perspective, all appreciation for the good things that remain in your life.” Klein makes an important point by saying, “Humor serves this purpose. It gives perspective and keeps us in balance when life seems out of balance” (p. 165).

Klein then echoes the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner in his best seller, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, which I re-read after my family’s tragedy. The same lines that he highlights are the ones I picked up on to help me see my way out of the darkness and towards the light I have been searching for since the loss. Kushner states, “We need to get over the questions that focus on the past and on the pain—‘Why did this happen to me?’—and ask instead the question that opens doors to the future: ‘Now that this has happened, what shall I do about it?’ ” (p.165).

Humor gives us a choice. We do not have to be hopelessly stuck in our problems, too blinded by pain and sadness to feel any happiness. Humor does not have to be the main focus during especially trying times as you will go back and forth in your grieving. Laughter is not always appropriate. However as Klein puts it, “We must keep in mind that loss is part of life; it is neither sad nor funny. ...We often forget how beneficial laughter can be during our dark times” (p. 166).

Klein references Norman Cousins’ beliefs that part of the responsibility for creating a humorous atmosphere to help with healing lies with the patient. As I mentioned earlier, Patch Adams takes this a step further with his philosophy of doctors treating patients with joy and humor and kindness so a true relationship exists between the care giver and patient. Humor does heal and is a powerful tool to help deal with loss. Klein states, “Humor in the darkest of places is

a sign of emergence from grief and depression. It is an indication that I am beginning to embrace life again and that healing is taking place.”

### **Empirical Evidence for Humor as a Coping Tool**

As a student of critical and creative thinking, I have been taught to look for the evidence to support my conclusions. After reading through many books discussing humor as a coping tool through anecdotal evidence, I was surprised to learn much systematic empirical evidence exists to support these conclusions as well. Norman Cousins touched on this when he had his doctor do sedimentation readings. Going further, there are currently many well documented studies that provide data on the measurable effects of humor. Most of this research is part of a quickly increasing field known as psychoneuroimmunology, which is a branch of medicine concerned with how emotions affect the immune system.

Nurse humorologist, Patty Wooten (1996) discusses some of this research in “*Humor: An Antidote for Stress*”. Her work focuses on nurses using humor to help patients heal as well as nurses using humor as a “self care tool to cope with stress.” Wooten references Lee Berk and Stanley Tan, at Loma Linda University School of Medicine’s Department of Clinical Immunology, who have produced carefully controlled studies showing that “the experience of laughter lowers serum cortisol levels, increases the amount of activated T lymphocytes, increases the number and activity of natural killer cells, and increases the number of T cells that have helper/suppressor receptors. In short, laughter stimulates the immune system, off-setting the immunosuppressive effects of stress” (p.3). Going further, Wooten discusses salivary immunoglobulin A as our first-line defense against the entry of infectious organisms through the respiratory tract. Studies showed that the subjects who tested strong for appreciation and

utilization of humor had an even stronger elevation of salivary IgA after viewing a humorous video (Lefcourt H., 1990, cited by Wooten).

Further evidence shows that encouraging and guiding patients to use humor allows them to gain a sense of control in life. This is what Norman Cousins found in his early experiment as well. Wooten states “We cannot control events in our external world but we have the ability to control how we view these events and the emotional response we choose to have to them” (p.5).

### **From Humor in the Workplace to Humor as a Means of Healing From Loss**

A result of my work is recognizing that I want to help others learn to cope with tragedy through the use of humor. Before the death of my grandson, I was very passionate about pursuing my interest in humor as a means of improving the workplace environment. Now, however, my goal is to restore a sense of balance and well being to my life and family.

SIDS is an extremely difficult topic to discuss. Dealing with the loss of a loved one due to this horrific tragedy is all the worse. As mentioned earlier, the current SIDS support groups were solemn and cold, even though they were intentioned to be supportive. There was not a moment of uplifting discussion, just more sadness and tears. The need exists for a support group where you can learn to rise above your grief with the gentle use of humor. The simple act of achieving some control in this regard places you in a different position, gives you a new perspective.

