



Jan Struck

Sharing Her Story with Laughter

by Beth Foreman, Associate Editor

I've met Ruby Begonia, Aunt Jane, Marta Von Bora, and Needa Mhytes so I know what it's like to be "struck by laughter." It's the rolling on the floor, holding your stomach until it hurts, tears streaming down your face kind of funny. If you've met Ruby or any of these memorable characters, then you get it too. If you haven't, well, then you are in for a real treat as you meet Jan Struck, the woman behind the laughter.

A much-loved Christian humorist, Jan sees humor in every corner of what she describes as her lifetime of bizarre experiences. She has been the humorous interrupter at four LWML national conventions and will be on stage once again this summer in Des Moines as a new character.

Recently, she shared her story with me on Skype — she in her sun-filled Florida home, wearing a breezy sleeveless blouse, me in chilly Michigan with a wool cardigan.

"You can come visit us here any time," she offered kindly, after explaining that she and her husband, Jim, spend the cold winter months in the south and the rest of the year in Wisconsin, close to family.

"My whole family is silly," Jan began. She lowered her voice and added, "We're all drama queens." She tipped her head ever so slightly and looked very serious. She talks with her hands and that matter-of-fact flat Midwestern accent that somehow makes everything she says even funnier.

"I grew up with humor and laughter. Always." She paused. "My whole family is nuts." (There's that serious tipped-head posture again.) "My grandparents were always joking. Laughter and fun filled our home," she explained.

"This sense of humor? It's a gift God has given me." Here she's serious. No tipped head. No sideways look. And while she loves to make people laugh, she's not always eager to step into a spotlight, feeling "extremely humbled and nervous" about our interview. "If you feel my story would be of value," she wrote in an email, "then I will be honored to do it."

Her story is, as she might say, a little "wacky-doodle."

"I steal a lot of ideas from other people," she said, lowering her chin, tipping her head and pausing with impeccable timing. "I heard a speaker once talk about sharing our life stories for our children and grandchildren. He talked about sharing our history. Then he wrote it as His Story. That really made an impression on me. Sharing your faith means you tell His Story in your life. I kept that as my theme. Whenever I share, I don't have to preach, I don't have to have a thousand Bible verses. God gives me what I need to say at the time, but all I'm really doing is telling people who I am and how His Holy Spirit has worked in my life."

Jan loves to tell her story with a touch of humor. "Even when I share the tough parts of my story, it's not a pity party at all. It's a look at how my heavenly Father took me through these things. Look how He strengthened me. The hope is always there. It's always Him in the story," she said.

Another long pause. "History. His Story. I really can't tell you who I stole that from," she admitted. "I'd give the man credit, but I don't remember who it was." That tipped head again.

Yes, her story always includes His Story, the story of redemption, faith, and mercy through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Hers starts in a two-room school at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Indianapolis. "I get a laugh out of this. The first five grades in one room, and the other room looked *exactly* like the first room," she said and then paused.

"But I was *terrified* to go to sixth grade because I had to go to the other room. Isn't that silly?" Her hands lift up in an oh-me-oh-my gesture.

"My kids always would say 'a two-room school! Really, Mom?'" Clarifying things a bit, she added, "It wasn't *Little House on the Prairie*, but it was unique, especially in a large city. I went to a huge high school, but my treasured memories are from those two rooms at St. Peter's."

As she was preparing to attend a high school with close to 6,000 students, Jan listened to her mother's wisdom. "She told me to find an activity because otherwise I'd get swallowed up in the whole process. And she suggested the drama club."

So that's where Jan began to learn comedy and stage presence and timing. "It started with speech and drama club, and I just loved it," she said. "I wanted to teach high school English and direct plays, so at Valparaiso University I studied theater and English."

During college, Jan became even more comfortable with comic roles and learned lessons she carried into her adult life when she married and started a family. "I taught for a couple years and then stayed home when we started having kids. By the time I wanted to go back to teaching, I would have had to return for more education. So I got into other jobs."

She found a new career path as a corporate trainer, a position which she said was a lot like teaching junior high. "These people did not want to be there," Jan recalled. "When I used humor, they not only remembered what I was teaching, but it turned out to be fun. Then it was okay to come to class because Jan was bound to do something ..." She lowered her voice and got very serious. "... Since Jan was bound to do something to goof up!"

