



Photo Courtesy: Drayton Entertainment

Saluting Life, Love & Laughter

By: Neil Aitchison

When I confided to my grade nine guidance counselor that I wanted to be a comedy actor he told me to, "Smarten Up!" I half expected the wallop against the side of the head to follow; he thought I was being a smart aleck.

The truth was, I had never been more serious in my life. I love to make people laugh. To me it's like oxygen – necessary for human survival.

I grew up in rural Harriston, Ontario: a town where everyone knew everyone and everyone's business. The population was 2000 souls when I was a kid. It's still 2000 all these years later. It seems every time a baby is born some guy leaves town.

For years everything was the same. I still tell my friends, "If you ever find out you only have a year to live, do it in Harriston, it'll feel like a lifetime."

Many of my teachers taught my older siblings as well as my parents. This meant I already had a reputation before getting to school; I'm lucky I had such great forbearers. At least I would be given reason for hope because of my older sister's academic achievement, and my parents' community reputation. When the teachers divulged that I was a pain in the neck, my ever supportive mom would remind them that I was, "a spirited child".

If you missed two subjects you missed your year and were forced to repeat. I always missed math and science.....out of principle. And so, June was a terrible time of year for me because that's when report cards came out. Just in case the townsfolk didn't know absolutely everything about everyone, *The Harriston Review* and the *Palmerston Observer* would publish, on the front page, a list of who passed and failed. IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER!

There I was at the top of the list. Kids can be cruel saying lines like, "You're dumb, you failed." And so I used humour as my first means of defense, rebutting back, "Yes, I won't be with YOU again next year!"

I chose to laugh.

I laughed because I loved life and I knew that it was about much more than the grades I earned. I laughed, because I was brought up in a home filled with love, a home where my parents kissed each other goodbye on their way to the bathroom.

My dad's philosophy was simple, he was always thinking about others. He walked to work every day and home for lunch. He walked to the bank and the post office, routinely picking up the mail for those more senior to him. He was known for his perfect pitch whistling and the smile he extended to everyone he met.

My dad continually challenged all of us to live every day as if it were our last, and my mother demonstrated through action that you can do whatever you set your mind to. I'm the product of a remarkable family that believes in the importance of unconditional love and the necessity of embracing differences.



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When my dad retired in June of 1986, a huge crowd came out to honour him at his retirement dinner, and when he suddenly died two months later, hundreds more came out to celebrate his extraordinary life. Over and over again we heard how he lived his life so fully, how he wore his politics, faith, and hockey team on his sleeve; he was everyone's friend. He left a truly amazing legacy.

I'm the middle of five children who all make a living talking. My *career in talking* began when I was released from high school to attend the Broadcast Program at Conestoga College. The thought of learning how to talk and connect with audiences sounded like a dream come true. I was embraced by a system that encouraged me to be exactly who I was. I was treated like an adult, and I learned what it felt like to be needed, wanted, and respected in an academic setting. Here I succeeded, achieving honours in a three year program.

I ran for Student President challenging the regular political archetype with an "I PROMISE YOU NOTHING" campaign. The student population loved it, and I became the first student president achieving 87% of the vote.

I found work at CKCO TV as a student in the news department, from there, through basic greed, I landed in sales and management. Being in sales paid far more money than if I was an on-air personality, and so I remained there for twenty-four and a half years.

Life got serious when, six months shy of the gold watch, a Toronto consulting company advised my employer to let most of the senior people go. I jumped at the opportunity to host a new talk show on a new talk station and segued into talking all day for a living. It was very well rated and I loved what I did. Three years later, the afternoon talk show was cancelled because it was deemed, "too local and folksy". I was devastated, having to face the decision to either leave the radio industry or leave the community.

But, sometimes you have to get dumped unceremoniously to see your dreams come true.

I still had to pay for a new cottage and put food on the table so I learned quickly, when the going gets tough it's important to laugh and play and access joy in the face of adversity. Being let go, became a springboard for creating a consulting company with my wife. I have an agent in Toronto for the performing aspect and I work as a PR specialist for an outstanding Canadian construction company. My hobbies became my career and since 1994, I haven't looked back.

When Alex Mustakas offered me the position of Director of Development for Drayton Entertainment, I began the most exciting period of my life. I helped manifest the dream of creating a theatre in the country and I felt a keen sense of involvement. We had consciously chosen a mandate of "music and laughter". What a blast! There's nothing like the feeling of sending people home having after experiencing a couple hours of good belly laughs.

While serving as the Director of Development for Drayton, I took my dad's advice to pursue something I loved and get paid for it! My very first paid speaking debut took place at Roy Thompson Hall. I stood stiffly at the podium in a tight tuxedo, and spoke deeply in my best radio announcer's voice. At the first break, a close friend pulled me aside backstage and whispered through clenched teeth, "What the heck are you doing? Trying to be Lorne Green? -Get back out there and be YOU. They hired YOU to be YOU!"

It was wise, wise advice. The easiest job in the world is to be yourself!

Over the years I've gained critical acclaim across the country as a professional speaker, entertaining master of ceremony, engaging musical theatre performer, and talented professional actor. I've presented numerous workshops to groups in both business and industry, and have served as the keynote



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speaker at federal and provincial political events, international concerts, and celebrity fundraisers.

But at every event, every performance, one thing remains constant: I focus on messages worth hearing, and generously lace them with humour to break down barriers. Whether it's a keynote address, a workshop or a half day interactive forum, people want a strong message, motivational in nature, and they really hope some laughter is involved.

A hearty laugh releases endorphins and encephalins which are the neuro-brain chemicals we all have. They pass through the system to balance and heal the stresses we face. Laughter has been labeled "inner-jogging" because the same feel good endorphins are released when we laugh as when we exercise. A hearty laugh session is much more fun than a grind at the gym and it's far easier on your hips and knees.

When speaking, I keep in mind that it's perfectly appropriate to make a fool of myself, but it's not funny when a joke is at someone else's expense. It's completely appropriate to lampoon your brother or a politician, they're both fair game. And, true stories are much appreciated. I include stories about my parents, my grandfather, my siblings, and more recently my grandchildren. Emotional rapport is vital and easily achieved when the audience can relate.

I spend my time trying to get audiences to take their lives seriously, but themselves lightly, knowing they'll live longer if they can shift out of a negative mindset.

There's no better feeling than soaking up gales of laughter from a room full of people I've never even met. After the performance I feel connected to the audience and it's reciprocal; it's as though we're all friends.

There's a strong bond forged through laughter because it's often not *what* is said or done that people remember, it's *how* you made them feel.

Every so often my father would ask me to reflect on my life. He'd encourage me to ponder how I'd like to be remembered by those whose lives I'd come in contact with. My answer then, and now, remains the same.

I want to be remembered as a "happy guy" who showed people how to inject laughter and play into their daily lives, and the lives of others.

Thank heaven, I didn't just "Smarten Up" and get serious in grade nine.