

Walking together hand in hand

Sadness, seriousness, and joy

Ben Borne

I will never forget March 2020.

Have you ever experienced a time in life when it seems like when it rains, it pours? That was my March 2020.

There was one week in particular when it felt like a hurricane was ripping through my life. People started feeling the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning to sweep across the nation. I felt it too. Everything began to shut down. No more going to school. No more going into work. Social connections cut off. I lost my job. One of my grandparents went into the hospital that week too—which later turned into a brain cancer diagnosis.

That week.

That was a heavy week.

I cried about it for a few hours. But, somehow, I came through still smiling, still finding joy.

Someone close to me remarked, “I don’t know how you do it. You still find a way to laugh through it all.”

My ability to laugh and smile through it all is an integral part of who I am. In recent years, I have come to realize that the deep sense of joy I experience has been a gift my entire life. It has carried me through some tough stuff. I had significant adverse childhood experiences, which resulted in a constant anxiety and fear of never being enough. But my sense of humor and my ability to lean into a sense of joy have always balanced out the more shadowy sides of my life experience. It is with this experience as a background that I can make a few observations about joy, laughter, and humor.

Sadness and joy can walk together hand in hand

Have you ever noticed that funerals can be both incredibly sad and particularly joyful—and, dare I say, even humorous—events? The first time I noticed this was at the funeral of a member of my congregation. I had not seen my good friend in a long time. He had moved away for university,

and it just so happened that this funeral was the first time we had seen each other since he left. It was during his winter break, and we were excited

Have you ever noticed that funerals can be both incredibly sad and particularly joyful—and, dare I say, even humorous—events? This is sadness and joy walking together hand in hand.

to see each other. I distinctly remember the congregation gathered before the funeral service began. My friend looked up at me, we made eye contact, and we started smiling at each other.

This is sadness and joy walking hand in hand together.

More recently, I had an uncle who had suddenly passed away. It was truly a tragic death for our family. In the days after he had passed leading up to the funeral, we would share funny stories

about my uncle. I suspect this is a shared experience for many other people too. As the week went on, I had recorded the stories I had heard about him to be used during the eulogy that I would deliver. At the funeral, I would be crying and laughing my way through the eulogy, and so would some of the people in attendance. We were experiencing deep joy and sadness as we remembered and celebrated his life.

This is sadness and joy walking together hand in hand.

Seriousness and joy can walk together hand in hand

My first foray into exploring the nature of humor was in the !Explore program through Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 2008. As part of this program, we were asked to bring a theological question to explore during our time in the program. I explored the question, *Does God have a sense of humor?* For some reason I had the idea that faith had to be a stern and serious topic that could not be taken lightly. I felt that my ability to tackle pain, struggle, and sadness with a sense of joy and humor was incongruent with the seriousness of faith. But over the years, I've realized that seriousness and joy are able to walk together hand in hand if we allow them.

Recently, a friend of mine remarked how I carried myself through the heaviness of the conversations around sexual orientation and gender identity in the church. This was particularly obvious to me at the Mennonite Church Canada conference in Saskatoon in 2016. The conversations were challenging for many, especially for me as a gay man. It is hard to sit in a room full of people and feel like they are talking about you. It is

hard to hear other stories of pain and anguish, and it is hard to hear from those who fundamentally believe that same-sex attraction is wrong. However, when I stood up to lead music during worship services, the sheer joy

of congregational singing together made me feel connected to those around me even when we disagreed from time to time.

If I could talk to someone, and we could smile together or laugh a little bit, it always disarmed or deescalated the conversation because humor and joy have a magical ability to connect people.

I also had some difficult face-to-face discussions during the Being a Faithful Church process. I remember instances where people wanted to get into the nitty gritty of scriptural interpretation with me right away to prove their point. But that was never my objective in these conversations. My objective was to build relationships with others so that they could get to know me, and I could get

to know them. By doing so, I felt it would be far easier to have productive and healthy discourse on these difficult and often personal subjects. Truth be told, if I could talk to someone, and we could smile together or laugh a little bit, it always disarmed or deescalated the conversation because humor and joy have a magical ability to connect people.

Laughter brings us together

Social psychologists Laura Kurtz and Sara Algoe write in their study on laughter, “For people who are laughing together, shared laughter signals that they see the world in the same way, and it momentarily boosts their sense of connection.”¹ This rings true for me. Humor, laughter, and joy help me connect. This is the critical piece lying underneath the examples I have shared above. In all of these difficult settings, being able to experience a glimpse of joy or share in laughter allows us to connect and ultimately support each other through difficult circumstances.

Sometimes we are shy about using humor because it can seem irreverent or inappropriate. However, I fundamentally believe when we numb

¹ As quoted in Jill Suttie, “How Laughter Brings Us Together,” *Greater Good*, July 17, 2017, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_laughter_brings_us_together. For the study, see Laura E. Kurtz and Sara B. Algoe, “When Sharing a Laugh Means Sharing More: Testing the Role of Shared Laughter on Short-Term Interpersonal Consequences,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 41 (2017): 45–65.

our ability to laugh together, we prevent ourselves from building deeper connections with each other. Do not get me wrong, I have made my fair share of mistakes with my sense of humor in the past. However, what I am suggesting is that using humor strategically and at the right moment can help build the relationships we want to see with each other.

After graduating from Canadian Mennonite University, I landed a career in corporate communications. Over the years, I have written speeches, content for social media, advertising copy, and the odd video script here



We have to keep leaning into joy, humor, and laughter to stay connected and to brighten up the shadowy sides of our collective life experiences.

and there. I have learned it is important to tap into a wide array of emotions and stories to communicate your message, including using humor and making people laugh together. And I believe this is more important now than ever before.

If you have been living under a rock for the past while, this might be a shock, but we are living in trying times right now. Building community and a shared

worldview together is more important than ever. We have to keep leaning into joy, humor, and laughter to stay connected and to brighten up the shadowy sides of our collective life experiences.

So next time you get behind the pulpit or sit across from someone face to face (or over a video chat), I encourage you—no, wait, I *implore* you—to think about how you can facilitate laughing together in a way that creates connection and ultimately builds up community across the street and around the world.

About the author

Ben Borne is the co-owner of a community consultancy in Saskatoon but spends his free time volunteering for the church in various leadership capacities and in Sunday worship. He is passionate about critically engaging with faith through the lens of the human experience, and vice versa. Ben holds a Bachelor of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies from Canadian Mennonite University and a diploma in public relations from the University of Victoria.