



Spirit of Life
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"The Power of A Smile"
February 17, 2013 Sermon
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We humans tend to be social beings. Throughout our lives we keep searching for ways to connect with each other. According to some researchers one of the first non-verbal connections between humans appears in new born infants when they are asleep. Others say this connection develops around 6 to 8 weeks of age while the infant is awake. The connection is a smile and the first true smile is a momentous occasion for parents especially. As we've probably all experienced, whenever a baby smiles at us it delights, excites and produces reciprocal smiles in everyone watching the baby at the time. In fact, if the act of smiling is absent when it is expected to appear in a child's development it may be a symptom of a serious difficulty such as autism.

Humans all around the world in every culture and known social grouping, smile. Smiling is usually associated with a positive emotion. This universal and universally recognized facial expression has a long evolutionary history. Smiling appears to be deeply rooted in our beings as humans. If that wasn't the case this universal facial expression might have become extinct or evolved into something else.

Smiling serves a variety of purposes and has many benefits. It costs nothing, doesn't have to be taught or grown into. It can happen automatically.

But, what actually is a smile? If we look at the smile anatomically and physiologically it results from the action of a number of facial muscles with fascinating names such as the zygomatic, mentalis, caninus, and others. The fibers of these muscles surround and actually make up the area of the face we call the mouth. When the zygomatic major muscles contract they lift the corners of the mouth to create the smile. If muscles around the eyes known as the orbicularis oculi also contract at the same time as the zygomatics they raise the cheeks and form crows feet around the eyes creating a genuine smile. Its opposite, a "fake" smile usually doesn't involve the area around the eyes and is a voluntary quick contraction of only the zygomatic muscles. The fake smile is often used to show politeness and women tend to use the fake smile more than men.

An anatomical distinction between these two types of smiles – genuine and fake was first recognized by Guillaume Duchenne a mid 19th century French physician and neurologist. The genuine smile has been named after him – the Duchenne smile.

Photographers hope to get genuine Duchenne smiles when they ask us to say “cheese” while posing us for a photo. The vowel “e” in the word cheese requires our mouths to open and our teeth to show while the zygomatic and orbicularis oculi muscles contract to create a smile. The photographer then makes a visual souvenir of a happy event, feeling or time.

Whether considering genuine, Duchenne smiles or fake smiles, some cynics may say a purpose of smiles is to make money. In fact to a great extent that is true. Billions of dollars are spent every year on products and treatments that straighten, clean and whiten our teeth, color our lips and focus attention on our eyes, eyelids and facial characteristics to enhance our smiles. Some of those billions of dollars are used to pay for ads and commercials in the media to try to convince us to buy various products or treatments while making money for the advertising firms who devise the ads and create spam on our computers.

There are also many professionals and people who make their living by concentrating much of their work on making us smile better or look better while we are smiling. Dentists, orthodontists, plastic surgeons, cosmetic manufacturers and others try to assure us that their treatments and products will help us maintain, improve or enhance our smiles. The cosmetic industry and plastic surgeons also have carved out a niche for those of us who don't like the facial side effects of smiling. They encourage us to use their products or submit to surgical techniques to get rid of our crows feet and wrinkles acquired in part, from smiling. So you see, smiling fulfills another purpose, it helps to sustain our economy.

Despite what cynics might say, smiles fascinate. They may range from small, shy barely perceptible to huge, wide, uninhibited grins. Smiles can arise when you're by yourself or in the presence of others and are related to a positive emotion. As Thich Nhat Hanh a world renowned Viet Nameese Zen Master and Buddhist Monk has written

“Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.”

Smiles can happen by themselves or accompany laughter. Consider this, it's very hard to laugh without smiling but you don't have to laugh in order to smile.

Smiles can get you into trouble sometimes. Each of us can probably recall at least one instance when you smiled and found yourself in trouble. The worst trouble resulting from a smile is captured in this limerick created by the poet laureate of limericks, Edward Lear. It goes like this.

There was a young lady of Niger
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger.
They returned from the ride
With the lady inside
And the smile on the face of the tiger.

Some memorable smiles have been created by artists. The enigmatic smile of Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa is one such famous and memorable smile. Since it was painted in the 1500's thousands of writers, composers, artists and others have tried to figure out and theorize why she's smiling or at whom. Some of us are old enough to remember Nat King Cole's popular musical rendition of the Mona Lisa. We might even be able to hum a few bars or recall the words that ask "Do you smile to tempt a lover?...or to hide a broken heart?"

Whether a famous smile or just our own seen in a photo, picture or mirror, we can rest assured that there are definite benefits to smiling. Mark Stibich, Ph.D. A behavior change expert and researcher particularly in the area of longevity, has compiled a list of health and psychological benefits gained from smiling. He gleaned this list of benefits from various research studies focused on the smile and smiling. Stibich claims smiling makes you stand out while helping your body function better. He cites a number of specific health benefits. Smiling relaxes you. So smiling lowers blood pressure, boosts the immune system and relieves stress.

Other positive health effects of smiling include releasing endorphins which are neurotransmitter chemicals in the brain, spinal cord and other parts of the nervous system. They are responsible for blocking pain and controlling emotion. Smiling also releases natural pain killers and serotonin another neurotransmitter. 90% of serotonin resides in the gut and 10% resides in the brain. Serotonin regulates intestinal movement, mood, appetite and sleep. If you smile the endorphins, serotonins and natural pain killers make you feel good. So, smiling produces an easily accessed natural drug and it's free.

Smiling also produces a natural, though temporary non-surgical face lift each time you raise the corners of your lips while contracting the muscles around your eyes. Smiling makes you look younger too. A Chinese proverb reinforces that finding and says "Every smile makes you a day younger." Some research claims smiling also makes you live longer.

There are psychological benefits that occur when smiling. Research has shown that smiling is contagious. It tricks the body into helping change your mood and when the smiling is done in the presence of others it changes their moods as well. A poem written by an anonymous author corroborates these research findings. It goes like this:

Smiling is infectious

You can catch it like the flu.

Someone smiled at me today

And I started smiling too.

Smiling also makes us attractive. People are drawn to those who smile perhaps because they wonder what they're smiling about. Frowns, scowls and grimaces push people away whereas a smile draws them in. Some have said it takes more muscles to frown than to smile but research results are equivocal about that observation. However, a study done in 1999 tried to find out what proportion of people would respond with a reciprocal smile when a smile was aimed at them. Around 50% did. So the conclusion

was smile and half the world smiles with you. Almost no one responds to a frown with a reciprocal frown.

To be honest, there are times when smiling may be the last thing you feel like doing. However, as we've explored together today, there are many benefits of a smile that you should not underestimate or ignore. Smiling is a readily available "power tool" on many levels and it may help you to remember this. I'd like to end with something that hopefully will leave you with a smile. Anthony Euwer an American poet and painter who combines limericks and anatomy in a form he calls Limeratomy suggests:

No matter how grouchy you're feeling,

You'll find the smile more or less healing.

It grows in a wreath

All around the front teeth-

Thus preserving the face from congealing.

So, keep smiling.