

HUMOR ME



HOW LAUGHING MORE CAN
MAKE YOU PRESENT, CREATIVE,
CONNECTED, AND HAPPY

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For Mollie, the person I love laughing with more than anyone else.

I'd also like to dedicate this book to the little snort noise that people make when they are laughing really, really hard. I love that noise. Thank you, lil' snort.

“A short quotation or saying at the beginning of a book or chapter, intended to suggest its theme.”

—*Google search for “what is an epigraph?” performed on June 30, 2024, after being told to add an epigraph to my book*

INTRODUCTION

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THE FUNNIEST PERSON I'VE EVER MET

THE FUNNIEST PERSON I've ever met was an eleven-year-old named Gary.

When I first met Gary, I was teaching a chaotic fifth-grade class in Boston, and suffice it to say, I was not in the best of mental places.

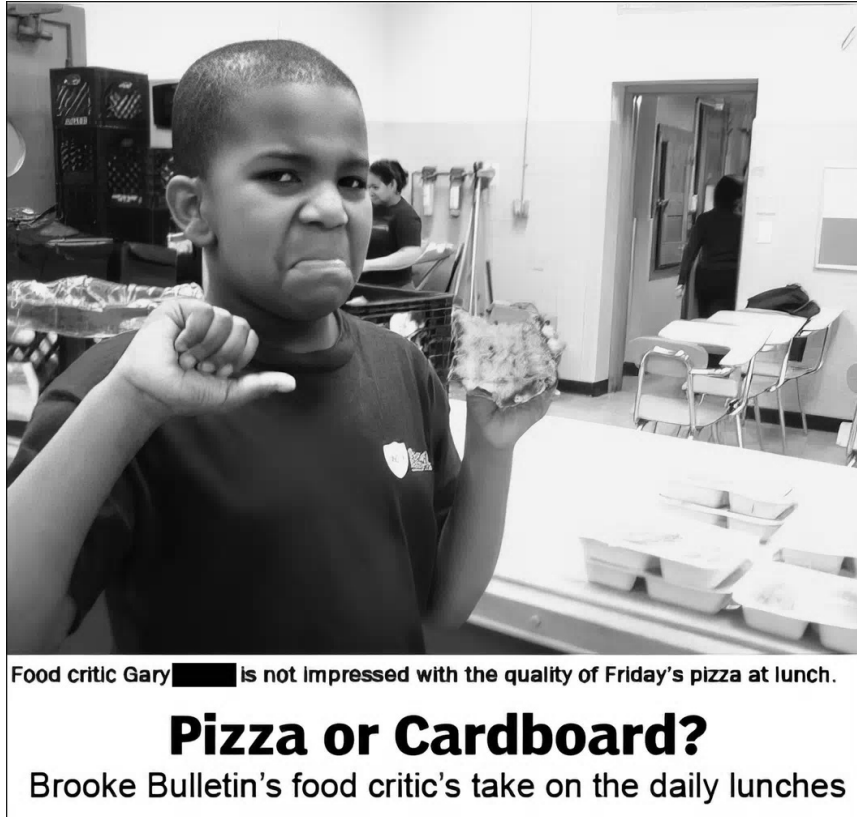
Neither was Gary. As my student, he was terribly behaved. He would get easily frustrated and lash out. He rarely turned in his work on time. When it was a writing assignment, he often didn't turn it in at all. I really struggled with how to teach him. I could see his potential, but I couldn't get him to see it. We butted heads over and over, in ways that often left him, me, and his mom all feeling angry and upset.

Everything changed one day when Gary was complaining to me about how terrible the school lunches were. I was only half listening, thinking about when I'd get to eat my own lunch. But as I started paying closer attention, I realized that Gary's complaints weren't just well-founded—they were hilarious. He was basically roasting public school lunch. In a moment of inspiration, I asked him how he would feel about writing a column in the school newspaper. He could be our official food critic for the cafeteria.

To my surprise, Gary agreed.

I could barely believe it. Not only would Gary be voluntarily practicing his writing skills, but I would get a much-needed infusion of comedy into my stressful teaching days. That first day of helping Gary write his food column, I laughed more than I had in the previous five months combined.

Here is an actual image from one of Gary's reviews. (He gave me permission to share it.)



Everything Gary wrote was pure gold, but I'd like to give you a taste of his work, some of my favorite food writing of all time.

Whole Wheat Two Cheese Pizza with Spinach and Fresh Fruit

This dish, originally from Italy, looks like cardboard when it is served. You can't taste the sauce or the cheese. The least they could do is put some pepperoni on top. Just writing this makes me want to have some real pizza. Real pizza is pizza where you get to choose your toppings and it contains lots of sauce and cheese. The smell of real pizza is like when you've just come out of the shower and used your sister's shampoo. It's so good.

Tell me that doesn't make you want to eat some pizza! It's a dish originally from Italy! It smells like using your sister's shampoo for reasons that are not explained!

Here's another masterpiece:

Vegetarian Hot Pocket with Carrots and Fresh Fruit

Warm and cheesy, saucy and meaty, that's how I would describe the taste of this dish. When served, it looks like a pizza roll, but bigger. "It's really good because of all the delicious stuffing," says diner Makael C. I found my hot pocket to be the

highlight of my dining day. I'm puzzled by the fact that it's called vegetarian when it appears to contain pepperoni. Usually, I think vegetarian food is a disgrace.

There's so much to unpack here, but the first thing I want to point out is that he interviewed another kid at his lunch table to get a quote for the article. Talk about world-class journalism! Get this man a Pulitzer! It's incredible too that this was one of Gary's favorite all-time meals despite him considering vegetarian food to be "a disgrace." And, of course, the questions on all our minds: Was that pepperoni? And if not, what was it?

Finally, here's a review that I'm sure sent at least one cafeteria worker into early retirement.

Chicken Hot Dogs with Baked Beans and Whole Wheat Bun

I normally like baked beans, but not these. These looked like chocolate raisins, another food I normally like. However, I like my beans beany and pure. As for the chicken hot dog, when I first heard this was being served, I thought it was crazy talk. I don't know what a chicken hot dog is. It's a mystery. I know chicken and this was not chicken. It wasn't pork either. When I hear the word "chicken," I think you mean fried chicken or barbecue wings. I certainly didn't think a tube with brown spots that resembled a chew toy for a dog would be served.

On the plus side, our server was still very nice and generous. I imagine she was probably embarrassed to be serving this. I give this lunch zero out of five stars.

Notice the compassion in those final sentences. Gary wasn't out to hurt anyone's feelings. He was simply calling things as he saw them, and what he saw that day were brown-spotty tubes.

I wasn't the only one who responded to these reviews. Gary won instant acclaim from his peers and the other teachers. But it's possible that, of everyone at that Boston elementary school, I needed them the most.

HUMOR, LOST AND FOUND

I'm no longer a teacher. These days I'm the host of the TED podcast *How to Be a Better Human*, as well as a professional comedian and TV writer. But I'll never forget Gary and the joy of laughing with him.

Before Gary started his illustrious career in cafeteria criticism, I was going through a rough patch. It was yet another freezing Boston winter, and somehow, amid the pressure and responsibility of teaching, I'd lost my sense of humor. Laughter didn't seem to fit into my life anywhere. I didn't have time for it. I was trying my best to prep lessons and grade homework and provide a safe space for students who were dealing with everything from homelessness to chronic illness to trauma. And because I was a new teacher, I was messing things up. A lot. When I did, I'd often get an angry phone call from a parent, chewing me out for my mistake.

I had once been gregarious, always eager to share a collection of funny stories and observations with friends or family after a long day. One of my earliest memories is of buying a book of "shaggy dog jokes" and bringing it to the hospital to cheer up my great-uncle Norman after a heart attack, like I was a pint-size Patch Adams. Unfortunately for Norman, the only thing more painful than open heart surgery is a shaggy dog joke.^[*1] Even at that age, though I didn't have the words yet to express it, I recognized humor's potential to unite, lighten, and heal.

But over the course of that gray Boston winter, the humorous version of myself became a more and more distant memory. I'd walk through my front door at the end of a taxing day and go straight to the couch, where I'd lie flat and escape into a *Game of Thrones* book^[*2] for a few hours before passing out from exhaustion. The Craigslist randos I was living with in our cramped apartment started joking that George R. R. Martin was our sixth roommate.

Then one day on my long bus ride home, I pulled Gary's latest reviews out of my backpack. I started laughing, at first quietly, to myself, and then out loud. Something about them flipped a switch in me. Gary's acerbic, cranky observations were the perfect antidote to my feelings of powerlessness and disconnection. That I had persuaded him to commit them

to writing, and that, inexplicably, the school paper had agreed to publish them, only added to the comedy of it all.

It was a tiny moment, the kind you could easily move past and then forget. But for me, it was an epiphany. This. *This* was what my life was missing.

A life without humor, it seemed clear to me, wasn't much of a life at all. I *needed* that catharsis of laughter. The joy, connection, release. Laughing wouldn't erase the hard parts of my life—I still had an unruly classroom, frustrated parents, and close living quarters to contend with—but it gave me the energy and the hope to deal with them.

So I made a conscious decision: to rebuild my sense of humor, to deliberately inject more laughter and comedy into my life, to transform the way I saw the world around me. It felt good. So much so that I didn't even mind being the crazy person on the bus laughing out loud to himself.

Making the choice to take humor seriously, to work to cultivate it—it changed everything for me. It would take me years to recognize the larger philosophy behind my epiphany, namely, that a sense of humor is a portal to a better life.

It's a life where the parts of yourself that you're most ashamed of are actually your greatest strengths. A life where you have deeper, more honest connections, which are also fun and easy. It's a life where you can walk into a crowded party and, instead of immediately pouring panic sweat, know that whatever you say is going to lead to a great conversation.

This book is about how to get there.

EVEN WHEN YOU LOSE, YOU WIN

What makes Gary's food reviews so delightful? Why do I love them so much? (And I really do love them. If my house caught fire, those newspapers would be among the first things I'd grab.) Gary's reviews make me laugh, first and foremost, because they're honest. He's not pulling any

punches. But they're not mean or cruel; he wasn't trying to drive cafeteria workers to put down their spatulas. He was simply observing the absurdity of the world within the walls of our shared lunchroom, and then bravely asking, *Everyone else is seeing this too, right?*

Gary and his reviews exhibit some of the greatest strengths of a sense of humor. Having one allows you to point out details that others may have overlooked, acknowledge the truth of a situation, and create community along the way.

Having a sense of humor isn't about denying reality. Gary's food reviews didn't change the way his chicken hot dog looked or tasted. (It remained a 0 out of 5 stars.) But they changed the way he experienced his reality. Humor is a lens that allows you to relieve the tension and weight of the world by finding delight and laughter in it. After he started writing reviews, when Gary went to eat lunch, it was always going to be a win. Either the food was good (obvious win), or it wasn't, and he had fodder for his writing (also a win).

Though it may not seem like it on the surface, any tough situation in life has the potential for humor. It was leaning into this mindset that shifted the way that I saw the world. It didn't make my terrible room in my terrible apartment any bigger, but it did change the way I felt about it. Months later, when my roommates and I were finally ready to move out, I was sitting in my bedroom when I heard the real estate agent outside my door. She was explaining the apartment's layout to prospective tenants. "And this is a little bonus room where you can store your trash can," she said. She then opened the door and was shocked to find me inside. "Oh my goodness! They've got someone living in the trash room!"

It wasn't one of my proudest moments. But it did make for a great laugh.

Humor didn't change my long trudge of a commute either, but it did encourage me to more closely observe the people on public transit with me. It brought color and nuance back into the gray. It allowed me to take notice of the quirks I'd otherwise ignore, rather than being frustrated about yet another delay. I'll never forget when a Boston bus driver caught a glimpse of a man walking up to his bus, slammed the doors shut, and zoomed past my stop, all the while yelling, "I swore you'd never ride my bus ever again!" I have no idea what history had transpired between the two of them, but it was funny enough to make the half-mile walk home worth it.

Seeking out the humor in a situation doesn't mean denying the uncomfortable or unfunny aspects of reality. Far from it. This is where humor differs crucially from so-called toxic positivity, the pressure to put on a happy face no matter the circumstances. It isn't about finding the silver lining in every cloud. It's about *acknowledging* the clouds. "I cannot believe how many fucking clouds there are! It's like the sky is JUST CLOUDS!" Humor is a way of addressing reality while shifting our relationship to it. It reverse-engineers despair into hope.

WHAT IS HUMOR?

Before we go any further, let's define exactly what it is that we're talking about here.^[*3]

Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, who teach at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and coauthored a guide to using humor in business, distinguish between comedy, humor, and levity.^[1] Comedy is the art form, the job. It's telling jokes and funny stories to a crowd. Humor is a practice. It's building the muscles to see, notice, and celebrate the delightful weirdness of our world. And levity is a mindset, being receptive to the laughter and joy that comes your way.

I've so far spoken of these elements as though they're universal. The truth is that they're deeply personal and subjective. Humor, levity, and comedy are going to look different for you than they do for me. For all I know, you might find Gary's food reviews dry or silly or broad. There's nothing quite so tedious as explaining what makes a particular joke funny. In the words of E. B. White, "Explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies of it."^[*4]

So I'm not going to try. I'll murder as few frogs as possible in the pages ahead. The point of this book is to show you how to develop your own sense of humor. I'm here to argue for the transformative power that laughter can have on your life. This book is not about getting better at comedy.

What's the difference? Here's a classic joke:

A man gets sent to prison for the first time. On his first day, he nervously walks into the dining hall, sits down next to an older inmate, and starts eating. Suddenly someone jumps up and calls out, “Fifty-two!” Everyone bursts into laughter. A few minutes later someone else jumps up and says, “One hundred twenty-eight!” Everyone laughs again. Another says “Fifteen!” More laughter. Finally, the man turns to the older inmate and asks, “What’s going on?”

The older fellow says, “We’ve been here so long that we’ve heard everyone’s jokes over and over again. So instead of wasting time telling the whole joke, we assigned each joke a number. All you have to do is shout out a number, and everybody remembers the corresponding joke and laughs. Try it!”

“Oh no,” says the new inmate. “I don’t know any of the jokes.”

“It doesn’t matter,” says the older fellow. “Just pick any number between one and three hundred.”

The new inmate jumps up and shouts, “Ninety-seven!”

He’s met with complete silence. No one laughs.

Confused, he sits back down next to his new friend and asks, “What happened?”

“Well,” the older fellow says, “some guys can tell a joke, and some guys can’t.”

The point of this book is not to make you better at yelling out “Ninety-seven!” I will not be breaking down the process of telling a joke. In fact, I’m not going to encourage you to write or tell jokes at all. The world already has too many comedians. (If you don’t believe me, spend an hour at a local open mic.)

But we *desperately* need more people with a good sense of humor. The single biggest misconception about a sense of humor is that you’re either born with one or you’re not. I couldn’t disagree more. And while I’m not interested in helping you tell jokes, I’m very interested in helping you be one of the inmates who has such a vast mental repository of funny stories that simply being reminded of one can spark spontaneous laughter and joy.

BE HERE NOW, BRO

Having a sense of humor is much broader than being good at comedy. It means not just that you enjoy making other people laugh but also that you

want a life filled with laughter, even if you never tell a single traditional joke.

In his studies on dating and humor, the Canadian psychologist Rod A. Martin found that nearly all the heterosexual daters he interviewed claimed to want a partner with a good sense of humor. But there was a catch. “Although both sexes say they want a sense of humor,” Martin told *Scientific American*, “in our research women interpreted this as ‘someone who makes me laugh,’ and men wanted ‘someone who laughs at my jokes.’”^[2]

Let’s not beat around the bush: My heterosexual brothers are completely missing the point. Having a sense of humor does not mean you’re the funniest person in the room or the center of attention at all times. In fact, the skills needed to accomplish those goals are often indicative of selfish and toxic traits that lead to a deeply unhappy life. (I can tell you from experience that the people who claim they are the funniest are far from the most joyous people you’ll ever meet.)

A good sense of humor is inherently *generous*. It means that you listen deeply, and that when it’s called for, you’re willing to puncture tension and deflate self-seriousness with a laugh. Humor is about creating and appreciating connection, warmth, and joy. It signals a willingness to be vulnerable and honest with others. It’s noticing the strangeness and absurdity of life and sharing it with those around you.

Or maybe even not sharing it! You can enjoy the benefits of a sense of humor all on your own. No matter how you express it, a sense of humor is about being present in the moment. You’ll never laugh hard if you’re only half paying attention. The spiritual teacher Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now* and famously a proponent of living in the present, often said that meditation and presence could unlock a “cosmic giggle.”^[3] One of the most beautiful parts of humor is that it commands our full attention. Getting that cosmic giggle snaps us into the present, helps us lock in with the people we’re communicating with (or with our own perceptions), and shines a bright spotlight on where we are right now.

YOU ARE YOUR OWN BEST MATERIAL

Being able to laugh at yourself is another crucial tool. Actually, Ram Dass was pretty good at that too.^[*5] Dass used to tell a story about how, after intensive meditation and yoga studies in India, he felt he had unlocked a higher level of consciousness. Then he came back to the United States for a visit, and the first thing his father asked him was “Do you have a job?” Dass immediately crashed back down to Earth. For years afterward he said, “If you think you’re enlightened, go spend a week with your family.”

Whether you’re an internationally renowned meditation guru or a guy named Chris writing a book about humor, acknowledging your imperfections lets you laugh about them. It takes back your power and control from thoughts and feelings of shame. Internally, you’ll come to associate feelings of relief (and an attendant surge of dopamine) with talking about the things you used to think you needed to hide.

At its most profound, humor allows you to grow a new relationship with your own shortcomings. Laughing at your flaws, imperfections, and weirdness encourages self-acceptance. (This is, however, distinct from self-mockery of the more hurtful kind. I’ll have a lot to say about the different types of humor in the chapters to come.) More than just making peace with your flaws, laughing at yourself can help you become fonder of yourself. It’s effective, research-backed, and more fun than writing self-affirmations and sticking them to your mirror. It’s also less likely to earn you judgmental stares when a guest comes over and needs to use your bathroom.

RISKY BUSINESS IS MORE THAN JUST A TOM CRUISE MOVIE

In addition to being present and laughing at yourself, humor requires that you put yourself out there and take social risks. Even just acknowledging your own foibles can feel risky! What you'll quickly find is that taking social risks, allowing yourself to occasionally look silly or foolish or vulnerable, isn't such a risky business after all. In fact, you'll come across as more confident, capable, self-assured, and relatable. When we openly acknowledge our struggles and weaknesses, we're often shocked to learn how many people around us are dealing with the same issues. Creating the space to laugh at what you're struggling with makes you the kind of person that other people want to be around and can trust with their own imperfections. But it doesn't have to just be laughing about yourself. All kinds of silliness and levity puncture the bubbles around us that say, *Don't talk to this person—they're very serious and unapproachable*. A little mischievousness cracks open the door. Being playful and open to laughter makes you magnetic, and the practice of humor builds connections and community in a way that nothing else can.

BUT DON'T TAKE MY WORD FOR IT

Over the course of this book, I'm going to take you across the globe to meet scientists, experts, and regular people who are changing the way we think about humor and its importance.

We'll meet a team of neuroscientists who put musical improvisers into an MRI machine and found that as they improvised, the parts of their brains that normally monitor and patrol their behavior almost completely shut

down. In other words, being creatively in the moment allows you to temporarily silence the anxious voice in your head, the censor scanning your words and actions to make sure that you're doing things "right."

We'll visit an assisted living facility in Hong Kong where doctors were eager to improve the residents' quality of life but hesitant to prescribe yet another drug. They offered instead a radical new approach: prescribing humor and then studying its effects. Was laughter really the best medicine? (Personally, I've always felt that penicillin deserves the top spot, but I'm open to disagreement.) You can't argue with their results. The experimental group experienced significant decreases in pain and perception of loneliness, and significant increases in happiness and life satisfaction, when compared to the control group.

We'll hear from professional comedians, a Navy SEAL, kindergarteners, Ivy League professors, a clown, critically acclaimed writers, presidential historians, and an encyclopedia editor about the surprising ways humor has encouraged innovation in their work and led to success in their professional and personal lives.

