

Humor an important spiritual practice, theologian asserts

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KANSAS CITY, Kan.—Humor doesn't show up on any spiritual practice list. But Richard Olson hopes to make that happen.

"Humor is a very important spiritual practice, especially for those under stress and turmoil," he said.

Listing the description the [Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People of Faith](#) advocates, Olson believes humor fits the criteria for a spiritual practice.

Richard Olson

"It involves us in God's activity, comes to us from the past, and we will shape its future," he said. "It's thoughtful, is done in the church and in public. It shapes people, has good purposes and comes to focus in worship."

And he points out that the Valparaiso Project includes "singing our lives" on its practice list. "It strikes me that if singing is a spiritual practice, humor should be included. Laughter participates in joy and in love. It renews the soul, something particularly needed for people in danger of losing those things," he said.

Humor and laughter benefit people at all levels—physical, psychological and spiritual. Spiritually, humor touches joy, hope and love.

"I see each as interactive. ... Humor can revive and rekindle hope and joy. It softens conflicts and helps build community," he added.

Olson, distinguished professor of pastoral theology at [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#), has just completed a book tentatively titled *Laughter in a Time of Turmoil*. It provides practical steps to using humor as a spiritual practice as an individual and in community.

“I caution readers to adopt some of the steps but not to force humor just for humor’s sake,” he said.

Individuals should first examine and develop a theological perspective of humor. Then, develop an appreciation for the humor of others, even for just attempts at humor, Olson said.

Each person should find his or her own voice, spend time with humorous people, journal humorous events or develop a humor collection, and try out ideas “humorologists”—comedians and others who teach people how to use humor—recommend.

One key to the practice is to work on sensitivity and timing. “Learn to discern when laughter is fitting in the midst of trouble or pain,” he explained.

“There is a lot of humor, particularly male humor, that’s heckling. For example, something like ‘Jack, you old horse thief,’ is appropriate in one setting—when you know Jack and you have a history—but inappropriate in others.”

He also encourages people to “go deeper into story and become story.” Storytelling is an art form that often contains humor, either blatant or subtle. Individuals can tap into the story they are living for humor they need or as ministry to others.

“Find, ponder, reflect and share stories that deeply connect to you. Then don’t worry about whether there is any laughter when you tell it,” he said. “Story carries itself and has a hidden gentle humor within.”

