

# I t's More Than Just A-Muse

## An introduction to a Seeing Your Glass Laugh Full

*It is my belief; you cannot deal with the most serious things in the world unless you understand the most amusing.* – Winston Churchill, Prime Minister

I was born with a gift. It's not one of those super extraordinary gifts like in the movie *Rainman*, where Dustin Hoffman's character can tell you what day July 7<sup>th</sup> will be in 2052, but it is a valuable gift nonetheless. On top of having most of my original teeth, being able to match my tie to my suit, and being schooled in Southern manners, I was blessed with the gift of humor.

Now let's get this straight. I am not a stand-up comedian and I don't write a daily column in the Washington Post (although that would be nice). But I do have an ability to see the humor in everyday situations.

Here's an example: Just the other day, during a workshop I was conducting, a woman told an embarrassing story of getting to work and finding a pair of her husband's underwear in her briefcase. My immediate response to this was, "Well, it was a *brief case!*" OK, so maybe you think I should return this gift. Regardless, it *has* been a blessing in my life.

I'm 42 years old. I own a great speaking business. I am a Rotarian, an active member of the Chamber of Commerce, and the president of a local association. I'm a former Deacon and Elder in my church. I'm a parent. I'm a husband. For all intents and purposes, I have a good life.

It's not likely I'll be featured on the cover of *Time* magazine anytime soon, but I have the privilege of doing many wonderful things in my life. I love my job. I love my family and I love life. And you know what I think is the secret to all this? Humor.

I know. You're thinking, "You're not that funny." You may be right; yet just about everyone around me thinks I am. In fact, if you ask anyone who knows me what my gift is, they'll say humor.

So what is this gift all about? That's what I want to tell you. It's the ability to see humor when and where most people can't. This gift allows me to bring a bit of lightheartedness into some of the most serious situations. Instead of seeing the glass half-full or half-empty as the saying goes, I tend to see it *laugh* full. It is this ability to see the balance of serious and humorous that my makes life rich. And you can develop that ability.

Let me give you an example.

## **Mary**

In the fall of 1987, I was in my second year as a hospice home care social worker. As a member of an interdisciplinary team of health care professionals, I was expected to attend to the psychosocial concerns of people who were terminally ill and to be a source for support to their families.

On a beautiful October day, I arrived at the home of Mary Burton (not her real name), a 68-year-old wife and mother of three. Mary had been married to her husband Joe for nearly 50 years. Her three daughters were grown and each had a family and a successful career. Mary was a loving parent and was the major reason for her family's success. Mary was also dying of cancer and had been given less than six months to live. As I arrived at Mary's house that day, I had no idea she would teach me one of the greatest lessons I would ever learn.

Joe welcomed me at the door and politely escorted me into Mary's bedroom. He then excused himself so Mary and I could get better acquainted. Mary was neatly perched on her bed, anxiously awaiting her afternoon "visitor." Her face lit up as I entered the room and she invited me to sit down and "make myself comfortable." It did not take long for me to understand why Mary was the love of her family.

As I sat in Mary's room that day, I saw first hand the significant role she played in her family's life. She loved her husband and cared for him as if he were breakable. She did this, not in a smothering way, but the way you treasure something valuable. She loved her children, and while she gave of herself freely to them, it was clear she had also provided firm yet understanding discipline. I recognized this by the way in which she and her family showed so much respect and courtesy to me *and* to each other. She spoke fondly of her life and expressed satisfaction in the way it all "turned out." At the same time, she expressed sincere respect for her illness and hoped her current state of relative well-being would last so she could savor the time with her loved ones. After about 45 minutes of conversation, I asked to talk with Joe and the one daughter, Jill, who was there at the time of my visit. They shared their sense of grief at the thought of losing Mary and yet they showed a strength that clearly came from her.

I left Mary's house that day feeling confident that she and her family would get through this difficult experience as we are all supposed to – by leaning on the shoulders of those we love. And since Mary was doing rather well, despite her illness, I looked forward to her family using the next few months to build upon their already strong relationships.