We won't skirt more challenging emotional matters. We'll talk to people struggling through grief, activists working on some of the most pressing social issues, and folks in the midst of tragedy about how humor can allow them—and us—to find a way to move forward.

We are living in a moment when anxiety and despair are troublingly on the rise.^[4] Between climate change, structural injustices, political dysfunction, and pandemics, there's a pervasive sense of hopelessness and isolation among many people I interact with in my daily life, especially younger people. Humor offers us a powerful and immediate antidote, not to deny the reality of these struggles but to cut through the cynicism and nihilism that we might otherwise resort to, to release tension and fuel the kind of creativity that can lead to social change.

WHAT YOU'LL GET OUT OF THIS BOOK (IN EXCHANGE FOR YOUR TIME AND MONEY)

When I told people I was writing a book about how to have a better sense of humor, a lot of them assumed I would be focusing on how to tell a joke or get more laughs from a group. That's certainly a skill that professional comics and performers need to master. I'm not sure it's so important for everyone out there in the world. We don't need everybody to be able to tell a joke. But I think there's a more fundamental, much-less-discussed skill that funny people have. It's how to look at the world and find material. How do you see the funny in your life? How do you identify what might bring you (and others) laughter in situations that would otherwise be mundane, boring, or even tragic? That's the skill that I think everyone would benefit from.

Everyone's life can be improved by the physical, philosophical, and perceptual shift that is a funnier life. This book will show you how to get there.

And I mean *you*, no matter who you are and what your relationship to humor is.^[*6] The idea that our sense of humor is innate or fixed is demonstrably false. When I first started teaching comedy, I thought that some people were just born funny and others didn't get the gene. But over more than a decade of working as a professional funny person, I've seen countless examples of people (both students in my classes and peers I met at open mic nights) going from painfully unfunny to hilarious. Now I believe that even the most dour, serious people can transform into joyful belly-laughers. Anyone can develop and strengthen their sense of humor. All you need to do is incorporate some simple (and fun) practices into your life. Sounds pretty good, right?

At the heart of building a sense of humor are the three key tools I described earlier: being present, laughing at yourself, and taking social risks. We're going to call them the Three Pillars of Good Humor. Each of the next three chapters will cover one of those pillars, diving into what it means and what it looks like in action, giving you examples of folks who embody that pillar particularly well, and then leaving you with practical exercises that will help you see how you might implement that pillar in your own life.

After that, we'll dive into humor in action, the ways you can apply those three pillars of good humor across different areas of your life and the benefits you'll get from doing so.

Finally, we'll wrap things up with an examination of what a life filled with good humor looks like. I'll also give you a word of warning about the ways humor can be misused. And if you make it all the way through the book, I've embedded hints throughout that lead to a buried treasure more valuable than you've ever imagined.^[*7] It may or may not involve clues hidden on the back of the U.S. Declaration of Independence.^[*8]

So what are you waiting for? Turn the page, and let's get into it.

Or if you're standing in a bookstore, browsing the introduction and waiting for a sign about whether to buy this book: This is that sign. Buy this book, and let's get laughing. Also, if you came into this bookstore with someone, go find them. They are probably bored of browsing and ready to go get lunch.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} A representative example: "How do you make a shaggy dog float? Two scoops of ice cream, a glass of soda, and one very small shaggy dog."

^{*2} Yes, nerd, I do know that it's technically a book from *A Song of Ice and Fire*, not a *Game of Thrones* book. I'm one of you. But saying it this way makes it clearer to the regular people, those unfortunate saps who haven't spent hours of their lives reading about people yelling "Seven hells!" or talking about their "nuncle."

^{*3} And by *exactly*, I mean let's define it enough that we're on the same page. This isn't an academic paper, and I'm going to be a little flexible when I use the words *humor* and *laughter* and *funny* and other terms. I'm mostly writing this footnote because my friend Jeff is an engineer, and he gets very rigid whenever I say the word *exactly* and then wiggle around a little bit. Sorry, Jeff! But it's my book and I can do as much wiggling as I want!

*4 Actually, when this book was fact-checked, I learned that this is not the exact quote! It has evolved, while being passed around, to this form, but it was originally, “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind.” My wonderful fact-checker, Lisa Dusenbery, pointed this out and apologetically noted, “Oof here I am dissecting the quote about dissecting the joke!”

*5 Don’t worry, this book is not going to be Ram Dass fan fiction. I promise that this will be the last time I mention him. So if you’re not a fan, don’t worry! It’s over. If you are a fan, you’ve reached the Ram Dass reference you were looking for. Enjoy it: Be here now.

*6 I assume you bought this book because you enjoy humor, but maybe it was a terrible prank you played on yourself. Or you famously have a terrible sense of humor, and this was given to you as a passive-aggressive gift. Honestly, both scenarios are hilarious.

*7 Buried treasure not guaranteed.

*8 It doesn’t. That’s the plot of the 2004 action-adventure blockbuster *National Treasure* starring Nicolas Cage.

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THE FIRST PILLAR: BEING PRESENT

Noticing That the World Is Filled with Absurdity

YOUR BRAIN IS THE BACKGROUND BLUR ON A ZOOM CALL

The first step to laughing more is noticing more. As far as I know, no one has mastered the art of laughing at things they have not yet noticed. The good news is that the world is filled with absurdity and weirdness—we’ve just accepted it as “normal.” And as a result, every day is chock-full of opportunities to tickle your sense of humor.

This morning, I saw a man wearing a transparent backpack with a cat inside and pushing a small dog in a stroller. I guess that technically this man was taking his pets on a walk, but he was the only one walking. Both animals looked distinctly bored, while this poor guy was sweating

profusely. I could swear that the cat and I shared a moment when we caught each other's eyes and both of us were thinking, *What is this guy accomplishing here?*

Noticing small moments and details brings more spontaneous laughter into your life and reveals the world around you to be a more magical, hilarious place. That works only if you're fully present. Our natural inclination, unfortunately, is to glance past the world without really seeing it.

As a result, a lot of the weird, delightful parts of the world, the opportunities for humor and laughter that surround you, fade into a nondescript blur like one of your coworkers' Zoom backgrounds (the one definitely hiding his many shelves of Lego spaceships from his coworkers). But we can train our attention and focus to bring the blur back into sharp definition. It's a skill that you can practice and that can pay big rewards.

We've all had moments of crystal-clear awareness and attention. Two experiences we've all shared, and during which I bet you've noticed your surroundings with real specificity, are your first night in a new home and any time you use someone else's bathroom.

When you first move to a new house or apartment, you're attuned to the details. You notice the sounds of the pipes, the creaky spot on the floor, the way one corner seems to have been patched up in a slightly different shade of white paint.

But then, a few days in, that stuff fades out of your attention. That's just how things are. After moving into a new place, I have a two-week period when I can put art or decorations on a given wall. If I go past that time frame, in my mind it becomes The Blank Wall. I can't hang up a picture over there, that's The Blank Wall! That's just how that wall is. It would look weird to put photos up there.

Alternatively, imagine you're at a friend's house, and you've asked to use their bathroom. It's always easier to notice strange, unusual details when you're outside your own home. When you walk into someone else's bathroom, you immediately see all the ways they've set up that space differently than you. How do they put the toilet paper on the roll? Do they do it correctly (with the paper coming down over the top) or like a degenerate (hanging down loose and wild in the back like some kind of paper mullet)? Do they have a little squatty potty stool? A bidet? Or do they have an old-school, thick plastic cushion on top of the toilet seat as though

it's intended for you to sit comfortably while you wait for a bus? Is there a pile of books and magazines? Are they disturbingly crinkled as though they've gotten wet and then air-dried?

This is the kind of stuff you see in someone else's place but fail to notice in your own. It stands out! It's weird to you! And it is exactly these kinds of observations that let humor in. That's the attention and mental frame that creates a fertile soil for laughter to sprout. Humor almost always springs out of noticing what's off, odd, strange, or delightful—*when you pay close attention*.

All of which brings me to the first pillar of cultivating a humor mindset: *being present*. If we're going to benefit from the joy, creativity, and insight that humor can bring, our goal should be to maintain, as often as possible, this new-bathroom frame of mind.

THE SECRET CODE OF LAUGHTER

We'll get into how to preserve that mindset soon. But first let's get deeper into what makes something funny when we are present and observing it. Why do we laugh? What does it mean for something to be funny?

Greg Bryant is a cognitive psychologist at UCLA who studies humor and laughter from an evolutionary perspective.^[1] There are a number of competing academic theories out there about how humor works. I put my faith in Bryant's research and papers not just because his framework, encryption theory, makes the most sense to me, but also because he's the only genuinely funny humor researcher I've ever met. You'd be shocked by how many of the people studying laughter seem to think dad jokes are the highest form of the comedic arts. Luckily, that's not Bryant. He's got a very dry sense of humor. When I asked him the last time he'd laughed hard, he looked at me stone-faced and said, "1998," before cracking the faintest hint of a smile. I burst out laughing.

Bryant's encryption theory suggests that, on a fundamental level, humor is a type of social test. It's a riddle, a puzzle, intended to see if the listener

can figure it out. As Bryant explained it to me, when someone says something funny to you, that's essentially a secret code. "The only way you can decrypt it is if you have a corresponding piece of information—you have the key. And if you have that key, then you get the joke, and then you signal back to me that you get the joke by spontaneously laughing."

From an evolutionary standpoint, encryption theory explains why laughter is so important that it exists universally across cultures. (It also explains why people are so sensitive to fake laughter. One of Bryant's research papers found that across twenty-one cultures, study subjects were able to identify the difference between a fake laugh and a real laugh at rates better than chance.)^[2] Knowing whether someone gets your joke, whether they can crack the code on your encrypted message, instantly tells you whether they're part of your group. It's an instantaneous, simple, and extremely effective test of whether you're on the same page. Throughout human evolution, that's the kind of information that could often make the difference between life and death.

Bryant's research suggests that this is a natural, unconscious process that underlies all intentional humor. Encryption theory doesn't explain why it's funny if you see someone trip and fall. That's not encryption, because it's unintentional. (A competing theory of humor, benign violation theory, is much more concerned with examples like this. We'll talk about it in chapter 2.) But intentional humor works by sending out a code to be broken. There's something satisfying and cathartic about getting it that triggers our genuine laughter. And, Bryant adds, "it explains why if you have to explain the joke, it's not funny anymore." It's no fun to solve a puzzle if someone hands you the solution.

This is also why being present is so crucial to humor. You're scanning the environment both for inspiration for riddles that you can set up and for puzzle pieces that will allow you to instantly decrypt the humor that's sent your way.

Do you need to have read the academic papers? Of course not. I've never encountered someone who was laughing hard, deeply and genuinely, and then said, "I didn't enjoy those laughs because I don't understand the theoretical framework behind them." But I do think there's something very satisfying about understanding the evolutionary motivations behind this strange, joyful exercise that humans do across the globe. Why do we spontaneously make involuntary noises out of our mouths while we're

having fun with friends? Why are some jokes inscrutable while others make us slap our knees? Every laugh is a mystery, a puzzle that we've unlocked. The more we pay attention, the more frequently we'll be able to set up and crack those codes.

UNBLURRING THE BACKGROUND

So how do you put these pieces together in a way that actually helps you to be present? How do you start seeing the absurdity—recognizing those puzzles and encryptions—in the places that previously blurred by you, unnoticed?

I recommend starting with the times when you are the *least* present, the *most* zoned out. For me, like for lots of people, that's my commute. When I'm on a route that I've covered hundreds of times before, I can feel myself switching completely into autopilot, my mind desperate to think about anything but my immediate surroundings.

We all have deep-set automatic routes in our lives, whether going to work, dropping off the kids at school, or driving to the grocery store. These are ripe opportunities for switching into noticing mode. But how?

The first step is simply to recognize what's happening—that your mind has slipped into blur mode. Since your commute (or other automatic route) is such a common culprit for inattention, treat yours as a chance to work those attending muscles. Take a moment to shake your mind out of the blur and really notice the people, the signs, and the scenery around you. Try to find a single thing you've never noticed before.

In her book *On Looking*, the author Alexandra Horowitz uncovers the “spectacle of the ordinary” by taking the same walk in her Manhattan neighborhood over and over, joined each time by a different expert.^[3] An animal researcher shows Horowitz the neighborhood through the eyes of a rat (horrific, would not recommend). A geologist helps her place herself in a

vastly bigger timeline. A sound designer shows her the way noises emanate from and bounce off the buildings around her.

We can't all enlist a bevy of experts to join us for our daily commute, but the principle holds: By engaging our powers of attention and applying different lenses to our minds—attending to that unnameable smell, the especially potholed street, the animal-screeching of a bus's brakes, the riders or drivers around us, what they're doing, wearing, watching, reading—even the areas we know best, the places we see every single day, become if not new and exciting, at the very least unusual and surprising.

It was commuting on the New York City subway that first snapped me out of the blur and into focus. I'd taken hundreds of subway rides, trips jammed full of passengers, of sights and sounds, but they all blurred together in my memory, with little to differentiate one from another. Just think about how much time we spend commuting. Those are hours of my life—and probably yours too—that just slipped away, that I essentially sleepwalked through.

What happened when I switched into presence and started scanning for things that would ping my sense of humor?

The first was that I started noticing all kinds of weird stuff. I noticed a man using a dollar bill as a bookmark, which, despite costing only a dollar, struck me as one of the richest things I'd ever seen a person do.

I saw a woman reading a book titled *How to Talk So People Will Listen* sitting directly across from a man reading a book titled *How to Listen with Intention*.

I saw a man rest against the pole in the middle of the car so that it perfectly lined up with his visible butt crack, leaving his hands free during the commute.

One time I saw a pigeon fly through the open doors of a subway car, only to be instantly (and extremely nonchalantly) caught by a passenger in their bare hands and tossed right back out the window.

Part of what I'm trying to advocate for here is that you allow for serendipity by not always being so desperate to avoid moments of downtime. Try, even for a few seconds, not to be so terrified of boredom, because so many of us just *run* from anything that feels like “waiting” or “transitional time” into the loving arms of the phone or the podcast or whatever our distraction of choice may be. I'm arguing that you'll laugh

more if you experiment with cultivating a practice of being in the transitions more and just seeing what's there from time to time.

If I hadn't ever switched up my typical routine of checking emails on my phone while walking to the train, I would never have noticed a sign for a Russian mystic who was evidently traveling to the United States on some sort of speaking tour. And that would have been a huge loss because there's something instantly funny about a person's job being "Russian mystic." I mean, is that what he writes on his taxes?

But what really turned it into a moment I'll never forget is the fact that, upon closer inspection, this Russian mystic looked uncannily *like me*. I had to take a photo next to the poster (see [this page](#)), with the help of a fellow commuter. Years later it's a moment I still remember fondly, a memory that still makes me laugh.

And this was far from an isolated incident. I mean, the mystic doppelgänger has never appeared again. But anyone who has traveled even a short distance with me knows that I'm constantly stopping to take photos or get a closer look at things that make me laugh.



On a recent trip to visit a friend in rural Michigan, I noticed a sign outside a farm that read THIS HORSE IS NOT DEAD! LEAVE HIM ALONE! AND THE OWNER! I can't imagine how much more impoverished my life would be if I had just driven past that farm and failed to see that message. Thankfully, because I didn't, I can tell you with 100 percent certainty: The horse was not dead.

Life is made of more than just commutes, of course. Your automatic routes are only the gateway to paying greater attention in the rest of your life. Once you start to build the practice of noticing what makes you laugh, you open up a world of possibilities. If you know what tends to delight you, you know which corners of life's nonsense you're going to most enjoy hanging out in.

A JOURNEY INTO THE DEPTHS OF WIKIPEDIA

A perfect example of someone who's found exactly her corner is Annie Rauwerda. Rauwerda's idiosyncratic sense of humor led her to explore the oddest entries on Wikipedia. She started by laughing at a page on cow tipping, then branched out into the entries on exploding trousers, Nuclear Gandhi, and sexually active popes. Now she runs the wildly successful *Depths of Wikipedia*—a live show, newsletter, and social media account that highlights the most hilarious, obscure, and interesting parts of the online encyclopedia.

In an interview for this book,^[4] Rauwerda told me she doesn't necessarily think of herself as a funny person. She described herself as much closer to an archivist than a comedian. But her dedication to detail and to being fully present in the niche world of Wikipedia, where she is a volunteer editor, has led to comedic gold.

One recent discovery involved a family of fish known as Oreosomatidae. Rauwerda told me she was in the middle of a boring, mostly mindless editing job on Wikipedia when she first came across the

creature. “It was on a disambiguation page, and I was checking, is this legit?” Something immediately pinged her attention. *A fish named Oreos*. She had to know more. “Its eyes are just so big. I was like, oh, its eyes are the Oreos? But then there’s no [conclusive answer.] The scientist that named it died and didn’t ever say if that was why.” Rauwerda smiles, as though the mystery of the Oreos fish’s name only adds to its delight for her. “I really found this only because I was doing this thankless Wikipedia task.”

Rauwerda brings that same passion for oddball details into all her work. She told me that for her next project, she’s hoping to create an extremely specific pop-up museum. “I love gimmicky museums. Like in Gloversville, New York, there’s a glove museum. It’s all about gloves. I love that.”

Rauwerda hasn’t settled on exactly what the subject matter of her museum will be, but she’s leaning toward a celebration of objects that have spilled off trucks. “When there are truck spills of random objects, that is so funny. And people just do not really memorialize them in the way that they should.” When I ask for examples, Rauwerda immediately cites a tanker that spilled an enormous amount of lube onto the road. “If a semitruck of lube spills, part of the nation does not have lube,” she tells me, with a totally straight face. “The fragility of the supply chain is really exposed when that happens.”

Later on, I google “truck spills” and find photos of an Alfredo sauce disaster, more than five million bees set loose on a highway, and an accident that covered a roadway with cans of Bud Light. I want you to know that if Rauwerda succeeds in making that truck spill museum, I will be first in line to buy a ticket for admission.

BORN TO BE MILD

When it comes to people who are dedicated to paying close attention and noticing the details in daily life, few can compete with the Dull Men’s Club. Founded in 1988 in New York City but now an international organization, [\[5\]](#) the Dull Men’s Club bills itself as “a place to slow down, enjoy simple,

everyday things, escape the troubles of life today. We do more than watch paint dry.”^[6]

I love that they feel the need to explain that they do more than just watch paint dry. I also love that their motto implicitly asserts that they do, at least occasionally, watch paint dry.

The motto of the Dull Men’s Club is “celebrating the ordinary.”^[7] The DMC is a space, largely online but occasionally in person as well, for its 1.6 million members (originally only men, but the club is now open to all dull folks) to “delight in ordinary things, things that many people think are dull.”^[8] In the frequently asked questions page on its website, some examples of activities the DMC supports include “watching grass grow, watching ice melt, listening to corn grow, watching wood warp, and much more.”

Some other questions that are answered in the FAQ:

16. Do dull men have a favorite flavour?

Yes. It’s vanilla.

17. What’s a favorite book for a typical dull man?

A dictionary. Words are nicely arranged in order in a dictionary.

20. What are you called—dullards?

No. We’re dullsters—opposite of hipsters.^[9]

As you can tell, the dullsters clearly have a sense of humor. The mere fact of creating an organization called the Dull Men’s Club guarantees you’re going to get some laughs. And it’s only heightened by the fact that they sell a calendar featuring twelve Dull Men of the Year.

