

SMILING WISDOM

by Roberto Assagioli M.D.

The ancients greatly appreciated laughter, which they looked upon as a divine gift and a helpful remedy.

There never was a time when such a remedy was more needed than now. Men today are tense, agitated, frantic. They are driven by the passion for speed, the thirst for possessions and for conquest and thereby become exhausted. While not renouncing what is dynamic, constructive and heroic in our age, we should correct its excesses, moderate and balance its extreme tendencies.

There are, above all, three things which modern man must learn in order to become a sane and complete being: *the art of resting, the art of contemplation, the art of laughing and smiling*. Here we shall briefly consider the latter, and primarily its superior and spiritual aspects.

The value of this art is manifold. Laughing has first of all a direct salutary effect upon our bodies. It is known that laughing produces rapid rhythmical contractions of the diaphragm. These rhythmical contractions have a healthful effect on the abdominal organs, stimulating their functions and activating the digestive secretions, especially those of the liver. They also modify the rhythm of breathing, stimulate the pulmonary function and the activity of the heart and thereby produce a better oxidization. The popular proverb which says that "laughing makes good blood" is therefore scientifically accurate.

But the psychological value of laughter is much greater. Laughter removes the inner tension with consequent great relief to the individual; it brings with it a beneficent release and replaces the activity of tired functions by the fresh use of others which had been little, too little employed. When one is tired or excited, it is easier to relax through laughter than through outer inactivity, during which the mind continues to pursue "in the void" its feverish activity.

Another useful function of laughter consists in its being a harmless and happy outlet for repressed tendencies, especially the tendency to play, which has remained alive in us and which we do not take enough into consideration. Too early and too harshly do we repress "the little child" which dwells in us with its fresh gaiety and its need for free and happy playing. But this urge to play can be re-awakened; it can bloom once more and exhilarate us, like a stream of fresh and pure water that issues from a mountain crevice.

Laughter can, and should be extensively and "earnestly" applied in education. It has great value, especially in furthering intellectual development. Contrasts, surprises, unexpected conclusions, which are among the most important causes producing laughter, awaken and sharpen our intellectual processes and thereby enable us to notice many things which otherwise might easily have escaped our attention. For instance, queer and ludicrous comparisons and resemblances, or the comical combination of facts which are different and heterogeneous, emphasize the common characteristics in things that are otherwise dissimilar, and the similarities in those which in other respects are quite different. They give us new perspectives, enable us to discover the curious relationship existing between various groups of facts, thereby sharpening our observation and bringing new ideas to birth in us. In short, they render our intellectual mechanism more active and more alert.

This stimulating influence is, paradoxically, associated with a restful mind. The nervous discharge produced by laughter diminishes excessive intellectual tension and re-establishes the balance upset by too intense effort.

It is often desirable—if one knows how to do it—to teach pupils in ways that will make them laugh, for laughter has a property which is very useful—that of increasing the pupil's attention. As is well known, one of the main difficulties in teaching lies precisely in attracting and holding the student's attention and keeping him interested in the things he is being taught. Equally great is the value of laughter for *understanding* and *remembering* the things learned. Modern psychology has proved how wrong it is to make a student learn by

heart end memorize mechanically abstract definitions instead of showing him by concrete examples the nature and the *practical consequences* of a fact or a group of facts. The comical can be of real help in this, owing to the precision and the vivacity of the images and ideas it arouses.

Laughter has another remarkable use in teaching: it indicates with certainty whether a pupil does or does not understand what is being taught. With the ordinary methods the teacher has no direct and sure proof of the student's understanding, and he has to ask him definite questions to make sure of it, while, when he presents the subject matter in a playful way, he can see at once, by the reaction of the student, whether or not he has understood.

Thanks to its mnemonic value laughter is very useful in facilitating the study of arid subjects that are based primarily on memory. There exists, for instance, a French book on anatomy in which the subject is dealt with in an amusing manner, and I recall having used it with pleasure when I studied that dry science. In the same way can the amusing *Chemistry in Verses* by Alberto Cavaliere be of great aid in remembering the properties of various chemical substances.

Laughter can be particularly helpful in the teaching of languages, by rendering alive their study which is so boring and dry if they are taught according to the pedantic grammatical method still in use in many schools.

In conclusion, our motto should be *study and teach with joy*.

Laughter can also have great moral and spiritual value. I said "can have," for assuredly not every kind of laughter has that quality. It is therefore necessary to distinguish clearly between the different types and "levels" of laughter. There is the vulgar, gross laughter, a simple enjoyment of the instincts which, alas, is only too widespread. Then there are sarcasm, contempt, mockery, which can be called "acidified laughter" and which may produce dangerous psychological autointoxication. Then there is, finally, the simple, inoffensive, comical laughter, such as is produced by puns, limericks, etc., which has no moral value and does not pretend to have any.

