

The Jewish **Post & Opinion**

*Presenting a broad spectrum of
Jewish News and Opinions since 1935.*

Laughter for Adar

In October, I attended an experiential “playshop” at the local Jewish Community Center called, “Laughlines...On Transforming Your Life through Laughter.” It was led by Diane Nelson Roberts, a therapist and dedicated laugher. Jews are commanded to be happy during the Hebrew month of Adar that begins this year on Feb. 19.

There are plenty of good reasons for being happy besides having been saved from Haman’s hangman. One is a recent study showing that laughter helps our hearts. The Jan. 5–7 *USA Weekend* had a special report on longevity. It begins with the famous quote “laughter is the best medicine.” It went on to say that researchers from the University of Maryland Medical Center found that people with heart disease were less likely to laugh off potentially stressful situations such as a waiter spilling water on them.

Continuing, it says recent research indicates that laughter is also linked to the healthy function of blood vessels. The more chuckles, the more the blood vessels dilate, increasing blood flow and potentially reducing risk of atherosclerosis, hardening of the arteries. Concluding, the article advised: “So this year, make a conscious decision not to take every moment of every day so seriously.”

The most interesting part of the laughter playshop was how Roberts got her training for it. She was scheduled to be in Southern California for something else and she knew she would have some extra time with nothing to do. In one of her trade magazines, she found an advertisement for a 9-day playshop in Santa Barbara.

When she arrived, the room was set up with 20 chairs in a circle and on each chair was a teddy bear the size of a 2-year-old. After all the participants arrived and were seated, they got their first assignment. Each member of the class had to take his teddy with him wherever he went for the entire duration of the workshop. Roberts got a string of pearls and a hat for her teddy bear and named it Amelia Bearheart.

The first evening out, Roberts made reservations at a nice restaurant. Walking on the beach on her way to the restaurant, a middle-aged homeless man approached her. She was a little nervous at first, but then he started talking to her about the teddy bear. It looked just like one that he had been given as a child. Talking about his childhood with Roberts brought tears to his eyes. Roberts said she ended up having a very meaningful conversation with the man.

When Roberts arrived at the restaurant, the hostess asked her, "How many in your party?"

"Two," she responded.

"So everyone in your party is already here?" the hostess asked, pointing to the bear.

"Yes," Roberts affirmed.

"Then follow me," the hostess said.

The hostess seated Roberts at a table for two, first pulling out the chair for Amelia Bearheart and then for Roberts.

When the waitress came, she asked Roberts, "How many menus should I bring?"

"Why, two of course!" Roberts replied.

The waitress returned with two glasses of ice water. She placed the first one in front of Ms. Bearheart and the other in front of Roberts.

After she took Roberts order, she asked, "Will you be ordering for her (pointing to the bear)?"

"I will," Roberts replied. And so she fulfilled her class requirements for the first day.

Roberts told our class at the JCC that some of the patrons in the restaurant were looking at her out of the corners of their eyes. Some were chuckling and even made remarks as they passed her table on their way out. For example, "I bet the bigger one is going to try and stick the smaller one with the bill."

What impressed me about this story was how something so simple as a grown woman carrying a stuffed animal brought out not only humor, but also an expanded imagination to the people Roberts encountered. In a conversation after the class, Roberts told me that even though some adults were made uncomfortable when they saw her with the bear, children who were strangers to her had no problem coming up to her and asking her all kinds of questions about it.

Rereading my notes from the playshop, I notice that several of the ideas for bringing more humor into our lives come from emulating children. Perhaps going back to one's playful attitude from childhood is one good way for adults to "lighten up." Some of the following suggestions come from those notes.

Read cartoons and funny stories. Listen to a comedian perform. Play with pets and/or little children. Play childhood games such as cards and board games and/or go to the park and swing on a swing, slide on a slide, or play in the sand box. Sing and dance. Give yourself permission to laugh. Play with balls and props. Be around others who like to joke and are funny. Write your own "humor mantra" – a word or phrase that reminds you of something funny.

A few months ago, there was a news article on Laughter Yoga, a sidesplitting new fitness fad that's part traditional yoga, part improv and all silliness. The following quote is by Jeffrey Briar who founded the Laughter Yoga Institute in Laguna Beach, Calif.

"Most people think they have to feel good first in order to laugh. But you can start from nothing, even start feeling unhappy and just laugh as a form of exercise, and happy feelings follow...If you are laughing with a group of other

people, fake laughter very quickly becomes real.” This forced laughter that ends up real was also a daily exercise in the playshop Roberts attended.

Wishing you, dear readers, lots of laughter in Adar and the rest of the year!

Jennie Cohen 2-14-07

Copyright © 2011 The Jewish Post & Opinion. All Rights Reserved