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News that Inspires

Humor as Spiritual Practice
by Karen Horneffer-Ginter

Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Give me your hand. --Rilke

I was going through airport security the other month, participating in the grind of pulling out my laptop and my Ziploc baggie full of plastic bottles, and removing my belt and my shoes and my watch and my jacket and trying to fit them all into the plastic bin in such a way that nothing would fall out as it went through its screening.

On the other side, I quickly gathered my belongings so they wouldn't get run over by the oncoming stream of objects. I started shuffling forward with my shoes half on and my arms weighed down by my scattering of possessions. As I glanced up, I saw a group of chairs and tables with an accompanying sign that read: "Recombobulation Area."

"Ha!" I grunted with laughter and relief. "How perfect is that!"

Not only did I appreciate having some space to pull myself together, but even more so, I loved that someone had invented this word and had gone to the effort of naming this area -- I loved how it created a moment of unexpected lightness, especially when I was feeling a bit bogged down.

I'm not quite sure why the human maturation process so often involves a movement away from such humor and lightness and toward the more serious aspects of life. Why is it that studies show that adults laugh far fewer times a day than children? I do understand the need to become responsible as we enter adulthood; unfortunately, this responsibility often seems to get paired with the wilting of some essential part of us.

The beauty of using humor and keeping a sense of lightness and playfulness in our life is that it helps us deal with life as it is -- the ups and downs, the unexpected changes, and the frustrations we may encounter.

A great example of the buffer allowed by lightness came on a day when my husband had been traveling and I had arranged for a sitter to have several hours of some much-needed alone time -- I was hoping to bring my attention inward, in the spirit of taking the best of my own advice to turn within. I felt giddy as she arrived, and I quickly oriented her to what she could serve my children for dinner and told her about a few new games they might want to play together. I scurried upstairs to my bedroom, where I had already laid out several poetry books, my journal, and a favorite pen. I fluffed up my buckwheat-filled meditation cushion and lit a candle.

"Ahhh," I sighed.

I began my time by reading a passage from Rilke: "Go into yourself and see how deep the place is from which your life flows."

I sat for several minutes, quieting the thoughts in my mind and allowing the invitation of Rilke's words to sink into my awareness. I started to notice the rhythm of my breathing, and I felt a sense of calm arrive.

"Ahhh," I sighed again.

I felt inspired to draw an image in my journal, and so I went to get some colored pencils from my office down the hallway. As I opened my bedroom door, I heard the words, "Well, maybe we should go get Mom and tell her." And then I heard the sitter say, "No, I think it's okay."

Bless her, I thought, and I fought the impulse to go downstairs.

Don't you dare, I said to myself. This is your time to be with Rilke and the place from which your life flows.

I got my colored pencils and walked back to my bedroom with resolve. As I closed the door I heard the sitter say, "Don't worry, honey. I don't think any of the eggs have hatched yet..."

I sat down on my cushion determined to stay calm and present with my journal and candle and breath. It was hard, however, not to feel haunted by her words. Eggs? I thought. I made macaroni and cheese for dinner. Why is she talking about eggs?

My mind kept scanning its inner reference points to eggs, much as I tried to keep my attention on my breath. Soon, I was consumed with my puzzling to the point where I felt my forehead squint into a crease.

"Oh no!" I said out loud as I remembered noticing my son's dry scalp that morning -- how I had encouraged him to use some dandruff shampoo to see if it would help.

I blew out my candle flame and closed my journal, letting out much more of a moan than a sigh this time.

Needless to say, the last thing in the world I wanted to do was blow out that flame. I didn't want to drive out to the drugstore, or to have conversations about lice, or to comb hair under bright lights. I wanted my time alone.

It helped me find some lightness in the situation when I started to wonder, Did Rilke ever have to deal with a case of head lice in his family? And how about the other contemplative saints throughout history? How about Thoreau on Walden Pond? I bet he never had to deal with such a thing. Somehow, letting my mind entertain these thoughts helped to make a disappointing situation a little less disappointing. It also helped me to appreciate what the evening did offer, which ended up being many sweet and amusing moments with my children.

When we bring a humorous lens to moments like this, not only does it make them more bearable, but it can also allow us to recognize that these types of disappointments and derailings of our spiritual practice are actually valuable spiritual practices in and of themselves. With a little lightness and humor, we're able to see our attachments,

just as we would in a meditation practice -- and we also end up developing greater levels of flexibility, just as we might from attending a yoga class. Such moments highlight how choosing a lens of humor can be a valuable spiritual practice.