



ON

# LAUGHING

Notes on the funnest sound there is.

By Patrick Madden

My three-month-old daughter is just beginning to laugh. She is not ticklish; she is not mimicking us. As far as I can tell, she is just delighted by the world. She sees a funny face, sees her brother in a giant witch's hat, sees me with my glasses on upside down, sees her mother dancing to the funky music of a commercial, and she laughs.

I have loved her since she was born — since before she was born, when she was only an idea — and yet I feel I haven't known her until now. Her laughter has become a common ground for us, a mutual realization that the world is an interesting and silly place.

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According to a third-century-B.C. Egyptian papyrus, "When [God] burst out laughing there was light... When he burst out laughing the second time the waters were born; at the seventh burst of laughter the soul was born." Man as the height of God's laughter: that explains a lot.

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Max Beerbohm, in his essay on laughter, wonders that "of all the countless folk who have lived before our time on this planet not one is known in history or in legend as having died of laughter." But Beerbohm is wrong. Bulwer-Lytton's *Tales of Miletus* speak of Calchas, a soothsayer who was told by a beggar that he would never drink of the fruit of his vineyard. Moreover, the beggar promised that if the prophecy did not come true, he would be Calchas's slave. Later, when the grapes were harvested and the wine made, Calchas celebrated by laughing so hard at the beggar's folly that he died before he took a sip.

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The word laughter is like any other word: if you say it enough, it begins to sound strange and wondrous. Listen to the sound as it separates from meaning; feel your tongue jump away from your front teeth, the way you bite your bottom lip slightly, the quick strike of the tongue against the teeth again — ter! If you say *laughter* fast enough and long enough it will make you laugh.

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Animals that laugh: hyenas, monkeys, the kookaburra or laughing jackass, an Australian bird whose call is so similar to raucous laughter that early European explorers of that continent were tormented by it. There is the laughing frog (which is edible), the laughing bird (or green woodpecker), the laughing crow, the laughing thrush, the laughing dove (or African dove), the laughing goose (or white-fronted goose), the laughing gull, the laughing falcon, the laughing owl.

Democritus (460–357 B.C.), called the Laughing Philosopher, proposed that matter was not infinitely divisible, that there existed a basic unit of matter, the atom, which was indivisible. It turns out that atoms can be further broken down into protons, neutrons, and electrons, which in turn consist of quarks, which name comes from the James Joyce novel *Finnegans Wake*, because Murray Gell-Mann, originator of quark theory, loved the line *Three quarks for Muster Mark!* This makes me laugh.

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In English, laughter as dialogue is often portrayed as ha ha ha. Santa Claus's laugh is ho ho ho. The Green Giant's laugh is also ho ho ho. Children are said to laugh he he he. The laughter of connivers and old men is heh heh heh. In Spanish, laughter is ja ja ja, jo jo jo, ji ji ji, and je je je. The same holds true for laughs in Romanian, French, Japanese, and Chinese, and I'd be willing to bet it's the same in most other languages too. Always a vowel sound introduced by an h, the sound closest to breathing, as if laughter were as basic as respiration.

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Some synonyms for laughter: cackle, chuckle, chortle, giggle, guffaw, snicker, snigger, titter, twitter. These words make my children laugh.

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Many things are laughable only later, after everything has turned out fine and we can reflect on our good fortune or our dumb luck. Such as my son's many trips to the emergency room for foreign objects in his nose: raisins, rubber, paper, a toy snake's tail. "See," I once overheard a nurse telling her coworker when she saw him in the waiting room, "I *told* you it would be him."