Through the years she continued laughing at her own goof-ups, making others laugh, entertaining at banquets, and performing in community theater. But most of her practice came right at home.

This is where her story gets complicated and painful. Jan's first husband was an alcoholic, and it took her a long time to face his disease and the dissolution of their marriage. "His drinking led to affairs, and finally there wasn't anything left." After nearly twenty-one years of marriage, she was suddenly a single mother with three children. "I realized that I had been using my humor as a wall to keep people away. I masked a lot of the pain I was going through. I didn't want people to know," she said.

She did some of her best acting right at home. "I tried to pretend with my kids, and they were the ones who confronted me about their dad's drinking, thinking I didn't know because I was doing such a good job of pretending. I wasn't really protecting anybody. I was allowing us to get deeper and deeper into the disease."

To most people, she looked fine. She was handling things. She was pressing on. She was strong. But really, it wasn't that way.

Sharing very intimate emotions, Jan explained, "When you are the town clown and you make people laugh, nobody looks further. I was using the gift God gave me in the wrong way. As a wall. As a protection. It was my form of denial."

And like so many other walls we build, this one came tumbling down.



"After my divorce, well, I lost my laughter because it had failed me. I hesitate to say I lost my joy, but I almost did. I lost my hope," she remembered. "Only Christ could get me through the situation. I couldn't pretend any more."

Her perspective, her view, her whole life looked different. "I wasn't non-functioning. I certainly wasn't morose. But everything was hollow for a couple of years."

In the midst of the emptiness, she didn't lose her faith. "I was very angry with God for allowing this to happen. This was not in my plan. This was not what I wanted."

Still, she moved forward, raising her children, worshiping, finding strength in her faith, working, serving, attending Al-Anon meetings, and healing. "I knew I was healing when I got my true joy back and my laughter. Then I realized I could share His Word through this gift. I didn't have to be somebody different. I could just be silly. The divorce helped me learn that. The divorce helped me realize that God never let go of me."

None of this happened quickly. "It was a gradual process. And things would come back and bite me. I'd take two steps backward and then I'd go forward again. I never want to give anybody the idea that if your faith is really strong, you won't go through all this. It's not true."

Two Bible verses helped her focus on Christ. "I clung to Philippians 4:13. *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* It's the one verse that is on my refrigerator. That was my promise verse, especially during the divorce, because it reminds me that I am not responsible. I can do it, but it's through Christ. In all situations in my life. The other verse is Jeremiah 29:11. He has a plan. I'll get through it because He will carry me through it. Not on my own hard work or anything else. When I get fearful or overwhelmed, I repeat it over and over. Be content. It's okay. I'll get through this."

Like so many of us, Jan had often wondered about her purpose in life, but perhaps even more so after her marriage ended. "When I was a kid, I always

thought there would be some tremendous event, and I would know what God wanted me to do. I kept waiting for that to happen."

After her divorce, Jan started to better understand her purpose. "The Lord showed me that my gift is in my everyday humor. I see things in a warped and silly way. I see humor in things where other people don't. That's my gift and I can use that to share the Word."

Single for about nine years, Jan wasn't looking to remarry, but she met Jim at a country line-dancing class. "We just agreed to be partners so we could learn the couples dances. That was it. Neither of us was looking for a relationship. So then eighteen months later we were getting married. As we were getting ready to go into the church, he stopped me and said, 'Are we still just dance partners?' So we were laughing when we came down the aisle. We've been married 20 years, and we're celebrating two years every year in the hopes of getting to our fiftieth."

The path to her adventures as Christian humorist at LWML events started in a small way. Living in Wisconsin, Jan had been active in her LWML society but had never attended anything bigger until she was invited to be the entertainment for a district banquet.

"Well," she continued her story with another tilt of her head, "the national rep at this convention was Gloria Edwards. Lovely lady." Jan spoke slowly. "Gloria Edwards. I had no idea who she was. No clue," Jan chuckled at her LWML naiveté. [Gloria Edwards was LWML President from 1997 to 2001.]

Gloria then asked Jan if she would be interested in speaking at other LWML events. "I said absolutely, and later wondered if I was crazy." She had been praying about how to use her humor in service to the Lord. "Is this the direction You are leading me, Lord?"

