

# Laughter and Leadership

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The role of the principal in our Catholic schools is arguably more challenging now than at any other time in our history. Meeting the diverse academic, social and spiritual needs of students, providing the necessary resources and support for staff, and engaging parents are all complex tasks that require time, energy and adaptive leadership skills. Educational theory and research support the need for ensuring that schools function as learning communities and stress the importance of principals embracing a leadership style that is shared and collaborative. The literature also emphasizes the need for an approach to instruction that is student-centred and personalized. The reality is that our current structures, from the organization of students in grades and in “egg-crate” classrooms to an adherence to rigid timetables, schedules and high stakes wide-scale assessments, tend to mitigate against moving beyond the rhetoric and putting the theory into practice.

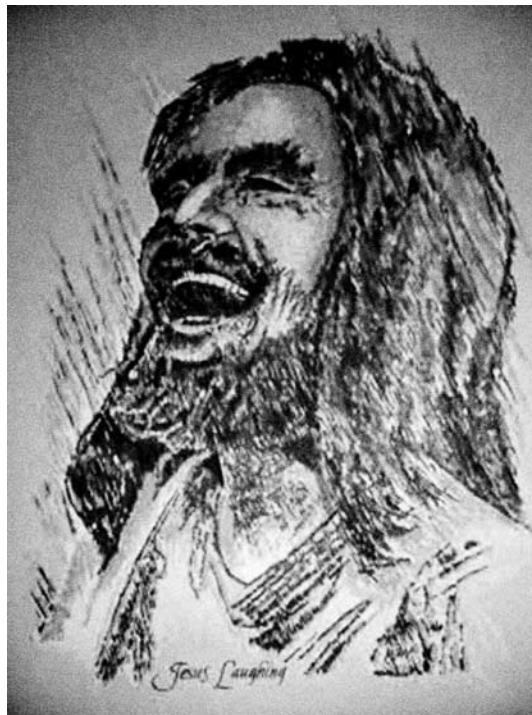
There seems to be a huge disconnect between what we know is effective and meaningful instruction and our ability to ensure that we actually have the structures and the resources to make it happen. Add to this a technology driven world that demands immediate responses and around-the-clock access and it is not difficult to understand why many principals experience a constant sense of being overwhelmed and stressed. How do principals cope at all? Well for one thing, principals are very good at understanding that there is a disconnect. Secondly, they are able to go beyond the rhetoric and strive everyday to build and sustain meaningful relationships. And, they are intentional in nurturing their souls and deepening their sense of humour. Perhaps it is the paradox or the incongruity in which principals find themselves on a daily basis that makes them well attuned to the need for joy and for laughter. Humour is often defined as the ability to see the incongruity, the absurdity in a situation. Perhaps it is because of the vulnerability that comes with the awesome responsibility of our roles that we may at times become a little fearful and rely on humour to help ourselves and others thrive.

Philosopher John Morreall believes that the first human laughter may have begun as a gesture of shared relief at the passing of danger. Since the relaxation that results from a bout of laughter inhibits the biological fight-or-flight response, laughter may indicate trust

in one’s companions. Building trust and establishing relationships are key to who we are and what we do everyday. What better way to make this happen than through creating an environment open to seeing the humour in so many serious situations.

A good friend and colleague, whose distinct laughter can light up a room, gave me a fridge magnet with the saying “The shortest distance between two people is laughter.” I have often thought how simple but profound these words are.

Certainly having a sense of humour, being able to laugh at oneself and to see the absurdity and silliness in life was a part of growing up in a large family. My mom uses her gift of Irish wit well. While my siblings and I may not have her quickness or facility with language, we have all learned that a hearty laugh can ease the pain, help us to cope with some of the tragedies of life and move us even closer to one another. When she says to us “just laugh it”, we know she is not diminishing our sense of pain, loss or betrayal but urging us not to be completely overwrought or obsessed by the problem and to see beyond ourselves.



The gift of grace that comes with shared humour and laughter is that somehow it makes you understand that you are not alone in your suffering. Suffering is part of life, part of being human. It can bind you closer together, make you stronger and more giving, or tear you apart and make you wallow all alone. When we use some of mom’s expressions like “Sure, she would make a cat laugh”, we can feel the release that comes with a sudden burst

of laughter. Although the problem or challenge is still there, we experience a renewed strength and a sense of resilience.

Cathy Fenwick in *Online Laughter Therapy Centre* puts it well: “Life does not cease to be funny when something bad happens anymore than it ceases to be serious when we are laughing.” Being of good cheer as a leader does not mean ignoring the messy or, as Heifetz calls them, the “swamp” issues that face us. Indeed, in Shakespeare, it is always the “Fool” who has the wisdom and courage to speak the truth. With his humour and silly antics, the “Fool” moves us beyond the immobile stance of the “nay sayers” and cynics and challenges us to act.

The research conducted by Norman Cousins through his personal experience, attracted the attention of the medical profession to the possible therapeutic effects of humour. The science of studying the biological effects of laughter to our immune system is called psychoneuroimmunology and is a growing field of interest among medical researchers and practitioners. It was inspired by the research of Norman Cousins, who contracted ankylosing spondylitis, a chronic and debilitating arthritic condition, in 1964. He decided that the hospital regime of strong medication, dull food and the institutional system was so depressing that any benefits he was gaining could be maximized outside the conventional treatment. He developed a program of therapy consisting of mega doses of vitamin C combined with regular doses of laughter stimulated by re-runs of the Marx Brothers' films and *Candid Camera*. These treatments of belly laughs appeared to relieve his pain considerably and, indeed, when his levels of inflammation were tested, they had decreased. Cousins also asserted that the increased release of endorphins caused by laughter eased the pain.<sup>1</sup>

The evidence that laughter and humour have therapeutic benefits on the immune system continues to grow. We know from our own life experiences that humour helps us to manage stress and cope with life's challenges. We also know that laughter breaks down barriers, connects us with one another and builds relationships. Why not a concerted effort to have the benefits of humour integrated into the curriculum and instructional practices of our teachers. Why not make sure that we continually enhance and encourage our skills in humour and serve as better mentors to our

colleagues by ensuring that our laughs per day (LPD) at least meet if not exceed the provincial average. Apparently, in our schools "What gets measured gets attention and what gets measured gets improved." Therefore, we can make an excellent case for adding LPD to our school and system priorities. According to Sister Anne Bryan Smollin, in her keynote address at When Faith Meets Pedagogy (Oct.2006), a good belly laugh is equal in its cardiovascular benefits to 10 minutes of rowing; therefore, it can fit nicely into the daily physical activity initiative.

Education is a very serious business and too often we are caught up in the urgency and "busyness" that we forget what truly matters. Being a school leader who infuses a sense of joy and who models for staff and students the gift of grace that comes with laughter and humour, is a powerful way to remind ourselves and each other that we are people of the light, filled with the hope and promise that is Christmas.

If you wish to develop further your sense of humour and increase the LPD average of your school community, read *Laughing Matters: Strategies for Building a Joyful Learning Community* written by two former principals. You can also Google "laughter" and enjoy perusing the many websites dedicated to the serious business of humour as a means towards making this world a better place. Be of good cheer.

<sup>1</sup> *Laughing Matters: Strategies for Building a Joyful Learning Community*, Susan Stephenson and Paul Thibault; Solution Tree; 2006

## Principal's Qualification Program

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