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# Laughter Ever After...

## Ministry of Good Humor

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A man speaks frantically into the phone, "My wife is pregnant and her contractions are only two minutes apart!" "Is this her first child?" the doctor queries. "Don't be silly!" the man shouts, "This is her husband!"

A young couple was nervously expecting their first baby. As her contractions began in earnest, the wife calmly announced to her husband that it was time to get to the hospital. Noting that it was rush hour, he shouted as he ran out the door ahead of her, "Let's take both cars. That way, one of us is sure to make it in time."

I thought he would appreciate these words of support, but I should have known, as a rather experienced "Minister of Good Humor," that not everyone is ready to hear the gospel at the time it is preached. But not to despair. They may come around later and tell you that your words were not wasted, after all.

## Preface

The idea of this book is that any Christian person of any age or station in life can minister to others by understanding the strengths and the limits of humor: what it can do for us, and what we should not expect it to do. Humor can be a wonderful resource for enabling us to get along better than we do, for helping us get through difficult times in life, for helping us appreciate the life that God has given us. Because it is such a wonderful resource, we may be tempted to abuse it, exploit it, or treat it as a panacea for difficulties and problems it is not meant or designed for. Like *anything* we cherish in life, we need to treat humor with respect; like *anyone* we cherish in life, we need to treat humor lovingly, with generosity, goodwill, and grace, and it will respond in kind.

This book is intended to help those who want to be Ministers of Good Humor to know something about the real, proven benefits of humor, who want to participate in the creation of a good humor ethos, who want to know about the human needs to which humor can sensitize us, who want to understand what humor has to offer those who are trying to cope with aging, illness, and death, and who want to know the qualities that are likely to enable one to be an effective Minister of Good Humor.

I invite readers of this book to think of it as a Ministry of Good Humor handbook. *Webster's New World College Dictionary* defines a handbook as "a compact reference book on some subject; manual of facts or instructions."<sup>1</sup> It is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but it should be enough to get readers started on the Ministry of Good Humor. Some people are already on the way. Some have

been doing it for so long it has become second nature. They are so good at it that they probably don't need this book. But they might want to share it with a friend who seems like a person who would be an excellent Minister of Good Humor, but needs a little encouragement. This book could also be the textbook for a Ministry of Good Humor class. The chapters are probably brief enough so that the class could cover one chapter per week, and members who attend all or most of the class meetings would receive a Minister of Good Humor badge or certificate at the end of the course. If they apply their knowledge outside of the classroom, I can virtually guarantee that they will make a difference in other people's lives and they will gain some valuable insights into themselves as well.

Most of the teachers whom I know like to explain in understandable terms what the course is about. When I do this, I try to define the key terms—in this case, *ministry*, *good*, and *humor*—and I make a bee line for the dictionary so that no one will accuse me of beginning a course with a personal bias. The dictionary defines *ministry* as “the act of ministering, or serving.”<sup>2</sup> Not much help there, so let's go to the word *minister*. There are lots of meanings for this word. The most relevant are “a person acting for another as agent,” and “the agent of some power, force, etc. (such as a *minister* of evil).”<sup>3</sup> So, as Christians, we act as agents for our Lord Jesus, and because he is good, we are ministers of *good*, not evil.

So what does *good* mean? There are seventeen definitions of the word *good*. These are the most relevant: “valid, genuine, real (as in *good* money or a *good* excuse),” “healthy, strong, vigorous (as in *good* eyesight),” “enjoyable, desirable, pleasant, happy, etc. (as in a *good* life),” and “dependable, reliable, right (as in *good* advice).”<sup>4</sup> There is also “proper, becoming, correct (as in *good* manners),”<sup>5</sup> but I sort of resist this one, because good humor usually walks the rather narrow pathway between being proper on the one hand and giving offense on the other. So let's flag that issue and move on to *humor*.

*Humor* is “the quality that makes something seem funny, amusing, or ludicrous” and “the ability to perceive, appreciate, or express what is funny, amusing, or ludicrous.”<sup>6</sup> So what does *funny* mean? *Funny* is “the simple, general term for anything that excites laughter or mirth.”<sup>7</sup> I think we all know what laughter is. *Mirth* is “joyfulness, gaiety, or merriment, especially when characterized by laughter.”<sup>8</sup>

So what do we have? Or, better, who are we? We are agents for the Lord Jesus who serve him by promoting laughter, amusement, joyfulness, gaiety, and merriment that is valid, genuine, and real; healthy, strong, and vigorous; enjoyable, pleasant, desirable, and happy; dependable, reliable, and right! Not bad for starters. Climb aboard the Happy Special. It's over on the Sunshine Track.