The spiritual value of laughter depends on the intention of the one who arouses it. There exist, for instance, literary expressions of the comical, such as satire, parody and comedy, which sometimes have a social and ethical value, if the purpose of the author is to denounce hypocrisy and immorality or to unmask pretensions and vanities. Remarkable examples of this function of the comical are the comedies of Moliere and Orwell's satires.

This leads us to discussing the higher and spiritual aspects of the comical, which represent true humor. It is very difficult to define humor because of its subtle and elusive nature and because it assumes different forms and colors itself with countless shades. However without imprisoning it in a formula, it is possible to indicate its most outstanding characteristics. Let us quote first some apt remarks by Guido Stacchini:

"Humour is like an intimate smile of the soul which, if one knows how to feel it, never becomes exhausted and never peters out; it is a superior joy where the best part of ourselves feels itself risen unto a higher level and experiences the entirely spiritual satisfaction of being, at the same time, actor and judge."

"The individual adopts a humorous attitude especially towards himself, as a means to overcome suffering, that is to say, he succeeds in treating himself as if he were a child, and at the same time he adopts toward that capricious and irresponsible child the superior role of the experienced adult."

"These means have, wider application relative to the lives of other people. When the adult recognizes the vanity of the interests and sufferings which seem important to the child, he ridicules them, and thus puts

things into their right place, giving them the value which belongs to them. In those cases the adult is the humourist, the child is the average human being, or the public."

These subtle remarks by Stacchini help us to understand and appreciate the great spiritual value of humor. The pains and anxieties which harass man, the big and little mistakes he makes unceasingly, derive largely from his passionate attachment to persons and to things; they are due also to his total lack of the sense of proportion which induces him to attribute enormous importance to things that are vain, empty and artificial, and he therefore neglects the things that are great and precious, the things that are real and eternal.

The noble function of humor is precisely to dissipate those illusions, to devalue the objects of those attachments, to unmask that ignorance, to put things and persons back where they belong. Humor can do this because—as Plato with deep intuition, expressed it "Ridiculous is he who does not know himself."

One of the human weaknesses which lends itself best to the arrows of humor and which deserves them most—for it is so strongly rooted and so widespread that it can be found even in people of real value is vanity. The adult, through the mere fact of being one, generally entertains the strange illusion that he has reached his goal. He is satisfied with himself and it does not occur to him that, as soon as he has finished school, he should enter the greater and real *school of life* that he should "take himself in hand" and begin his self-education. Instead, as Stacchini so well expresses it, "the age which is supposed to be the age of reason is the one where one begins to commit serious stupidities."

How blinding vanity is As Schopenhauer says: "As unfailingly as the cat begins to purr when its back is stroked, so unfailingly does one see a sweet ecstasy appear on a man's face who is praised, particularly when the praise concerns his pretensions, even if such praise is a flagrant lie."

Vanity often is accompanied by presumption which, among other ways, shows itself by contempt for those who are a little lower on the social ladder and by flattery toward those who are at its top. These pretentious people behave as did the glass lamp of which Rabindranath Tagore tells in one of his fine and profound aphorisms contained in *Stray Birds*:

"While the glass lamp rebukes the earthen for calling it cousin, the moon rises, and the glass lamp, with a bland smile, calls her "My dear, dear sister."

Then there are oases where those that are small seek to raise themselves by belittling and lowering those that are great, but their efforts are in vain, for their ridicule and contempt fall back upon them, as Tagore expresses it in another of his *Stray Bird* aphorisms:

"The learned say that your lights will one day be no more, said the firefly to the stars. The stars made no answer."

Other little gems of humor contained in *Stray Birds* are: "A mind all logic is like a knife all blade. It makes the hand bleed that uses it."—"Do not blame your food because you have no appetite."

Men are so often shut up within themselves and their selfishness that they lose all sense of justice and do as the little girl did in the American story, entitled *As So Many Others*:

"Little Emily ran toward her mother, crying bitterly, 'What has happened to you?' 'Tom has broken my doll.' 'Row did he do it?' 'Ithrew it at his head.'"

One of the most useful tasks of humor is to unmask hypocrites and ill-wishers. It is used very appropriately by Jesus in His reply to the Pharisees who had put to him a captious question:

"Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle Him in His talk.

And they sent out unto Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we knew that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man; for thou regardest not the person of men.

Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar or not?

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, 'Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?

Show me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny.

And He said unto them, Whose is the image and superscription?

They said unto Him, Caesar's. Then saith He unto them, 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's.

When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left Him, and went their way." (N.T. Matthew 22)

A weakness which often appears as comical, is fear. Alexander Manzoni, in his novel *The Betrothed* (Everyman's Library. New York: Hutton, 1956), has in a most amusing way described a person obsessed with fear. The dialogue between don Abbondio and Cardinal Federigo, in which the comical and the sublime are subtly interwoven, is one of the most charming examples of spiritual humor.

