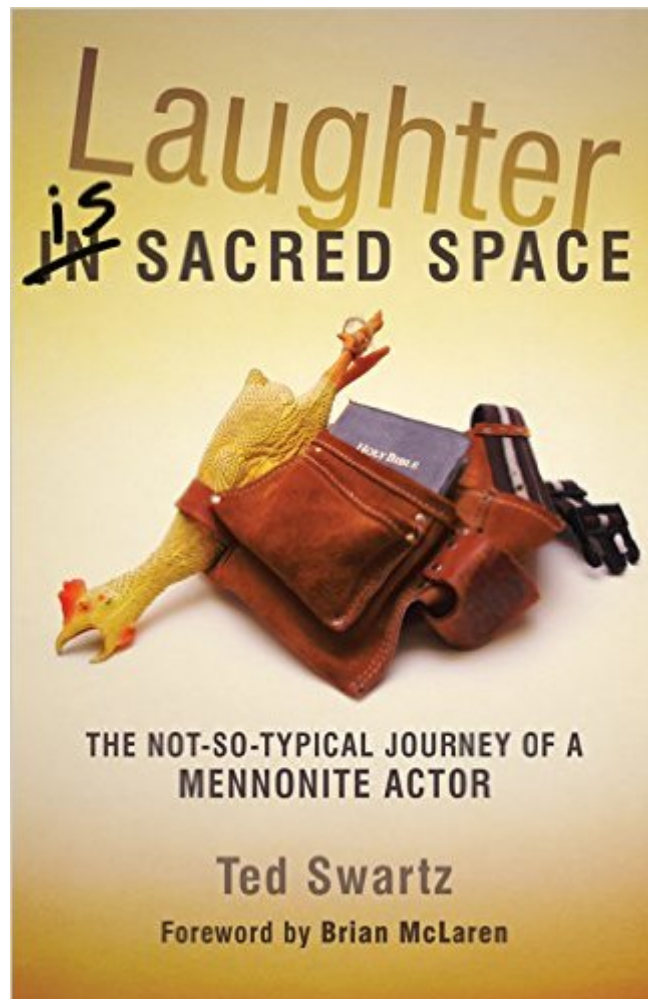


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# Laughter Is Sacred Space: The Not-so-Typical Journey Of A Mennonite Actor



## Synopsis

A Preview from the Prologue, Scene 1:THIRTY-SEVEN PERCENT.Thirty-seven percent is a comfortable humidity level, a great batting average if you're a baseball player. If it's a grade on a test, it is not...so great.I was in seminary, training to be a pastor, and I had failed Greek Exegesis class. Not just failed, actually; obliterated might be a better description. Yes, obliterated, decimated, demolished, pulled a 37 percent on the final. Out of 100, yes.When people talk of having a calling, we occasionally lift our eyebrows, as if they are telling us they hear voices, including the voice of God, perhaps. And we mistrust them, these folks who hear voices. Because sometimes a calling is an excuse for selfishness, an abuse of power, and a sense of superiority.But it's also a powerful thing: it can shape a career, give meaning to life, clarify direction. I had thought I had oneâ"what happened to it...this calling to be in seminary, to be a pastor? I was thirty-two years old, married for thirteen years to my high school sweetheart; I had three beautiful sons (eight, six, and four years old), and a congregation in Pennsylvania counting on me to be a pastor. Not just counting on, but paying for five years of tuition and housingâ" a recognition and investment in the gifts they had discerned in me. It seemed like a well-orchestrated, God-directed plan, drenched in much prayer and great intentions. In my mind and many others, serving, ministering, pastoring a church was the highest call.Was it possible to fail a calling?I hadn't told the congregation about this semester's report card, wasn't anxious for that particular conversation. They hadn't invested thousands of hard-earned dollars for a 37 in Greek Exegesis...or a 70...or an 85, quite frankly. My wife, Sue, and I were products of the Swiss German Mennonite community of eastern Pennsylvania. One of the hallmarks of this community was hard work (neat lawns, good business sense) and God's subsequent reward for that effort. This wasn't the planâ" failing Greekâ" and I wasn't wild about the daunting prospect of Hebrew or systematic theology, on the plate for the fall semester. Oh, and what I really wanted? To be an actor.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ted Swartz, a first time book author, is not unaccustomed to writing. He has simply transferred his skills from the stage to the page. I read the book in one sitting. I was fascinated by Ted's life. It's not a glamorous life--he did not paint his family life and life on the road as idyllic, but as real, thoughtful, and very human. Ted wove his work--his characters and sketches, written with and without Lee--into his writing. It was a reminder that our life and work all intersect, sometimes more personally than we like. In *Laughter is Sacred Space*, Ted opens up about his relationship with former acting and business partner, Lee Eshelman. Ted and Lee's relationship seemed as much like a brother or marriage partner as it did a business and acting partner. It was a beautiful, fraught relationship, full of things left unsaid. I could relate to this relationship--pieces of it look like my marriage, my sibling relationship, and the dynamics with my closest friends. As I read the book, I could hear Ted's voice, his inflections, even his laugh come through. It was like reading a book of David Sedaris' short stories--they are good, even if you don't know what his voice sounds like, but knowing the author's voice enhances the experience. The chapters were short, reflecting Ted's self-described personality, temperament, and ADD tendencies. Because of these short chapters, the reader is left to wonder what the point is. But, just like Ted's sketch comedy, the pieces come together. What you think is superfluous become essential and pivotal information later. I did have a few issues with the book. First, the publisher (I assume) bleeped out the curse words, creating a puritanical feel. Given the nature of the book, I'd assume that the targeted audience is adults. We all (even me, a pastor) say the words. We know what's being said. It is not necessary to replace the "bad words" with asterisks. I worry that the book will not get read outside of the Mennonite community. The book's subtitle, "The not so typical journey of a Mennonite actor" could limit the audience, which would be too bad. This is more than a memoir of a Mennonite actor; it's the memoir of a actor, writer and Christian, and it address issues of faith, doubt, friendship and mental health. I appreciate Ted's openness and honesty, sharing a difficult story, and his journey to a new place in his life and career.