### *Get a Transfer*

If you are on the Gloomy Line,  
Get a transfer.  
If you're inclined to fret and pine,  
Get a transfer.  
Get off the track of doubt and gloom,  
Get on the Sunshine Track—there's room—  
Get a transfer.  
If you're on the Worry Train,  
Get a transfer.  
You must not stay there and complain,  
Get a transfer.  
The Cheerful Cars are passing through,  
And there's lots of room for you—  
Get a transfer.  
If you're on the Grouchy Track,  
Get a transfer.  
Just take a Happy Special back,  
Get a transfer.  
Jump on the train and pull the rope,  
That lands you at the station Hope—  
Get a transfer.<sup>9</sup>

So where are we going?

*The Town of Don't You Worry*

There's a town called Don't-You-Worry  
On the banks of River Smile;  
Where the Cheer-up and Be-happy  
Blossom sweetly all the while.  
Where the Never-Grumble flower  
Blooms beside the fragrant Try,  
And the Ne'er-Give-Up and Patience  
Point their faces to the sky.  
In the valley of Contentment  
In the province of I-Will,  
You will find this lovely city,  
At the foot of No-Fret Hill.  
There are thoroughfares delightful  
In this very charming town,  
And on every hand are shade trees  
Named the Very-Seldom-Frown.  
Rustic benches quite enticing,  
You'll find scattered here and there,  
And to each a vine is clinging  
Called the Frequent-Earrest prayer.  
Everybody there is happy,  
And is singing all the while,  
In the town of Don't-You-Worry  
On the banks of River Smile.<sup>10</sup>

Too good to be true? Not if the Lord's Ministers of Good  
Humor are afoot.

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## What Good Is Humor?

If you want to be a Minister of Good Humor, you'll want to know the benefits of humor and to tell other people what it's good for. Some skeptics think it's a waste of time, that it's frivolous, pointless, a distraction from what's important. You'll want to be able to answer the skeptics. This chapter tells you how to do this. It does this by reporting on empirical studies that have proven that humor has some real benefits. So if some skeptics say to you, "The last thing we need around here is a Minister of Good Humor," you can refer to this handbook and say, in an appropriately authoritative tone of voice, "With all due respect, studies show..." If they are fair-minded, they will say, "You've convinced us," and allow you to go about your business. You may even have converted *them* to the gospel of Good Humor.

On the other side of the argument are the folks who, like myself, grew up with *The Reader's Digest* view that "laughter is the best medicine." This belief goes all the way back to the Bible: "A cheerful ["merry" in KJV] heart is a good medicine; but a downcast spirit dries up the bones" (Prov. 17:22 NRSV). The folks who take this position would seem to be your best allies, but, as Robert R. Provine points out in his book *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*,<sup>1</sup> many of the claims for the medicinal or health-promoting nature of laughter and humor are pretty exaggerated. So, if you are to be a Minister

of Good Humor in the “valid, genuine, real” sense of good, you will not want to cozy up with the “laughter is good for your health” crowd. The best strategy for the promotion of good humor is to lay out a middle way between the skeptics and the enthusiasts.

### **The Overselling of the Health Benefits of Laughter and Humor**

The idea that laughter is the best medicine got a big shot in the arm when Norman Cousins wrote about his affliction with a painful and life-threatening degenerative disease (ankylosing spondylitis) and his successful self-treatment with vitamin C, Marx Brothers’ movies, and episodes from the television series *Candid Camera*. In collaboration with his physician, he removed himself from the hospital and checked into a hotel, where he improvised a therapeutic regime that included a healthy dose of humor. In a 1976 article published in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*, expanded into a book titled *The Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*,<sup>2</sup> he claimed that ten minutes of laughter provided him at least two precious hours of pain-free sleep and other desirable health benefits. His book became a best seller and he became a widely sought speaker on medical matters from the patient’s perspective. Later in life he moderated his laugh-your-way-to health message, noting that humor should be thought of as a metaphor for the entire range of positive emotions. But the idea that laughter was the key factor in the remission of his disease is what everyone seems to remember, and other explanations have been conveniently set aside. There is something about the scene of a man sitting in his hotel bed watching videos and laughing his head off and getting well that has almost universal appeal.

Provine doesn’t want to expunge this picture completely from our minds, but he says that studies of the physiological effects of laughter haven’t proven much of anything. After reviewing a lot of them, Provine concludes: “No amount of scholarship can piece together a coherent physiological picture of laughter or humor from this hodgepodge of odd parts. Investigators often disagree about the most basic

results.”<sup>3</sup> He points out that in none of these studies was there a control for the possibility that the presumed effects of laughter were really due to the playful social settings in which laughter occurred, not from laughing itself. No study evaluated the uniqueness of laughter’s physiological profile by contrasting it with other energetic vocalizations like shouting or cheering.

Then what about longevity? Does a “cheerful heart” add years to your life? Unfortunately, a study of the long-term effects of personality on health actually showed that cheerfulness (optimism and sense of humor) in childhood was *inversely* related to longevity. A better predictor of a long life was conscientiousness.