I have discovered a path to some further control in combating my sorrow by becoming involved in SIDS Awareness and Education and to participate in raising funds to help with research. That said, we have participated in two SIDS Walk-a -Thons as well as directed all donations in Cole’s memory to various organizations involved in SIDS research and support for families. Our long term wish is to be involved in finding the cause for this heartbreak and in

helping to eradicate it forever. There are currently 7 babies a day that die from SIDS in the United States. SIDS is a worldwide problem and it is the most common cause of infant death in developed countries.

Continuing with my wish to help other families deal with similar loss, I will go on with my work with SIDS organizations in many facets. I especially want to continue my research into the power of humor to provide healing and hope for those affected by such tragedies. There is great need for support groups and workshops to help in both the short term and long term for families to gain back their joy in life. The stress that comes from dealing from the after effects of tragic loss affects all aspects of one's life. Humor has the potential to be more effective than any medicine in combating the stress related symptoms associated with grief.

I believe the following words sum up my thoughts: "Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh." (George Bernard Shaw). I will move forward with my work in this area to identify the best practices currently used for humor as a tool to help heal.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### **My Journey Thus Far**

I could not have predicted that there would be a shift in focus from my original, deep interest in designing a workshop to add humor to an organization's culture. However, life has led me in other directions. My work in the CCT program has been and will continue to be a major influence in my life both personally and professionally. By changing my focus I feel a deep commitment to further investigating the use of humor to help people heal while dealing with loss. When I decided to change my focus, I believed I would develop my new research into a workshop/support group that I can do in conjunction with the support services that are currently offered through SIDS organizations. I know now that I would like to develop a broader model that can be used to help people deal with the loss of a loved one, whether family or friend. However, I still believe that there are some issues that are SIDS specific, thus I would like to develop some strategies for coping with that particular issue. As well, I'm also confident that, in time, I will return to my original work in developing a program to add humor to an organization's culture to open up and affirm creativity to be used as a positive change agent.

This has indeed been a difficult year for me and my family. The remarkable spirit of the CCT program has helped infuse me with the will to keep moving ahead in my life, to have hope for the future, and to believe that I will be a change agent who can take the risks necessary to accomplish all of this. The CCT program supported this by allowing me the space I needed to incubate ideas and most importantly to instill in me the courage to listen to my inner self and proceed accordingly. I appreciate and value the support of the CCT faculty and my fellow CCT students and alumni in this effort. We are a true community in the deepest sense of the word.

Thinking back to some of the important skills I learned in my CCT training, I recalled the SCAMPER (substitute, combine, adapt, modify, put to other uses, eliminate, and rearrange) technique for producing ideas that I had learned in my Creative Thinking class. (S) What else could I do with the current research and path that I was on? (C ) How could I combine my thoughts to work for a different purpose? (A) What else is like this? What ideas could I use to help in this new direction I am drawn to? (M) What new twist could I put on the knowledge I had already accumulated to move me forward in the new work I want to do? (P) Other uses I could think about if I modified my work? (E) Is there anything I would eliminate? (R) Could I rearrange some of my work to give it different meaning? These thoughts helped me to look at my current research with fresh eyes and think how I might change the purpose of my work. My goal for the future is to put into place a workshop to help people heal from loss by using the warmth and energy of humor, laughter, joy, and smiles. As the comedian Phyllis Diller said, “A smile is a curve that sets everything straight.”

The research on humor and healing described in Chapter 4 (Synthesis) indicates that much has already been done in this area. It is my hope to get to learn more from pioneers like Patch Adams, Allen Klein, Paul McGhee, and Joel Goodman. Joel Goodman’s book, Laffirmations, 1001 Ways to Add Humor to Your Life and Work (1995), is an important tool I can carry with me when I need a quick fix of humor. It would be enlightening to attend one of the workshops or conferences that are held annually to bring together like -minded individuals to advance the cause of the power of humor to help people live happy, fulfilled lives regardless of what circumstances life tosses at you.