My wife and I read this book just days after the funeral for our stillborn daughter. It turned out to be

an incredible blessing during this time of sadness and grief. I found myself totally wrapped up with Ted Swartz's ability to write in such an authentic way. He brings his reader in to some of the most vulnerable moments of his life, and my wife and I worked through our own grief and loss, it was incredibly cathartic. It took me only a few days to finish reading, and I just needed to extend my thanks to the author. Thank you for inviting us to experience your pain and joy. Thank you for illuminating subjects and moments that are often left in the darkness. Thank you for creating something that people can resonate with in deep and meaningful ways. It means a lot.

Back at the beginning of August, I saw posted on the Ted & Co TheatreWorks FaceBook page an opportunity to get a free book. Nerd and bookworm that I was, I posted the necessary comment to get my free brain candy. Here is what I said in response to the query "tell us why laughter is sacred". "Laughter is sacred in that it is the truest expression of joy. Laughter can happen in good times and in bad. And in those bad times, it is laughter that brings release to enjoy where you are in spite of the pain. Being able to laugh in those times expresses to the rest of the world that God's love and power brings joy to the hurting. Without laughter to liven the pained spirit, all we have left are tears." Little did I know what I was getting myself into. The book, *Laughter Is Sacred Space* is an autobiographical memoir of one Ted Swartz, walking his readers through his life from his time among a very conservative Mennonite community through his calling into some sort of ministry and into the struggles and trials of running a Christian comedy theatre company...and the darkness that somehow always seems to follow humanity wherever we go. Swartz's primary medium for writing is in the form of scripts and dialogues for skits and sketches. So, he keeps to what he knows and writes this book in a series of 5 Acts with a prologue (is this a nod to N.T. Wright's 5 Act play of the story of Scripture...or am I just too much of a Bible geek to let it slide?). The Prologue seems out of place at first. It seems a little too dark, too gloomy at points, a little poignant, and certainly, while funny at points, doesn't seem to really be talking about laughter. But it's necessary. It sets the target for the rest of the book. Without the Prologue, what happens later on would shock us too much. We need to be primed in order to prepare us for what is to come. Act 1 describes Swartz's life as a child in a conservative Mennonite community of south-eastern Pennsylvania. This is, to me, the funniest part of the entire book. For laughs, these scenes elicit the most joy and hilarity for me. Perhaps it is because, while I didn't grow up quite so conservative, I have enough conservative relatives and have experienced much of the same traditions and general ideas that I could relate with almost every scenario presented. I think, though, that this would probably be the biggest drawback to this book for the larger market. There are many, even in the Mennonite church today, who would not

understand the jokes about women who wash feet in another room because we might see the stockings actually off the feet. These images resonate well with me, but would they with others? In any case, I enjoyed the laughter. From that point on, while the book does have its light moments of laughter, we are taken on a journey of what it means to wrestle with calling that does not seem to fit the mold of what "ministry" looks like. I can relate to this in my own life as my "ministry" doesn't seem to be very traditional. The growth, though, of the theatre company out of the minds of Ted & Lee seem inspired. The struggles on the road of life give plenty of fodder for light-hearted humor and the interjections of scripts from the shows and the dialogues between the two main actors make the story human. But is it sacred? The answer to that question comes in the brevity of the third act, and the depth of the fourth, and the doubt and tension of "what next" in the fifth. I hesitate to say more detail because, like any good story, giving away the ending ruins it (although, many people who know Ted Swartz and his journey already know what happened). But my initial blurb on that FaceBook page rang true. Ted shares how humor, acting, and theatre allowed him to step out the pain and share in the joy, even while the pain was real. And that laughter even allowed him the outlet to express his pain in ways that nothing else could. As the artist behind the scripts, Ted poured his grief and agony into his work, even in the comedy (the hill-billy Jeremiah is genius) and through this was able to connect people to something sacred, something beyond themselves...and in the process was able to connect himself to that "other". As humans, grief and pain are facts of life. We must deal with them. And we deal with them either by working through them...or surrendering to them. Ted's partner, Lee, seems to have chosen the latter. Ted chose the former. And Ted chose laughter as a way of transforming that pain. I recall my own father, in the days and months after my mother's death (coincidentally, only 6 weeks after Lee's) when he would share something about my mother, it was frequently a funny moment, a time of joy and laughter. And I hurt at the time, but my father would laugh and cry at the same time. He was grieving, but he was also remembering joy. This is where Ted takes us in this book. We find that sacred space in the laughter where grief is transmuted into joy, where humor is applied as a balm to a deep wound, and where hilarity helps us to find that connection of community where people can come together and remember. The world around us with its wars, death, disease, hate, depression, and grief defies us to laugh. What good is there in such a world? What Ted shows us in this book is that by entering into laughter, we defy that same world. We say that we can still find the sacred spaces in between, those spaces that we fill with laughter, not to forget the pain, but to make that pain bearable so that we can cry and laugh and remember, together. Three words: buy this book.

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