The authors of this study suggested “to the extent that optimism and humor are healthy, they may act as adaptive coping mechanism to a transient crisis.”<sup>4</sup> Provine shares this view, noting that there is “little scientific support for the popular idea that people with the personality traits of humor, cheerfulness, or optimism are particularly healthy or long-lived, but the possibility remains that situational laughter and humor are effective coping mechanism for transient stress.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, if a cheerful heart is a good medicine, it’s a medicine that works like a placebo—it probably doesn’t have any physiological benefits, but it does seem to have psychological benefits.

So what are these psychological benefits? Having combed through scores of empirical studies on the psychological benefits of humor, I believe that humor has three main benefits: it may help to reduce life-stress; it may help to alleviate milder forms of depression; and it may help to reduce anxiety. A related conviction is that the person with a well-developed “sense of humor” is more likely to experience these benefits than a humorless person who has sporadic bursts of humor. But measuring a “sense of humor” empirically is problematic, especially because the studies suggest that there are two ways to be a humor-loving person: you can be a person who produces humor for others to enjoy, and you can be a person who enjoys the humor produced by others. This means that you can have a well-developed

sense of humor and never tell a joke or even say something funny or comical with a group of friends. In fact, your sense of humor may be more well-developed than a person who is constantly saying funny things or performing amusing antics. With these preliminary thoughts out of the way, let's take a look at the empirical studies. In presenting them, I will do my best to make them as nontechnical and palatable as I can. I wouldn't want to turn off any readers in the very first chapter. On the other hand, if you have an aversion to empirical psychology, no one is compelling you to hang around. Take a breather, and let's get together again at the beginning of chapter 2.

### **Humor Reduces Life-Stress**

"Doctor, you gotta help me. I'm under so much stress that I keep losing my temper."

"Just calm yourself, and tell me all about it."

"I JUST DID, YOU STUPID IDIOT!"

Almost everyone agrees that stress is greater today than at any time in our nation's history. In our grandparents' and parents' generations, people complained of chronic fatigue.<sup>6</sup> Today, we complain of stress and being "stressed out." When our grandparents and parents talked about stress, they were usually talking about the structures of buildings, and whether a post or wall could handle the weight placed upon it. In much the same way, we talk about the pressure we feel, the strain we are under, the tension in our minds and bodies. When we think of ways to reduce pressure, tension, and strain, we might not think of humor because humor seems so temporary and fleeting. This, to some extent, is true. What reduces life-stress most is not an occasional joke but a sense of humor, or a humorous temperament or disposition. However, a sense of humor can be cultivated or nurtured. It's the rare baby who comes laughing through the birth canal and has a ready smile for the obstetrician. Most looked scared, confused—stressed out. So, if we are not born with a sense of humor, we can develop it, and it's never too late to get on with it.

But what's the evidence that humor reduces life-stress? The study of the link between humor and stress reduction has been going on for forty years. It began when a psychology professor, Herbert Lefcourt, a psychology professor at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, had a couple of students who, under his advisement, wrote their doctoral dissertations on humor.<sup>7</sup> Humor research ended when both of them graduated. But then Lefcourt attended his father's funeral. He expected a very solemn occasion. Instead, the reuniting of family members far and wide was an occasion for mirth and good will. This was not at all out of disrespect for his father. It was almost in his honor. He had always been ready to make light of the grimmest of circumstances, often with a joke or cliché that would fit the occasion and cause others to take the situation less seriously. The humor displayed at the funeral was very much in character with the ways his father would have joked if he had been there to take part.

Lefcourt's experience at his father's funeral led him to begin studying humor in earnest, and he and Rod Martin, a fellow Canadian teaching psychology at the University of Western Ontario, developed a humor questionnaire. It was designed to measure the propensity to smile or laugh in a variety of daily life situations, the kinds of situations that are likely to cause a person to get embarrassed, irritated, upset, or angry. A typical question is, "Suppose you were eating in a restaurant with some friends and the waiter accidentally spilled a drink on you." The choices range from "I would not have found this particularly amusing" to "I would have laughed heartily at my own expense." (Maybe the question should have specified whether the drink was hot or cold; almost everyone I have discussed this question with has said if the drink was hot, they would howl in pain.) Then they developed a coping humor scale consisting of seven statements that would ask you to rate your degree of agreement or disagreement. Typical statements include, "I usually look for something comical to say when I am in tense situations," or, "I must admit that my life would probably be easier if I had more of a sense of humor."

The idea was to use both instruments to find out if a sense of humor reduced life-stress. They also used a questionnaire to assess a person's current mood level, with five negative moods—including tension, depression, anger, fatigue, and confusion—and one positive mood—vigor. Every study that Lefcourt and Martin carried out had the same result: humor reduced the impact of stress. No gender differences were found. A study of severely disabled persons had the same result. The authors found that there was greater acceptance or transcendence of their disabilities by those who were able to express humor about the very state of being disabled. The authors concluded that persons who are *not* disabled "have much to learn about humor and grace from handicapped persons."<sup>8</sup>

Studies by other researchers have supported these findings. In a study by Smadar Bizi, Giora Keinan, and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi,<sup>9</sup> 159 Israeli soldiers, aged 19–20, who were taking part in a training course for combat and defense forces, filled out the questionnaires developed by Lefcourt and Martin. In addition, crew members evaluated one another on two kinds of humor: *productive* humor, when one tells jokes and makes humorous comments that cause others to smile or laugh; and *reactive* humor, when one mainly enjoys the jokes and humorous comments that others make. These researchers found that humor aided performance under stress, and that this was especially true for *productive* humor. They were not sure why it was more helpful for those who tell jokes and make humorous comments, but the probable explanation is that making light of the stressful situation is more likely to reduce their own inner stress and tension. Those who merely *react* with a smile or laughter to the jokes or humorous comments of others may not experience the same release.

