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We laugh because we know who we are

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Oct. 11, 2011 My Table Is Spread

?The devil, the proud spirit, cannot endure to be mocked.? -- Thomas More

Dictators run some countries, and dictators run some families. Dictators can even be found running some churches. What the tyrants have in common is a hatred of the sound of laughter. Rather than indulge in laughter, they indulge in what G.K. Chesterton calls ?the anger of the idle kings.?

For proud spirits live in fear that the joke is on them.

Which, of course, it is: on them, and on us. To be human is to fall, to slip on the banana peels that line our paths. We fall down and get up and fall down again. We walk out of bathrooms trailing ribbons of toilet paper. We forget to zip up and tuck in and scrape the spinach off our teeth. Our bodies are engineered to make noises so silly they constitute high comedy on the schoolyard playground. Our survival as a people is ensured only by the wholesale assumption of ridiculous postures.

We lose our tempers and our dignity and our way. We misspeak, misstep and mess up. If we live long enough, we end the way we began, wearing diapers and eating baby food, waiting for someone to change and feed us. Pretty funny, when you think about how much time we spend protecting our dignity, our appearance and our position.

The dictator?s goal is to be recognized as God, even if God over only this little house, that small nation, or the most modest parish. Dictators work hard at building and maintaining the illusion of godhood. Laughter destroys the illusion.

I remember a night years ago when my father was as angry as he was drunk. He resolved to go up to the bedroom he shared with my mother and lock -- really lock -- the door. He would show us. To that end, he grabbed a hammer and a can of nails. He weaved his way up the stairs, yelling at us that we would no longer be able to make his life a living hell, or words to that effect.

My father slammed the door. Soon, we heard the sounds of nails being hammered into the doorframe, mingled with the sounds of the hammer missing the nails and hitting the wood.

Now my parents? bedroom was a large single space above the two-car garage. I don?t think the builder planned it as a bedroom, since it had neither closets nor an adjoining bath. Its primary virtue as a bedroom was its distance from mine.

The evening had been long and loud. My mother and I were tired. We stood silently at the bottom of the stairs, listening to the sounds of wood splintering above us.

I was about to turn and go to bed when my mother gestured towards the stairs and drawled, ?Un-huh. Just wait till he needs to pee.?

A beat, then I started to laugh. My mother started to laugh. We looked at one another and began to howl, full out eyes-watering, nose-running, snorting laughter.

I don?t remember how long we laughed that night, but I do remember how the gloom evaporated and the power of my father?s wrath was destroyed. I think it was the image of my father pulling out the nails, one by one, in a race against time (not to mention his bowels and bladder) that dispelled the sense of his power.

Free men and women laugh. They laugh because they know who they are, and who they are is not God, upper or lower case. Indeed, laughter may be the surest way to know and acknowledge one?s place in the cosmos, one?s place as creature and not creator.

In ?A Hymn for the Church Militant,? G.K. Chesterton gives a glimpse of right and holy order, an order that includes a prayer for ?the firm feet of humility,? and concludes with a prayer for the gift of laughter:

Cleanse us from ire of creed or
class,
The anger of the idle kings;
Sow in our souls, like living
grass,
The laughter of all lowly
things.

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