

Humor and Tragedy in New Orleans

By Dr. Ed Dunkelblau | Guest Blogger at <http://rickkaempfer.blogspot.com> | June 2006

Ed Dunkelblau, Ph.D. is a psychologist, speaker and consultant dealing with corporations, healthcare organizations and educational institutions on the topics of Humor, Health and Emotional Intelligence. Dr. Dunkelblau's work has been featured in the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, USA Weekend, Readers Digest, Jet Magazine, on CNN and NPR. He can be reached via his website at www.teacheq.com or at drlaugh01@aol.com Dr. Dunkelblau was also a regular guest on the John Landecker show, and when I contacted him to blog about his recent trip to New Orleans, he graciously submitted this. -RK

Just days after Mardi Gras I was walking down a wide city street looking at the empty but mostly intact houses that lined the road between trees and piles of refuse emptied from the moldy interiors. I passed an attractive, yellow, 2 story home that was also abandoned, but looked Ok. Ok, that is, until I realized that it was sitting in the middle of the street, having been separated from its foundation 30 feet away.

The flood waters of New Orleans have done indescribable damage to the neighborhoods, economy and the people of the "let the good times roll" city.

It was in the shadow of this incredible disaster that a colleague of mine, Patty Wooten, and I were invited to speak to the people of New Orleans on the topic of Humor and Tragedy. Our task was to provide a life affirming message of hope while not dismissing the hurt, sadness and pain being felt by virtually everyone who remained after the floods. Patty and I are both Therapeutic Humorists, both clinicians and both winners of the Lifetime achievement Award given by the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor.

Speaking on Humor and Tragedy, though not easy, was familiar to us, having given a number of presentations shortly after the 9/11 attacks.

We were prepared for the sorrow, the horrifying stories of loss and despair experienced by the people of New Orleans but we weren't prepared for the scope of the devastation. It went on for miles and miles. And this was 6 months after the disaster!

Together and separately we gave a total of 6 speeches to professional and general public

audiences throughout the area. The responses that we received have changed our lives forever.

The people of New Orleans were ready to laugh. Patty and I spoke about how humor and laughter can be a vacation from sorrow and loss and these folks were certainly ready for a vacation. Our jokes and stories were never funnier and our message never more appreciated than by those in attendance.

We spoke about how humor provides perspective, connects people and how it can help people feel more in control. We helped them identify what they found funny and how humor can help them physically and psychologically.

We talked about Sandy Ritz's recovery phases of humor and where they fit into the developmental coping mechanism that humor can provide

- Heroic (at the time of impact)
- Honeymoon (one week to 6 months)

Laughs at absurdity of situation

- Disillusionment (2 months to 2 years)

Aggressive humor to express anger

- Reconstruction (several years)

We talked about how humor can reflect common fears or problems.

As it was days after Mardi Gras, we found some examples of humor from the local press and included them in our presentation. A crowd favorite was a group of women dressed as if they were blind with dark glasses and white canes and wearing signs " LEVEE INSPECTORS"

We gave the audience suggestions for bringing more humor into their lives i.e. Find a humor buddy, someone who understands your sense of humor; Seek out things that are funny, schedule humor breaks into your day, etc.

Finally, we cautioned them about the risks of humor: Avoiding racist, sexist or any other "ist" humor; know your audience, etc.

The most moving part of the presentations came at the end. We invited the audience members to share their stories of humor, survival and courage.

One that stands out was shared by a woman quoting a police report that described how some

rescuers approached a house where the family had already evacuated to safety but the pet golden retriever was unfortunately left behind. Rescuers were eventually able to get back to the house where they saw the dog desperately swimming around the living room trying to keep its head above the water. The story had a happy ending and the dog was saved but the rescuers were confused about why the dog continued to swim rather than find safety on the floating sofa. The owner laughed and shared that he is a very good dog and he knows that his isn't allowed on the furniture.

Experiencing the resilience, tenacity and kindness of the people of New Orleans changed our lives. I hope that with our message of humor, personal power and caring we were also able to positively touch theirs.