

# THE WORD

NOVEMBER, 1913.

---

Copyright, 1913 by H. W. PERCIVAL.

---

## MOMENTS WITH FRIENDS.

*What is laughter, and why do people laugh?*

Laughter is the expression of an attitude of the mind and of the emotions through inarticulate vocal sounds. Upon the individual and the circumstance exciting his laughter, depend the variety and nature of laughter; as the giggle, titter, gurgle, of simple and exuberant youth; the mellow, silvery sweet, or hearty laugh of generous good nature; the laugh of derision, scorn, sarcasm, irony, ridicule, contempt. Then there is the abominable laughter of the hypocrite.

Laughter is as sure an indicator of the character and the combination of the body and mind of the one who laughs, as speech is the index of the development of the mind which gives it articulation. A cold in the head, hoarseness, or other bodily ills, may effect the smoothness and roundness of a laugh, but such bodily impediments cannot disguise the spirit and character which enters into that laugh.

The physical vibrations of the laugh are caused by the action of the vocal cords and larynx on the air force over them. But the attitude of mind at the time of the laugh gives the spirit to the laugh, and so acts on the nervous system as to compel such muscular and vocal agitations as will give body and quality to the sound in which the spirit of the laugh is expressed.

Like many of the wonders of life, laughter is so common that it is not seen to be wonderful. It is wonderful.

Without mind there is no laugh. To be able to laugh one must have mind. An idiot can make a noise, but cannot laugh. A monkey can imitate and make grimaces, but it cannot laugh. A parrot can imitate the sounds of laughter, but it cannot laugh. It does not know what it is trying to laugh about; and everyone in the neighborhood knows when a parrot is imitating laughter. Birds may hop and flutter and twitter in the sunshine, but there is no laughter; cats and kittens may purr, roll, pounce or paw, but they cannot laugh. Dogs and puppies can prance and jump and bark in playful sport, but it is not given to them to laugh. Sometimes when a dog looks into a human face with what is called "such intelligence" and with what

seems to be a knowing look, it is said that perhaps he understands the fun and is trying to laugh; but he cannot. An animal cannot laugh. Some animals at times can imitate the sounds of the voice, but that is not an understanding of words. It can at most be only an echo. A dog cannot understand the meaning of words nor of laughter. At best he can reflect the desire of his master, and in some degree respond to that desire.

Laughter is a spontaneous expression of quick appreciation by the mind, of a condition which unexpectedly reveals something of unfitness, awkwardness, inappropriateness, incongruousness. This condition is provided by some happening, or action, or by words.

To get the full benefit of laughter and to be able to laugh readily the mind must, in addition to a quickness to understand the awkwardness, incongruousness, unexpectedness of a situation, have its imaginative faculty developed. If there is no imaginativeness, the mind will not see more than one situation, and therefore lack true appreciation. But when there is imaginativeness the mind will quickly picture from that occurrence other laughable occurrences and situations and relate the incongruities with harmony.

Some people are quick to understand a situation and to see the point in a joke. Others may understand the situation, but without imaginativeness they cannot see what that situation would suggest or lead to and to what it is co-related, and they are slow to see the point in a joke or a humorous situation and tardy in finding out why other people are laughing.

Laughter is a necessity in human development, and especially in the development of the mind to meet all conditions of life. There is little laughter in grinding monotonous pressure and hardships. When life requires a constant struggle to get a bare existence, when war and pestilence sweep over the land, when death reaps its harvests by fire and flood and earthquake, then only the terrors and hardships and the difficulties of life are seen. Such conditions bring out and compel endurance and strength of mind and quickness in action. These qualities of mind are developed by coping with and overcoming such conditions. But the mind also needs ease and grace. The mind begins to develop poise, ease, grace, by laughter. Laughter is necessary for ease and grace of mind. As soon as the bare necessities of life are supplied, and begin to give place to plenty, laughter comes. Laughter makes the mind unbend and takes away its stiffness. Laughter helps the mind to see the light and cheer in life, as well as the dark and cold. Laughter relieves the mind from

strain after its struggle with serious, stern and awful things. Laughter fits the mind for new endeavor. By acquiring the power to laugh, the mind can renew its strength and cope with difficulties, prevent melancholy and even insanity, and may often drive away illness or disease. When a man gives too much attention to laughter, then the love of laughter prevents him from appreciating the seriousness, responsibilities, duties and the work of life. Such a man may be easy and hearty and good-natured, may see the funny side of things, and be a rollicking, jolly good fellow. But as he continues to make laughter a pleasure, he becomes softer and unfit to meet the stern realities of life. He may pity and laugh at the man who he thinks takes life too seriously, yet he understands and appreciates life no better than the one who goes through life carrying a heavy heart and burdened by a frown.

More of a man's character can be known in a short time by his laughter than by his words, because he tries less to conceal and can conceal less in his laughter. With words he can and often does mean the opposite of what he says.

There is scarcely anyone who will not welcome the rich, full sounding, generous laughter of appreciation of quick wit and good humor tempered in its volume and tone to suit the occurrence and place, and who will fail to shun the empty gobble or cackle of a person who boisterously persists in his cackle or gobble, whether or not the occasion provokes it. Whether a person is or is not well bred, the fullness or shallowness of mind or emotion may be known by his laugh. Those with tendencies to nervousness, fits or hysteria, will show them by their short jerky, spasmodic gasps, or their long, sharp, piercing screams of laughter. The noisy, rasping, metallic sounds, the hiss, the squeal, are indicative of character as surely as a well rounded character is revealed by its harmony in laughter. Harmony in laughter shows a well rounded out development in character, no matter what may occasion the laugh. Discords in laughter show lack of development in a character, no matter how one may try to conceal what he lacks. Discords give place to harmony in laughter, as the character is developed. The tone, the pitch and the volume of discord in the laugh, indicate the lack or twist in development of character.

One who has magnetism in his laugh is usually one of a natural and sensuous disposition. The crafty and cunning and miserly and the cruel will repel by their laughter, though they may entice or deceive by their words.



THE  
WORD FOUNDATION, INC.

A Non-Profit Organization Established in 1950  
P. O. Box 17510 • Rochester, NY 14617 • USA

[www.thewordfoundation.org](http://www.thewordfoundation.org)