

You Gotta Laugh

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I am at my old farmhouse in Maine, now, a wonderful too-brief respite in the midst of a lot of travels. It was a long day yesterday, beginning with a 10 AM memorial service for a close friend who died ten days ago, then the three-hour drive here to arrive in time for a scheduled telephone interview with a writer for a Houston newspaper, since I'll be in Houston in a couple of weeks as part of a promotion tour for the book GOSSAMER.

She (the Houston journalist) asked me about the use of four particular words in the book. Stupidly, I don't have the book here with me, and now can only remember three of them: Peace. Family. Laughter. When I get back home Monday I'll add the other one. Or maybe it'll come to me when I'm out cleaning up the gardens because sometimes when you are doing mindless things, your brain takes the occasion to work on something else that was left undone.

(LATER NOTE: I just thought of the other: *courage*.)

Anyway...in the book, those words are important; they are actually given to, or bestowed upon, people who are in need of them. (Tough to explain. You have to take my word for it.) The newspaper writer wondered about my choice of the words. It had, in fact, not been a conscious one, really; I needed four words, four concepts, and those were the ones that came to me during the writing. Nor had I thought about them, and their choice, until she asked me. But – as I told her on the phone – those are the things we most need in our lives. They are what we seek, what we yearn for. Copurage. Peace. Family. And....

Laughter? Yes. I think so. After talking to her, and thinking about it, I remembered the memorial service with which the day began. Picture a large, quite beautiful Catholic church: St. Paul's, in Cambridge, MA. Picture a crowd gathered to say goodbye to a dear man, a greatly-admired and much-loved friend (and husband, and brother), who had died with enormous dignity after a long and terrible illness.

Now picture this: the priest, for who-knows-what-reason (misread his own handwriting? Took bad notes to begin with?) used the wrong name. Jack, he called our friend, who was not named Jack.

Our beloved Jack, what a swell guy he was.

Everyone in the church glanced at each other briefly, quizzically. *Jack?* We murmured to each other. *Who is Jack? Are we at the wrong church, wrong funeral?*

But no, he was describing our friend: his distinguished career as a naval officer, as a lawyer, his love of sailing, his happy hours on Narragansett Bay.

How we will miss dear Jack, the priest told us.

Some of us began to chuckle a bit, a little irreverently. Even when the priest told us that Jack had safely sailed over the horizon and was now in the arms of the Lord, we chuckled.

His wife, at the door of the church afterward, rolled her eyes and said, "Well, it kept me from crying."

And okay, this too: later, driving to Maine, thinking about it, picturing the priest back at his residence by now; picturing him after someone has pointed out the error to him; picturing him - what: groaning? grimacing? - and murmuring: "*His name wasn't Jack?*" in disbelief and chagrin.

It made me laugh.

I think laughter is one of the most important navigation tools we have in our lives. It's how we

make our way from one surprise to the next.

And now I have to go outside and see if I can muster up a chuckle as I assess what damage the deer have done to my garden.

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