But there’s also something profound about celebrating the mundane. It’s at the heart of why being present is the first pillar of this book. When you look at the supposedly boring and dull world around you closely, without judgment and with those new-bathroom eyes, of course you’re going to find something specific that will delight you. Kylie Davenport, the DMC’s New Zealand moderator, told a local newspaper that the point of the club is finding joy, even in something everyone else thinks is excruciatingly boring. “It’s not about keeping up with Jones, if your passion is collecting USB sticks then great; you’re going to find your tribe,” she said.^[10]

YOU'RE NO PICASSO

If you pay close enough attention, you can find delight even in experiences that are indisputably bad. In fact, that's the entire premise of the Museum Of Bad Art, an institution in Boston dedicated to displaying art "too bad to be ignored." MOBA^[*1] started out as a joke between two friends, but now, three decades later, it's a full-time museum and nonprofit with an ever-growing collection of work.^[11]

What makes a piece of art worthy of display in MOBA's galleries? According to the museum's website, the paintings range from "the work of talented artists that have gone awry to works of exuberant, although crude, execution by artists barely in control of the brush. What they all have in common is a special quality that sets them apart in one way or another from the merely incompetent."^[12]

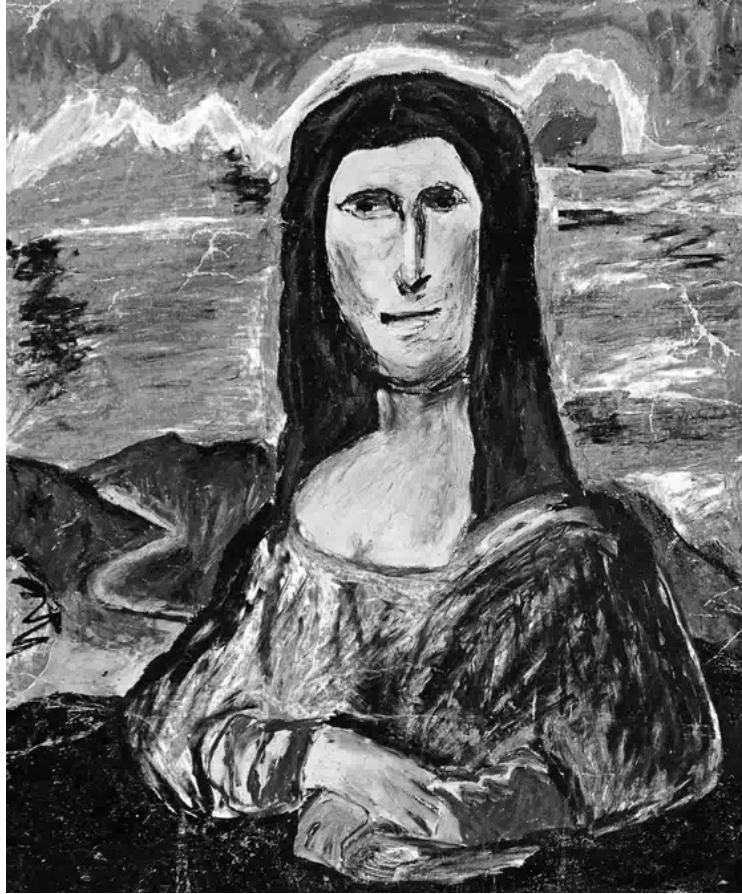
The very first painting ever displayed by the Museum Of Bad Art, the piece that inspired its founding, is known as *Lucy in the Field with Flowers*.



Lucy in the Field with Flowers
Anonymous
Oil on canvas, 30" x 24"
Rescued from trash in Boston, MA
1993

According to MOBA, “This single painting planted the seed that grew into MOBA. The motion, the chair, the sway of her breast, the subtle hues of the sky, the expression on her face; every detail cries out ‘masterpiece.’”[\[13\]](#)

One of my personal favorites is this piece, known as the *Mana Lisa*:



Mana Lisa
Andrea Schmidt
Oil on canvas, 16" × 12"
Donated by the artist from Vancouver, Canada
January 2002

From the museum's description: "*Mana Lisa*'s nose is critical to the composition, offsetting the dialogue between the foreground and profoundly varnished background." MOBA curators also wrote that, in trying "to better understand this mystifying work," they were going to take "their cue from *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown" and use anagrams of its title to decipher its meaning.^[14] As you gaze into *Mana Lisa*'s eyes, consider these phrases that MOBA curators offer up:

I AM NASAL
A SAIL MAN
AS ANIMAL

AM A SNAIL
MAIL NASA
MAN ALIAS

Each anagram as thought-provoking and bewildering as *Mana Lisa*'s tiny pitch-black left eye.

When it comes to visitor favorites, a frequent crowd-pleaser at the museum is *Mama and Babe*:



Mama and Babe
Sarah Irani
Acrylic on canvas, 24" × 18"
Donated by the artist
1995

“The artist places an astonishing emphasis on facial bone structure, and uses flesh tones that bring to mind the top shelf liqueurs of a border bistro. The upright marionettish pose of the babe hints that the early bond between mother and child is as formal as it is familiar.”^[15] They also note that the

mother bears a striking and somewhat eerie resemblance to former secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton.

When I interviewed Louise Reilly Sacco, the museum's permanent acting interim executive director,^[*2] she told me that spending more than thirty years looking for art bad enough to be hung in the museum had changed the way she sees everything: "It's made life more interesting. I find that I look closer at people."^[16]

Louise's other job, in addition to MOBA, is working as an usher at Fenway Park during Red Sox games. "I meet lots of people. And I find I'm more interested in who they are, and why they are who they are, when I have a three-minute conversation with somebody. It's been a way of looking more closely at the world."

I pressed Louise on what specific noticing skills she's gotten better at since she started trying to find art that's odd or unusual enough to make her laugh. She told me that a big piece was her version of the presence pillar that I've been describing in this chapter. She's worked to build "a mindset of, instead of just dismissing something and saying 'Eh, waste of time,' you take just enough time and mental energy to look at it and think about what's going on."

Often, in Louise's experience, the funniest paintings seem pretty unremarkable at first. Many of the paintings that have become her favorites don't start out with a burst of laughter but with a bit of a smile. They're the ones that stick in her head and that she thinks about on her way home, getting funnier as she considers them more.

Part of the joy of the Museum Of Bad Art is the way it takes the idea of a museum and turns it on its head. I tend to be intimidated by the fine art world. When I walk into a traditional art museum, I'm often self-conscious and in my head. *What am I supposed to be looking at? What makes this work brilliant enough to sell for millions at auction and be hung in a celebrated institution? What's the history and the meaning of the imagery?*

"When you go into a big traditional formal museum, it's hard, especially for a young person, to say, 'Well, I don't think that's very good,'" Louise tells me. That's why she tries to get school groups to pair visits to MOBA with field trips to traditional art museums. "After they visit us, they're a little freer to disagree with those decisions. And I think that's a very good thing."

The Museum Of Bad Art welcomes everyone. If you think you could do a better job than the artists being displayed, guess what? You probably can! It's an invitation to accept our honest, authentic impressions of a work of art, rather than trying to figure out what we're "supposed" to think. Not going outward, searching for meaning elsewhere, but being in the moment and trusting your own sincere instincts: That's a key piece of this first pillar.

GOOD ENOUGH FOR A VOICE MEMO

Whether it's terrible art, paint drying, oddly named fish, or something else entirely, once you begin identifying the types of absurdity that delight you and the corners of the world that fit your sense of humor best, the next step is to start keeping track of them. On its surface, this might seem like a, well, humorless thing to do—taking that perfect butterfly of laughter and joy and then ruthlessly pinning it down into a frame. But if your goal is to infuse your life with more humor, then each of these tiny, daily observations is a small step toward that. Recording these observations not only extends their ability to delight you—it would otherwise be all too easy to forget about the dollar-bill-bookmark guy—but also encourages you in the habit of being present to the humor around you.

Every professionally funny person I know has a system for keeping track of these humorous bits and bobs. Some carry a notebook in their back pocket and scribble something down every time they have a thought worth recording or witness something that tickles them. My friend Myq Kaplan, a prolific stand-up comedian, carries a digital voice recorder at all times. If, in conversation, you say something that makes him laugh particularly hard, he'll say, "Please hold," then dictate a note so he doesn't forget it. (That also means that if I'm talking with Myq and say something I think is clever, but he *doesn't* take out the voice recorder, I get a little bit offended. *What? That wasn't voice memo quality?!*)

Liana Finck, a cartoonist for *The New Yorker*, told me she created a separate, secret email account that she uses only to send herself ideas when she's out and something strikes her as interesting or humorous.^[17]

The artist Wendy MacNaughton talks about “putting on your art eyes” in her ongoing project DrawTogether, which has provided imaginative creativity exercises to tens of thousands of adults and free social-emotional-learning and art curriculums to nearly 300,000 learners worldwide.^[18] She made up the phrase “putting on your art eyes,” she told me, “to teach kids (and grown-ups) how to look at the world in a noticing kind of way. In a more formal setting I’d call it ‘active looking.’”

MacNaughton and a friend of hers, the author Laurel Braitman, were talking about how this idea of active looking is central to both of their work. As a joke, they even printed up business cards for an organization they call the Attention Club. I’m extremely proud to say I am a card-carrying member. The first rule of Attention Club, as listed on the membership cards, is to “put on your art eyes.” (This is very different from the first rule of Fight Club, a club that we do not talk about.) Paying this kind of active attention, looking through art eyes, means seeing the world as a source of inspiration and beauty.

MacNaughton talks about how one of her inspirations for Attention Club was Corita Kent, also known as Sister Mary Corita. According to MacNaughton, Sister Corita “plucked imagery and text from all around her—advertisements, magazines, even bread packaging—and reframed it (literally), using color and composition to help us all consider these things we’d normally overlook in a whole new light.”^[19]

One of Sister Corita’s tools in her own work (and in teaching people who don’t see themselves as artists to make art) is to use a “finder.” A finder is basically a small rectangle made out of paper or cardboard that you hold up and look at the world through, like a camera’s viewfinder, only without the camera. She said it helps us to see the world “one piece at a time.”

As MacNaughton puts it, “In our day-to-day lives, with all the visual stimulus we have going on around us, we probably never notice little things like an old car’s bumper. Or the edge of a wooden chair. Or someone’s painted fingernails. We’re so overwhelmed that we just don’t *see* them.”^[20]

For MacNaughton, the little things that jump out when she’s looking through a finder are inspirations for drawings. But take a look at any of her work, and you’ll immediately see how much humor and laughter are

embedded in it. Her drawings are a great reminder that humor doesn't have to take the form of jokes. It can be in visual designs or photographs. (The artist David Shrigley makes me laugh just as dependably as any stand-up comic.) It can be in movement. (Watch a performance by Cocoon Central Dance Team or Bill Irwin.) Humor can also simply be you internally laughing and delighting in the one piece of the world that's come to your attention today. In general, though, when it comes to attention, I'd urge you to think small. It's there, and not in the panorama view, that you'll find those things that delight you.

THERE'S A LAUGH TO BE FOUND EVERYWHERE

Finding pieces of the world that bring you humor offers you a key to the spaces where you can start to make yourself (or other people) laugh. The spotlight of your attention becomes not just a tool for noticing humor but a beam that you can shine on the little weird things you see that no one else seems to notice. Here are a couple of examples that I love and that always make me laugh:

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have a very catchy theme song, in which the words *teenage mutant ninja turtles* are repeated over and over. My friend Tom is constantly on the lookout for words and phrases that share the same rhythmic pattern. As a result, I get messages with hilariously perfect alternative lyrics. A few favorites: "List of people from Montana," "Did not mean to send to channel," "Hiking paths of Martha's Vineyard," and "No redeeming social value."^[*3]

Another opportunity to bring humor to the mundane comes from the hilarious world of tax documents. When a U.S.-based comedian reaches a certain stage in their career, they typically have to form a corporation or limited liability company (LLC). That entity gets a legal name, but no one ever really sees it besides the comedian's lawyers. Regardless, it's a *prime* opportunity for a laugh, and far be it from any of us to let that go to waste.

Nick Kroll's production company is called Good At Business. And you know what? He is. It's a very successful company![*4] Eugene Mirman and producer Julie Smith Clem originally called their company Rich Pregnant Teenager, LLC, until a university they were working with told them they were going to have trouble getting a contract approved for a rich pregnant teenager. Clem and Mirman held on to the joke for a while longer, but Clem told me that after she tried to open a new corporate bank account and the teller's eyes went wide at the idea of a wealthy impregnated adolescent, they finally changed it. "The woman kept making me say the name and made me go through so much paperwork, and it was so awkward that I called Eugene after and was like, 'We need to switch names.' So now our company is called Pretty Good Friends."

Personally, I tried to call my own limited liability company "Fully Liable LLC." That is, until a lawyer told me that, while she thought it was funny, it was also quite likely to ruin my life, legally speaking. As a general rule, lawyers advise against signing all documents with the words "fully liable."

Despite the risks, if you engage your attention with a mind toward humor, even corporate paperwork can be a place where you make yourself giggle. We'll talk more about how to put yourself out there and create laughter in chapter 3. We'll talk more about how to structure your taxes in another book.

LOOKING FOR LAUGHS IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES

When you start paying attention in this new way, it can feel overwhelming. After all, it's not possible to pay this level of close attention, to be so fully present, at all times and in all situations. At least, I can't do it. Maybe there's a supermonk of humor who has achieved full enlightenment and is now shaking their head in hilarious judgment. To Supermonk, I say: Thank you for buying my book, and I'm sorry I underestimated you.

To everyone else: Start by paying more attention to what's easiest for you to notice. I've always gravitated toward language and words, so I start with signage. What's that homemade flyer stapled to a telephone pole? What do the bumper stickers on your neighbors' cars say? What are random businesses named? Once I was traveling through Maine when I passed a hair salon named Hair Force One. It was a pun so hilarious and terrible that it stopped me in my tracks. And then, over the course of the next week, I noticed more and more hair salon puns: State of Mane, Curl Up and Dye, and so many more. To me, Maine is now a state defined by business name puns so excruciating that they come back around to being amazing.

You might not be a wordplay person. Maybe you're more drawn to sounds. In that case, what snippets of conversation do you overhear on the street or in a coffee shop? What music can you hear coming out of the car next to you at the stop sign? What machines are making weird noises? I once went down a long rabbit hole trying to understand why all new washers and dryers seem to play a full sonata when they're finished with a cycle. And I can't tell you the number of winter nights I've lain awake in my apartment in New York cursing whoever had the idea of combining boiling-hot water and the sound of hammering into a device called the radiator.

For the visually minded, what are people wearing? What color are the walls painted? What about a person's nails? What haircut is a dog sporting? How are the birds outside behaving? Look around. What's an odd thing happening in your sight line right now?

PRESENCE LEADS TO LAUGHTER, LAUGHTER LEADS TO PRESENCE

The best part of strengthening the muscles of attention is that the cycle starts to build on itself. The more you're in the moment, the more you'll laugh. That laughter, in turn, grounds you in the present. You clutch your sides, you close your eyes. While you're laughing really hard, you can't

think about the length of your to-do list or that rude thing your coworker said. That's one of the most beautiful parts of humor. It at once comes from being present and reinforces your presence in the world.

So much of modern life is about being efficient and effective, managing our countless responsibilities. We spend our days going from beds to phones to computers to phones to TVs to cars to tables to desks and back to beds. The first pillar of good humor, being present, is an attempt, if not to break that cycle entirely, then to build the muscle that lets you step back and observe it all. Maybe humor will come from acknowledging how little time or attention you have to give to noticing humor! Or maybe it will let you spot your own attention patterns, the autopilot that you switch on in your life without even realizing it.

Strengthening your muscles of attention is a continual process, and we'll come back to it over and over in the chapters that follow. But to summarize, here are some of the key ways to practice:

Embrace a new-bathroom frame of mind. Try to see the world around you as if you're looking at it for the first time.

Look at your everyday life through different eyes. Don't see the world just through your own eyes. Experiment with what it would look like if you were a geologist, a painter, a rat, a hawk, or a member of a very cool motorcycle gang. The particular perspective you choose matters less than the fact that you're trying on new lenses to see the world.

Seek out weird facts. You don't even have to leave your room to find things to laugh at. Embrace bizarre histories, strange facts, and unexpected explanations, like Annie Rauwerda from *Depths of Wikipedia*.

Don't dismiss the dull. What's the dullest activity you do or the most boring object you can imagine? Imagine who would be obsessed with that or how you could make it compelling. And then flip it around and think about what passions or interests you currently have that you could

lean even further into it if you allowed yourself permission to join the dullsters.

Celebrate the bad. Don't pay attention only to the good—also seek out the terrible. What makes it so memorably bad? What is the hilarious flaw? Be as specific as you can, whether it's in identifying each and every flavor in a 0/10 slice of pizza, the frankly baffling choices made by an advertiser on their billboard, or the terrible interior decor of a home on Zillow.

Narrow your focus with a finder. When you're having trouble being present or finding something to notice, make it easier by limiting your field of vision. Whether you literally use a finder like Sister Mary Corita or you simply embrace the spirit of her technique, narrowing your focus and then looking at the details in a small corner of the world can often spark discoveries and inspirations.

Pay attention to what jumps out at you. As you experiment with these practices and start being more present, notice what you're finding funny and what's delighting you. Keep track of it in a notebook, a voice recorder, or a memo. It's extremely valuable information to know what tickles your funny bone.

I don't want to sugarcoat it, though. This is going to be hard! The challenges to being present and finding laughter are endless. The modern world is designed to keep us moving quickly, always striving and searching for something new and flashy and bigger and better. It's hard to slow down! It's hard to be present and to pay attention. This is a skill and a muscle that you build over time. It's totally fine if you're bad at it at first.

As you continue to work on this first pillar, let's move on to the second, which is all about turning that attention and presence inward: looking and laughing at yourself.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} The staff at MOBA repeatedly let me know that they feel strongly about the letter *O* being capitalized in both their name and acronym. Take that, MoMA!

*2 In and of itself, a perfect and hilarious joke of a title.

*3 *xkcd*, a brilliant webcomic, wrote a piece about Wikipedia article titles that could be sung to the Ninja Turtles' theme song. It's unclear to me if this is what inspired Tom's passion or if it was parallel thinking. Either way, the comic is worth looking up at <https://xkcd.com/1412/>.

*4 Good At Business as a business name reminds me of another joke title that always makes me laugh. Stand-up comedian Joe Mande named his 2017 Netflix special *Joe Mande's Award-Winning Comedy Special*. As far as I know, it has won no awards, but it will still always be his "award-winning comedy special." Truly genius.

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THE SECOND PILLAR: LAUGHING AT YOURSELF

Noticing the Absurdity and Weirdness Inside Yourself

“There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one’s self.”

—Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard’s Almanack* (1750)

ONE DAY when I was working as an elementary school teacher, I woke up with a huge zit right on my nose. I knew, rationally, that I should just leave it alone. But I convinced myself that if I popped this pimple, it would be as though it had never been there at all.

Of course, my plan backfired as soon as I popped the zit. Now there was a giant red mark on the tip of my nose, more prominent and painful than ever before. I told myself that no one would notice. I could only see it because I’d been staring at it in the mirror for so long. Besides, I was already running late. I needed to get out the door and off to school.

I entered the cafeteria for my breakfast duty, supervising a table of kindergartners. I had almost succeeded in convincing myself that the zit was no big deal when the first kid walked in, immediately pointed at my face, and said, “You got pecked in the nose by a bird.”

That mental image transformed my embarrassment and self-consciousness into glee. The idea that I was being hunted by some sort of

bloodthirsty nose seagull was a gift, something I got to share with my fellow teachers for the rest of the school day.

When we're able to laugh at ourselves and honestly name our imperfections and fallibilities, it takes away their power to shame us. It allows us to accept ourselves as we are. Even better, it makes other people like us more.

It's also really hard to do. I certainly struggle with it. Here's another moment from my teaching career, one in which I completely failed at my own lesson.

I was just out of college and working as a teaching fellow in an ESL class while living in a house of other teaching fellows from the same school. My friend Kristin, a genuinely hilarious person, was one of my housemates and closest friends. One day I came home after a frustrating class, upset that my lessons hadn't gone according to plan and irritated that I had a lot of grading to do that night. I was in a foul mood, feeling utterly humorless.

Kristin tried to engage me and say hello, but I was short with her. I don't remember what I said, but it was snippy. Rather than be offended, as she had every right to be, she simply walked away, picked up her laptop, and returned with the song "Bad Day" by Daniel Powter blasting.

If you're not familiar with the song, it was a 2005 pop hit all about—you guessed it—having a bad day: "You had a bad day / You're taking one down / You sing a sad song just to turn it around." It's one of those songs that inexplicably gets stuck in your head for days after you hear it just once, and now Kristin was blaring it on repeat while following me around the house.

Years later I can admit it: This is objectively hilarious. A self-serious man is acting pouty, so his friend enters the room with a hit song that perfectly encapsulates his current emotional state and proceeds to play it at full volume *directly into his psyche*.