### **Humor Moderates Mild Depression**

A guy and his girlfriend were going out on the town. When he called for her at her tenth-story apartment, she wasn't quite ready. She said to make himself at home, so he began playing ball with her little dog.

The door to the balcony was open, and when the ball bounced out the door and over the ledge of the balcony, the dog leaped after it. A few minutes later his girlfriend appeared, looking as lovely as ever. He asked, "Have you noticed your dog has been acting depressed lately?"

By all accounts, depression has been on the increase over the past several decades. The American Psychiatric Association indicates that the lifetime risk for major depressive disorder in community samples has varied from 10 to 25 percent for women, and from 5 to 12 percent for men, and that the lifetime prevalence of chronic depression is 6 percent.<sup>10</sup> These numbers represent just a small percentage of the persons who experience less severe forms of depression that do not come to the attention of psychiatrists or psychotherapists. Also, many persons do not use the word *depression* to express how they feel. Instead, they may talk about being sad, discouraged, gloomy, or unhappy. Or they may be having trouble sleeping, or complain of listlessness, or have difficulty concentrating or making decisions, or have a low opinion of themselves, or have feelings of hopelessness, all of which are common symptoms of depression.<sup>11</sup>

Because humor is associated with mirth—joyfulness, gaiety, or merriment—it isn't surprising that researchers would try to find out if humor has an effect on depression. Because the studies by Lefcourt and Martin also found some evidence that humor moderates depression (one of the five negative moods that they studied), Albert Porterfield decided to test whether humor reduced depression as well as life-stress.<sup>12</sup> Surprisingly, he didn't find much evidence that humor reduced life-stress, but he did find considerable evidence that humor moderates depression. He guessed that stressful life experiences are typically the cause of depression, so the idea that humor reduces life-stress was indirectly supported.

A subsequent study by Stephanie L. Deaner and Jasmin T. McConatha came up with the opposite results. Humor helped persons cope with stressful situations but had less

effect on depression.<sup>13</sup> If we compare the depression scores of the persons they studied with the persons who Porterfield studied, we can come up with a pretty good explanation for the difference. Porterfield's study used students at Oberlin College, and they had very high depression scores. Deaner and McConatha used students at West Chester University, and they had unexpectedly low depression scores. Their depression scores were probably less affected by humor because they were so low to begin with.

On the other hand, some students at West Chester University were more depressed than others. What Deaner and McConatha discovered was that those who were less depressed use humor as a coping mechanism more than those who were more depressed. This could explain why Porterfield didn't find much support for the idea that humor helps persons cope with life-stress. There may be a point where depression is so severe that humor is unable to moderate the stresses of life.

What these two studies seem to tell us is that the relationship between humor, depression, and coping with life-stresses is quite complex. Another team of researchers, Arthur M. Nezu, Christine M. Nezu, and Sonia E. Blissett,<sup>14</sup> studied a group of Fairleigh Dickinson University students, and found that humor moderated the depression scores of persons who were currently experiencing a stressful situation in their lives. This finding suggests that someone who is chronically depressed may not be helped by humor, but that humor may help someone who is currently having a rough time of it, and has gotten depressed as a result.

### **Humor Helps to Reduce Anxiety**

An elderly woman was terrified of flying to visit her family in Australia, because she was so afraid that there would be a bomb on board. They tried to convince her that the risk of such an occurrence was remote and persuaded her to consult an actuary. "What are the chances of someone having a bomb on a plane?" she asked. "Very slight," he replied, "About one in 10,000." "And what are the chances of two

people having a bomb on the same plane?" "Even smaller. Something like one in a billion. Practically zero." After that, she was happy to fly...as long as she took a bomb on board.

The fact that humor may reduce life-stress raises the question of whether it also helps with anxiety. Anxiety and stress are not the same thing, but they often overlap. The pressure, strain, or tension one feels when one is stressed may be due to anxiety. (It could also be due to fear.) Anxiety is a state of being uneasy, apprehensive, or worried about what may happen; it is a concern about a possible future event.<sup>15</sup> Psychiatrists refer to it as "anticipatory dread," especially dread of a situation in which we think we will be placed in a vulnerable position.<sup>16</sup> Our feelings of vulnerability may cause us to "catastrophize," or to dwell on the worst possible outcome.<sup>17</sup> "I will flunk the midterm and fail the course," "The plane will crash and everyone will survive but me," "My proposal of marriage will be flat-out rejected and, in my despair, I will jump off the nearest bridge."—that sort of thing.