Soon after, Jan received a formal letter inviting her to be the humorous interrupter at the 1999 LWML Convention that was to be held in St. Paul, Minnesota.

"I read that letter and realized who Gloria was." Jan's eyes got bigger as she told me this story. "I realized how big this convention was going to be. So I folded that letter up and put it right back in the envelope. I didn't touch that letter for a couple days." She shivered a little as she remembered her near panic.

"I thought to myself . . . no, no, no, God. I was talking about Wisconsin. You totally misunderstood me."

Then it all became real when Virginia Von Seggern, then convention program committee chairman, called to discuss the specifics. "I'm already terrified," Jan remembered. Then she learned details. She was asked to work the theme (Let Freedom Ring), the 500th anniversary of Katie Luther's birth, and the Y2K scare into five four-minute interruptions. "And I said sure because I'm too stupid to say no," she added matter-of-factly.

When she hung up the phone, she thought, "I can't do this! I can't do this!" But she did. She created a memorable character, Marta Von Bora, Katie Luther's cousin. And looking very serious, she added, "Getting ready for that convention aged me ten years."

Graciously, Jan wanted to credit the first humorous interrupter, Past LWML President Linda Reiser, who played Sparky at the 27th Biennial Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. "I followed in her wonderful footsteps," she said.

Jan's goal as Humorous Interrupter has always been more than entertainment. "I want to help people process the convention, what just happened, what's going to happen, and emphasize the LWML Mission Grants. I try to have the character start at one level and then realize the point of the convention, and finally want to share the Gospel."

After her stint as Marta Von Bora, Jan returned in 2005 as Needa Mhytes in Tampa, Florida. "Needa was the Young Woman Rep because I was the youngest one (ahem) in my society. I had come to Tampa with the intention of just going to the beach."

“Getting ready for that convention aged me ten years.”

Two years later, Jan was invited to create a character and script to honor the past presidents at the 32nd Biennial Convention in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. "So I became Aunt Jane, and we were serving Lutheran lutefisk and talking about the piece of cod that passes all understanding. And I talked about all the past presidents and how we were just like this . . ." Jan smiled and crossed her fingers to illustrate how close Aunt Jane was to the past presidents. "The neat thing was when then President Linda Reiser was able to tie in a line in her closing speech saying that after the convention, God will be just like this (crossed fingers) with each one of us." Jan smiled at these memories. "Oh gosh. This is fun, reminiscing!"

In 2009, Jan returned to the LWML stage in Portland, Oregon, as Ruby Begonia, a volunteer who just came for the free lunch and the free t-shirt.

Thinking about Ruby brought back one of Jan's favorite on-stage memories when things went a bit off-script. Looking for a way to incorporate the theme of prayer into Ruby's character, Jan asked the song leader, Dina Vendetti, to help with a segue, "not knowing then that Dina has as warped a sense of humor as I do," Jan recalled with a smile. The plan was for Ruby to ask Dina if she had seen her friend, and Dina was going to encourage her to pray. Simple.

"So, I ask my question in the script. Dina is chewing gum, which I thought was kind of odd. And then Dina said, 'I didn't find her. I looked for her. I even looked under my piano bench. And she wasn't there. But I did find this complimentary piece of gum under the bench.' And she took the gum out of her mouth. I had no idea she was going to do this."

As Jan tried to compose herself in character, stifling her own laughter, she turned to Dina who then stretched out the gum and asked, "You want half?"

"It was hysterical. People's favorite part. And it wasn't even scripted. Now Dina and I are the best of friends. She had me laughing so hard, when she finally said, 'Why don't you pray about it?' I didn't even remember what the script was anymore," Jan recalled, tossing her hands in the air.

"Impromptu. God steps in and leads. It wasn't my script, but it turned out to be one of the funniest parts of the whole interruption."

Jan finds that sometimes the script we attempt to write by ourselves isn't the best one at all. "When I try to control things, I'm trying to make it perfect for me so I don't look dumb," she explained. "I can work myself into a dither wanting to say the perfect thing. Even when I give my talks, I try to cram every theological thing in and the Holy Spirit says, No No No, just tell them this."