In the moment, though, I was furious. I stormed from room to room trying to escape Kristin and the sound of Daniel Powter's sweet and earnest voice, my blood boiling. I couldn't laugh at my ridiculousness in that moment. Not at all. Instead, I was irate that someone would treat me with anything other than the absolute seriousness I thought my situation deserved.

It's easy to laugh at that version of myself from a distance of more than a decade. But we all have days when we're swept up in self-righteous indignation, when we feel as though we've been given one bad turn after another, and when we refuse to let in the humor we sorely need.

Why is it so difficult and scary to laugh at ourselves?

I'M FUNNY HOW? I'M FUNNY LIKE I'M A CLOWN?

Laughing at yourself involves admitting your imperfections. It means owning up to the fact that you are, sometimes, ridiculous. It's highlighting your weaknesses, flaws, and idiosyncrasies. If you haven't already built up your humor muscles, this can be a terrifying prospect. After all, society urges us—at our jobs, in our relationships, and in our social media posts—to excel, to be perfect, and to do so effortlessly. When you think about someone who is perceived as enviable or desirable, you probably don't imagine them burning their frozen pizza dinner, losing their temper at their toddler, or showing up late to an important meeting because they stayed up all night watching *Property Brothers* reruns.^[*1] I know I certainly don't.

There's a fear in many of us that we might lose something if we laugh at ourselves. We'd have to admit that we're far short of perfect. Worse, it might not just be us laughing; others might join in, finally exposing us for the disgusting, unlovable failures that we, in our worst moments, see ourselves as. Is there any worse feeling than that of being ridiculed by our peers or loved ones? That sense of shame is the stuff of our most wrenching childhood memories and our present-day nightmares. It's little wonder that we might resist exposing ourselves in a way that could invite the mockery of those around us.

But I'm here to tell you: When you put this skill into action and allow yourself to laugh at yourself, you will find that the opposite occurs. Not only does making light of your own shortcomings *not* diminish people's

view of you, but it can charm them, making you seem only *more* confident and likable.

A 2019 study emphasizes this point.^[1] Researchers discovered that when you're willing to laugh at your flaws, other people view those flaws as less important than if you'd addressed them more dryly. The study found that "job candidates who revealed their limited math ability in a humorous manner ('I can add and subtract, but geometry is where I draw the line') were perceived as better able to do math than those who disclosed the information in a serious manner ('I can add and subtract, but I struggle with geometry')." ^[2] I might argue that if you're in a job interview where they're asking about your addition and subtraction skills, things have already gone off the rails, but the point stands.

Another classic experiment found that, when asked to rate high-performing candidates and average candidates, study participants preferred the high performers. No surprise there. But the highest-rated candidates of all were the high performers who had also just spilled coffee all over themselves.^[3] In other words, we want you to be able to do your job, but we don't mind if you're kind of a mess. In fact, we prefer it! You're relatable.^[*2] ^[4]

Being willing to laugh at yourself doesn't just make you seem more competent—it can also make you appear sexier. In a study called "Dissing Oneself Versus Dissing Rivals," psychologists found that self-deprecating humor increased long-term sexual attractiveness.^[5] They speculated that your willingness to laugh at yourself can be "an especially reliable indicator not only of general intelligence and verbal creativity, but also of moral virtues such as humility."^[6] And who doesn't want an intelligent, creative, and humble lover?

If you put those three studies together, you've got a fairly robust, peer-reviewed argument that the shortest route to success is to not know basic math, pour coffee all over your new pants, and then be willing to tell people about it.

I'm not trying to seduce you right now, but I do want to brag about the sheer quantity of things that I do not know. When it comes to owning ignorance, I'm one of the biggest property holders in town. Over the past ten years, I have carved out an unexpected little comedic niche for myself as a person who interviews academic experts onstage and on air. I've talked

with everyone from Nobel laureates to MacArthur geniuses to the world's leading expert on raccoon intelligence. And the biggest superpower I've developed is being willing to say, "I have no clue what you're talking about." With almost no exceptions, extremely smart people have been delighted and relieved when I admit that I don't understand even the most basic fundamentals of their field. I might say, "I want to talk to you about your groundbreaking research in nuclear physics, but can you first explain to me: What is physics? I know I was supposed to learn that in high school, but I was unfortunately not paying attention."

This is my most useful tool in interviews. Geniuses don't have to stress over how to respectfully tell me I'm full of crap. If I've already admitted that I know nothing, we can have an honest conversation. It's a lot like when you go to an event with a Q&A afterward. There's a huge difference between a person who asks a genuine question and someone who walks up to the microphone to deliver a monologue intended to showcase their deep knowledge. (This type of "question" often ends with a person proudly asking, "What are your thoughts on that?")^[*3] Nobody likes the monologue guy. Admitting your ignorance allows space for an actual conversation.

¡SOY EL TONTO!

Proudly owning the gaps in your understanding puts people at ease. If you admit that you're clueless, it's pretty obvious you're not a threat. And there's something immediately delightful about that. Maybe it calls us back to watching a baby struggle adorably to do tasks as basic as walking and eating. If you're willing to look like a fool, those of us who are around you will drop our defenses a bit, because how could you be a threat? You're just a big baby!

I've found that calling that out explicitly always gets a laugh. An example: I love to learn languages. It's something that I do for fun. In my opinion, nothing beats the rush of being able to communicate with someone across a linguistic divide. And as a person who lives for praise, no comedy

club standing ovation^[*4] can ever compare to the overjoyed intensity of a group of two or three middle-aged ladies discovering you're trying to speak their native tongue.

While I'm still in the early phases of learning a language, I stumble over even simple sentences. One of the biggest hurdles in language acquisition isn't grammar or vocabulary. It's forcing yourself to use the language with native speakers, even though you know you're likely to fall flat on your face. But here is where owning your ignorance comes in handy. If I show up in Mexico and present myself as a talented Spanish speaker, there's nowhere for me to go but down. I can only disappoint.

So I take the opposite tack. One of the first Spanish phrases I memorized was "Sorry, I am a large baby with a beard." I have found that it almost always gets a laugh. And not only does it immediately convey exactly how bad I am at the language, it does so in a way that makes people open up.

I had similar success with Korean when I memorized a proverb about working hard to learn. In English, it translates literally to "Even a dog could learn to recite poetry after three years in a village schoolhouse." I would follow it up with "But I am still a puppy." That got me a big laugh and, in several Korean restaurants, a server happily bringing me a free drink.

That's my approach, but you don't need to acknowledge your foolishness to get a positive reaction from native speakers in a language that's not your own. A long-running collaborative linguistic project began when a Harvard student, Ethan Mollick, observed that travelers often have "an irresistible urge" to say *something* in a local language, even if it's just a rudimentary phrase.^[7] In most cases, the best they can come up with is asking where the bathroom is. Mollick's suggestion was to forget about the basic guidebook phrases and instead master this single phrase: "I can eat glass, it doesn't hurt me." With that under your belt, you present yourself not as another bumbling tourist but "as an insane native," Mollick says, "treated with dignity and respect."^[8]

Mollick's phrase became one of the first viral internet memes. It has been translated into more than 150 languages as of this writing. Boldly stating the philosophy behind his project, Mollick wrote that it was "a challenge to the human spirit, in much the same way as the Apollo Program or the Panama Canal was, except that it involves much less digging and slightly less spaceflight."

There's so much delight to be found in laughing at yourself. It's a powerful tool for self-acceptance, and it can put others at ease. But like any tool, it has to be used properly.

THE RIGHT KIND OF LAUGHTER

There is a line when it comes to finding humor at your own expense. If you go too far, or if you're too harsh in your self-assessment, you can verge into self-bullying territory. We've all witnessed it: the friend who makes vicious fun of their own weight, the colleague who ridicules their own performance at a meeting, the family member who always emphasizes their clumsiness and social awkwardness (but who frankly isn't that clumsy or socially awkward). These moments might have you laughing, but they conceal a wince—you watch as someone you care about injures themselves before your eyes.

Needless to say, this sort of self-degradation serves no one. It counteracts the confidence and attractiveness that laughing at yourself might otherwise project, and it's damaging to your self-esteem (and more so if you belong to a marginalized community).

You might reasonably ask: Where's the line, then? How can you differentiate between good and bad laughing at yourself?

In chapter 1, I told you about the encryption theory of humor. But when it comes to laughing at yourself, a different theory of what makes things funny might shine some light on the line between helpful and hurtful humor.

Dr. Peter McGraw is the director of the Humor Research Lab at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He insists, in interviews and online, on referring to his academic group as the HuRL. The comic in me resists that acronym as something of a groaner, but as far as jokes go, HuRL is pretty harmless. And as it turns out, the idea of harm is at the center of McGraw's framework for understanding humor.

For more than a decade, McGraw and his collaborators have been developing their “benign violation theory.”^[9] Under this theory, “Humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously.”^[10] A universal example of a benign violation is tickling, a “physically threatening but harmless” attack. And in fact, tickling doesn’t make just humans laugh—it’s also been documented in chimpanzees. (Please don’t try to tickle a chimp. I would hate to be responsible for you getting your arms ripped off.)

McGraw points out that benign violation theory doesn’t just explain why some things are funny—it also explains why others are not. If you push things too far, the joke or situation can stop feeling benign and start feeling genuinely threatening. There’s a big difference between your partner lightly tickling you and making you laugh and them tickling you relentlessly, a demonic gleam in their eyes. Cross over the benign threshold, and things stop being funny real quick. As McGraw puts it, “Jokes similarly fail to be funny when either they are too tame or too risqué.”^[11]

When we think about where to draw the line at making fun of ourselves, I find the idea of a benign violation to be very helpful. If you’re laughing at yourself, you’re puncturing the idea that you’re someone who’s perfect or cool or doesn’t lock himself out of his apartment once a week. But the key word is *benign*.

What does a benign joke about yourself look like to you? Think about a few times in your recent memory when you’ve laughed at yourself—when you called yourself a goblin for going a month without cleaning your room, snapped a photo of a long hair growing straight out of your ear, or sent an email about the importance of proofreading with a typo in the first sentence. Were you poking gentle fun at yourself? Or were you being your own bully?

In her book *Unreliable Narrator: Me, Myself, and Impostor Syndrome*, the comedian Aparna Nancherla talks about how, for a time, she would open her stand-up sets with “It’s okay, I’m surprised I’m a comedian, too.”^[12] Aparna says she intended the joke to be about how she “wasn’t the most boisterous personality.” But audiences frequently laughed at it because, to them, it was about how she, as a South Asian woman, didn’t look the part of a comedian (namely: straight white man). Reflecting on this particular act of self-denigration, she realized, “I was aiding and abetting

my own difference. But it's fine, we tell ourselves (and each other), because comedy often comes from self-deprecation. I'm not punching up or punching down, I'm punching the mirror. Nobody gets hurt—except me.”^[13]

So while I stand by the value of laughing at ourselves—it is one of the three pillars I'm discussing in this book, after all—it's worth it for you to take the time to calibrate where precisely your own personal lines are. I would tell you my own, but the truth is, they're always changing. It's a set of goalposts that move forward and backward in sync with my self-esteem. When I was performing on lineups at cool alternative comedy theaters, I used to joke about how I looked like an uncool dad who was at the show to chaperone his teenage son. But nowadays, I am a dad, and to be honest, I'm a little worried that I actually don't fit in and that it's sad and embarrassing that I'm even trying. Some nights, making that joke hits a little too close to home. Other nights, I still think it's funny! (Maybe even funnier now that there's truth to it?) It depends! Am I sweating through my button-down shirt and nervously pacing in my podiatrist-approved ASICS running shoes? Or am I feeling comfortable and secure?

I believe the rewards of laughing at yourself, done correctly, outweigh the risks. It makes you seem appealingly vulnerable and self-assured, and it opens you up to real, authentic connection with others. It lets you acknowledge the areas you might want to work on in a way that still allows for positivity and optimism about yourself.

LAUGHING AT YOURSELF IS SLIGHTLY BETTER THAN ELECTROCUTION

I don't want to understate the difficulty of seeing yourself accurately and honestly enough to be able to laugh at your foibles. When I talked to psychologist Timothy Wilson, he told me that “one of the overwhelming

motives we all have is to maintain our self-esteem; to have people like us and to feel good about ourselves. I think it takes a certain security to be able to laugh at oneself...to look ridiculous if that's what it comes to.”^[14]

Wilson is the author of *Strangers to Ourselves*, a book that has the unique distinction of being not just a celebrated psychology text but also the purported inspiration for an album title by indie rock band Modest Mouse. His research has focused on how difficult it can be to have an accurate idea of who we really are, and the lengths to which some of us will go to avoid spending time alone with our thoughts.

In one hilarious experiment, Wilson asked study subjects to sit alone in a room with their thoughts for fifteen minutes.^[15] “The team left participants alone in a lab room in which they could push a button and shock themselves if they wanted to. The results were startling: Even though all participants had previously stated that they would pay money to avoid being shocked with electricity, 67% of men and 25% of women chose to inflict it on themselves rather than just sit there quietly and think.”^[16]

It's not like they were acting out of curiosity. Before the experiment began, all the participants had willingly experienced what a shock from the button felt like, and they universally agreed that it was painful and unpleasant. But a lot of guys still preferred shocking themselves over quiet introspection.

In fact, Wilson told me that one guy shocked himself more than one hundred times in fifteen minutes. Afterward the research team thought that maybe that had been an error and that the button hadn't reset correctly when hit repeatedly. “One of my research assistants...volunteered to test that,” Wilson told me. “And she hooked herself up and said, ‘Yeah, I'm getting shocked every time.’”

The inspiration for the shock button experiment came from a meditation class that Wilson and his wife had attended. Everyone else seemed to find gazing inward to be relaxing, but he sat there thinking he'd rather stick a fork in a socket. So he designed an experiment to see if other people might feel the same way.

Wilson succeeded in discovering that he was not alone. He also showed how lucky we are to have humor. Meditation might suck,^[*5] but laughing doesn't. Wilson's research demonstrated vividly how uncomfortable many of us are with boredom and silence. Luckily, the benefits that meditation

proponents often talk about are surprisingly in line with what you can accomplish by laughing at yourself.

Seeing the humor in your own situation and self-presentation allows you a distance from your own thoughts, the very goal of meditation. Rather than experiencing every feeling, idea, and sensation as an immutable fact, a natural and unavoidable response to the world around you, humor forces you to take a second look. Is this accurate, or is it hilariously ridiculous? In a stealthy way, scanning for the laugh also allows you to observe your thoughts as they pass instead of being carried away by the stream of them.

FINDING THE FUNNY

If you already know what makes you laugh about yourself, that's great. Go forth and laugh, my child.

But if you're struggling to figure out what could possibly be funny about you, don't despair. Sometimes if you haven't practiced paying attention to the funny things about yourself, they can seem invisible at first. That doesn't mean they're not there! No one is so bland as to have nothing funny or strange to laugh about within them. And even if they were truly that beige, that in itself would be hilarious. *Geez, do I ever have a controversial thought? I have the Switzerland of personalities!*

I believe there's something hilarious about everybody. The interviews I did for this book only deepened that belief. I talked about what's at the core of humor with Jesse David Fox, a journalist and comedy expert. He literally wrote the book on comedy. It's called *Comedy Book*. Judd Apatow said in a blurb, "I thought I was the ultimate comedy obsessed nerd but after reading Jesse David Fox's comprehensive *Comedy Book* I realized there is someone out there much sicker than me."

When I interviewed that sick, twisted comedy fanatic, Fox told me, "People are obsessed with the idea that comedy comes from surprise, but I think a lot of times the hardest you laugh, at least with your friends, is not when they surprise you. It's like when they've acted exactly how they

[always] act.”^[17] That really resonates with me. Maybe the funniest thing about you is how predictable you are. It’s just a matter of taking a step back to see yourself from a new angle.

Here are four of my own techniques and tricks that you can use to take stock of yourself and attempt to view (even for a moment) your quirks or shortcomings through the lens of humor.

1. Notice when other people laugh at what you say.

In his studies on self-awareness, Timothy Wilson found that simply introspecting rarely led people to have a deep understanding of themselves. One technique that worked better was for them to talk to and observe the people they spent time with. That’s not to say that your friends, colleagues, or family members know everything about you, but taking in the data they provide lets you have a more unbiased and accurate assessment of how you come across.

When it comes to humor, you can use this beautifully simple test. Say a statement about yourself, and see if other people smile or laugh. For example, when I say, “I am a ruggedly masculine outdoorsman,” people crack up. This tells me that I am, in fact, not a ruggedly masculine outdoorsman.

Wilson shared an example from one of his courses. He once told a class that he used to be a jock, and the students all erupted into laughter. But the thing was, Wilson really did used to be a jock. He played competitive sports all through high school. His students’ immediate laughter clued him in to the fact that, as he said, “Uh...I guess I aged out” of seeming like an athlete.

And that’s okay and good! The fact that people laughed at that statement didn’t have to change Wilson’s own history or his relationship to himself, but it could heighten his self-awareness of how he now comes off. Another part of this is that we are always changing in who we are and how we come off, so it’s a good exercise to make sure your sense of yourself is reflective of who you are now, not who you were when you were seventeen.

2. Think about your most commonly used words or phrases.

We all have words or phrases that are stereotypically *us*. And it's often very funny to realize what they are. At one point recently, I realized that I was texting the phrase *you rock!* at least four times a week. Yes, it's great that I'm trying to be supportive, but it's also strange that a middle-aged man is texting like a tween from 1997.

If you want to find the linguistic quirks that define you, one way is to scroll back through your text messages looking for patterns. You could also ask friends or family what they think of as “so you.” Or I bet there's some sort of horrible dystopian AI bot that you can feed your personal data into. [\[*7\]](#) Whatever method you choose, finding your phrases has the double benefit of being funny and giving you the opportunity to switch things up. (*You rock!* is up for grabs, just FYI.)

3. Make a you starter pack.

In the same vein as finding your most commonly used phrases, it can be rich comedic material to think about the clothes and objects that define you. You may have seen the starter pack memes that, according to the website Know Your Meme, “illustrate the archetype of a celebrity, company or subculture.” [\[18\]](#) For example, the “you can beat me up but my dad will sue” starter pack features a Ralph Lauren polo shirt, pink sweater, khaki shorts, and boat shoes.



My starter pack would feature the extremely unstylish but comfortable ASICS running shoes I've mentioned before, a gray T-shirt, and pockets filled with free snacks looted from whatever event I am currently attending. What clothes or accessories would be in yours?

4. Narrate your life as though it's a nature documentary.

Imagine the famous British naturalist David Attenborough has broken into your home with a film crew. They're making a new season of *Planet Earth*, but this time it's taking place entirely within your daily life. What would the narrator say as they watched you?

The footage from my day today might include this riveting sequence:

The adult male approaches the refrigerator. Despite having already eaten less than 45 minutes prior, he's on the hunt for food again. He opens the doors and scans for prey. There's nothing there. He lets out an involuntary wail. He closes the fridge and wanders into the living room. It may seem as if he's not doing anything, but in fact, this is one of this individual's most highly developed skills: procrastination.

IF YOU CAN'T LAUGH AT A NEAR-DEATH HELICOPTER ACCIDENT, WHAT CAN YOU LAUGH AT?

Laughing at yourself doesn't mean you can't be a tough, respected leader. Joe Choi is a former platoon commander with the Navy SEALs. Not only did he pass the grueling Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training and SEAL Qualification Training, he was also deployed to the Philippines, Guam, and Iraq. You might think that a leader of one of the planet's most elite military teams would be a stern, imposing, deadly serious person. I can attest that Joe commands respect, projecting a self-evident grit and determination. But that tells only half the story. Joe is also a cheerful, hilarious goofball.

To Joe, the two sides of his personality are connected. Reflecting on leaders he worked with in the navy, he told me, "The best leaders were the ones who were able to laugh at themselves. They took their job very seriously but not necessarily *themselves* very seriously."[\[19\]](#)

Joe has found that a willingness to laugh at himself, even in extremely dangerous situations, can be a gift. In the SEALs, "we had a saying: Calm breeds calm.... Those who were able to laugh at themselves, especially if they were in leadership positions...helped alleviate a lot of the tension and...direness of what we're training to do and what we're getting prepared to do."