Several years before Lefcourt and Martin studied the link between humor and life-stress, Ronald E. Smith and his colleagues tested some students at Purdue University to see if humor reduced their anxiety as they took an examination.<sup>18</sup> About half of the 215 students were given an examination that contained one-third humorously worded test items, and the other half received a nonhumorous form of the test. Several weeks prior to the exam, they filled out a test to determine their normal anxiety level (low, moderate, or high). When they took the examination, half of the high anxiety group was given the humorous exam, the other half was given the nonhumorous exam. The same was done with the moderate and the low anxiety groups.

So what happened? The test scores of the high anxiety / nonhumorous test group were much *lower* than the scores of both low anxiety groups and both moderate anxiety groups, and the test scores of the high anxiety / humorous test group were much higher, equaling the performance level of the



other two anxiety groups. So, for the high anxiety group, humor obviously helped.

But something unexpected happened. The moderate anxiety/humorous test group performed at a rather low level on the test, even lower than the moderate anxiety/nonhumorous test group. Why didn't the humor help them? In talking with some of these students, the researchers found out that the humorous questions helped them "loosen up," but they also had a distracting effect.

What this study seems to show is that persons who are very anxious are especially likely to be helped by humor. This is the opposite of persons who are depressed. The more deeply depressed, the less likely humor will be of any assistance. This study also indicates what most persons who go in for humor are already aware of—that when they use humor to loosen others up, others may experience such efforts as an irritating distraction. The grade school class clown comes to mind. Maybe he was a high anxiety guy who did it mainly for his own benefit.

Another study had both an expected and an unexpected result. In a study conducted at Allegheny College by Nancy A. Yovetich, J. Alexander Dale, and Mary A. Hudak,<sup>19</sup> two groups of students awaited an anticipated application of an electric shock. The group who were shown some comedy routines had less anxiety than those presented with a geological documentary as they waited. While they awaited the shock, both groups were informed that the shock would cause no physical damage, but if they wished to discontinue the experiment, they should knock loudly on the instrument panel in front of them and the experiment would be terminated. They assumed that the shock, which was never applied, was to be the test. Little did they know that the test was going on as they anticipated the dreaded event. That those watching comedy had less anxiety was the expected outcome. The unexpected one was that the persons who benefited most were the ones who scored lower on a sense of humor test. One explanation is that persons with a greater sense of humor are more likely to be helped by *productive* than *reactive* humor. Still, this result left the researchers scratching

their heads and wondering if the artificial conditions in which the students were placed had something to do with it.

At this point, I can well imagine that older readers of this little handbook may be saying to themselves, "Why don't these psychologists study the effect of humor on something that is really worth being anxious about? After all, midterm exams and even electric shocks are rather small potatoes as far as reasons to get anxious are concerned!" Fair enough. How's death for a potentially anxiety-provoking event? James Thorson, a gerontologist at the University of Nebraska in Omaha, and his colleague, F.C. Powell, tested the relationship between sense of humor and death anxiety.<sup>20</sup> They studied 426 persons (290 women, 136 men) ranging in age from 18 to 90, with a mean age of just under 38. They devised a sense of humor scale, which included coping humor, humor production, humor appreciation, and appreciation of humorous people. Only one of the four made a difference. Those who used coping humor *less* scored somewhat higher on the death anxiety scale.

There were some small differences between the women and the men. Women were slightly lower in humor production and slightly higher in their use of coping humor. Also, coping humor increased slightly as the age of the respondent increased. Older persons also showed a bit less appreciation of humor itself and a bit more appreciation of humorous people. It is worth noting that this study only involved filling out questionnaires. It did not include direct exposure to humor, such as jokes and cartoons, relating to death, a procedure that paid significant dividends for Lefcourt and Martine when they studied disabled persons.

One last study on the effects of humor on anxiety is one that I especially like. William E. Kelly, a member of the counseling department at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, conducted an investigation of worry and sense of humor.<sup>21</sup> He used a worry questionnaire that assesses five areas of life in which a person might have worries, including personal relationships, lack of confidence, aimless future, work concerns, and financial concerns. (Incidentally, *Webster's New World College Dictionary* says that *worry* means "to feel

distressed in the mind; be anxious, troubled, or uneasy"<sup>22</sup>). Kelly also used the sense of humor scale developed by Thorson and Powell to determine whether humor has any relationship with worry, and, if so, in what ways. As I have mentioned, the sense of humor scale includes humor production, humor as a means of coping, humor appreciation, and appreciation of humorous persons.

