

Shall I Laugh or Shall I Cry?

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It is a pleasure to stand before you this morning and welcome each of you to fall semester at Brigham Young University. This summer has passed very quickly for me, and I would imagine that it has for you also. I would surmise that there were fun times, work times, family times, and possibly even challenging times.

I hope that all of you will now have a very successful school year. For some this is a new adventure: you are freshmen. Others are experienced at the rigors and excitement of university life, whether you were here previously or have transferred from elsewhere. The days ahead await you. There are going to be days when you are calm and serene. There are going to be days when you are stressed. There will be times of success and times of failure. There will be joys and sorrows that affect you periodically. However, I do wish for each of you that there will be many occasions of laughter.

I remember a saying that I heard once: “A good laugh a day keeps the blues away.” I believe that humor in life can enable you to cope with the challenges and trials that come your way. You can be buoyed up through laughter and mirthful experiences and stories. There is strength in laughter that can give you

the means to overcome difficulties and enable you to keep life’s ups and downs in perspective and balance.

Last summer my husband and I went on a cruise with his siblings and their spouses. There were ten of us, and we had a wonderful time. On our last evening together, eight of us were sitting at a round table chatting, and a soft drink was requested by a sister-in-law. The waiter brought a tall glass filled to the brim. As he reached out to give it to her, he dropped it in the middle of the table. Its contents went everywhere, and we all went into panic mode and started trying to clean it up. I had it all over my face and started wiping it away. The distraught waiter grabbed towels and tried to soak up the liquid in them. Then we all heard a voice from one of our group, speaking loudly: “Hey, anybody got a straw?” Laughter took over. Any tension was dissipated. This witty remark had given ease to an uncomfortable situation—especially for the young man who had accidentally created it. Laughter has a way of doing that. Finding jocularity and

Sharon G. Samuelson, wife of BYU President Cecil O. Samuelson, delivered this devotional address on 10 September 2013.

amusement in an embarrassing or uneasy circumstance can be a great means of communicating that it's all right, we understand, or we're here to help.

In Proverbs 17:22 we learn that "a merry heart doeth good like a medicine." If you are merry and joyful and demonstrate these attributes in daily actions, you will be happy and create an atmosphere of cheerfulness that can bless the lives of your associates, friends, and especially family. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, counseled that whatever comes your way, "be of good cheer" (John 16:33). What enables you to be of good cheer? It is your knowledge of His Atonement and all the blessings that are available for you as a result of it.

Each of you is given the choice to be an optimist and smile or be a pessimist and frown. Striving to develop a sense of humor in facing daily tasks is a work in progress. It isn't always an easy or simple trait to acquire. Sometimes it may appear to be impossible. You will face some obstacles in your studies, employment, church callings, interpersonal relationships, and many other undertakings. These are times when you will have the choice of whether to laugh or cry, smile or frown. Sometimes life's circumstances may seem to be in turmoil, and you may have so much on your so-called "plate" that you don't know where to begin or what to do. This is when I believe humor and the ability to be optimistic can enhance the quality of your life. Elder Hugh B. Brown said, "One must have a sense of humor to be an optimist in times like these" (*The Abundant Life* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965], 50).

President Gordon B. Hinckley and his wife, Marjorie, were wonderful examples during their lives of optimism and humor. Sheri L. Dew's description of them mentions that "Gordon and Marjorie were attracted to each other's sense of humor, love for the gospel, innate optimism, and love of life" (*Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996], 106). Sister

Dew also described their marriage as one in which "Gordon's dry wit delighted Marjorie, who loved the fact that although her beau was practical, self-disciplined, and serious about the things that mattered to him, he didn't take himself very seriously and was often the first to poke fun at his own quirks" (*Go Forward*, 106).

Listen to the words of Sister Hinckley as she gave advice on the way to get through life:

*Another thing that we tried to do is not take ourselves too seriously. You get into a lot of trouble when you do that. I tried to laugh instead of cry when you felt like crying. It was always better to laugh, [like] the day I took a beautiful casserole from the oven and my six-year-old boy said, "Mom, how come you baked the garbage?" Children are like that. There are days when it is hard to laugh. [Marjorie Pay Hinckley, BYU Women's Conference, 2 May 1996; see also Marjorie Hinckley in *Glimpses into the Life and Heart of Marjorie Pay Hinckley*, ed. Virginia H. Pearce (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 61]*

This is insightful advice from a witty, cheerful, and gentle woman that we would be wise to follow.

In another instance of speaking concerning laughter, Sister Hinckley added, "The only way to get through life is to laugh your way through it. You either have to laugh or cry. I prefer to laugh. Crying gives me a headache" (Marjorie Pay Hinckley, *Small and Simple Things* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003], 126; also *Glimpses*, 107).

Laughing instead of crying helps you to move forward and face your challenges as you fill your lives with the virtuous, lovely, and praiseworthy things of life. Good effects can come from communicating with humor and laughing with friends and family.

Hopefully you are all aware that humor and laughter can also be abused. It must never be used to degrade or embarrass others. It never should involve profanity or the denigration of

the sacred and spiritual aspects of your lives. Always be sensitive to the feelings of others. Don't be malicious or thoughtless in words or actions to any of your associates—especially loved ones.

Sometimes, laughing at yourself and with others can create friendships and memories that last forever. Can you find humor in something that happens to you when your choices are to laugh, cry, or possibly become angry? Can you, as was described of President Hinckley, not take yourself too seriously? Each of you has had and will continue to experience these types of incidents. How do you respond?