For a SEAL, finding ways to release mental pressure isn't just about stress relief—it can literally be life or death. I asked for an example, and Joe broke out into a big grin. He told me about a training exercise in which he accidentally grabbed the wrong side of a ladder hanging from a helicopter. He was dragged underwater and nearly drowned as he tried and failed to pull himself up. Just before losing consciousness, he managed to dart around to the correct side and save himself.

"I climbed up the ladder and I'm coughing out water. In my head, I'm like, 'Holy shit, I almost just drowned.' And then one of the guys in my

platoon just looks at me and starts hysterically laughing. He goes, ‘You should have seen yourself, Lieutenant! That was some hard frogman shit, dude! That was *tough!*’ ”

The whole helicopter crew cracked up, including Joe. “I’m just like, all right, guys, I deserve it. Next round of drinks is on me. I’m the idiot. I almost drowned. I’m supposed to be the leader.”^[*8]

For Joe, being willing to laugh at himself, even immediately after a terrifying experience, served several purposes: It helped to bond his team together, it relieved the tension of a difficult moment, and it allowed the team to see him as a human they could relate to, not just as their invincible leader.

It also transformed the story from “I can’t grab a ladder correctly” to “I am doing hard frogman shit,” which I think we can all agree is the narrative we’d rather be the star of.

When you’re laughing at yourself, you get to transform the situation you’re in. You’re using the lens of humor to examine your internal narrative and, if you want, to change it. What you think is funny versus what you think is terrifying or tragic or just plain boring is always going to be subjective and personal. That’s just as true when you’re looking for humor in the world as it is when you’re finding laughs inside yourself. But understanding yourself and your preferences helps you to see yourself more accurately and acknowledge how ridiculous you really are. So grab on to the ladder and let yourself get dragged.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} At the time of this writing, the Property Brothers have not been involved in any terrible scandals. But I can’t say I’d be shocked if two handsome, white, identical-twin real estate millionaires turned out to be monsters! So, if a horrible secret about them is revealed and at the time you’re reading this they’re known as, like, the “Orphanage Arson Brothers” or something, please know that I was unaware at the time of publication. If no scandal has broken, then ignore the previous lines and let me just say: Those guys are charmers!

^{*2} It’s important to emphasize, though, that you have to actually be able to do your job to get the coffee-spill-likability bonus. As two social psychologists summarizing the research put it, “Psychiatrists can build trust by spilling their coffee and saying, ‘I’ve never been very good with my hands.’ Surgeons can’t.”

^{*3} In a classic of the speech-not-question genre, I once went to a film screening in Los Angeles. At the talk afterward a guy walked to the microphone and smugly told a long, rambling anecdote about how closely he had worked with Tom Hanks on several movies.

At the end, his “question” was: “Don’t you think Tom Hanks is great?” And to be clear, this screening was not for a film that Tom Hanks was involved with in any way. The director answered, “Yes, he seems great,” then moved on to the next questioner.

*4 I’ve never once received a standing ovation at a comedy club, but that doesn’t stop me from fantasizing about getting one every single time I perform.

*5 For some people! Not for everyone! If you’re someone who loves meditation and is upset by what I just said, please do a ten-minute loving-kindness meditation where you direct positive thoughts my way and work on releasing your anger, like a cloud briefly passing through a clear blue sky.

*6 My friend Matt Porter told me a great story that illustrates perfectly the power of being willing to laugh at changes in how you’re perceived. Matt was about to take a trip, and “the guy driving the shuttle from the car rental place to the airport was going around asking people’s airlines and being very intense and everyone was, like, very scared of his intensity. A few people even called him ‘sir.’ And then he got behind the wheel and kept driving and then after a long silence he was like, ‘I’m sorry, guys, I was a drill sergeant for, like, twenty years and it’s my first week doing this.’ And everyone laughed and so did he. Then we all started chatting about where we were going, and it became a little community on the previously silent shuttle. When we got off the shuttle, we all told him how great he was doing.”

*7 I asked ChatGPT to “write a footnote in the style of comedian Chris Duffy” and it absolutely roasted me to within an inch of my life. “Footnote: And yes, I know what you’re thinking: ‘Is this really a footnote, or is it just an excuse for the author to squeeze in one more joke?’ Well, it’s both! Because who says footnotes can’t be funny? Except maybe my editor. Sorry, Susan!” Oh no. I guess that *is* one way to find out my stereotypical phrases and wording. For the record, though, my editor’s name is not Susan.

*8 If this happened to me, I wouldn’t be buying drinks for the guys. I would be weeping on the floor and then fleeing the country. But that’s why Joe is a SEAL and I am not.

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THE THIRD PILLAR: TAKING SOCIAL RISKS

Being Willing to Be Laughed At

I WILL ALWAYS remember the day I officially became the chief executive officer of LinkedIn.

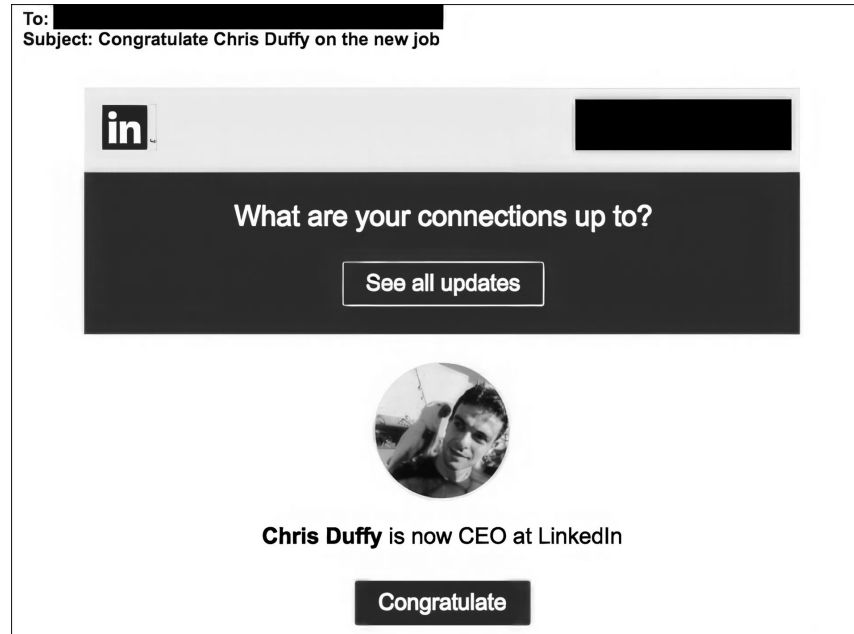
The greatest professional accomplishment of my life began when I realized that, as a comedian, I would never have any real use for a LinkedIn profile. It's a digital network built for people with real jobs. People with serious résumés. People who have practical, applicable skills that other people can endorse.

The very idea of joining LinkedIn as a comedian made me laugh. It was such a strange platform and so foreign to my work experience. Of course, that meant I *had* to join. I needed to see how far I could follow that laugh. I created a profile and sent out connection requests to a bunch of (presumably very confused) friends.

I quickly discovered that you could make your job title whatever you wanted. If you said you were a middle manager at Nike, no one fact-checked you on it. That seemed unbelievable to me! Companies didn't have to verify that you actually worked for them? I felt like I'd discovered a huge, glaring loophole in the system. To test how far that would go, I decided that I would aim straight for the top. I listed my current job as "CEO of LinkedIn."

Incredibly, LinkedIn allowed me to do it.

Not only did it let me, it took the joke to the next level, sending an automated email to all my contacts announcing my new job.



This was, I can say in all honesty, one of the happiest moments of my life. I was proud of my work at LinkedIn and honored to be appointed its chief executive officer.

For the next few months, I would periodically get messages from people who clearly had not done any research (or even clicked through to my profile) asking me to speak at their conference or give them advice on starting their own social network. I tried my best to respectfully decline. I was busy running a business, after all.

Then on my one-year work anniversary, LinkedIn sent yet another email to all my contacts, this time asking them to congratulate me on one year as CEO. That's when I finally got a message from a woman named Faith in LinkedIn's "Trust & Safety" department. She said my account had been locked due to concerns that it was inaccurate. I sent her a photo of my driver's license to prove that my name was, in fact, Chris Duffy. She responded that the issue was not with my name but with the fact that I was claiming to be CEO of LinkedIn.

I wrote her back: "Faith, you are taking quite a disrespectful tone for someone who works for me." Ten seconds later she deleted my account.

Ultimately, it was probably for the best. I cherish the time I spent at the helm of LinkedIn, but if I were still its CEO, I probably wouldn't have time to write this book.

Taking social risks, whether it's running afoul of a business network's terms of service or making a fool of yourself in public, is the third and final pillar. While it's possible to master the first two pillars quietly and inwardly, this one requires you to put yourself out there a bit more. There's an element of danger required.

Introverts, have no fear: I'm not going to insist you can't have a good sense of humor unless you make a big public speech. But I will say that you can't have a great sense of humor by always playing it safe. You have to accept that you're going to screw things up occasionally, and more than that, you have to embrace that making mistakes and breaking rules are at the heart of finding laughs.

REJECTS, REJOICE!

A key element in taking social risks is getting comfortable with rejection. No one likes to flop, to be turned down, passed over, or rejected. As a result, many of us wildly overestimate how painful and humiliating a rejection would be. It's a well-worn cliché that "You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take"—if you're someone with my level of sports ability, you also miss 100 percent of the shots you *do* take. But the truth is that getting rejected isn't nearly as bad as we think it will be. Moreover, it's an unavoidable step on the path to any sort of meaningful success or accomplishment.

Jia Jiang knows this better than nearly anyone. He is a master of rejection. A bestselling author, entrepreneur, and speaker, Jia didn't begin to succeed until he realized that he was so afraid of rejection that he was sabotaging his potential successes. He would only try for goals that he was almost positive he would achieve. He wouldn't put himself out there, ask others for help, or make himself vulnerable, for fear of being rebuffed. As a result of his overthinking, he missed out on possible relationships, business

opportunities, and adventures. Like many people (myself included), Jia would construct elaborate narratives in his head about all the terrible things that would happen to him, and all the people who would be mortally offended, if he simply asked for what he wanted. Unlike most of us, though, Jia decided that handling rejection was a muscle and that he was going to start exercising it.

Jia began a program of “rejection therapy.”^[1] He set out to get at least one rejection every day for one hundred days. He started by making a request that he was positive would get rejected: asking a stranger if he could borrow a hundred dollars. As expected, the random security guard at an office complex said no. But the funny and revealing part wasn’t the rejection, it was the gap between what Jia thought would happen (“I thought he might pull out a gun or just yell at me”) and what actually happened (the security guard looked confused and said, “No, why?”). In fact, Jia was so unprepared for the guard to ask him a follow-up question that he just backed away without even answering.

Over the ninety-nine days that followed, Jia set himself up for all sorts of hilarious rejections. Some of my favorites include requesting a “burger refill” at a fast-food restaurant, asking to give the weather report for a local TV station, ordering a model of the Olympic rings made out of Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and trying to send a package to Santa Claus via FedEx. He learned through the process that rejection not only was far less painful than he’d expected but could actually be fun. And the more he put himself out there, the more he was surprised by what was possible.

This is where Jia’s rejection therapy ties back explicitly to our third pillar. The most common mental barrier I experience, the one that stops me from taking risks, is fear of rejection and anxiety about how other people will react. Jia’s project was designed to defuse precisely that internal response, and it couldn’t help but make people laugh. Because when you put yourself out there, rather than reject you, most people are either delighted or, at the very least, curious.

Of course, there are bound to be exceptions. Bona fide jerks surface from time to time. But that person is far rarer than the salesperson who laughs with joy and tries her best to construct interlocking doughnut Olympic rings. (She succeeded, and they looked incredible.)

LAUGHING WITH STRANGERS ON THE BUS

A ton of behavioral science backs up the idea that taking social risks leads to positive results. Among the many studies, hardly any make people quite as skeptical as the one that found that talking to a stranger on the train or bus would improve the quality of their day.^[2] A typical reaction goes something like “Maybe that works for some people, but not on the buses I take.”

In fact, the University of Chicago team that conducted the study found that “those who talked to strangers reported a significantly happier ride than those who kept to themselves—even though a survey of a separate group of commuters predicted the opposite.”^[3]

I imagine this effect is even more pronounced when the moment being shared on a bus is one that makes both people laugh. Most of us would agree that a shared laugh among strangers sounds pretty good, but difficult to accomplish. And yet it’s easier than you think! There’s nothing quite as satisfying as seeing something bizarre happening and then making eye contact with a stranger and confirming that yes indeed, you are both seeing that.

I was once at a miniature golf course when the group in front of mine started screaming and jumping around. It turned out that a large rat had appeared in the miniature windmill they were trying to putt their way through. I looked at the screaming teenagers, then back at the family of strangers behind me. All I had to do was raise my eyebrows, and the mom said, “Yup, we’ll probably be skipping that hole.” We all burst out laughing.

All of which is to say that taking social risks doesn’t have to mean making grand, rejection-worthy gestures like Jia’s. You can create great, memorable moments with something as small as a knowing look. The key is letting a connection happen. You’ve got to be willing to both see and be seen.

IMPROVISING YOUR BRAIN OFF

It's a lot easier to take a risk when you're fully in the moment, your awareness not held hostage by concerns about, say, the amount of eye contact that feels "not creepy," or the fact that you called someone's spouse by the wrong name, or whether some water that splashed while you were washing your hands makes it look like you peed yourself. When I'm totally present and in the moment, the part of my brain that is scanning other people's reactions to make sure that what I'm doing is "okay" and "not embarrassing" and that "no one in this Wendy's thinks I'm covered in my own urine" feels like it switches off.

And it turns out that the unselfconsciousness I experience isn't *just* a feeling. On a neurological level, something is actually happening in my brain. A pair of medical researchers from Johns Hopkins and the National Institutes of Health had jazz musicians improvise—a practice that demands a musician attend to their senses, environment, and feelings—while inside an fMRI machine.^[4] When the researchers looked at blood flow in the improvisers' brains, they found something remarkable. The musicians had "turned off" regions of the brain linked to "self-censoring and inhibition, and [turned] on those that let self-expression flow."^[5]

I love this study for several reasons. One is that a report about their research was titled "This Is Your Brain on Jazz." But the bigger reason, the one I come back to again and again, is that it's concrete proof of the power of trusting your instincts. While playing jazz, the parts of the brain that generate that anxious, self-critical voice—the ones that dog so many of us throughout our days—are deactivated.

And luckily for us, that mental state isn't exclusive to improvising riffs while in a giant magnetic tube. Similar results have been demonstrated with improvised comedy and even something as modest as trying to come up with a humorous caption for a blank cartoon.^[6]

To me, this is one of the biggest benefits of cultivating a humor mindset. So many of us spend our days burdened by anxious chatter, endlessly scanning and rescanning social interactions, dwelling on any perceived social error, no matter how slight. Cultivating humor can help us take a deep breath and quiet our minds.

It also, to me, explains why so many of the funniest people tend to be neurotic or anxious. It's not that being neurotic is somehow a prerequisite for being funny, but that neurotic people have discovered how powerful a tool humor is to quiet their anxious minds. Humor, when practiced correctly, can be a legal, socially acceptable, side-effect-free way to modify your brain, at least temporarily. When I'm in that zone, I don't worry about what people are thinking about me, or where I should hold my hands in a photo, or where I should hold my hands when I'm not in a photo, or oh god, what do normal people do with their hands?! If I can make someone laugh (or try to make myself laugh), that critical, questioning voice quiets down, and I can take in the world more clearly.

SHOULD YOU SEE A THERAPIST OR BECOME A CLOWN?

At this point in the book, you may be thinking to yourself, *Humor is good and all, but what Chris really needs is a therapist.*

To you, I would say: I agree! I'm a big proponent of therapy. And yet the line between therapy and humor is blurrier than you might imagine.

In her fantastic book *Animal Joy: A Book of Laughter and Resuscitation*, the psychoanalyst Nuar Alsadir draws an explicit link between her training as a psychoanalyst and her experience performing comedy and training as a clown. If you're like me, you might be skeptical about receiving life advice from a Paris-trained-clown-turned-New York City-based Freudian analyst. But Alsadir is the exception to the rule that says don't share your intimate psychological struggles with a clown.

Alsadir writes that "both psychoanalysis and the art of clowning—though in radically different ways—create a path toward the unconscious, making it easier to access the unsocialized self, or, in philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's terms, to 'become the one you are.'"[\[7\]](#) That's a fancier way of saying what I've been delving into in this chapter: Humor relies on you being the person you are. The unsocialized, honest you.

Alsadir points out that in comedic performances, the lines often regarded as the funniest could easily, with “a different tone of voice and context,” be delivered in a therapy session. This rings true when I think about some of my favorite punch lines: “What I should have said was nothing.” “I have never, ever wanted to date a man who is chill. ’Cause chill don’t pay the bills.” “Walking around with me is like walking around with someone who is running for Mayor of Nothing.”^[*1] In Alsadir’s experience, audience members “laughed less because a performer was funny than because they were honest.”^[*2] [8]

Alsadir’s clown teacher once told her that he was trying to “undo socialization: *stop wiggling, sit still, please behave*. When someone says *please behave*, it means please behave less.” “Behaving less” may sometimes smooth the road of our days, keeping things easy and nonconfrontational. But as Alsadir sees in her therapy practice, it also “trains us to develop a radar for what is wanted by other people, as opposed to tuning in to what is inside us.”^[9]

Subverting society’s expectations for how you’re supposed to behave, think, and conform is no easy task. “A thing is funny,” George Orwell wrote, “when—in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening—it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.”^[10]

This is exactly why I work in comedy and why humor matters so much to me. In one of the only buttoned-up cubicle jobs I’ve ever held, I was told that I needed to stop asking so many questions about the way things worked. I was a lowly summer intern in the communications department of a large foundation. My job consisted largely of sending out form letter responses to people who had sent the foundation unsolicited mail. Whenever I ran out of assigned tasks, I couldn’t stand to just sit around and do nothing. But my supervisors were not interested in my taking any initiative. I was told to sit in my cubicle and wait for more mail to arrive.

The situation was exactly what Alsadir’s teacher told her about. The instructions to me to behave less were explicit. I couldn’t handle it. I started decorating my cubicle with form letter responses I had created in response to hypothetical queries we’d never fielded before. “Thanks for your letter asking for a recipe for the world’s tastiest margarita. We’d be happy to share our thoughts” and “I speak on behalf of everyone here at the foundation when I say we are so sorry to hear that your parrot was charged with a felony.”

At the end of the summer, my supervisor told me that he didn't think I should pursue a full-time position in corporate comms. "We think your jokes are funny, but I'm not sure everyone else will." I certainly wouldn't claim that my form letter wallpaper was an Orwellian revolution, but it did help me become more myself and avoid fitting perfectly into the established order of career path striving.

Ideally, that's what getting past socialization and creating those mini-revolutions does. It feels empowering and gives you permission to be bigger and more you.

PUTTING A BOW ON PUTTING YOURSELF OUT THERE

So where does that leave us?

Taking social risks is a way to be truer to yourself. It brings your full self into view. You've already seen how you might apply the first two pillars of good humor. You've attuned your senses to the funny things in the world, and you've been willing to laugh at your own ridiculousness. Now you're trying to actively bring other people in on those laughs.

You could sign up for an improv class or a clowning workshop. You could follow Jia Jiang's example and set your own hundred-day rejection therapy challenge (as a large community on social media has done). You could even explore these skills by going to therapy, as Nuar Alsadir pointed out.

Those are all pretty big commitments, though. What if you want some more laid-back, lower-cost practices to start building the muscle of taking social risks? Don't worry, I've got you covered there.

1. Talk to the stranger on the bus.

You had to know this one was coming! It's research-backed! It's going to improve your day! It's also going to feel terrifying at first! But whether it's

on the bus, the train, or the plane, or in line at the post office, take the risk of chatting with a stranger. Don't even worry about laughing together at first. Just initiate contact. Chances are a laugh will come organically, but it's fine if it doesn't. The goal is to make the social risk of initiating communication feel less risky and more normal.