Kelly didn't try to guess what the results would be, but we probably should not be surprised to learn that there was a negative relationship between worry and sense of humor. In other words, persons with a high sense of humor are less likely to worry. The main reason for this, though, was that worry had a very negative effect on humor production. Because there was also a strong positive association between humor production and confidence, Kelly guesses that lack of confidence hinders persons from humor production. This may be because "worriers would question their ability to produce humor in such a way that others would find favorable."<sup>23</sup> A similar explanation might be made for the relationship Kelly found between worries about personal relationships and humor. He guesses that persons "who worry about disrupting, or losing, relationships might be less inclined to use humor for fear that others will not approve of their humor."<sup>24</sup>

The findings mentioned so far are pretty much along the lines that we would probably expect. There was one finding, though, that hardly anyone would have expected. I certainly would not have. This was the fact that worry was *positively* related to one of the humor dimensions—which was coping humor, or using humor to cope with frustrations and problems. This less surprised Kelly because he knew of another study that demonstrated that worry is an active cognitive coping mechanism. We tend to think that worry doesn't do any good, that, if anything, worrying makes things worse. But if humor helps people cope and worry helps people cope, "it is less surprising that worry and coping with humor are positively related."<sup>25</sup> These findings suggest that worriers are less likely to deal with negative life experiences by treating them lightly, as though they are not

worth taking seriously, and more likely to employ humor as a way to mitigate the negative *consequences* or *outcomes* of these experiences. The startling conclusion, then, is that worry is a means to *reduce* anxiety and to *avoid* depression!

### Worry and Humor: Partners in Coping

The Jewish mother's telegram: "Begin worrying. Details follow."

A popular song of the 1980s advised, "Don't worry, be happy." And the poem in the preface of this book says "There's a town called Don't-You-Worry / On the banks of River Smile." Kelly's study suggests, instead, that worry may actually contribute to happiness—the cheerful heart—by forestalling anxiety and depression. Since humor also has these effects, worry and humor have a lot more in common than we would have guessed. If anxiety relates to situations that we dread because we suspect that we will be vulnerable, worry and humor may be thought of as partners in forestalling or inhibiting anxiety. Instead of viewing worry and anxiety as the same thing (despite what the dictionary says), we should instead think of worry as the opponent of anxiety, just as humor is. The difference is that the worrier does this by *anticipating* all the things that could *possibly* go wrong, while the humorist does this by *minimizing* the importance or significance of what may *in fact* go wrong.

This conclusion is supported by Julie K. Norem's *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking*.<sup>26</sup> She contends that negative thinking is actually a positive coping strategy for some individuals. Where others tend to minimize what might go wrong when they invite a group of friends over for dinner, or when they organize a business conference, negative thinkers (what Kelly would call "worriers") think of all the things that might go awry and plan for these exigencies. If "non-worriers" say to them that their fears are groundless or that many of the things they worry might happen are only remotely possible, the worrier may not disagree, but will still maintain that it is best to anticipate *all* the things that might go wrong. Kelly's study suggests that dealing with worries about these exigencies and remote possibilities has the

positive effect of reducing anxiety. Thus, worry and anxiety are two very different psychological phenomena.

This being the case, we should probably change the poem presented in the preface to "There's a town called Don't-Be-Anxious / on the banks of River Smile." You and I should also volunteer to join the next team of Bible translators on the day that they are trying to figure out how to translate Matthew 6:25. The *King James Version* has Jesus saying, "Therefore I say unto you, *take no thought for your life*, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on" (emphasis added). Later translators, in addition to wanting to get rid of the archaic-sounding "ye," must have figured that "take no thought" could be misunderstood to mean that you and I are not to engage in any future planning whatsoever. They may have been thinking, too, that if people really did this, their families would have to share the burden of supporting them the rest of their lives or get them married into a wealthy family. Billy Collins, former United States Poet Laureate, imagines such an untroubled soul in the following poem:<sup>27</sup>

*The Life of Riley: A Definitive Biography*

He was born one sunny Florida morning  
and napped through most of his childhood.  
He spent his adult life relaxing in beach chairs,  
always a tropical drink in his hand.  
He never had a job, a family or a sore throat.  
He never mowed a lawn.  
Passersby would always stop to remind him  
whose life it was he was living.  
He died in a hammock weighing a cloud.

Here, Collins portrays the proverbial "life of Riley," the fellow whom Americans, back in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, loved to envy.<sup>28</sup> One hardworking soul envied him so much that he wrote a song about the fellow who "lived the life of Riley when Riley wasn't around" (eating his food, sleeping in his bed, driving his car, etc.).

The New Testament section of the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible was copyrighted in 1946. I can imagine that its

team of translators were concerned that the "take no thought for your life" phrase in the *King James Version* would be misconstrued as an endorsement of the life of Riley, so they had to find an alternative. They came up with, "Therefore I tell you, *do not be anxious about your life*, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on" (emphasis added).

When the *Revised Standard Version* was updated in 1989, the "shalls" were changed to "wills," and "anxious" was changed to "worry." Thus, the *New Revised Standard Version*, published in 1989, reads: "Therefore I tell you, *do not worry about your life*, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear" (emphasis added). The *New International Version*, copyrighted in 1973, also uses "worry": "There I tell you, *do not worry about your life*, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear" (emphasis added). In the version I own, there is a heading above verses 25–34 that reads, "Do Not Worry."