Two weeks after my visit, Mary was admitted to the hospice inpatient unit, a unit reserved for patients in crisis or near death. Apparently, she had taken a dramatic turn for the worse in the previous two days. Her doctor thought this episode was unrelated to her illness due to its sudden onset and assumed it was either a reaction to her medication or a virus. To be on the safe side, he admitted her to the hospice unit so he and the nursing staff could monitor her more closely.

The Hospice of Northern Virginia inpatient unit was a beautifully renovated school building which opened in 1982 as one of the first hospice inpatient facilities in the country. It was a lovely setting complete with hardwood floors, flowered sheets and colorful wallpaper. The setting was intended to seem more homelike, even though it functioned as an acute care hospital.

The moment I walked into Mary's hospice room, I realized her situation had changed dramatically for the worse. The color in her face was gone. Her listless body sunk into the mattress as though she had no strength.

As I approached, a comforting look of recognition warmed her face. I took her frail hand in mine and asked, "How are you doing?"

"Not good," she whispered.

"Are you getting what you need?"

"They're spoiling me." she said with a weak grin. "The nurses have been so nice – they seem to anticipate my every need."

Then Mary rose up on her elbows, took a long look around the room and announced, "This place is beautiful. I had heard so much about it, *I was dying to see it!*"

I froze, not knowing how to respond.

Mary closed her eyes, fell back on her pillow and let loose a weak burst of laughter.

“Can you believe I said that?” she asked, shaking her head in disbelief. We laughed together while I marveled at her brave use of humor in the face of such daunting circumstances.

Six hours later, Mary died.

Mary had it. She had the balance. She knew she was dying, or else the comment would not have been so funny. Yet she allowed herself to enjoy a moment of fun. She saw her glass *laugh* full and appreciated the humor where others would have been afraid to acknowledge it, much less say it out loud. As a result, she experienced all the situation had to offer. It was rich.

### **Humor Is the Ticket to Happiness**

“We don’t laugh because we’re happy, we’re happy because we laugh,” said William James, the eighteenth century philosopher and psychologist. As you will see, the nature of humor is to change our thinking and turn it upside down. It helps us to see the ups during the downs in our life. Our happiness depends on seeing through the adversity, despair and tragedies of the world around us to that which is positive, healing and healthy. Humor is not the only way to achieve this but is one of the most effective and affective ways I have found. It’s fulfilling *and* fun.

We live in a time when the world is battling adversity around every turn. Many of us see our glasses as half-empty. Now, more than ever, we need a bright spot that outlasts the darkness. Humor is the way we keep our sanity while focusing on what’s important. It’s the *fun* in funeral, the *ha* in hazardous, and the *yuk* in yucky that makes life bearable.

For me, humor has been the ticket to happiness. Yet it's not just about the humor. It is humor coupled with other personality qualities such as compassion, integrity, and responsibility. When you think of someone like Bill Cosby, Erma Bombeck, or Garrison Keillor, what comes to mind? Humor, right? But there is something else.

They exude a goodness that comes from the heart. It's not just the humor that works. It's the combination of the human-ness and the humor-ness. It's a potent formula for a good life: Good humor = a good life. Through the stories in this book, I would like to show you how it works so that you can bring a little more humor into your life.

There is no *one* secret to a fulfilling and balanced life. If there was, best-selling author Stephen Covey would have already found it! The secret is in the way we live and the way we laugh.

Your life is up to you. But if you are willing to take this journey with me, I can guarantee, based on years of experience and my good fortune of working with thousands of people across the United States, this philosophy works – if you apply it.

Let me ask you to do these things. Read this book for its entertainment value. Enjoy the stories. Ponder the quotes. Consider the ideas. Then, think about the ways the information applies to you. My hope is that these ideas will help you live a rich, full, and happy life. Why? Because if you are happy, you tend to make the people around you happy. If the people around you are happy, they may come into contact with me! See, it all comes full circle.

I truly believe that adding humor to your daily routine at home, at work, and in your community can have a profound impact on the way your life turns out.

Oscar Wilde, the nineteenth century writer said, “Life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.” Are you ready to talk seriously about how the power of seeing *your* glass *laugh* full can help you lead a good life? Then let’s go.