2. Share what you've noticed from the first two pillars.

For many of us, our default is to connect over a complaint: "The traffic these days is awful." "Can you believe how delayed the train is?" "These prices are outrageous." Those kinds of observations can lead to connection, but they're rarely the most fun option. If you're trying to spark joy and bring more laughter into your life, try experimenting with sharing things that you've already found humor and lightness in. Use the details that you notice from being present or observing yourself honestly. The options for how you can frame those discoveries are almost infinite, but some examples include:

"Isn't it so funny how _____?"

"I noticed recently that I always _____."

"Every morning, I see this exact same thing happening! Look at _____."

Initiating a conversation with a friend, coworker, or stranger by sharing the gift of something you've found humor in is likely to prompt them to reciprocate and share in it too. Or at the very least, you'll get to see if your observations resonate outside your own brain. It's not guaranteed they will! That's the risk in taking social risks.

3. Behave more, not less.

Listen to Nuar Alsadir's clown maestro! Don't limit yourself to behaving only in the quiet, conforming ways that you think you're "supposed to behave." Instead, pay attention to when that little voice inside your head that says *Don't do that; that would be weird* pipes up, and experiment with not obeying it. A small, simple example might be when you're in public and you hear a song you love. Your voice, if it's anything like mine, probably

says, *Whatever you do, do not dance or sing or even bob your head along to the music at all!*

Maybe you ignore that command in a small, tiny way. You do a little shimmy as you cross the street. Or you roll down the window of your car at a red light and belt out the chorus of the song that's pumping out of the car next to you. That might be way too big a swing for you! Okay then, maybe you just harmonize with your windows rolled up and your eyes locked straight ahead on the road so you won't have to know if the other driver even saw you. Take the risks that feel right for you! But do take a risk, because you'll find that it gets easier and easier over time.

4. When all else fails, join the kids' table.

I spent many years teaching adults how to do comedy and improv. I also taught in an elementary school. One of the biggest things that I was struck by, having those two parallel groups of students, was that many of the humor skills I was teaching adults were just things that kids do naturally.

To me, that's a very hopeful fact! It's not like you need to learn something completely new that you've never been able to do before. Instead, it's more about unlearning the shame, self-consciousness, and anxiety around "doing it right." Kids are amazingly unfiltered. I only taught for a few years, but I have a near-endless supply of examples.

Once a fourth-grader told me that my teeth "looked like a famous person's teeth." Having spent years in braces, I have to admit that I was more touched than I probably should have been. Then she followed it up with "Except famous people's teeth aren't yellow."

She roasted me good. And it's true. Very few movie stars are known for their beautiful yellow smiles.

I'm not encouraging you to give the people around you your unvarnished thoughts about their physical appearance. But I would push you, if you're feeling stuck about how to take social risks, to occasionally ask yourself *What would a nine-year-old do?*

If you're at the beach, a nine-year-old might build a ridiculous sand creation.

If you're at the mall, a nine-year-old might try on the largest hat she can find.

If you're in a dull, gray, fluorescent-lit cubicle, a nine-year-old might decorate it with stickers and declare it an autonomous country.

When all else fails, join the kids' table. Pull up a tiny chair and ask them for advice.

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There are so many ways you can bring more social risks into your day-to-day. In fact, just about every one of the following chapters of this book is going to explore how to bring laughter into various contexts of your life. Being willing to engage in a humorous way with those around you lets you accept that whatever reaction people have to you is going to be okay. That can be a huge relief and a powerful form of freedom. We get to be our true selves rather than fighting so hard to fit into a prescribed societal role. But if we ever do get sick of our true selves, we can always go back to being the CEO of LinkedIn.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[*1](#) Jokes by Mike Birbiglia, Ali Wong, and John Mulaney respectively.

[*2](#) She also goes on to say, “Of course that’s not how all laughter operates, but the kind of laughter I’m interested in—spontaneous outbursts—seems to function that way, and clown performances push that dynamic to its extreme, which is why I decided to enroll in clown school, and how I earned the grating nickname ‘smarty-pants.’”

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THE MATH OF COMEDY

The Practical Logistics of Making Things Funny

THE CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED writer Simon Rich once told me that writing comedy is exactly like writing horror—except that in comedy, you build to the point of greatest tension and then release it, letting the audience off the hook with the catharsis of laughter. In horror, you just keep raising the tension higher and higher until people die.

One of the biggest powers of humor is that release of tension. Humor can puncture a stressful moment and leave us laughing instead of fighting. When I lead workshops on comedy for adults, one of the first techniques I try to highlight is how, in an onstage fight or a real-life squabble, you can invert the dynamics almost immediately by finding the laugh.

One way to do that is to agree wholeheartedly. An improv student I taught once started a scene by saying to his scene partner, “You never listen to a word I say! You only ever think of yourself!”

Most of us, when faced with an accusation like that, would be naturally inclined to defend ourselves. And that’s exactly what his scene partner did. She threw back, “That’s not true! I’m listening to you right now!”

Totally understandable response. It’s what most of us would say too. But it’s not very funny, not very unexpected, and not very likely to lead to

anything other than the same argument we've already heard dozens of times.

But if you agree wholeheartedly, you open up the possibility of a different result and a big laugh. So I had my students run that same scene back. Once again, the scene started with "You never listen to a word I say! You only ever think of yourself!" But this time, the scene partner responded with "You're right! I'm not listening to a word you say and all I'm thinking about is how long it's going to be until I can get home and order a pizza!"

That got a big laugh from everyone in the room, including her scene partner. He gave a sly grin and added, "I've been thinking about pizza all day too. Why would we fight when we could be picking out our toppings?"

Much funnier, much more unexpected, and much more fun to watch than two people yelling at each other!

Whether we're in an improv scene or in real life, there's something delightful about realizing that other people are experiencing the same things that we are. Even when what we're experiencing is unpleasant, like realizing that we're being kind of annoying! The sense of shared experience is one reason laughter is such a powerful tool in building social connections and bonding among groups (topics we'll discuss in depth in chapters 5 and 6). This is also why it's so much fun to see someone make an accurate joke about themselves ("They notice it too! It's not just the rest of us who see that glaringly obvious thing about them!")

But aside from the bigger-picture social and philosophical reasons why humor works, there are also a number of smaller, technical ways to make something funny. As a professional comedy writer and a stand-up, I'd like to offer you some of the unwritten rules that govern what makes people laugh. Although I guess they won't be unwritten rules by the time you're reading this because I will have written them down.

I'm teaching you these techniques because you may want to experiment with them in trying to make other people laugh, but also because understanding the mechanics can help you look more closely at what is making *you* laugh. Knowing these tricks gives you some specific frameworks for what to look for out in the world when you're trying to find things to amuse yourself.

1. FUNNY THINGS COME IN THREES[*1]

If I was going to give you just one piece of comedy mechanics, it would be this one. Things are funniest in threes. There are a number of reasons why that might be. For one, comedy often relies on the unexpected. But if you want to subvert expectations, you first have to establish them. That's where the rule of three comes in. Introduce an idea, establish a pattern, and then break that pattern for a laugh. This is not a new idea! In fact, one of the classic examples of the genre comes from the 1960s TV classic *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. A waitress is taking an order from a bald man and asks him: "Can I get you anything? Cup of coffee? Doughnut? Toupee?"

As the audience, we think we know where she's going with her questions and then suddenly, bam! She's taken it in a whole new direction.

[*2]

Threes aren't only funny when they're breaking a pattern, though. Three is also the funniest number of times to use a laugh line. The first time, it's funny. The second time (assuming enough time has passed), it's a delightful surprise, a callback to the earlier laugh that gets an even bigger laugh. But the third time is the peak laughter.

There's something inherently satisfying about threes. When I first learned about the rule of three, I started seeing triples everywhere. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I came, I saw, I conquered. Snap, crackle, and pop. And it's even more universal in comedy. Look at your favorite sitcom or movie, and I bet you'll find a joke being brought back three times. In my personal life, one of the things I notice most is how the person who doesn't seem to "get it" when it comes to having a sense of humor is almost always the person who brings back a funny phrase or joke for a fourth or fifth time.

If they just stopped at three, they'd be way better off. The third appearance is maximally satisfying—it's as delightful as a fresh new wig on a bald man's head.[*3] It feels as though there's a pattern that's been completed. And if it comes back a fourth time? It's invariably kind of disappointing. After three times, like a breakfast-themed toupee brought out

to lunch, you're getting diminished returns, and the joke needs to be given a rest.^[*4]

2. YES, AND

In the comedy pantheon, right up there with the rule of three is the concept of *yes, and*. *Yes, and* is one of the core tenets of improvisational comedy. According to the legendary comedy theater Second City, it's much more than "simply two words strung together, it is a state of mind that all of the performers adhere to."^[1]

The idea is that in any moment, rather than arguing or denying what your scene partner is saying, you affirm it and then build on it. Many times this involves an improviser literally saying the words *yes, and*. But it can also be an unstated spirit of collaboration that allows the comedy to build and grow collaboratively.

There are two pieces to making this skill work. The first is to agree with the other person, to say yes to them. Here's a description of what that looks like, again from Second City: "If you start a scene by saying that you are an alien, and your scene partner completely commits to also being an alien, being abducted by an alien, etc., both of you know you can count on the other person. On the other hand, if you start by saying you are a puppy, but your scene partner says 'Wait, I thought you were a cat!', the scene is compromised. Not only do you feel less confident, but also the audience is less entertained."^[2]

The second piece is to build on what they've given you. You don't just accept the first brick they've handed you—you add another of your own, and you're well on your way to building something collectively. As Tina Fey put it in her book *Bossypants*:

If I start a scene with "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you just say, "Yeah..." we're kind of at a stand-still. But if I say, "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you say, "What did you expect? We're in hell." Or if I say, "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you say, "Yes, this can't be good for the wax

figures.” Or if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “I told you we shouldn’t have crawled into this dog’s mouth,” now we’re getting somewhere.

[3]

One reason *yes, and* has spread so far outside the insular world of improv comedy is that the concept can just as easily apply to interactions in everyday life. When you think about a person who takes what you say, supports you, and then builds on that support, you’re probably thinking about a person you’d like to spend more time with! The first interaction I ever had with my wife was when we were both on the sidelines of an indoor intramural soccer game and one of the players took a stray soccer ball to the groin. She asked me to explain what that felt like. We ended up riffing together on the tragic evolutionary debacle that left half of all humans with their most delicate body parts dangling in an unprotected pouch. Luckily, the soccer player quickly recovered, and thanks to his pain, I started down the path that led to me having a beautiful, loving family.

Laughter and humor are always easier when there’s that element of trust and support. If you’re going to put yourself out there, you want to know that the people around you are safe. Put another way, no one wants to do a trust fall if they think there’s fifty-fifty odds of the other person just letting them hit the ground rather than catching them.

3. TAKE THE ELEVATOR, NOT THE ROCKET SHIP

She’s my boss, and she’s yelling at me. She’s the CEO, and she’s yelling at me on an all-company Zoom meeting. She’s the president of the United States of America, and she’s yelling at me during the State of the Union. When you’re *yes, and*-ing or creating groups of three, you get the best results if you heighten as you go. A boss is high stakes. A CEO is higher stakes. The president is the highest stakes. Laughs tend to get bigger and jokes get funnier as they increase in ridiculousness or the stakes get raised.

At the same time, you don't want to go too big too fast. It's not as funny to start with the president, because it feels a little too dramatic to be real. There's also not much further up you can go from there. So when you're heightening, take the elevator, not the rocket ship.

I once took a trip with my wife's family to Boulder, Colorado. While we were there, we decided to go on a tour of the Celestial Seasonings Tea Factory. I was told it's one of the Top Ten Tea Tours in America, a list that I'm positive exists only for its alliterative power.

I was more than a little skeptical of the idea of taking this tour. We had just arrived in one of the most beautiful natural areas in the United States. We were in a famously walkable and bikeable city. And yet we were going to spend several hours of our very limited time there touring a factory that makes tea? It seemed like a waste of time.

I was completely wrong. As soon as we got to the tea factory, I realized this was going to be incredible. Our tour guide was a young outdoors bro who kicked things off with a series of rapid-fire tea puns. "This tour is going to be tea-riffic! Don't worry, the stairs aren't too steep. Let's get this par-tea started." I was already a fan, but then he directed our attention to the first stop on the tour. It was a large window that, in the sunlight, reflected back like a mirror. "That's right, our first attraction is your beautiful selves!" After that, I was ready to follow him to the ends of the earth, especially once I realized that he'd used the word *beau-TEA* to be *flir-TEA* with us. We were in the presence of genius.

The facility itself was much more impressive than I'd expected. There's only one Celestial Seasonings factory in the world, so if you've ever had Sleepytime Bear, Red Zinger, or Lemon Zinger, this is where the magic happens. As we entered, every few steps we'd encounter another pile of ingredients and another enchanting aroma. Several tons of orange peel here, giant bags of dried hibiscus there. It was a feast for the senses.

They kept one ingredient segregated from all the others, and they made a big deal about it throughout the tour. They even sold magnets and T-shirts in the gift shop that said I SURVIVED THE MINT ROOM.

When we got to the mint room, expectations were high. The tour guide yelled, "Are you ready for the mint room?!" We all yelled back, in unison, "We're ready for the mint room!"

Then he hit a big red button on the wall, and this giant metal door started slowly moving upward, opening with the theatricality of the gates to

Jurassic Park. As the door opened, the smell of mint hit us in a wave. It was so powerful that it brought tears to my eyes and took my breath away. As soon as the mint reached us, as soon as it hit us, a little girl in the front of the tour group just, *blech*, vomited *everywhere*.

She truly did not survive the mint room. I can only imagine that in the gift shop on the way out, they said that they were sorry but they couldn't sell her that T-shirt.

The incredible thing, though? The smell of mint was so powerful that even though we could see the throw-up, I couldn't smell it at all. And that's how you know they use high-quality ingredients.^[*5]

That's a true story. But it's also funnier because I didn't start with the wildest part. If I had opened by saying "I once saw a girl throw up all over the place in a tea factory," I would have had nowhere to go from there. So I took a slower train to get there. In this case, it's funnier even if it took oolong time.^[*6]

4. START WITH THE SECOND-BIGGEST LAUGH

If you want to make people laugh, you've got to set the tone up front. We're social creatures, and we need to know that you're allowing us to laugh at you. It's mortifying to give a full-throated laugh at what you think is a joke, only to realize that the person you're laughing at was earnestly sharing something vulnerable. Who among us hasn't had to suddenly swallow a laugh as we realize that we've terribly misjudged a situation?

"Oh! You were serious about getting back together with your ex? That's...great! I was just laughing at the idea because it's...so good," you mutter as you turn bright red and slowly back away.

Because we've almost all had some variation of that experience, we learn that it's safer to assume that someone is not trying to be funny unless we get a clear signal otherwise. That's why the very first thing you say matters so much in setting the tone. In stand-up comedy, one of the

universal rules that every successful comedian learns is to start with your second-funniest joke. If you get the audience laughing right off the bat, you have a *much* easier time for the rest of your set. If you don't get them laughing right away, you've dug yourself a hole that's often impossible to get out of.

Starting with a big laugh sets the expectation and the tone. Not only does the audience know that they're allowed to laugh, but now they also feel that they're in the hands of a capable and talented performer. Once the laughter starts, inertia is in the comedian's favor. It's much easier to keep people laughing than it is to take them from stone-faced and sullen to that first laugh.

Why start with the second-funniest joke and not the funniest? Well, that's because comedians want to save their best joke for the very end. By closing with the strongest material they have, they leave the audience on a high note, which tends to paint the rest of the performance in the best possible light.

The point of this book is not to teach you how to be a professional comedian, so how can a regular person apply this in their life? To me, the key idea of this stand-up trick is that humor builds on inertia. If you want to laugh more, you should expect that it's going to take effort to get that first laugh going. But once you're there, each successive laugh gets easier and easier. I think there's also an important point to accept about closing strong, which is that you can't keep the big moments of humor going forever, so it's best to recognize when the laughter has reached its crescendo, and to walk away at the peak. That's the most satisfying outcome for everyone involved.

In real life, you don't get to have a theater crew black out the lights or drop the curtain after your funniest joke gets a big laugh. So it's not always going to be as dramatic as it might have been onstage. To be clear, it's not like I'm climbing out of the window at parties to make sure I end on a high note (although I have to admit that's a tempting idea). But I do frequently excuse myself to go get a drink or visit the restroom after a big laugh. Even without leaving the conversation, I'd recommend moving on to a new topic or, at the very least, letting other people talk and just listening for a while so you can share the spotlight.

5. [INSERT YOUR LAUGHTER HERE]

In our everyday interactions, most laughter doesn't come from anything resembling a joke or a punch line. Instead, it's often a social lubricant that greases the wheels of chitchat. People laugh to fill an awkward space in a conversation. As a result, if you want to make someone laugh, you have to give them the space to make the noise. If you just keep talking after saying something funny, chances are you'll squash the laugh. For better results, combine a pause with a knowing look or a raised eyebrow. That kind of pause fuels laughter the way oxygen fuels a fire.

It's also key to know where to insert that pause. If you look at almost any joke, humorous observation, or sentence that makes you laugh, you'll notice that the funniest part is at the end. If you were to write out a funny sentence, the funniest word should come right before the period. Jack Handey, one of the most admired humor writers of all time, is famous for cutting everything extraneous from his jokes. If you look at how he structures any of his "Deep Thoughts," you can see the math of comedy in its purest form. One of my favorite Jack Handey jokes is "The crows seemed to be calling his name, thought Caw."

To me, that's a perfect joke, and the whole thing hinges on the very last word. Switch the order, and it's not funny at all. "Caw thought the crows seemed to be calling his name." Nope. No, thank you. We need the funniest word to come last and to be followed by a pause that cues us to laugh.

6. THERE'S A REASON COMEDY CLUBS DON'T INVEST IN LIGHTS

When you visit a venue that specializes in comedy, one thing you'll likely notice is that the rooms are dark, the seats are crowded, and the ceilings are low. It's not a coincidence that many of the most famous comedy clubs are located belowground.

Laughter is a social phenomenon, and it's contagious. But it's much more contagious when you're sitting close to another audience member who is laughing too. You're less likely to be self-conscious about your own laughter if the room is dark. Low ceilings ensure that the sound of laughter bounces around the room and builds, making it even more contagious, rather than dissipating up into rafters.

The vast majority of people aren't trying to perform a tightly crafted stand-up act. Instead, they're just looking to goof around and laugh with friends. The lesson that we all can take away from what makes a professional comedy venue great is that people laugh more and have a better time when they're less self-conscious and less aware of themselves. The more you can get people feeling like they're part of the group rather than individuals, and the more you can make them feel like they're not being watched or judged, and the more you make them feel connected to the story or joke or moment, the more they'll laugh.

Sometimes you can produce that effect simply by taking a tiny step forward, if you're talking to a group of people in a circle, so the circle is tighter. Have you ever noticed that when a person starts to speak more quietly or whisper, the whole group leans in as though they're about to get some juicy gossip? That's a small, subtle way of making the moment feel more like a group conversation and less like individuals talking. You can also accomplish this with your emotional affect. The more you put people at ease and let them feel like they fit in, the less they'll be in their heads and feeling like atomized individuals. Another way of saying this is: If you let people know you like them and you're glad they're there, they'll have a better time and laugh more.

7. YOU CAN PULL THE THREAD THROUGH, BUT YOU CAN'T PUSH IT

Personally, I find the most satisfying laughs come toward the end of a performance or a conversation. There's nothing that I love more than finding an unexpected connection between topics and laughing uproariously at the way they line up. This is satisfying only if the connection isn't forced. That means it has to come naturally and spontaneously, by looking back at what's been brought up and finding how it all ties together. If you try to game the system by bringing up subjects or pushing the conversation in a way that you know will connect, it'll feel forced and fall flat.

At one comedy theater I used to teach at, we'd have new students practice this concept by getting them to suggest three random movies, then come up with a name for the film festival that would show those three. Since they hadn't been thinking of a theme beforehand, they'd have to struggle to come up with a connection that felt genuine. The results were often hilarious. I remember one student got *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, and *Cinderella*. They decided their event would be called the People Getting Exciting Invitations Film Festival. I still laugh when I think about that. It's a perfect theme.