Another common form of fear is anxiety about the future. How many needless worries men thereby create for themselves'. Their pessimistic provisions and excessive precautions are wittily expressed and derided in this Toscan saying, "To bandage one's head before it gets hurt."

Still another kind of fear is the preoccupation about the opinion of others. How many people poison their lives by anxiously trying to avoid any blame or criticism! Yet the impossibility of satisfying everybody has been known since time immemorial. We read in the *Dhammapada* a Buddhist text originating several centuries before Christ: "This saying is ancient, O Atula, and by no means of today: he who is silent is spoken ill of, and he who talks much is spoken ill of; also he who talks little is blamed. Nobody in this world is exempt from criticism."

Among the numerous mistakes, a subtle and not obvious, but no less real one, is that made by certain intellectuals and philosophers who spend themselves in vain discussions of purely academic interest, when there are urgent moral and spiritual tasks to be accomplished, as long as true liberty has not been achieved. This folly was brilliantly derided by Buddha. "It is said in the *Majjhimanikaya* that the monk Malunkjaputta one time went to see the Buddha and expressed to him his dissatisfaction about his not telling his disciples whether the world was eternal or non-eternal, infinite or finite, etc. The monk went so far in his effrontery as to present to the Buddha a challenge. He demanded that the Buddha should either reply with a yes or no to his questions, or admit that he was incapable of so doing. In the former case, the monk declared himself disposed to remain his disciple, in the latter he would return to the life of the world. The Buddha, without losing his serenity for a single instant, answered him thus: 'A man has been wounded by a poisoned arrow, and his friends call the doctor. If the wounded man says 'I shall not permit this arrow to be torn out of me before knowing who the man is that has wounded me, which is his family, what he looks like, whether he is tall or short, dark or fair, and where he lives' he would certainly die before it were possible to help him. This exactly would happen to one who, before entering the road to liberation, would demand that he be given a reply to all his questions.'"

If we ask ourselves what the typical attitude of the humorist is, we can reply that he regards human life on earth essentially as a theatrical performance, a "comedy" in which everyone must play his part as well as he possibly can, without taking it too seriously, and, above all, being ever *conscious that he is playing*.

Hermann Keyserling, in his most profound book *South American Meditations* (New York: Harpers, 1932), chapter "Divine Comedy," clearly shows to what degree such an attitude is truly *spiritual*

Already before him, a great Italian, Tommaso Campanella, described in an admirable sonnet the grandiose "cosmic performance."

Spiritual humor is a paradoxical combination of an attitude of serene and detached observation, the feeling of the oneness of life, and a deep sympathy for and compassion with others. "The humorist," writes Prof. Fanciulli in his essay on humor, "is to the highest degree gifted with the ability of living the life of others...He feels the ties which bind all things. Plurality is relative...perhaps only seeming; all parts are linked to each other by ties which cannot be broken...An admirable synthesis is effected the pain and pleasure of others become the pain and pleasure of the self. This sympathy has the quality of tenderness. It partakes of the sufferings of the weak, of the conquered, of the poor."

But this sympathy is always conscious and serene and does not prevent that which Fanciulli justly regards as the typical attitude of humor, namely the *smile*. All this, end more, hides and reveals itself in the smile of the liberated Buddha, a smile full of compassion, but a smile born of the certainty that the way to salvation exists, and that *all* human beings, sooner or later, will reach liberation and bliss.

In anticipation of an easy objection it must be stated that all things, even the best, can be misused, and it is precisely the task of "the art of living" to use all things to good purpose and in right proportions. As to humor, let us remember that its function is similar to that of salt in food—a seasoning which gives savor to the life which is our portion, but that salt itself is no nourishment.

From another angle, humor is the contemplation of the passing pageant of life; it is not direct and active participation in events. However, the complete human being, the true sage, is not he who confines himself to contemplation and even less he who is wholly absorbed in and by action. He is a sage who, while living, suffering and beneficently working with one part of himself, keeps his higher and real Self a detached and smiling spectator.

To attain such a state of inner freedom, it is necessary to use humor first of all towards oneself, gently making fun of one's personal little self which is so full of its own importance, giving itself such airs and taking itself so seriously; which is touchy, restless and suspicious.

That which Giuseppe Zucca has so aptly called "the steel cabin" of the self cannot long resist—however hard and thick its walls may be—the subtle, penetrating and consuming flame of humor; sooner or later its door opens and man can free himself from that narrow and suffocating prison. When that happens, one can say that the greatest achievement has been reached. The soul spreads its wings and joyously, with a divine smile, unites itself with the other souls, with all creatures and with God.