Getting off-script during formal speeches can be unnerving for any speaker, as Jan well knows. "I don't admit this to everyone," she confessed with a smile. "I'm kind of worried about it." She leaned into the camera as if she were sharing top-secret stuff. "I don't read my speeches. I just have notes, and I pray for the Holy Spirit to lead me. Sometimes I find myself off on a tangent and think, how did I get here! I pray it's the Holy Spirit and not dementia. The older I get, the more nervous I get about it," she added. "I'll be like, okay, Lord, help me get back to where I was supposed to be!"

Just like Ruby Begonia and the chewing gum scene, straying off-script is sometimes exactly what is supposed to happen. "God has been gracious enough on a couple of occasions to have someone come up afterwards and say, 'That's exactly what I needed to hear.'"

Jan believes that having the script isn't always the answer. "We can all work ourselves up thinking it has to be perfect. Sometimes I can get myself wacky-doodle over it. What if I don't say the right thing? No, just be who you are and share it. He will give you the words."

For actors and comedians, timing is everything. When it comes to sharing our faith, **the time is now**. “We don’t have to wait for a special event to share our story. Every day our heavenly Father gives us opportunities. I try to be open to those. I fly a lot, and I’ll be honest . . . there are some days when I pray the seat next to me stays empty,” she admitted. “I’m just pooped. Other times I realize He’s giving me an opportunity. I don’t have to preach, but something will happen where I can share my faith. A lot of times it’s when they ask why I’m going to, oh, say, Boise, Idaho. Then I get to tell. I get to talk about LWML and tell them I’m a Christian humorist. I had one gentleman say, ‘Christian humorist? Isn’t that an oxymoron?’ Then I get to talk about that!”

“There’s a verse from Psalms,” Jan started to share. Then she shook her head and said, “Oh, I wish I were one of those people who could just pull the verses out of my head! But I can’t. What it basically said was to take your everyday, ordinary life and offer it as a sacrifice to God. Look for something He is giving us in our family, our neighborhood, our community. It’s there to do now. Not wait for something spectacular. We cannot let fear keep us from those opportunities. **The time is now**, and He will give us the opportunity. It’s not a frightening thing. It’s a Wow! I wonder what’s going to happen at the grocery store today?”

Jan is blessed to be involved in an organization that is all about telling His Story. “I love that LWML gives opportunities for women of all ages. We have deliberately formed ourselves to be intergenerational and intercultural. We haven’t just expected it to happen. I love that our focus is service and Bible study and not just what silverware goes into the kitchen,” she said.

And she added, with her trademark matter-of-fact delivery, “I cultivate friendships with younger women because when I get older someone’s got to keep me in Depends® and get me to LWML.”

There it is again. Funny when we least expect it.

On script, off script, in character and out of character, Jan keeps telling her story, with a bit of wacky-doodle mixed in, and His Story — with grace and joy. **Q**



A Peek into **Jan's Wacky-Doodle Days**

Typical Day?

Well, I’m retired now so my day revolves around a lot of procrastination. But I usually exercise in the morning because if I don’t do it then, I get too lazy in the afternoon. I like to do *Today’s Light Bible* reading every day, but I’m not perfect. It is Gospel, not Law, here. I also love to read cozy mysteries, those light ones with a little puzzle to solve. I’m very involved in our neighborhood and at church here (Grace, Winter Haven, Florida) and in Wisconsin (Good Shepherd, Appleton, Wisconsin), so there is always something going on. Both churches have active LWMLs, and I get to be part of both. My favorite part is that I get to be in two districts!

Secret indulgence?

Sneaking a 20-minute power nap.

Cooking?

I don’t like to cook. When we told our grown children we were getting married, my son said to Jim, “You do realize she is not Betty Crocker, don’t you?” I love the poster that says, “My favorite thing to make for dinner is reservations.” That’s me.

Hobbies?

I’m not very good at it. But I do like to knit. I don’t do sweaters. I like to make afghans for gifts, weddings, baby showers. I can’t just sit and watch TV. I like to be doing something with my hands. Keeps me from eating.

Best thing about living in Florida?

The fresh fruits and vegetables and the warm weather.

Worst thing?

The critters, especially the geckos. It’s not like alligators are strolling down our street. The geckos get inside and it’s hard to catch them. But it’s not bad. They don’t have teeth so they’d have to gum you to death.