Outside comedy, I've often used this concept while talking to friends and gotten big laughs by summarizing the thread that ties together what we've covered in conversation: "Pretty wild that over one lunch, we covered everyone's workout routines, going on trips with our parents, and the presidential election. I guess today was all about things that make me sweat profusely."

Aside from humor, I find the principle that there's always a thread to pull to be very reassuring when I think about my own life. It's okay if my disparate jobs and interests don't all seem to have a unifying theme in the moment. I can't push the thread forward. I'll only be able to see how it's all connected in the future, when I look back.

These are just a small sampling of the many comedic principles and rules that make things funny.^[*7] Take whichever ones resonate with you, and ignore the rest. Or make up your own! At the core, what matters is that to get a laugh, you have to find a way to communicate whatever you find funny to another person in a way that they understand.

Jerry Seinfeld often uses a metaphor to explain this concept. Every joke, he says, is you making the audience jump from one side of a chasm to another. If the gap between your setup and your punch line is too small, the audience doesn't feel any danger, so they get bored. If it's too far, they don't make it to the other side with you, and they fall, in confusion, into the crevasse. But when you get the distance just right, they're excited, they don't see it coming, and they make it to the other side with you.

That's fundamental to good comedy and to good humor. You have to make sure everyone can make the leap with you.

That's an important concept for all communication, not just comedy. Paying close attention to the person you're talking to, listening to them, and responding rather than simply delivering a memorized "funny story" will allow you to see where they're confused or bored and reconnect with them. If I want you to laugh and enjoy talking to me, I need to make sure you have the necessary background information. Comedians might call it "making sure your premise is clear." Other people might call it "being an empathetic human."

I need to make sure that I've taken the time to clearly structure what I'm saying. Then I add to the delight by putting the strange, funny words in a place where you'll get to savor them. I serve them up to you on a plate and give you the time to laugh at them. And I build on your understanding by taking you with me on a journey, so that by the end, you're laughing just as hard as I am. Otherwise, you're down at the bottom of a crevasse with the rest of Jerry Seinfeld's audience. And that's a fate worse than airplane food.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} Could I have made the rule of three number three on my list? Absolutely, I could have. Do I think it's funny to have the rule of three be a number that is not three? Yes, I do.

^{*2} Side note: I do think a coffee shop that also sold toupees would be a great business. They could specialize in breakfast and wigs and call it Top o' the Morning.

*3 Do you see what I did there? I forcibly wedged in a third reference to toupees. *Rule of three!*

*4 Of course, like all creative rules, there are exceptions, and plenty of skilled performers break this rule repeatedly. One of the more common ways you'll see it get broken is by going so far past three repetitions that the laugh goes all the way downhill into not funny at all, and then, because the performer just will not let it go, it starts to become so absurd that it's funny again around the tenth or twelfth repetition.

*5 High *quali-TEA*.

*6 I can't resist the siren song of tea puns, but this is actually another good example of how the rule of three would have made things funnier. I should have stopped while I was ahead. That would have required self-control that I do not possess, though.

*7 If you want to get deeper into these ideas, a few classic comedy texts are *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation* by Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson; *Improvisation for the Theater* by Viola Spolin; *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual* by Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh; and *Finite and Infinite Games* by James P. Carse.

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BECOMING MAGNETIC

Humor for Social Connections

I WAS ONCE having a picnic dinner with some friends in a public park when we looked over and saw a man walking a large goat on a leash. At first, seeing a goat out for a walk seemed totally normal. *Oh yes, that man is walking his pet. Very normal*, I thought to myself. Then the reality of what I was seeing hit me. *That's not a dog. It's a large goat, complete with horns and terrifying rectangular pupils.*^[*1]

As soon as the goat walker and his beast passed by us, we made eye contact with each other and all the strangers in the vicinity. Everyone was silently, nonverbally confirming that yes, we had all seen the same thing, and yes, we all thought it was unusual. Then there was a collective burst of laughter. Even better, everyone, formerly strangers, started joking about what we'd seen. "Just a regular day in the park, walking my goat!" "I left my bison at home!" "Imagine having to find a landlord that allows livestock!"

My favorite part about public spaces like libraries, parks, and even the DMV is how it takes only one eccentric event for all the people there to go from separate, silent strangers to allies, forever bonded in the witnessing of goat man. The moments after a strange public encounter are some of the funniest and most connected moments I've ever experienced with strangers.

That's what this chapter is about: how humor can instantly forge bonds in a way that almost nothing else can. How can we take advantage of that magic and make it happen more often?

YOU HAD TO BE THERE

When I ask people about the last time they laughed so hard they cried, they almost always have trouble explaining the source of those belly laughs to an outsider. It's a moment between friends or family members when you're deeply connected, and you're winding each other up, and the laughter just won't stop. It's much rarer for me to hear about that kind of deep laughter coming from watching a movie or a comedy performance or even reading a nonfiction book about the importance of humor.

On the one hand, this aspect of humor makes it pretty uninteresting to hear tales of other people's moments of hardest laughter. It's a lot like hearing about other people's dreams. I'm sure it was riveting when you were in the Technicolor rainforest that was also somehow your high school auditorium, but I'm having trouble tracking the narrative, and I'll just take your word for it.

On the other hand, this is the magic of humor. You have a shared lore with this other person in a way that only the two of you can fully understand. I have friends where, decades after the original incident, we can say three words to each other ("Good point, Bryce," or "Nothing has changed") and instantly be back in a fit of laughter.

That level of connection, that rush of endorphins, makes us want more. We want to spend more time with the people who make us feel that way. We want to be around them. They're magnetic.

This is actually one of the biggest misconceptions about humor that I'm hoping to dispel with this book. Many people seem to believe that having a great sense of humor means you're the center of attention, and you make it all about yourself. That when you're out at dinner or at a party, the person with the best sense of humor is the person who is telling a story or joke, surrounded by rapt audience members. In fact, I'd argue that the person

with the best sense of humor is the person connecting the deepest and laughing the hardest. They're far more likely to be a generous listener than a constant entertainer. The kind of humor that I am advocating for is more about care and attention than about charisma and charm.

TIE THE SHOES

One of the best ways to cultivate that type of humor is by spending quality time (socializing or collaborating) with other people. The more comfortable two people are together, and the more they trust each other and know each other's likes and quirks, the more easily they can fall into deep laughter together.

One of the most celebrated improv comedy duos of all time is TJ & Dave. TJ Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi have been spontaneously creating and performing remarkable (and often hilarious and moving) one-hour plays together since 2002. These plays are completely original and made up from scratch in the moment at each performance. TJ & Dave's work has been called "breathtaking," "miraculous," and "amazing." At the core of what they do professionally is acting from a place of generosity and trying to make the other person look good.

Once, early in their careers, Pasquesi won a prestigious performance award and said in his acceptance speech, "Our job is to make the others look good. By getting this award, I guess I'm not doing my job. I'll try harder next time."^[1]

A key way that Jagodowski and Pasquesi work to make each other look good is paying extremely close attention to each other and letting go of the idea that their role onstage is to draw attention to themselves. As Pasquesi put it in an interview with the literary journal *Wag's Revue*:

I remember I was teaching a class one time, and everybody was just fuckin' moving around, for no reason. I told them all to just stand still and not move until they have a reason to move. And somebody shifted their weight, and I'm like, "Why are you moving? Why are you moving?" and they couldn't answer, so I said, "Then stand fucking still. Stand still." And nobody moved, and then they

started getting crazier and crazier about why they're not moving and what have they got to do—one person went over and tied somebody else's shoe. That is: there's nothing within me; my use is to other people. That's really the reason that should motivate me to do anything in improvisation.^[2]

That motivation, to be of service, is essential in life as well as onstage. We're not all professional improvisers. And yet every day of our lives, we are inventing our interactions. We have no script to follow. You could do far worse than following Pasquesi's direction: If you're going to do something, do it to help others.

Another important piece here is that Jagodowski and Pasquesi see laughter and comedy as a by-product of connecting honestly and deeply with each other, not as the goal in and of itself.

"If doing something funny is your goal and you fall short, you've got absolutely nothing. But if the goal is something else, and you fall short, it may well be funny, it may well be interesting," says Pasquesi.

Jagodowski adds that it's true in musical improvisation as well. "You play until you make a mistake, and then you make that mistake over and over and over again.... There's nothing better than an honest mistake."

You may be saying to yourself, *Who on earth would want to hear a musical mistake?* But that's probably because you're thinking of a mistake as something bad rather than simply as something unexpected and not according to plan. Part of the beauty of improvisation and creativity is the ability to take an aberration and weave it into something new and delightful. Think about how a jazz musician can take a single dissonant note and build it into a unique instrumental riff that makes that "mistake" feel like it fits perfectly. Or how a painter can take an unexpected movement of watercolor paint and use it to add nuance and subtlety to the shading of the sky.

For Jagodowski and Pasquesi, taking those "mistakes" and immediately giving them justification and support, rather than allowing them to bring shame and anxiety, is the highest calling of humor. Imagine I'm at a fancy work event, and I'm feeling a bit nervous and out of place. While introducing myself to someone, I nervously stumble and say, "Me name is Chris." If the new acquaintance doesn't say anything or gives me a weird look, I'm probably going to obsess about that verbal stumble for the rest of the event.

On the other hand, if they immediately launch into a pirate accent themselves, give me a warm smile, and say, "Ahoy, Chris! On this here

vessel, they call me Captain Joanna,” now we’re both having fun, and I want to spend the rest of the night chatting with Captain Joanna instead of wishing I could dig a hole in the floor and disappear.

This kind of humor and connection can’t be forced. We can all imagine a way Joanna could have delivered a belittling response that would have made me feel even worse. But if it’s coming from a genuine reaction, with kindness and play behind it, the odds of success are much higher. After all, everyone makes mistakes. Everyone says and does weird things sometimes. What we can control is how we react and the context and meaning we give those moments. Pasquesi says, “Laughter is just a reaction to recognizing the absurdity of just being us.”

If you want people to want to spend time with you, if you want people to find you delightful, if you want to be the kind of person others describe as magnetic, one of the best things you can do is embrace absurdity. How can you create space for others to feel embraced in their ridiculousness around you?

Sometimes that might simply be acknowledging your own absurdity, as we talked about in chapter 2. Everyone likes to know they’re not the only one who’s imperfect. Other times it might be joining in to make a person feel like they’re part of a group. If your coworker is bopping her head at her desk while listening to music on her headphones, maybe you start bopping along in rhythm too, so it’s not just Janice from Accounting being an oddball—it’s a silent cubicle dance party. Or maybe it’s as simple as commiserating and laughing with someone when they stumble and drop a slice of cake on the floor. “Are you okay? This is exactly the kind of tragedy that haunts me for years. I still think about a brownie I lost to gravity in 2007. Can I grab you a replacement slice?”

For me, the ideal friend is a person I can laugh with and safely make mistakes around. Those are the people I seek out and want to spend time with.

BETTER THAN QUITTING SMOKING

The ability to forge a deep interpersonal connection through laughter isn't just a pleasant party trick. Friendship can be, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

Robin Dunbar, an emeritus professor of evolutionary psychology at Oxford University, is a world-renowned expert on social connections and friendship. In his book *Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships*, he writes, “Loneliness is turning out to be the modern killer disease, rapidly replacing all the more usual candidates as the commonest cause of death.” In his view, one of the most surprising medical discoveries over the last decade has been “just how dramatic the effects of having friendships actually are—not just for our happiness, but also for our health, wellbeing, and even how long we live.”^[3]

Dunbar's view is supported by research done at Brigham Young University's Social Connections and Health Laboratory by Julianne Holt-Lunstad. She and her coauthors conducted a meta-analysis of nearly 150 epidemiological studies (comprising more than 300,000 patients in total) and found that stronger social connection was associated with a 50 percent reduced risk of early death.^[4] The only health intervention that even came close in terms of impact was quitting smoking.

Dunbar, looking at those studies, draws a pretty remarkable (and hilarious) conclusion: “It will no doubt get me into trouble with the medical profession, but it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that you can eat as much as you like, drink as much alcohol as you want, slob about as much as you fancy,^[*2] fail to do your exercises and live in as polluted an atmosphere as you can find, and you will barely notice the difference.”^[5] On the other hand, if you don't have friends or social activities that you're involved in, you will dramatically shorten the length of your life.

Those of us convinced about the importance of relationships can still find it overwhelming to try to figure out how to actually get more socially connected. After all, as we get older, structural factors make hanging out with friends increasingly challenging. I have less free time than I used to, I

have family responsibilities to juggle, and my oldest friends have spread out geographically. I don't have a group of buddies within a five-minute walk. At this point in my life, maintaining a friendship takes planning and time.

Humor makes that all easier. In fact, the experience of social connection, rather than being a burden, a green vegetable that I reluctantly add to my plate, becomes delightful when I'm laughing and joking around with friends. I'm not doing it to increase my odds of survival from a medical catastrophe—that's just a welcome side effect! Cultivating the right kind of humor makes connection come naturally. It draws people to you.

UNLESS YOU'RE A PUN GUY

Unfortunately, the wrong type of humor, the self-centering, domineering “Look at me!” jokes that we discussed earlier in this chapter, can often push people away. It's hard to want to connect with someone who is always putting on a show. It's much easier to build a relationship with a person who is involved and listening, being of service, and building something together with you.

In my personal experience, I've found that heterosexual men (a group of which I am a member)^[*3] struggle the most with using humor to connect rather than to perform. That's especially tragic considering that straight guys are one of the demographics most affected by the epidemic of loneliness. Dunbar cites a study of nearly four thousand Australian men that “reported that men with few friends and low social support experienced [the] most psychological distress. The ones that were especially vulnerable were those whose friendships were based on nothing more than a common interest, such as a sports club: as participation in the activity fell away, as members married, had children or moved away, so those who remained lost friends, and these weren't easily replaced.”^[6]

The good news is that quality of relationships seems to matter more than quantity of relationships. Which means that attracting a few people you have a real connection to, and feel safe being vulnerable with, provides a

huge benefit. And it's always possible to develop the skills of using humor to bring people in rather than push them away.

Adam Mastroianni, a postdoctoral researcher at Columbia Business School who's also a talented improviser, calls the magnetic type of humor "jamming" (as in when musicians get together and play for fun) and the performative type of humor "joking."

It's a distinction he learned the hard way, after several years of pushing away friends and prompting eye rolls from family with constant puns. As he wrote about the experience, "I would prowl the periphery of conversations, pouncing when I spotted any series of words that could be fashioned into a pun. Like, a girl would introduce herself as being from Oregon, and I would burst in and say, 'Ah so you're an Ore-Gone Girl,' as in, a reference either to the 2014 film or the 2012 novel of the same name (dealer's choice)."^[7]

Mastroianni now understands how little this type of humor was helping him socially. Even at the time, he could see that it didn't lead to free-flowing conversations. But he didn't fully get why. "Maybe people thought I was funny. But nobody *knew* me. After literal years of friendship in college, one of my friends told me, 'It's kinda hard to get to know you.' My response was something like, 'Me? Haha well I guess if I was a James Bond film I'd be *Dr. [Hard to Get to] No* haha oops that's just me *The Man with the Golden Pun* HONK HONK AWOOGA!' But in the quiet of my heart I was like, 'Oh.'"^[8]

That experience led Mastroianni to some of his most important academic research, on conversations, which is directly applicable to all our lives and to my quest to encourage a healthy, generous, magnetic sense of humor.

CONVERSATIONAL DOORKNOBS

When does a conversation end? Why do some conversations feel like they could stay fascinating forever while others fizzle out and feel like an eternal slog? Those are questions that Mastroianni decided to get to the bottom of.

“Most conversations end when nobody wants them to, both because people want to talk for different amounts of time, and because they have no idea when the other person wants to go,” he writes.^[9]

Mastroianni has a boyish face with a wide smile, salt-and-pepper hair, and eyes that glint with mischievous energy behind his glasses. Personally and professionally, he is fascinated by how we experience the social world. As he put it in a scientific journal, “Social connection is essential to physical and psychological well-being, and conversation is the primary means by which it is achieved. And yet scientists know little about it—about how it starts, how it unfolds, or how it ends.”^[10]

Understanding what makes conversations flow (or grind to a halt) also helps us understand why humor is so magnetic and attractive in a conversation partner. Before Mastroianni entered the vaunted halls of academia, he used to perform improv comedy like TJ & Dave. More specifically, he would perform improvised musicals. He explained the secret behind those shows in his delightful newsletter, *Experimental History*.

You’d be doing a scene about, say, bringing your boyfriend to Thanksgiving for the first time and having to explain to your parents that he’s Spiderman, and all of a sudden the pianist would thunder out some chords and now you’re singing something like:

SPIDERMAN, SPIDERMAN
THAT’S WHO I’M DATING, MOM AND DAD
WILL HE EAT?
DO NOT ASK
HE WILL NOT REMOVE HIS MASK

Doing this on the spot is really hard, and the trick that kept us afloat was called “take-and-take of focus,” meaning that whoever was singing had to keep going until someone jumped in to take the spotlight from them, which should happen quickly and often. Though it’s nearly impossible to invent a whole funny song, you can probably fire off a verse, your teammate can come in with the chorus, and if you can do that twice and toss some harmony on top, the audience will go wild.^[11]

As Mastroianni got deeper into his academic studies on conversation, he realized that the improv technique of “taking focus” is crucial to what makes a satisfying social interaction. People often mistakenly believe that a good conversation is always give-and-take: One person asks a question, and

then the other answers, and vice versa. But as Mastroianni's studies found over and over, "Conversations, like improv scenes, start to sink if they sit still."[\[12\]](#)

A conversation where one person won't stop talking is certainly unpleasant. But equally challenging is a conversation where no one is willing to volunteer opinions, statements, or ideas for the others to build on. It's like trying to figure out what to make for dinner. If everyone says, "I'm easy. I'll eat anything," it's actually harder than if they just suggested something they like. Not being willing to offer up a statement (to take the focus of the conversation momentarily) puts all the pressure on the other person to figure it out. Or even if everyone gets to voice an opinion, "Let's all go around and say our favorite food" is a pretty painful first-year-college-seminar type of conversation to have with friends. I'd much prefer someone to grab the focus and say, "The best food in the world is lentil soup."[\[*4\]](#)

Mastroianni thinks of a focused remark like this as a "conversational doorknob"—a thought others can react to so the discussion can quickly gain momentum.

When done well, both giving and taking create what psychologists call *affordances*: features of the environment that allow you to do something. Physical affordances are things like stairs and handles and benches. Conversational affordances are things like digressions and confessions and bold claims that beg for a rejoinder. Talking to another person is like rock climbing, except you are my rock wall and I am yours. If you reach up, I can grab on to your hand, and we can both hoist ourselves skyward. Maybe that's why a really good conversation feels a little bit like floating.

What matters most, then, is not how much we give or take, but whether we offer and accept affordances. Takers can present big, graspable doorknobs ("I get kinda creeped out when couples treat their dogs like babies") or not ("Let me tell you about the plot of the movie *Must Love Dogs*..."). Good taking makes the other side want to take too ("I know! My friends asked me to be the godparent to their schnauzer, it's so crazy." "What?? Was there a ceremony?"). Similarly, some questions have doorknobs ("Why do you think you and your brother turned out so different?") and some don't ("How many of your grandparents are still living?"). But even affordance-less giving can be met with affordance-ful taking. ("I have one grandma still alive, and I think a lot about all this knowledge she has—how to raise a family, how to cope with tragedy, how to make chocolate zucchini bread—and how I feel anxious about learning from her while I still can.")[\[13\]](#)

Offers and acceptances are at the heart of humor. This is the decoding that the humor theorists we met earlier believe underlies all social laughter. You offer me a doorknob, and I know how to turn it. The breathless, tears-running-down-cheeks laughter that I crave so badly is possible only with people who are offering and accepting those psychological affordances. That's when the jokes and silliness start to build on each other and compound, rising all the way to that feeling of floating that Mastroianni describes.

BECOMING MAGNETIC IS CHILD'S PLAY

Lisa Sibbett, a writer and education expert, describes something similar when she gives advice to people about how to talk to kids. For many child-free people, she says, figuring out how to engage a kid in conversation can feel somewhere between awkward and impossible. She doesn't have children herself, but she's dedicated to being the best auntie possible, so she prides herself on finding conversational doorknobs to offer kids. The most common mistake adults make with children, she says, is trying to make small talk such as "How do you like school?" "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and so on. That's pretty boring for kids (and honestly, pretty boring for most adults too).

