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**LAUGHTER and BEING A CHILD AT PLAY –
FURTHER R_x FROM STRESS GURU DR. EDWIN RILEY**
Interview by Jude DeLorca, Boulder, Colorado

It's a rainy day strolling down the Pearl Street promenade in Boulder with Dr. Edwin Riley, psycho-therapist and integrative health care guru extraordinaire. Having spent the early afternoon at his alma mater, Naropa University, where he is alumnus of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, promoting his widely read book *STRESS Rx: A Step-by-Step Guide to a Stress Free Life: 103 Prescriptions for Overcoming Stress and Achieving Lifelong Happiness*, we are looking for just the right spot for our interview. Enjoying the light play off the glistening cement and brick walkways, the huge terra cotta pots brimful of flowering impatiens and geraniums soaking up the welcome wet, and the street uncharacteristically deserted, Dr. Riley is laughing in the rain like a child at play, one is somewhat grateful there weren't any puddles. Riley catches the signage "tequila" and comes to a dead stop – "This is where we need to be."

The Tahona Tequila Bistro is a very welcoming place, rain or no rain. Riley commandeers two stools at the spacious bar and captivates the bartender to let us set up our interview equipment and notes. I learn Dr. Riley knows his tequila; I am treated to a careful exposition of the differences between plata, joven, reposado, and añejo. The many years of travel and residence in the Mexican highlands studying shamanic methodology and centuries-old *curandero* healing practices has implanted in him a grand respect for the cultural aspects of Mexico as well as the enchanting blue agave plant, whose heart must be removed in the twelfth year to make tequila.

Infectious good humor and laughter accompany our conversation as we begin the normal Q & A process. Before we start with the usual background, he stops me to say that a very important ingredient to stress relief is laughter and he wants to concentrate on that point, as he has taught it over 30 years as therapist, counselor and mentor. It is highlighted in his book, R 23: "Laugh hard and often." Having read the book in preparation of our conversation, I recalled his emphasis on the efficacy of fun, laughter, allowing the child in you to play.

Second, Riley states a surprising statistic that 95% of all problems of the universal human condition are stress related. The individual response is very personalized and it's all about *how* we react to stress, not the stress itself that is the stressor. It's up to the individual to

build the personal responsibility to combat stress and he has devoted the last decades to teaching the most stress traumatized person how to reclaim his or her life.

The study of laughter as a relief to stress and as a cure for medical conditions is seeing a great deal of print. Riley states that wide awareness in U.S. culture probably began with the famously reviewed and controversial, at the time, writer/editor Norman Cousins' 1979 book *The Anatomy of an Illness*, his personal experience recovering from cancer with laughter, and later, psychologist Harry Olson in the 1980's started a movement of positive thinking that included the key thought, "If you don't feel full of fun, pretend".

Backing up his long-held theory, Riley cites the recent comprehensive *New Yorker* profile¹ by Raffi Khatchadourian on Dr. Madan Kataria, the Indian "laughing guru." Kataria was highly influenced by Olson and embraced "the idea of faking laughter". To date, Kataria has disciples and clubs in 66 countries teaching his tenet that "people are practicing laughter yoga and getting better."

Khatchadourian's documentation of the history of laughter reinforces Riley's own theory of it as one of the essential combatants to stress. Beginning with sixteenth-century England documentation on the salutatory physiological effects of laughter forward to a French anatomist in late 1860's, through to Dr. James Walsh in his 1920's book "Laughter and Health", all building to immunologist Nicholas Cohen in the late 1970's who was the fulcrum for Cousins' thought that "is it not possible ... laughter .. have therapeutic value?" It wasn't until almost 1990 that Cousins collaborated with Drs. William Fry and Lee Berk to confirm that laughter "can reverse or attenuate" hormonal changes brought on by stress."

"There it is, if you don't believe how important laughter is ... check out that article – it is comprehensive on the subject – and Kataria has thousands all over the world just getting together to belly laugh together at home, in parks, over the phone, on Skype... everywhere. Truly amazing how the simplicity of it has huge ramifications." Riley, in fact, says that about the other 102 R for stress that he teaches – nothing is complicated, it just requires a person to be willing to center themselves and have an internal dialogue of living "in the now" – there is no past and the future has not arrived and is owed to no one."