I enjoy the story of J. Golden Kimball—a General Authority for over fifty years beginning in the 1890s—when he could have responded with anger to an action by another individual. The following was reported by his grandnephew, Jim Kimball:

On a snowy day two weeks before Christmas, he was crossing South Temple to the north door of ZCMI [a department store in downtown Salt Lake City]. He walked slowly to the middle of the ice-slick street.

A woman burst out of the north door of ZCMI with a pile of packages in her hands and no clear line of sight.

She plowed right into Golden.

Packages flew everywhere. Golden was knocked down and the woman fell on top of him. Together they began to slide south towards the curb.

All traffic stopped. Everyone stood entranced by this most unlikely sight.

They slid until they hit the curb. It was then that the woman realized someone was beneath her. She brushed the snow away and exclaimed, "Oh, Brother Kimball, it's you! Speak to me. Are you all right?"

"It's all right, Sister, but you'll have to get off here," he painfully croaked. "This is as far as I go." [James Kimball, J. Golden Kimball Stories: Mormonism's Colorful Cowboy (Salt Lake City: White Horse Books, 1999), 90]

The ability to not take oneself too seriously and to use humor in times of mistakes, small and accidental incidents, and stressful situations can help alleviate embarrassment, fear, and even discouragement in circumstances such as these. Elder J. Golden Kimball demonstrated this perfectly.

As mentioned earlier, there are times in our lives when it is very difficult to smile and especially to laugh. There are periods of anguish and suffering when only the gospel perspective brings us comfort as it reminds us of those eternal things that really matter. All of us have had such times in one way or another and will continue to have them in the future. It is part of God's plan for us. Smiles can come to us, however, as we recall many fond memories of good times, love shared, blessings received, and the knowledge of the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is an expression I use at times when life seems to throw an unexpected and unwelcome curveball. It is one I heard years ago, and I have used it many times to put some incidents in perspective. It states: Crisis plus time equals humor. Many times throughout life this can be true. I am sure that each of you can recall some incident in your life when something occurred that caused unhappiness, inconvenience, stress, loss, and so forth that you can laugh and smile about now after the passage of time.

Let me tell you a personal experience as an example of what I mean. Almost twenty years ago my husband and I arrived in Rome, Italy. After disembarking from our flight, we walked to the train station with our son, who spoke Italian, in order to purchase some train tickets to travel in other areas of the country. We set our luggage down by a wall, and I was given the assignment of watching and guarding all of it as my husband and son went to a ticket booth. As I was standing there, silently looking around, a man approached me and spoke in broken English asking about the metro train

located right outside the door. At the time the thought came to my mind, “Why is he asking me about the train? He knows I am a tourist and don’t know anything.” I explained that I was sorry but really couldn’t help him, and he went on his way. I continued waiting for my husband and son to return.

When the two returned with the purchased tickets, my husband looked around and with a concerned and puzzled expression on his face asked me, “Where is my briefcase?” It took me only a second to realize why that man had asked me a question he knew I could not answer! There were two doors behind me—one on each side of the luggage. He was distracting me while another equally despicable individual reached around in back of me and stole the briefcase. I ran out of the door to see if I could see him, but, as you would guess, he was nowhere to be seen. I had let myself become distracted from my assignment, and our trip began on a very low note.

Among many assorted items that included my husband’s scriptures, we also lost our plane tickets, passports, and some money. To make a long story short, instead of spending our first day seeing the wonderful sites of the Eternal City, we spent it at Delta Airlines and the United States Embassy. You can imagine what my picture looked like on my new passport acquired that day. It will not be shown as a visual aid.

I tried to look for anything positive. For example, maybe he or a family member would read the Book of Mormon and become converted. Then we would receive a note of apology and our stolen items would also be returned. Of course, as of today, it has never happened.

Now you can be assured that there were tears shed—mine. It was not a jovial and comical matter. At the time my husband, son, and I could find no humor in this situation. I felt responsible for creating a circumstance that caused our vacation to be miserable at the outset. However, remember the previous

statement: Crisis plus time equals humor. My family and I can now laugh about what happened in Rome, even though at the time it was no laughing matter. We joked the following December that we wouldn’t be able to purchase any Christmas presents because Mom let the briefcase get stolen. Now it is truly a memorable part of our family history. We can recall what we felt like then and compare that with what we feel now. This experience created a bond in our family that enables us to know that when mistakes are made, difficult situations arise, and tears are shed, it is our relationship that really matters and the love we have for each other.

In conclusion, my dear friends, I know of no other people in the world who are happier and more cheerful than you, the students of Brigham Young University. When dignitaries and visitors from places throughout the world enter this campus for various reasons—especially those unfamiliar with it—they notice and feel something very different from what they have encountered elsewhere. They comment that you seem so happy. You smile and respond to them in a friendly manner. You like to laugh. You seem to enjoy associating with each other. You impart strength and confidence. They want to know why.

We know why. You are filled with the spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You are representatives of Him. He told you to be of good cheer, and you are. You are happy because you are striving to achieve worthwhile goals. Amid your daily challenges and struggles you smile, laugh, and encourage others. I so encourage you to continue to do so during your sojourn here and as you “go forth to serve.”

I have a testimony that our Heavenly Father lives and that He loves each one of us. We have a prophet, Thomas S. Monson, who is a perfect example of an optimistic and cheerful man. He smiles, he laughs, and he teaches us. May we always listen and follow him in my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.