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"Give me a place to stand and I will take you somewhere else."

Erma Bombeck's Humor – Pleasure or Pain?

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"There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt."¹

— Erma Bombeck

You'll get a chuckle out of the book title *"I Lost Everything in the Post Natal Depression"* if you know what the phrase "post-natal depression" refers to and if, having studied the Great Depression in high school history class, you are aware that many people lost everything they owned in the Great Depression of the 1930s. But those two pieces of awareness are a big step removed from the real thing. Erma's contemporaries in the 1960s and 1970s grew up during the Great Depression. They would have known of people who, as a result of having "lost everything" in the crash of October 1929, threw themselves out of buildings. Furthermore, Erma was read by many a new mother who experienced the sleepless nights that accompany – and the powerful hormone flux that amplifies – the oh-my-gosh realization that the precious new life entrusted to her didn't come with assembly instructions or an operation manual. So, on both counts, Erma's title cut closer to the suffering for her readers. The irony is, the closer our proximity to the pain, the heartier we chuckle.

Throughout Bombeck's writing the laughter runs parallel to the pain. She complains: "I have dieted continuously for the last two decades and lost a total of 758 pounds. By all calculations I should be hanging from a charm bracelet." She mocks expectations for housewife perfection: "I consider ironed sheets a health hazard." She serves up saucy assessments of her offspring: "Never have more children than you have car windows." Or, a few years later: "Never lend your car to anyone to whom you have given birth." And she flings out flippant comments about her husband, "Men who have a thirty-six-televised-football-games-a-week-habit should be declared legally dead and their estates probated." She puts into print what many think, but feel we aren't supposed to admit we're thinking. By divulging her struggles, self-doubt, and maddening frustrations she dispels the taboo.

After publishing six books, and appearing twice a week on Good Morning America for six years, in addition to keeping up her newspaper column *At Wit's End*, Erma tried her hand at a TV sitcom, *Maggie*. It flopped. How come? Maybe it didn't hurt enough. In pondering why the series fizzled, she wrote, "[The network] can reject scripts in which they feel you are being too irreverent. And that in essence is what I feel happened to *Maggie*. She got watered down by too many nervous people who don't understand what women feel. Just because we yell at our kids doesn't mean we don't love them, or when we fight with our husband it doesn't mean we're splitting. I wanted the dark side of Donna Reed. I got Florence Henderson with a Twinkie in her teeth."

Erma Bombeck used humor to cope with the everyday things that drive us crazy. She knew, "If you can laugh at it, you can live with it."

¹ If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What am I Doing in the Pits? Chapter 14. (p 274 in Four of a Kind)