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Laughter heals; it can change the flavor of tears. When our cat died after nineteen years with us, my family was stricken with grief. My brothers dutifully prepared to bury him, digging a grave near the woods where he once romped. The former cat waited in a plastic bag inside a cooler from the vet's office. Everyone was crying silently, speaking in whispers. When the diggers rested for a moment, my father prepared to deposit the body in the hole. But we weren't done, the hole was too shallow, and my brother shouted, *Wait! Don't let the cat out of the bag!*

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On a train one afternoon, Fourth of July, hot, tired, my son can't sit still. He can never sit still, but he is extra-can't-sit-still today. He jumps, hangs, clambers, throws his grandfather's hat, drops his crackers, chatters. I plead

with him to be still as he wriggles and twists. He laughs, thinking I am trying to tickle him. The woman behind ducks to where he can't see her. He steps on my leg to peer over the edge of the seat. She jumps up and whispers "Boo!" He falls limp to the seat below, convulsing with laughter. She does it again. He does it again. She does it again. He does it again. His baby sister stares intently at her brother. Her eyes radiate something I want to call admiration. Each time he falls to the seat beside her, she laughs heartily, uncontrollably. Pretty soon the whole train car is laughing. My daughter's laughter is so bright and clear and pure and unselfconscious that I suddenly understand why a cool mountain brook might be said to laugh.

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"And God said unto Abraham," according to the Book of Genesis, "as for [Sarah] thy wife ... I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed."

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The next passage, you will remember, is Sarah also laughing at the prospect of bearing a child at her age (supposedly ninety). Lesson: God has a sense of humor, a special kind of love. God also chooses the name of their son: Isaac, which means *he laugheth*.

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We laugh at, with, about: clowns, jokes, funny faces, children, ourselves, contortions, misfortunes, wordplay, irony, other laughs, others' joy, good fortune, madness, sickness, health, debilitation, recovery, things we can't change, things we can change, sports, games, circuses, animals, drunkenness, sobriety, sex, celibacy, errors, equivocations, mistakes, blunders, bloopers, boners, double meanings.

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The late Norman Cousins, editor of *The Saturday Review*, when stricken with ankylosing spondylitis, treated himself with Marx Brothers movies. He recovered almost completely. Doctors were not sure why. Cancer and heart patients at Loma Linda University's medical center today are treated with episodes of *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners*. Laughter apparently increases levels of disease-fighting T cells, the very cells killed off by AIDS. Doctors are not sure why.

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*Among those whom I like*, said the great poet W.H. Auden, *I can find no common denominator, but among those whom I love, I can; all of them make me laugh.*

That laughter is sweetest which is unexpected, which takes one unawares. "To that laughter," says Max Beerbohm, "nothing is more propitious than an occasion that demands gravity. To have good reason for not laughing is one of the surest aids." In church, then, in a foreign land, in a foreign language, one might reach such heights of laughter as to lose entirely any semblance of reverence.

A hot Sunday morning in Carrasco, the rich neighborhood of Montevideo, Uruguay. I am one of two gringos among nearly a hundred Uruguayans. The chapel is filled with families in summer dresses and breezy shirts. After a solemn hymn a member of the congregation approaches the podium to say an opening prayer. "Our kind and gracious Heavenly Father," he begins, and I bow my head, close my eyes, try to keep my mind from wandering as I listen to his prayer. Slowly I become aware of a muffled, tinny music in the air. Appalled, I open my eyes and slyly look around me to find the blasphemer with a Walkman. All other heads are bowed, none with headphones. I close my eyes and try to focus again, but by now the music is clearer; it's the egregiously awful "She's an Easy Lover," by Phil Collins and Phillip Bailey. Then I realize that the speakers in the chapel ceiling are channeling the music along with the prayer.

I slide down the bench away from my friend, so as not to laugh, and I fold over in airplane-emergency-landing position, biting my tongue, casting my mind, feebly, to serious thoughts, solemn thoughts, when I feel the pew start to rumble and shake with my friend's silent convulsions. With that the dam bursts, and no amount of biting our tongues and holding our noses shut can stop the laughter. The tears roll down our faces, we snort profusely. Finally the prayer ends, and as the members of the congregation lift their heads and open their eyes, everyone turns toward us, on every face an expression of dismay.

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As I write, I can hear my daughter's laughter behind me. She is lying in bed, sucking on her whole hand, eyes bright with the morning sun through the window, and she is laughing. It is not clear to me what she is laughing about, but her laughter is beautiful. I listen closely, I watch her, and I start to laugh too. Amen. ■

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