

# On Laughter



I love to laugh.

Like all things good, laughter can be misused. It can be weaponized; used as a tool for harm, for mockery and derision; employed as a distraction from serious and necessary work.

But in its purest form, laughter is a gift. It is something that I find distinctly holy.

Studies have shown that laughter lowers blood pressure. It boosts the immune system. It increases oxygen flow throughout the body. It triggers the brain to secrete serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins, giving it a natural “antidepressant” effect as well as a natural painkilling effect. At the same time, it reduces cortisol, the body’s stress hormone. And it fosters intimacy – we are thirty times more likely to laugh when in the presence of other people than when we are alone.

There are two different kinds of laughter – involuntary and voluntary. **Involuntary laughter** is what happens when we laugh

because we can’t help it. It is spontaneous and genuine. Somebody says or does something that is downright hilarious. Or someone is tickling us. Or someone else is laughing and we “catch” it. This is the kind of laughter that can have us rolling around on the ground and snorting; that can cause our ribs to hurt from laughing so much. We have very little control over this kind of laughter.

**Voluntary laughter** is different – it is the kind of laughter that we get to choose. We laugh because something is “supposed” to be funny, or because it is the polite thing to do. (I *choose* to laugh at my husband’s horrid “dad jokes.”) It is more controlled; we can turn it on and off at-will. It is also known as “posed” laughter. Interestingly, brain scans have shown that with voluntary laughter we still get **all** of the physical and emotional benefits of involuntary laughter, but voluntary laughter also turns on the “thinking” portion of our brains, as our minds start actively

working to search for the source of the laughter—searching for something funny – looking for something that can raise our spirits.

“Laughter Yoga” is a recently-emerging movement in the yoga community, based on the idea that intentionally practicing laughter is as beneficial to our physical and emotional health as breathwork, mindfulness, and physical activity.

I wonder if the same may be true for our spiritual health. What might it look like to approach laughter as a spiritual discipline, as a means of grace? How might the Spirit of God be present in a good, hearty guffaw?

## Questions for Reflection:

1. **When was the last time you can remember laughing so hard that your sides hurt?**
2. **Can you recall a time that you have been hurt by laughter?**
3. **How has laughter shown up in your spiritual journey?**