Asked what the physiological aspect of stress is - really what takes place in our bodies when we don't deal with stress or respond to neutralize it – Riley speaks of the hormones cortisol and epinephrine (adrenalin) released when stress hits and activates a *fight-or-flight* response and suppresses immune function. A domino effect can follow, fast heart beat, high blood pressure, panic attacks, trembling, and psychological effects of depression and fear, to name just a few aspects of untreated stress.

Back to those MDs Berk and Fry, their study showed laughter "dampened the production of cortisol" and found "objective, measurable and significant neuroendocrine and stress hormone changes ... that mirthful laughter increases the production of natural-killer cells,

¹ *The New Yorker* August 30, 2010
"Letter from India" "The Laughing Guru:
Madan Kataria's prescription for total well-being."
by Raffi Khatchadourian

which help the body to fight viral infections and cancerous growths.”² “Powerful stuff!” Riley proclaims.

In recent months, Dr. Riley and Viktoras Kulvinskis, Co-founder Hippocrates Health Institute and author of *Survival in the 21st Century*, co-partnered workshops in their “FUNdamentals of BLISSology”, for which participants as a requisite must read *Stress R*. “Our collaboration of over 60 years of teaching and mentoring came together in presenting one powerful day-long expo.” Currently they are on World Tour with their F of B expo taking them to England, Spain, Holland, and Canada. Upon return, they will again be booking these workshops nationally.

Kulvinskis is quoted that while traveling and working with Riley he saw “the *Stress R prescriptions* working ... side effects reported by readers include youthful energy and hysterical laughter ... he is the ‘Johnny Appleseed’ of happiness.” Riley laughs joyfully at the moniker and drawls, “Well, a So’ Carolina boy Appleseed” and says he and Kulvinskis offer a uniquely structured program coupling fun with serious personal growth.

The energy duo is also putting their respective consciousnesses together for the 2012 Mayan calendar apocalypse hype looming huge on spiritual fronts with their Dec. 28 – Jan. 4 “2012: Energy-Consciousness Summit. Preparing for Today” at the global healing center at Tepoztlan in the Mexico highlands. Again, Riley says he and Kulvinskis will be emphasizing joy and laughter to diffuse any negative energy. To that emphasis, they’ve enlisted comedians Dick Gregory and Eddie Brill to “keep it light.” All the info is available at Riley’s website and their www.funandbliss.org .

“You know, my favorite all-time quote relates to our conversation, ‘Maturity is the recovery of the seriousness of a child at play.’ Nietzsche. That pretty much sums up my philosophical stance inserted in my counseling and my personal life.”

Dr. Riley’s background spans many disciplines and as he states, he is always learning; “When you lose your curiosity, you lose your life force.” He has been a journalist, a top-40 DJ, a public relations executive, a poet, a writer, Beats literature professor, a seeker, a healer, a teacher, director of South Florida Stress Reduction Clinic and his continuing private practice in meditation, holistic living, nutrition, and stress-related issues. Much of what he teaches is an “acceptance, not struggle, of your ‘self.’”

Lifting a small glass of reposado, “These agave plants are beautiful, you see them all over the place up in the highlands where I studied with the shamans and *curanderos* – do you know Carlos Castaneda wrote there?” Riley begins describing the August 6-13, 2011 Stress Reduction Vacation he will conduct prior to the end-of-year Summit up in those tropical highlands of Tepoztlan, the village reputed to be the top energy and natural healing center on the planet. Limited to only 10 guests, Riley has designed a program for a powerful stress release Retreat and promises it to be “joyful, fun and entertaining while offering a personal, evolutionary journey into the body and soul.” And laughter.

² Ibid. Raffi Khatchadourian *The New Yorker*

Oh, yes, I'm a believer, indeed! *Por supuesto!*

It's still raining as we leave, but we're a bit warmer, and inspiration mixes in the air; Riley has worked his magic. I'm planning on seeing those blue agave plants and holding my heart up to those crystal clear nights in the highlands.

[Dr. Riley's comprehensive website provides full information and background for all the workshops, retreat and Summit, the book and his practice in Florida's West Palm Beach area: www.stressreduction.com and Dr. Riley can be reached personally at riley@stressreduction.com or 561-628-8007. *Stress Rx* can be easily ordered online at www.amazon.com .]