Given all the other biblical passages that Christians struggle over, I'm guessing that I am a party of one when it comes to fretting over the change from *anxious* to *worry*. The humorist in me tells me not to worry about it, that it's no big deal. But the worrier in me responds, "It's a very important issue, and that's why I'm writing about it now in a book that is attempting to proselyte on humor's behalf!" The two of me will probably not settle the issue by reaching a compromise, but we will continue to live together amicably, and this makes my point: I urge anyone who aspires to be a "Minister of Good Humor" to treat the "Priests of Worry" with respect. If you do, there's a greater chance that they will respect you, especially if you tell them that you and they are fighting against two common enemies—demonic forces—who are formidable opponents: Anxiety and Depression. Tell them, too, that you know that their methods are different from yours, and yours from theirs, but that these are merely differences in strategy, not in goals. Remember that you do not have to *convert* the worriers to your side. You only need to get them to respect you, and the best way to do this is to demonstrate that you respect them. Above all, don't put them on the defensive,

because this is what others have been doing to them all their lives, and their resentment is justified.

### What about Gender Differences?

Probably because of the perception that boys tend to goof-off more than girls do in grade school, we tend to think that men go in for humor more than women do, and that women are generally more serious than men. So it's natural to ask if there were gender differences in the empirical studies reported here. In fact, few gender differences were found or reported. As I have mentioned, Thorson and Powell found that women were slightly lower in humor production and slightly higher in using humor to cope with situations. Another finding was Robert Provine's discovery that women laugh more than men do, on a roughly 5 to 4 ratio.<sup>29</sup> He thinks this is due to the fact that men feel good when they elicit laughter from women especially, so they work hard to make women laugh, which leads women to laugh more. But a woman colleague of his suggested a simpler explanation, that "in dealing with men, there is so much more to laugh at."<sup>30</sup>

I *did* locate a study, though, that tested the gender issue directly. Millicent Abel wanted to know how humor and gender interact in moderating stress and the physical symptoms that result from stress.<sup>31</sup> She asked 131 students (70 men, 61 women) at Western Carolina University to fill out the humor scale developed by Thorson and Powell (the one that tests for coping humor, humor production, appreciation of humor, and appreciation of humorous persons), a perceived stress scale, and the anxiety and somatization scales from a symptom checklist. The somatization scale measures distress associated with common physical symptoms such as headache, loss of energy, and muscle aches.

Abel found no significant gender differences on the measures of perceived stress, distress from anxiety, and sense of humor. But she did find a gender difference on the measure of distress from physical symptoms, with the women reporting more physical distress than men. What about the effect of humor on anxiety, stress, and distress relating to physical symptoms? She found that humor had a "buffering effect"

on stress for both genders, but that it had a buffering effect against anxiety for men only. She also found that for both genders, humor moderated the relationship between stress and physical symptoms. Since the major difference between men and women related to the "buffering effect" of humor for anxiety in men, she suggests that men and women with a greater sense of humor may use similar adaptive coping strategies against distress caused by physical symptoms but different strategies in response to distress caused by anxiety: "Men may prefer humor as a more appropriate expression of emotions such as anxiety, *whereas self-disclosure may be the preferred and more acceptable mode of expression for women*" (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup> The idea that women are more likely to talk about their anxiety makes a lot of sense. On the other hand, the contrast that Abel draws between humor and self-disclosure reflects the popular view that humor is a mask—in this case, a means of masking one's anxiety—and is not itself self-disclosive. Maybe we need a further study along the very lines that Abel has set forth that addresses this very question—namely, do men use humor as an indirect way of disclosing to others that they are experiencing anxiety?

### What Ministers of Good Humor Can Learn from These Studies

Let's see if I can summarize the main things that we can learn from these empirical studies. Because most of them were based on subjects who were mostly in their late teens and early twenties, we need to be cautious in generalizing their findings to other age groups. Also, the results of these studies are not uniform. Some are even contradictory. Still, taken as a whole, they support the idea that humor may help a person cope with negative life experiences and that humor may counter the tendency to become depressed when one is in the throes of a painful life experience. It is less helpful for persons who are chronically depressed or suffering from a major depressive disorder. Whether humor helps to relieve the anxiety that occurs when a person is anticipating a negative life experience and its consequences is less clear, but it does seem to reduce or moderate anxieties relating to

one's loss of control or inability to determine what happens. This could help to explain why persons who are afflicted with the problems due to aging will often use humor.

The research also seems to suggest that other people are likely to take notice of those who "produce" humor and to assign them a higher "sense of humor" score, but persons tend to rate themselves as having a good sense of humor on the basis of their ability to appreciate the humor that others produce, and to perceive the humor in their own negative life experiences. Thus, persons use humor as a coping mechanism in various ways. Some of these are overt and easy to recognize—such as cracking jokes in dire situations—while others are more covert and harder for others to detect—such as laughing to oneself.

