

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

One of the things I admire most about Clara, my mother-in-law, is her wonderful sense of humor. She has heard some of her husband's jokes at least 257 times. I know because I've heard some of them a time or two myself. But no matter the staleness of the joke, Clara's enjoyment of the humor is fresh for each telling.

At a recent family reunion, I focused my attention on Clara because I wanted to capture her laughter in a photograph. The photo is slightly out of focus, but the humor is enthusiastic and clear. Hal did his *famous* watch trick, in which he hammers the watch of an unsuspecting nephew to smithereens in an apparent failure of magic powers. He does this trick at every reunion, it always fails, and the unsuspecting relative is always the same one (some people learn more slowly than others?) — and Clara **always** dissolves into giggles.

When someone asked her the secret of their 59-year marriage, she responded that Hal has a great sense of humor, which has proven to be a mighty effective tool for getting over the rough spots.

Because Clara and Hal have passed this quality to their children and grandchildren, I live in a family where humor is the most revered human trait. I am lucky enough to listen to laughter every day and to watch people laughing together. I live in a climate of teasing and banter. I notice humor — and I particularly notice its absence.

Life is hard work; it's serious. But the dailiness of it can be filled with lightness and joy if we use our senses of humor to meet the challenges and even the drudgery.

I have a hobby job as a cooking class assistant. What this means, really, is that I wash dishes and wait on people. The work itself isn't much fun, but it's great for observing human behavior. Last week I worked with a very efficient woman who was all business. People were greeted and served, their plates whisked away as they forked in the last bite. Dishes were washed and everything was spit spot in no time. Efficient, but not particularly fun.

We missed the interactions with people that happen naturally when you smilingly hand them a taste of *Crêpes Farcies avec Pommes aux Mielles et Pignones avec Crème Chantilly* or a bite of *Roasted Whole Pumpkin Stuffed with Wild Mushroom Bread Pudding*. Camaraderie among staff can create a warm and happy environment that facilitates positive, humor-filled interactions. Floundering our way through language and difficult recipes and discovering flaws in systems can play themselves out as tragic episodes or serendipitous moments. Mistakes, stumbles become the starting point for laughter.

A child care program, like any work environment can be about getting the business accomplished or about enjoying all the potential of the moment. What do children sense in your program? Is it a place where they hear people laughing and enjoying each other? Or is it an environment where the bumbings of life become tragedies?

Humor comes more easily to some of us than others, but we all make choices about how we live our lives. We do important work that we must take seriously; but do we sometimes take ourselves too seriously? Can we lighten each day by using humor as our filter? If we live our lives with humor and grace, we will bring sparkle to the lives of children and adults we interact with each day — and to our own lives as well.