

Interview with Mary Huntley and Edna Thayer, authors of “A Mirthful Spirit: Embracing Laughter for Wellness

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Mary Huntley and Edna Thayer, who are here to talk about their new book, “A Mirthful Spirit: Embracing Laughter for Wellness.”

Edna L. Thayer, aka (or affectionately known as) The Laughing Lady, began her interest in the serious side of humor in early 1990 when she developed a staff development class entitled, “Stress Relief Through Humor.” The popularity of the topic grew by word of mouth and soon Edna was branching out and being asked to present at other groups to which the attendees belonged. Thus began Humor THAYER-apy, a term Edna uses to describe her business. In eighteen years, she has given over 800 talks in seven different states and Canada, varying from 20 minutes to all day workshops. In October 2007, she was certified as a laughter leader through the World Laughter Tour (CLL).

Mary Huntley's life has also been weaved together by events focused on humor: Writing a booklet of riddles and jokes while in sixth grade; admiring her father share his mirthfulness, great story telling, and wonderful laughs; experiencing lightheartedness growing up in a family that had its own set of “hard knocks;” living a life filled with uplifting music; choosing a life partner who loves to laugh; and enjoying a family that laughs with each other. A new chapter in the journey of laughter occurred for Mary when her daughter chose laughter as the topic for a 1984 high school English paper titled, “Laughter’s Positive Force in Life.” After reading her daughter’s paper and its supporting resources, Mary understood how laughter could intentionally influence wellness for people. Thus, Mary’s dissertation research topic blossomed when she returned to graduate school in 1985.

Edna and Mary met as colleagues at Minnesota State University. Both have extensive backgrounds in medicine, nursing, and teaching. It was their belief in the importance of laughter as a means to wellness that led to their writing “A Mirthful Spirit.”

Tyler: Welcome, Edna and Mary. I’m glad you could join me today. To start out, we always hear laughter is the best medicine. How true is that statement?

Mary: We believe the statement is very true. Laughter is best because it is easily accessible, always available, and free. It is an adjunctive type of therapy, which needs to be used along with other modalities. Laughter triggers a whole host of positive outcomes for bringing people together, reducing tension, and such amazing things as stimulating endorphins to lessen pain.

Tyler: What made you decide to write a book about laughter and how it can keep a person well?

Edna: The two of us have been immersed in the study of the benefits of laughter for many years. We decided we were not getting any younger and we wanted to record the highlights of what we knew as a heritage for our families and as a benefit for anyone who would read the book. We wanted our message to live on to help others. When we started our project, we thought we might write a book that could be used as a teaching reference/textbook for the health care professions. Our goal changed and while it has been used as a teaching textbook, it is written to benefit the general public.

Tyler: Will you tell us a little bit about how the book is organized and written? I understand there’s a variety of prose and poetry.

Mary: The book is organized into four parts. The first part, “Embracing Mirth and Laughter for Wellness,” defines our terms and describes the physical and psycho-social benefits. The second part, “Nurturing a Mirthful Spirit,” tells tips on how we can enhance our humor potential from infancy to old age. In this part we also talk about preventing negative teasing and stress the importance of using humor and laughter for positive outcomes. The third part focuses on a mirthful spirit in the work place. The first chapter of this section talks about using laughter in all work places; the second chapter talks about laughter in the health care setting, and the third part talks about the importance of positive humor for learning in the educational setting. The last section of the book explores the serious side of humor. In this section, we describe the historical and cultural aspects of humor and laughter, share the laughter associated with some forms of music, and then talk about our research study. Comments from our research participants are sprinkled throughout the book in order not only to honor our evidence, but to keep the book light and festive.

We use a lot of acronyms in the book to organize our content and then sprinkle the information with anecdotes, quotes, and some jokes. We summarize some of the information with select bits of poetry.

Tyler: I’m curious about your mention of the historical and cultural aspects of humor and laughter. How has humor changed through history or how does it vary from one culture to the next?

Mary: The focus of humor and laughter way back in history was about laughing at others. People were ridiculed in front of others and then laughed at. The goal was to feel superior to others by putting others down—doing what we call bullying today. The court jester’s role was to humor the king and possibly save some people from his wrath by refocusing through humor and wit. From a cultural perspective we can say that laughter has no accent. We all smile as part of any language. However what is funny is a matter of perspective. Thus, what happens in some cultures is very funny because it is not our experience. However we need to be careful that we are laughing about that difference in perspective, not laughing at some person directly. There is also the issue of work cultures with inside jokes and humor that comes from a particular work setting. As long as that humor stays within the boundaries of the work setting so it is not misinterpreted by “outsiders,” it can serve a useful purpose of releasing tensions.

Tyler: What are some of the physical benefits of laughter?