In a general sort of way, the empirical studies summarized here confirm what we already knew, or thought we knew, about humor. There are a few surprises, but, by and large, the studies confirm the popular opinion that humor can be beneficial for moderating the effects of negative life experiences and that, even if it is not a panacea, it has minimal negative side effects when used or resorted to in this regard. This is not to say that humor has no negative side effects whatsoever; this would be to disregard the whole issue of offensive humor, a topic that I discussed in *A Time to Laugh*,<sup>33</sup> and will therefore not discuss further in this book. If they *do* confirm popular opinion about humor, this gives the research studies greater, rather than lesser, credibility, because we would tend to distrust studies that run counter to everything that we understand about humor from personal experience.

Interestingly enough, one of the studies reported here quotes the first half of Proverbs 17:22—"A merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (KJV), thus implicitly linking its investigation to the Bible itself. Unfortunately, the second half of the proverb—"but a downcast spirit dries up the bones" (NRSV) was omitted, so the proverb's suggestion that humor and depression are negatively related was therefore lost. Nor did any of the studies presented here take up the issue of misplaced humor, a topic that Proverbs 26:18–19 invites

us to consider: "Like a maniac who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows, / is the one who deceives a neighbor / and says, 'I am only joking!'" Even so, the citation of Proverbs 17:22a in a scientific research study on humor suggests that contemporary researchers on the psychological benefits of humor are in good company, and, in light of Robert Provine's cautionary note about making unsubstantiated claims for the positive *physiological* effects of laughter and humor, it is rather nice to see this quotation in an article that explores their *psychological* effects.

### The Indirect Benefits of Humor

The studies that I have presented here focus on the direct effects of humor. I want to conclude this review of empirical studies on the benefits of humor by mentioning a study showing that the benefits of humor may be indirect—that is, the humor may be beneficial to persons other than the ones for whom it is intended. In their article, "Laughter in a Psychiatric Ward," Marc Gelkopf, Shulamith Kreitler, and Mircea Sigal report on their study of the potential therapeutic effects of humor on hospitalized patients suffering from schizophrenia.<sup>34</sup> They carried out an experiment involving thirty-four resident patients in two chronic schizophrenic wards. Over a three-month period, the patients in Ward A were exposed to seventy humorous movies, while patients in Ward B were exposed to seventy movies of different genres (action, romance, drama, and some comedies). The main positive effect of this barrage of humorous movies was that the patients in Ward A experienced a slight but statistically significant decrease in verbal hostility as this was perceived by members of the nursing staff. This was what the authors had hoped would happen.

But there was also an unexpected result that had never entered their minds: They found that patients who "had been exposed to humor experienced a higher level of social support from the staff."<sup>35</sup> They couldn't tell if this "increased experienced support from the staff" was initiated "by some humor-induced change in the patients or by some humor induced change in the staff."<sup>36</sup> Whatever the most likely

explanation may be, the patients noticed the change and reported it.

The authors concluded, "The humorous films affected the staff to a larger extent than the patients," and, therefore, "It may be advisable to consider the possibility of affecting the patients by projecting humorous films *with the staff as the target population*" (emphasis added).<sup>37</sup> One could therefore imagine a second article by the authors in which the *staff* reports that the *patients* treated them better than they had in the past! But the more important point is that the nursing staff did a better job of *caring* for the patients because they had been exposed to some humor. It wasn't that they made any overt efforts to amuse the patients, such as by telling them jokes. No. It was that they simply did their jobs better than they had before.

What this means is that even though nothing overtly funny or amusing occurs in the interaction between the professional and those for whom the professional is expected to care about, the care recipients may, nonetheless, be the beneficiaries of humor. If one of the features of professional burnout is *depersonalization*, or "a negative, cynical, and impersonal attitude towards the people one works with,"<sup>38</sup> this unexpected finding of the study suggests that caregiving persons may find in humor a valuable resource for maintaining a positive, hopeful, and personal attitude toward the persons they work with (parishioners, patients, students, other staff members, employees, employers, etc.).

This effect of humor on the unknowing recipient suggests that the psychological benefits of humor are often indirect. Therefore, they are not always easy to detect or to demonstrate empirically. This does not mean, though, that they are any less real or any less powerful than, say, being whacked on the head with a brickbat, plummeting into an uncovered manhole, or suffering the effects of a gunpowder blast:

Every Thanksgiving, the Martins had Grandpa and Grandma Martin over for dinner. Grandpa Martin liked his turkey and stuffing with lots of pepper. Millie Martin, their daughter-in-law, asked little

Willie Martin to go fetch the pepper from the kitchen cupboard. Willie rummaged through the cupboard and found a container he thought was pepper, and brought it to Grandpa Martin. The next day Millie Martin discovered little Willie Martin's mistake. He had brought Grandpa Martin an unmarked box of gunpowder. So, Phil Martin called his father and explained the mistake. "Well," Grandpa Martin replied, "I'm glad to find out what happened, because when we got home last night, I leaned over to tie my shoe and I accidentally shot the cat."