#### **Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH)**

Through the work of Allen Klein, I have discovered the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH) which is an international community of professionals who incorporate humor into their

daily lives. AATH is the leader in providing evidence-based information about current research and practical applications of humor. As noted on their web site (<http://www.aath.org/>):

AATH is both a personable *network* and a *resource* for humor and laughter authorities and enthusiasts. Our membership is occupationally diverse, representing our pillar communities: Health & Wellness, Seniors & Aging, Education, Spirituality & Faith Communities, and Business. Established in 1987, our mission is simple yet challenging: To advance the understanding and application of humor and laughter for their positive benefits. Our members include professionals who incorporate humor and laughter into their lives and work, people committed to humor and laughter, scholars and researchers who study humor and laughter, and all who feel they would benefit from this organization. Humor and laughter are used to enhance work performance, support learning, improve health and as a coping tool.

The AATH has their own official definition of "therapeutic humor": "Any intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life's situations. This intervention may enhance health or be used as a complementary treatment of illness to facilitate healing or coping, whether physical, emotional, cognitive, social or spiritual."

The AATH provides a wealth of knowledge and creative thinking strategies pertaining to the use of humor for healing. There are members throughout the country and in the local area as well. I look forward to talking with some local members about my envisioned work. I also plan on keeping in touch with Allen Klein, who is the immediate past president of the organization and suggests that I join the group for their annual five day conference coming up on January 31, 2008. Mr. Klein also kindly responded to an email from me describing the tragedy that changed my life which is why I am now looking into humor as a means of healing from loss. His response to me was personal, profound, and healing for me and reads as follows:

**Email sent Sunday 10/28/2007 2:11 AM:**

Hi Sheryl,

First of all, thank you for emailing me. Being an author is often lonely work and writers don't know how many lives they touch. It is only from people like you, who contact

us, that we get a glimpse of what our work meant to others.

Second, my condolences on your loss. Losing someone you love is not easy. But, I believe it can make us a better and stronger person if we don't let our anger about that loss get in the way of us learning more about ourselves as we confront that loss. Though the child may have only lived a short period of time, from what you have told me, it sounds like he has already influenced people's lives and perhaps, if nothing else, shown how precious life is.

And third, you ask about other resources. I'd like to suggest another one of my books, The Courage to Laugh. In it, I show how people who were facing life-challenging issues, like cancer, AIDS, lingering loss, sudden loss, etc., used humor to gain hope and to heal.

Right now it may be hard to see why such a young life was cut short. But we cannot see the bigger universal picture. I, for example, could not see why my wife was taken away from the world at 34-how could this happen to me? But looking back, I see that it had a higher purpose. Hopefully, someday you will see the higher purpose in your grandson's death.

My healing thoughts are with you. Allen Klein

Allen Klein's book, The Healing Power of Humor, affected me deeply. Moved by his words and suggestions; I immediately emailed him my thoughts and my situation on why I had bought and read the book. I did this at 1:00 A.M. as I was so engaged in the reading and how I was going to transfer it into my own life. When I awoke in the morning, I was astonished to see that Allen had responded back almost immediately to my email. He is indeed a caring and empathetic person who has turned his own tragedy in life into something positive and uplifting. Allen Klein is an inspiring role model and, hopefully, will be a mentor for me as I move forward in my new direction. It is also my intention to look deeper into the AATH and get to know more about this organization and the good work they do as individuals and as a group.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Feeling energized and on the road to my own personal healing as a result of my synthesis work, I am inspired to continue my work in developing a program to help others deal with loss by using the powerful tool of appropriate humor. I choose to see joy and happiness in my life

again. Humor and the ability to smile, to laugh, to realize that even though I have suffered an unimaginable loss, my spirit is indomitable. My personal philosophy has come back to the glass being half full rather than half empty. A change in attitude occurred for me through my humor research which the following anonymous quote expresses well:

Our lives are not determined by what happens to us but by how we react to what happens, not by what life brings to us, but by the attitude we bring to life. A positive attitude causes a chain reaction of positive thoughts, events, and outcomes. It is a catalyst, a spark that creates extraordinary results.

-Anon.

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