Edna: Some of the most commonly accepted physical benefits include: lightens stress, anxiety and tension; improves pain tolerance; increases brain-cell functioning; improves immune function; stimulates respirations, circulation, and digestion; and exercises all internal organs. Cognitively, humor promotes psychological well-being, raises self-esteem, improves mood, and improves interpersonal interactions and relationships.

Tyler: How do people incorporate laughter or humor into the workplace, school, or other places which generally are not considered fun places to be?

Mary: This starts with having a mirthful spirit within oneself. One must be a joyful person before one can spread joy to others. A lot has to do with attitude. One needs to have a positive attitude and look on the bright side of things rather than focusing on the negative. Once this is accomplished, there are suggestions in the book on how one might include humor in the work setting. An example is to have a humor corner where jokes could be posted. Another example is to have a silly hat day. Maybe at a designated time people can share their hat stories; it creates lots of fun. It gives people permission to laugh with each other not at each other.

Tyler: Obviously, there are negative types of humor—ridicule, mockery, sarcasm. Do you distinguish between these types of humor from the more positive ones in “A Mirthful Spirit”?

Edna: Yes, negative humor is that which hurts instead of heals, that which leaves people feeling worse instead of better, and that which is at the expense of other people. Defining negative types of humor is an important part of the book. One of the most detrimental types of humor is taunting and sarcasm. We devote a whole chapter to preventing negative teasing of this sort. We emphasize repeatedly the importance of laughing “with” and not “at.”

Tyler: Mary and Edna, I’m curious to know how you personally use humor in your lives. For example, when something bad happens that could cause you to be depressed, how do you lift yourselves out of that state?

Mary: If I am in a safe place and feeling sad I believe it is important to cry and let those healing tears emerge. Then I believe it is important to find my “laughing place”—to think of a place where I have been where I was happy,

felt good, and focus on that event to help the smiles emerge and maybe a few giggles. I also seek out people to be with who are good positive laughers.

Edna: Life is full of situations that are both happy and sad, negative and positive, good and bad. I try to focus on the positive and look at the bright side of things. For example, we feed birds at our bird feeders. I choose to hear their songs and enjoy their bright colors instead of focusing on the droppings they leave on the sidewalk and lawn.

Mourning is a natural process, and there are times when one experiences a loss, that it is appropriate and necessary to mourn. But I choose to try to replace the sadness of the time with happier memories from the past.

Tyler: Do you have any favorite books, comedians, or film or TV comedies? I'm curious what the two of you find funny?

Mary: I love Robert Fulghum books. One of the funniest things that happened to me was the day I graduated with my PhD degree and one of my good friends gave me one of Fulghum's books, "*All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*." My favorite comedians are Victor Borge and Bill Cosby. One of my favorite movies is "*Patch Adams*."

Basically, I know that we as human beings are very funny; we have our own imperfections that can spark much laughter if we allow it and can do it in a positive way. My grandchildren are very funny and spark tons of laughter in my life.

Edna: I enjoy many of the old time comedians, i.e. Lucille Ball, Jack Benny, and Bob Hope. My most favorite movies are not really comedies, but they bring joy to my life, such as "The Sound of Music," "White Christmas," and "It's a Wonderful Life."

Tyler: Why did you choose the title, "A Mirthful Spirit" and particularly the word "mirth" which is not a commonly used word any longer?

Mary: Having been immersed in the study of laughter and humor, the word, mirth, was a very familiar word to both of us. It really was not until after our book was published and we began speaking about the book, that we realized the word was not a common word with everyone. Mirth means joy and is the emotional response to humor, while laughter is the physical response to humor. We believe that both mirth and laughter contribute to wellness and we wanted to emphasize the importance of both. In fact, at a conference of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor in Feb., 2008, one of the presenters made a major point that mirth may be much more beneficial than laughter in promoting wellness.

The word "mirth" actually comes from the Bible, Ecclesiastes chapter 8 verse 15: "Then I commanded mirth, because people have no better thing to do under the sun than to eat, drink, and be happy."

Tyler: That's interesting. I didn't realize mirth was the emotional response to humor. Is mirth different from joy or happiness or is it the same basic idea? Does mirth have to result from humor specifically while joy or happiness might result simply from something good happening?

Mary: Mirth and joy are the same. If I were to elaborate more on mirth, I would say that it is the warm pleasant feeling we experience inside ourselves when something humorous triggers a response. Whatever makes us smile brings about mirth, joy, and a happy feeling. This is a key factor because we do not have to have lots of belly laughs to be well or to promote healing. These smiles with mirth and joy also contribute to healing and wellness.

Tyler: Will you tell me about how you collaborated together in writing the book?

Edna: First we decided to replicate Mary's 1988 research study. That took the whole year of 2004. Then we wrote an outline based on the theoretical framework from the research study. We divided the chapters for each of us to write the first draft. As we finished one, we e-mailed it to the other partner and then met. We constantly shared drafts back and forth because we wanted the book to sound like it was written by both of us, and we did not want to duplicate information which had already been discussed in a prior chapter. We had many revisions, some major and some minor, before the book was in its final form.

