

By Debra Judge Silber

Chores got you down? Don't get cranky. Get goofy. It helps lighten the load.



In Praise of Silliness

Look at this," I said to my son, Matt, 10, when I had finally found my keys during the usual stressed-out morning rush. Taking a precious second, in utmost seriousness, I held the key fob facing me and pressed the button. My mouth slowly opened. I pressed it again, and my mouth shut. I was relieved to see Matt smile, mildly amused by my imitation of a garage door. His sister Jenny, 11, caught up in the scowl of getting to school, only cast me a withering look that said, "My mother has lost it."

I'm sometimes afraid I have lost it. In fact, it pains me to think that maybe my whole family has. I'm not talking about losing my mind, which was Jenny's meaning. I'm talking about losing the ability to be silly.

That morning, like most, we were caught up in a frenzy to get to our schools and our jobs and achieve, achieve, achieve. There were math tests to take and Cub Scout badges to earn, raises to strive for and a refrigerator to stock. There were goals to meet and people to impress. There was no margin for silliness.

That's when it struck me how important a little bit of silliness every now and then is to the health of a family—

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and how much my family in particular was missing out on this essential lightness of being.

Silliness is not the same as humor. People work at humor. Silliness simply erupts. I'm certain that's why it comes so naturally to children. And it's probably why I have such a difficult time with it. Humor is O.K. in adult circles; to be funny is to be clever, witty. But to be silly is to be foolish, immature, even infantile. So it's a tough act for parents like me who sometimes get too caught up in being our children's on-site role models of maturity. When I do manage to conjure up some silliness, my kids aren't always sure how to take it—like Jenny that morning. I understand. It is a bit incongruous to be angrily chiding them to hurry or they'll miss the bus one minute, and to be imitating a garage door the next.

But I miss silliness. I grew up with it in the house. It's not that my family was a laugh riot, but there was always a potential to be slightly ridiculous lurking in the background. When the opportunity arose—and it often did—we delighted in tripping the switch of silliness and catching everyone in its light. You could never tell, for example, when my brother Kevin would pluck a banana from the fruit bowl and place it against his cheek. "Hello? Hello? I can't hear you. I've got a banana in my ear." Then he'd hand it to a visitor with a casual, "It's for you." If being asked

to take a call on a piece of fruit didn't lighten up people, there were always the smiling peas. These were ordinary peas served to dinner guests with a serious warning that no one could eat them without cracking a smile. Go ahead. Try. Sur-

rounded by expectant faces, very few guests could manage to lift their forks without lapsing into laughter.

I wonder if it was easier to be silly then. Those were the days of *Laugh-In* and Flip Wilson, when prime-time humor was nothing if not silly. I have no doubt that my brothers and I modeled our behavior on the sitcoms and variety shows that I view today as incredibly bland and naive. Sometimes I blame the lack of silliness in my family on today's humor. Too harsh. Too cynical. Other times I blame myself. Too uptight. Too stressed. Too concerned about people's impressions to even consider—God forbid—acting silly.

A few weeks ago my son committed some minor offense. He dumped his coat on the floor or tracked mud up the stairs. I don't recall. I do remember that instead of lashing him with angry words—my usual practice—I waved my arms around my head in mock hysteria and chased him through the house. Yeah, it was silly. But he ended up laughing instead of sulking. And that's fine with me. I want him to remember my displeasure over his misbehavior—and, in this case, I'm sure he will. Does it guarantee he'll remember to hang up his coat or wipe his feet next time? Probably not. But I'm beginning to think that, in the grand scheme of our family life, putting so much importance on such minor things is, after all, just plain silly.

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Photo, Ross Whitaker. Hair and makeup, Margaret Avery for Richard Stein Salon. Styling, Kathy Imlay. Sweater, Lands' End.