



# Croydon High School

for girls aged 3-18

Leadership Likes 



This weekend I watched a documentary about ships. It was riveting!

I open my blog this week with a one-liner (dad) joke that came to



prominence at the world-famous Edinburgh Fringe festival a few years ago. I might not be a comedian, but I do love a good laugh, and I enjoy making people laugh. As my fellow members of the Senior Leadership Team will no doubt attest, I can be relied upon to provide the humour. Against the backdrop of the global pandemic, I have been asking myself why this is the case. On the most basic level,

laughter can be a hugely helpful tool when we feel under pressure or alone. Over the past few months, laughter has been particularly important for me in this regard. And, I am not alone in feeling this way. Recently, the BBC Entertainment Editor Will Gompertz reported that since the pandemic started, we have been streaming comedy films or sets from comedians more than any other genre of entertainment. Psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman, from the University of Hertfordshire, says "finding the funny" is a "common way" of coping. Laughing in households while following government advice to stay at home is good for you, he said. "Don't feel guilty, it's a human thing and if it helps, it's OK".

It is often said that 'laughter is the best medicine'. But is there any actual truth in this? Research has revealed several ways in which laughter is good for your health because of its effect on the neurotransmitters in our brain. Laughter relaxes the whole body. A good hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, leaving our muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes afterwards. Laughter also boosts the immune system. It decreases stress hormones and increases immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies, thus improving our resistance to disease. Laughter diffuses anger. Nothing reduces anger

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4 December 2020



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and conflict faster than a shared laugh. Looking at the funny side can put problems into perspective and enable you to move on from confrontations without holding on to bitterness or resentment.

Laughter helps us to bond with other humans and build stronger communities. Shared laughter can be a great experience, and laughter can often be infectious. Laughter connects us in a powerful way, and it feels good. When we share laughter with others, we benefit from the experience of being in sync with them, thus strengthening our relationships. Laughter is, then, like social glue. Endorphins and other neurotransmitters released by social laughter help us to manage stress and be more creative and flexible in our thinking. At a time when we have all been isolated from one another, laughter has brought us



back together by traversing physical distance.

Many people comment on the infectious sound of children's laughter, in particular. Their giggling, laughing and enjoyment of the most basic aspects of life remind all of us that, no matter what age we are, we need to laugh and find joy in life. Indeed, it was one of the things I cherished at the start of term, when the school's corridors were echoing with laughter and excited chatter after months of being silent. If you are not privileged enough to work with young people every day, then there are endless videos of babies laughing which are just a few clicks away. Isn't it great that, even at a young age, we can benefit from laughter? In fact, the Navajo, a Native American tribe, have a ceremony to mark and celebrate a baby's first laugh because it is seen as an important milestone in the baby's introduction to and membership of the community.

It is important to be able to laugh at ourselves sometimes, too. There is a saying that 'as long as you can laugh at yourself, you will never cease to be amused'. Learning not to take ourselves too seriously is an important lesson in life. There is a balance, though, between becoming too serious, and clowning around all the time. A shared joke with others, or even finding the funny side in our own actions and situations, can help us to find this balance. But, as with all gifts, it is possible to abuse the gift of laughter. We can, and sometimes, *do* use laughter to mock or make fun of others, laughing at another person in a way that is cruel and hurtful. We do not like to be on the receiving end of other people laughing at us unless we have invited it. To laugh in a way that is cruel, or mocking is not the way we should behave. We have plenty of idioms in English to describe this phenomenon, such as being the laughing stock, the butt of the joke or a source of ridicule. There is a fine line between gentle banter that pokes fun and cruel

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humour that is hurtful and unkind. It takes maturity, care and wisdom to understand the difference.

It is perhaps only because of the global pandemic and the need for collective laughter, that a programme which was so popular in the 1980s and 90s, *Spitting Image*, has returned to our TV screens this month. For those of you unfamiliar with the programme, it is best described as a satirical puppet show about those who are in the public eye, such as politicians, celebrities and the Royal Family. The show magnifies them both literally, in terms of the features of the puppets themselves, and metaphorically, lampooning their words, actions and character.

Originally, sceptical TV executives thought that the irreverence of the show would only be suitable for children; they were proved to be wrong as the programme was regularly watched by 20 million viewers each week, an audience figure which is seldom achieved in the age of Netflix and other streaming channels. To try and make sense of how a show like *Spitting Image* sits alongside my assertion that the gift of laughter can be abused if it is used in a way that is cruel, requires a brief pit stop on a word I 'trotted out' without thought a moment ago: satire.

Simply put, a work of satire uses humour—particularly irony and exaggeration—to expose flaws in human behaviour. When notions of human frailty, indecency, or inadequacy are juxtaposed with other factors—such as societal issues or political commentary as is the case in *Spitting Image*—satire can be a powerful tool to provoke and challenge attitudes. That laughter may be used as a cover to say or do things that you would not otherwise dare do, is the *modus operandi* of many modern comedians. Laughter helps keep the lid on the Pandora's box of provocative issues which we would not dare to lampoon so openly if we were not laughing at them. Some great examples of satire in the literary canon include George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which ridicules the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia; Voltaire's *Candide*, which attacks the philosophy of Optimism; and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which satirizes the "high-class" tastes, social expectations, and popular philosophies of his time.

The original *Spitting Image* helped break the reverence for politicians, celebrities and the Royal Family. It punctured a bubble (to use a word *du jour*). When it first aired, TV cameras were not allowed in the House of Commons, celebrities were not all over *Twitter* or *Instagram*, and royalty were only seen at ceremonial or public events. As a result, people in the public eye could carefully craft and control their public image and pronouncements. Now these people proliferate our popular culture. Satire, too, is everywhere. Before any politician has finished an interview, their words have been twisted in a thousand irreverent tweets. Celebrities are frequently captured on film and the comment-hungry nature of popular culture demands that we seek to characterise or judge their actions, whether they invited it or not. A litany of high profile events in tandem with their use of social media has humanised the Royal family. This humanisation has come at a cost, though, since it has also provided a licence to make them a satirical target.

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Does satire have a place in the time of COVID? Well, certainly the argument about the importance of laughter in times of COVID extends to satire. Perhaps satirizing the policies and personas involved in our national response to the pandemic, bring us together and helps us to make sense of it under the safety net that collective laughter provides. Is there room for satire in the era of social media? The answer to this question is not as straightforward. "Social media is fierce, but it's limited," says Matt Forde, the voice of the Boris Johnson puppet on the *Spitting Image* reboot. "If you're creating art through satire, as we intend to do, you're doing more than just being rude for the sake of it: you are saying an issue or action requires our collective attention."



To my mind the difference between laughter as cruelty and laughter for satirical purposes comes down to intent. Is the ultimate intent to poke fun at a person for the sake of it (something which we define as parody) or is it to draw our collective attention, via satire, to a political or societal issue which warrants it? Walking the line between parody and satire is especially perilous and requires the talents of those who are particularly gifted at handling laughter. It is no accident that the performers on *Spitting Image* are professional comedians. If you or I tried it, we would most probably get it wrong and cause offence as a result. This is especially the case with social media such as *Twitter*; one of its many problems is that, as a largely text-based medium, the challenge is to ensure that our written communication is heard in the way we intend it to be.

Laughter is a gift which we all can give. And we need it now more than ever. But we should use it with care especially when the intent of our laughter may not always be clear. I leave you, then, from the relative safe ground of a one-liner from Joe Kearsse, which was just pipped to the post as the 'best one-liner' at the Fringe in 2018. "I had a job drilling holes for water", Kearsse said. "It was well boring!"



**Dr Philip Purvis**

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