Tyler: Do you have plans to write more books, either individually or together?

Mary: I might because I have a couple topics I am interested in putting into a book.

Edna: I do not plan to write any more. My goal is to promote this book for the next five years.

Tyler: Will you tell us about the presentations you give on laughter?

Edna: We talk to a wide variety of audiences for whatever length of time requested. Our shortest presentation is 20 minutes. Although both of us have done all day workshops in the past, we now prefer to limit the length of our presentation to three hours or less. We use a lot of energy in our presentations, and anything over three hours is too exhausting.

The general outline for the talks is based on the book, although our examples, and what is emphasized, depends on the audience and what they want. The size of the group this past year has ranged from around 10 to 1000. Although some children have been in the audiences and enjoyed the message, the talk is usually presented to adults.

The shorter talks are usually for groups who want a presentation that is highly entertaining. The longer talks, while also entertaining, are often more informational and educational. In addition, we have a “specialty” talk for church services. We call ourselves the “Mirthful Messengers” and base the sermon on scriptures from the Bible. We plan the worship services with the clergy and music leadership for both traditional and contemporary services.

Tyler: What kinds of responses do you receive from people who attend your presentations?

Mary: We receive many positive responses. People like to laugh and people like to learn about ways to make a difference in the lives of others by bringing joy to others. We like to impress upon people the power that laughter really has. If one considers the fact that “peace begins with a smile” as said by Mother Teresa and as Patch Adams said, “the most revolutionary act we can commit in the world is to be happy”—that says a lot about what each person can decide to do to make a difference by promoting positive smiles and laughter.

Edna: How can I remain humble while I tell you that one recent participant said it was the best session she had ever attended? Perhaps the best testimony is that people leave with smiles on their faces and laughing. Our only advertising is “word of mouth” and it keeps us busy.

Tyler: As professionals in nursing and healthcare, do you feel the importance of laughter is overlooked in the medical professions?

Edna: We would broaden that question to the health care profession, and yes, we feel that much more emphasis could be placed on the importance of mirth and laughter. Some people, i.e. Dr. James Walsh, Dr. William Fry, and Dr. Patch Adams have been pioneers in this field. Some health care settings have begun to do more with promoting opportunities for mirth and laughter. Much of that activity occurred when Norman Cousins book, “*Anatomy of an Illness*,” was widely read and hospitals started creating humor rooms and joy carts to bring humor and laughter to the hospitalized patient. Now that patients do not stay in hospitals very long, we need to find other ways to emphasize the healing power of laughter. While the field of integrative medicine is beginning to become more popular, laughter is often not a part of it. Integrative health care is offering patients the opportunity to use complimentary types of therapy along with the traditional, i.e. touch, aroma therapy, reflexology, spirituality, nutrition, and massage. We think humor therapy should be a part of these offerings. We all need to be intentional about including humor in our lives, and it has to be a choice.

Tyler: What do you feel the medical professions should do to improve wellness by using laughter?

Mary: First, one needs to assess one’s own level of mirthfulness. Is the health care giver open to humor stimuli and assessing the openness of their clients/patients?

Then, principles of humor therapy could be incorporated into a person’s assessment and care plan. It could be an option given to them along with other types of integrative modalities.

Tyler: Edna and Mary, if people are depressed or having a bad day, what is one thing you would suggest they do to cheer themselves up?

Edna: They can identify things in their lives that bring them joy and intentionally include these things every day. We can look at the bright side of things and positive side. If we don't feel like smiling, we can smile anyway, and "fake it till we make it."

Someone who is severely depressed may require professional intervention. People who are clinically depressed have often lost their ability to be mirthful. As they heal, one sign of that healing is the return of smiles and an ability to laugh more.

Tyler: Thank you, Mary and Edna, for joining me today. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information can be found there about "A Mirthful Spirit: Embracing Laughter for Wellness."

Mary: Our website is www.mirthfulspirit.com. We talk about the book, ourselves, a schedule of our upcoming events such as presentations and book signings, how to order books, stores where books can be purchased, and how to contact us.

Tyler: Do either of you have a joke before we go to keep us in the right frame of mind?

Edna: I have a problem keeping my weight down. I even went into a paint store the other day because I heard you could get "thinner" there.

Mary: Some people have a repertoire of one-liners and jokes that they can recall instantly. Others, like myself, do not remember jokes easily, but really enjoy laughing. I prefer to cuddle up to someone who spreads positive humor, listen to them, and laugh. Family stories, especially those involving children and grand children are among my favorites. I am great at nurturing good humor and I have become very comfortable telling others about my embarrassing moments. Learning to laugh at oneself often takes practice and a willingness to enjoy sharing the imperfections we as human beings know all too well.

Tyler: Thank you, Mary and Edna for joining me. I hope you bring mirth to many people.

Mary and Edna: We thank you, Tyler, for this opportunity.

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