Instead, Sibbett suggests, "you can make conversation easier on [kids] by going first, and offering (interesting!) information. In the world of education, we call this *lightening the cognitive load*."^[14] Instead of asking a child how they like school, what if you told them about the boy you knew who always found and ate ants on the playground? Or your fourth-grade teacher who wore a big cowboy hat to school every day? Or how one year there was a pet rabbit in the classroom, and you got to take it home for a week over spring break?

Whether you call statements like that conversational doorknobs, attempts to lighten the cognitive load, or just fun facts, they're very likely to

get a kid excited and make them laugh. After you've had your first conversational back-and-forth, Sibbett advises not pushing too far. In fact, she says, you should "walk away and give them some space to decide what they think of you. In a little while, mention another topic they might be interested in. Wait for them to come to you. Chances are, pretty soon they'll run up with something they want to say. When that happens, chat away! Just be ready for them to scamper off again pretty quickly, possibly in the middle of a sentence."^[15]

As is so often the case with kids, they reveal some of the fundamental dynamics that drive us all, regardless of age.^[*5] When someone uses humor in a conversation to create playful, fun, unexpected topics for us to talk about and ways for us to interact, we want to keep running back to them over and over. It's truly like that person is a magnet. We're drawn to them, delighted to have the opportunity to chat more. When, on the other hand, they're just going through the motions, discussing details and platitudes that even they aren't interested in, we can't escape the conversation quickly enough. We start looking for the bathroom or making excuses that we need to get another drink or take a call.

IT'S PARTY TIME

How do you put these academic concepts into place in your own life? Next time you're at a dinner party or an event, experiment with some of these techniques:

Pay attention to doorknobs. When you're chatting with someone and they offer up a question or statement that can turn the conversation in a deeper, funnier, or more interesting direction, take them up on it! Grab the doorknob and open the door. On the other hand, if there aren't any opportunities for that, offer up a doorknob of your own. Some of my personal favorites are: If you were an evil villain and had no morals, but you had the exact same skills and job experience as you currently have,

what would you do?[*6] I also find that conversations often take off if I share a story about an unusual food I was obsessed with as a kid (I asked for the skin, and only the skin, from the top of a chocolate pudding for one birthday) or a small life hack (a chef friend taught me to keep ginger in the freezer and then grate it from frozen—much easier!).

Make the other person look good. Whether it's as simple as smiling and laughing at their stories[*7] or embracing a mistake or error to make it fun rather than embarrassing, do your best to make them look and feel like a genius. There's a reason one of the most common pieces of advice given for conversation is to "be interested, not interesting." Make it about them, rather than about you! If you do, there's no reason you can't be both interested and interesting.

Listen well and bring it back around. Relatedly, listen to what the people around you are saying. Actually hear it. Don't just "listen" while you're biding your time for your next opportunity to jump in with a clever retort. One of the best ways to get a laugh and a surefire way to make yourself more magnetic is to listen closely enough that you can bring back a topic, idea, or little joke from the conversation later on. In improv or stand-up, we call this a callback. Maybe at the beginning of the night, a person shares that they've just adopted a new dog named Ruffles and they're working on training her. If, several hours later, you hear barking outside, turn to that same friend and say, "Ruffles is here." Is that an all-time great joke or observation? Absolutely not. But it shows that you were listening and remembered the name of their dog, and I would be very surprised if they didn't react positively.[*8]

Finally, don't forget to be honest and vulnerable, while still being kind and generous. Very few people want to be friends with the nonstop pun machine. A lot of people want to spend time with a person who listens to them, reacts with genuine care, and finds ways to be silly and unexpected when appropriate. A good test is to ask yourself: If the people you're interacting with were all eight years old, would they be running back to you

to share more, or would they be squirming away in the other direction? If all else fails, you could always buy a goat and walk him in the park.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

*1 Side note: I will never be able to mention a goat's eyes without hearing the actor Tracy Morgan's voice in my head saying his line from *Saturday Night Live*: "That goat's got devil eyes."

*2 "Slob about as much as you fancy" has to be one of the most fantastically British phrases ever written.

*3 I don't think I've ever written a phrase that makes it seem less like I am actually a heterosexual man. "A group of which I am a member" is *VERY* "the lady doth protest too much, methinks."

*4 Tell me you didn't read that sentence and immediately feel compelled to say *No, it is not!* That's how you get a conversation started with a bang.

*5 As soon as my wife and I had our first child, it became clear to me that all the actions that made the baby stop crying were the same things that made me stop being upset. *Am I really angry, or do I just need a snack, a nap, a walk outside, or maybe to change my smelly clothes?* Now I find that the things that make conversations fun for kids are also what make them fun for me. Don't ask me about work! I would much rather hear about a dinosaur or a giant dog.

*6 I call this your shadow profession. While I would never do it in this world, I think in a world where I'm a villain without morals, I'd be incredible at befriending and then defrauding the elderly.

*7 When appropriate! Don't smile and laugh when they tell you about a medical calamity—that would be terrifying.

*8 Unless maybe Ruffles kept them up all night with her barking. In which case, they might give you one of those half-laughs that's really a terrified *Oh no, I'm in for another night of pet-based torture tonight.*

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INSIDE JOKES WITH ABE LINCOLN

Humor to Form Group Identities

WHEN ABRAHAM LINCOLN assembled his famous “team of rivals,” he had a cabinet full of brilliant statesmen. There was only one problem: They mostly hated each other, and they didn’t particularly like him. So how did Honest Abe turn the group of rival politicians into a team?

Lincoln’s answer was, in part, to laugh with them. To create a group identity with inside jokes, folksy anecdotes, and shared humor. Anyone who knew Lincoln knew he had no shortage of jokes. One contemporary said Lincoln’s jokes were as “plenty as blackberries.”^[1] And if there’s one thing we know about blackberries, it’s that there are lots of them.

Modern portrayals of Lincoln tend to paint him as a serious and tragic figure, for understandable reasons. But much of Lincoln’s skill as a politician and a leader was his ability to connect with people by getting them laughing. Benjamin P. Thomas, a Lincoln scholar, wrote that “in thinking through a proposition Lincoln’s mental processes were cautious and deliberate; yet he was ready with an instant witticism or retort under almost any circumstances.”^[2]

Unfortunately, humor is very culture- and context-dependent, so I can’t give you many examples of Lincoln’s jokes that I find even remotely funny

now. One rare example that translates to modern times is a joke Lincoln made about being ugly. During the Lincoln-Douglas debates, when he was accused of being two-faced, Lincoln responded, “Honestly, if I were two-faced, would I be showing you this one?”^[3]

A very solid self-burn!

But most of his other punch lines are incomprehensible to me here in the twenty-first century. He had a supposedly very funny story about a horse getting bitten by a fly. It doesn’t do it for me, but I trust the contemporary reports that say that, in his time, Lincoln crushed. He was bringing down the house with bits about a hog trying to root in winter or a farmer who shot a skunk and then felt bad about it. In 1842 former president Martin Van Buren spent a night with the politicians of Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln was still years from becoming a national figure, but he more than held his own when it came to entertaining the ex-president. Apparently, according to Thomas, “Van Buren related several amusing incidents of New York politics, while others told tales of early life on the frontier. But all yielded at last to Lincoln, who kept them in an uproar far into the night with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of yarns, until Van Buren insisted that ‘his sides were sore with laughing.’”^[4]

Historians have written tomes about the importance of Lincoln’s cabinet for the Union’s eventual success in the American Civil War and the future of the country. But it’s often underappreciated how humor played a role in Lincoln’s ability to lower tensions and maintain order within a group full of big egos and big ambitions.

It’s important to note some historical context on what people understood “humor” to be in Lincoln’s time. The cartoonist and former *New Yorker* cartoon editor Bob Mankoff has long been interested in Lincoln’s humor. As he explained in an essay, “We don’t make the distinction between ‘wit’ and ‘humor’ anymore, but in the nineteenth century people did. Wit was sarcastic and antipathetic while humor was congenial and empathetic. It’s the difference we note now when we distinguish between ‘laughing with’ and ‘laughing at.’ Lincoln was much more about ‘laughing with’ than ‘laughing at.’ And when ‘laughing at,’ it was often himself he was mocking.”^[5]

That Lincoln-style congeniality and empathy can help disarm detractors and create a more comfortable space for positive group dynamics to form. There are evolutionary reasons to suspect that this may be one of the

earliest and most important functions of humor. Animal behavior experts have long observed that chimpanzees and other primates engage in an equivalent to human laughter.^[*1] After laughing together, primates are often more relaxed and less aggressive.^[6] Similarly, children all over the world laugh during play, and most of their first games are some version of *I'm gonna getcha!* So we have a biological inclination to release defensiveness and wariness through humor.

Once you've gotten past people's initial objections and skepticism, laughter can play an essential role in bonding a group together. That's where developing your own secret languages, rituals, and symbols come in.

INSIDE THE INSIDE JOKES

For me personally, one of the biggest joys of making friends and spending time in community is the opportunity to generate new inside jokes. The best inside jokes are impenetrable to outsiders; they're a secret language that you and your group members share. Going back to the grand scientific theories of humor we talked about in chapter 1, inside jokes are the ultimate example of decoding. The only way you have the key to the riddle is if you're in on the joke.

Explaining an inside joke to someone on the outside is almost always a recipe for disaster. It's quite literally a "you had to be there" moment. But for the sake of discussion, let me attempt to break down one from my own life so we can analyze it.

Every Wednesday I work a shift at my local food pantry. It's staffed entirely by volunteers, so the cast of characters changes a lot. But there's a core group of us regulars, and over time we've become good friends. One of the main ways we've built that relationship, despite spending only a brief time together each week and almost never socializing outside the pantry, is through an ever-growing collection of inside jokes and references.

Once one of the volunteers, nicknamed Caballo, was trying to tell us a story about visiting the beach and tossing out some bread to feed the

squirrels. But Caballo mumbled the end of the sentence, so we all misheard him. We thought he said, “I went to the beach to toss some bread out to my girls” instead of “squirrels.”

All of a sudden, the food pantry was paying attention in a whole different way. Who knew Caballo was such a playboy? Tossing out bread to his “girls”? I did not see that coming. Neither did Caballo, it turns out. But it led to a good laugh, and now, months afterward, we still ask Caballo regularly how his girls are doing.^[*2]

The fact that we all know what we’re talking about, and that a reference to “the girls” reliably gets a laugh or at least a smile, builds the feeling that we are a cohesive group at the food pantry. When a new volunteer starts coming regularly, we explain the bit and initiate them in a way. They speak our lingo. They know our slang. They’re part of our culture.

Because that’s really what inside jokes are. They’re the evidence of culture being built within a group. In West Africa, there’s a Yoruba concept, *egbe*, which means “spirit of the group.” Each collection of people has a different *egbe*. We can shape and form that collective spirit by how we interact with each other. Laughing together and building memories of jokes and stories strengthens those relationships and reinforces the bonds.

Eventually, when you’ve been in a group long enough, the original source material often drops away, and you’re left with just the joke. My college friends and I have, at this point, decades of nonsense tying us together. We’re also proof that you don’t need to be in the same physical location to keep an inside joke alive. For years, we had an active banter going over email. But then that wasn’t enough to accommodate the weight of all our accumulated inside jokes. So now we use Slack, a tech platform better known for facilitating productive work communication. On our Slack, almost nothing productive has ever happened. Instead, it’s just a repository of inside jokes.

The channel titles themselves are all bits and would be largely inscrutable to outsiders. When someone feels like a joke didn’t get fully appreciated when it was first shared, they repost it in `#dont_cry_for_me`. If it still doesn’t receive any love (in the form of emoji reactions), it gets reposted yet again to `#temple_of_pain` as a mark of shame. If several of us meet up on Zoom or in person without the full group, we try to snap a selfie and put it into `#why_am_i_disgusting_to_others`. It’s weird, and it doesn’t make a lot of sense. That’s the beauty of it. We’ve even made custom

emojis that correspond to inside jokes and can be used to react. I often have to remind myself that sending a tiny photo of a person we met once in college named Bryce to someone who's outside our friend group—say, a person I'm collaborating with professionally—won't immediately translate as me saying “You made a good point.”

That's precisely the power of inside jokes. They don't make sense to everyone. They make sense only to your in-group. And who doesn't want to feel special and included? A good in-joke is the rewards card of a relationship. You've spent the time, so now you get a fun little bonus for free that casual outsiders don't get to enjoy.

ZERO THE HERO

One Tuesday morning early in the year, I found myself standing in the bathroom of an elementary school dressed in a cape, mask, and flamboyantly decorated costume.

I was hiding out until my friend Jocelyn gave me the signal to run through the hallways and shock her kindergartners dressed as the base-ten superhero, Zero the Hero. A puppet version of Zero visits the kids every tenth day of school so they can learn about how numbers work. But for the hundredth day, Jocelyn and her coteachers had a whole costume created for a real-life version.

Zero the Hero already had an extensive lore and mythology built up in the classroom, so when I answered the students' questions, they were mostly like:

“Is it true you have a spaceship shaped like a zero?”

And I would say, “Yes, that's true.”

Then another kid would say, “And you're from the planet Zero?”

And I'd say, “Yes, I'm from the planet Zero.”

Some questions gave me more creative license, like when I got to tell them about all the foods I love that are shaped like zeros (Cheerios, doughnuts, bagels, etc.). Another student was very skeptical and kept asking me, “Okay, but are you *really* Zero?” And when I said yes, he asked how

old I was, which felt kinda like a gotcha question. I turned it around on him and said, “In Earth years or in planet Zero years?” I think that really won him over.

I think in previous years, when the teachers had convinced friends to come in and play the role of Zero, it had ended relatively quickly, when the friend said they needed to leave. In a twist that really sums up everything you could ever need to know about me, the teachers had to tell me, “Okay, Zero, it’s time to leave. We have to get back to class.” I would have stood outside all day answering trivia about my home planet and Zero-based inventions.

More important than providing me with an opportunity to ham it up, the Zero role is a great example of how teachers routinely use humor and creativity to build a culture in their classrooms. The kids laugh and are delighted, but humor also makes the concepts stickier and gives them a shared experience that, even years later, they can reminisce about and feel bonded over. I know that’s true because as I was running through the hallway toward the kindergarten classrooms, some older kids caught a glimpse of me. Their eyes went wide, and they nodded in recognition, grabbed each other’s arms, and said, “That’s Zero!”

While you probably wouldn’t get a friend to dress up as an alien with superpowers and run around your office (although you could, and it would be cool as hell if you did), these same principles apply to offices and to creating positive experiences and lasting bonds with coworkers.

YOU’RE INVITED TO THE PHEROMONE PARTY

When it comes to finding creative, unexpected ways to build connections in a group, Emmy-winning filmmaker and radio producer Bianca Giaevers is in a league of her own. Both in her work and in her personal life, Giaevers is always looking for ways to connect with other people. She once took a bike trip with a friend, cycling from the southern tip of Florida all the way

northwest to the Arctic Ocean at the edge of Alaska. Along the way, she kept a comprehensive list of her favorite mailboxes and traffic cones. Neither of those is a typical roadside attraction, but the idiosyncrasy, the weird specificity of it, was exactly what got the strangers she encountered all across the United States talking as she chatted with them over meals or during her pit stops. No matter where a person lives, they've almost certainly seen a mailbox or a traffic cone. Having met someone who's obsessed with them, they're going to see the world around them in a slightly new light. They might even have a treasure of their own to share with Giaever.

When she's not cycling thousands of miles across the country, Giaever is coming up with other unique and humorous ways to bring people out of their shells. Here are some parties she has organized, all of which she gives you full permission to steal and host on your own:

1. Pheromone Party

Preparation for this party starts three nights before the event, when all the guests are instructed to sleep in a plain white T-shirt for the next three nights, without washing it or using any fragrances. When they show up at the party, T-shirt in hand, it is immediately put into a plastic bag, sealed, and labeled with a number. Only the host knows whose shirt corresponds with each number. Once all the guests arrive, everyone receives a blank chart. Then the bags are passed around, and guests sniff each specimen, writing down their "smelling notes" as they go.

Your version of the party could end right there, attendees having experienced a diverse array of pheromones and walked away with a great story to tell, not to mention some fun, unguarded time together. If you're of a more methodical disposition, the way Giaever was, you could ask guests to vote for "best smell," "worst smell," and "most interesting smell." (It might be kinder to withhold individual results from guests, so they don't develop a complex about their natural body odor.)

One interesting finding of Giaever's was that, while many of us might expect there to be a unanimously "bad" smelling shirt, smell turns out to be intensely subjective. In a group of about twenty guests, every shirt had someone who loved the smell and someone who was repulsed by it. It turns out beauty isn't just in the eye of the beholder—it's also in their nose.

2. Stranger Dinner

This was a dinner party like any other, with one huge exception. No one attending knew anyone else. That included the host. The way Giaever set this up was to ask friends (or even better, friends of friends) to think of someone she had never met and ask them if they'd be willing to attend a dinner party at her house. She deliberately tried to make the guest list cross-generational and cross-cultural. To make the invitation more appealing, the strangers were promised a delicious meal and were told they didn't need to bring anything.

I was skeptical that it would be a success, but Giaever reported back that the party was a home run. One of the most thrilling parts of the dinner, she said, was that no one had heard anyone else's stories or anecdotes before. So once they got past the basic introductions, people could blow each other's minds with their most interesting stories (the ones that friends and family had surely rolled their eyes at a thousand times).

3. Same-Height Party

This gathering is a dream that Giaever is nursing, inspired by German artist Hans Hemmert, but she hasn't been able to execute it quite yet. Everyone who arrives at this party will have their height measured precisely. Then they will be given platform shoes (or plastic additions to the bottom of their sneakers) that bring them to the exact height of the tallest person in the room. All of a sudden, everyone will experience the world from exactly the same angle. How will the group dynamics change? What will it be like to achieve full height parity? Someday Giaever hopes to be able to report back.

THE PICASSO OF PARTIES

Giaever's suggestions are some of my all-time favorites, but you don't have to throw an eccentric theme party to accomplish similar results. One of the

best books that I've read about how to bring groups together is Priya Parker's *The Art of Gathering*.^[7] Parker gives lots of practical tips and advice for events that would apply just as well to Giaever's parties as to a formal wedding or baby shower. Parker says that two of the crucial elements of creating a group experience (and building the potential for inside jokes and social bonding) are crafting a narrative for the event and making the details "disputable."^[8]

For the narrative, give your party a background story. Maybe you feel like you should throw yourself a birthday party, but you've also been feeling like your life is too hectic and scheduled. Following Parker's advice, you might explicitly say that in the invitation. Then, you could suggest that people come over wearing sweatpants with popcorn or snacks and watch two hours of mindless reality TV with you. No singing, no dressing up, no presents—just lounging and bingeing.

Or maybe you're putting together a retirement party for someone who's feeling very mixed emotions about leaving their career behind. Instead of the classic gold watch and cake, maybe you hold a wake for their office equipment, where coworkers eulogize the communal stapler, finicky copy machine, and the terribly designed email client that the honoree will never have to use again. There's nothing wrong with leaning into the bittersweet while also laughing about the parts of the job that they're probably glad to say goodbye to. Rest in peace, strange-smelling microwave in the break room.

Parker's other key element of a group event is making it disputable. By that, she means making it specific enough that a person might disagree with the idea or not want to come. If you invite me to a full moon celebration that starts at midnight and ends at four a.m., there is absolutely zero chance that I am going to attend. But that's a good thing! The time is a clear and disputable element of the gathering, which means that the people who do attend are going to be into it and excited. Disputable also means that everyone who is brave enough to attend will be sharing the story and laughing about it for years to come.

Every year my friends Will and Jocelyn host a soup party at their home. It's a dinner party where all the food is—you guessed it—soup. That's disputable! If you don't like soup, you should not come to the soup party. If you don't like swimming in cold water, you should not go to a polar bear plunge. If scary movies freak you out, please do not attend the horror film

festival. Disputable means that it's not for everyone. Disputable also means that it's specific enough that it creates the possibility for laughter and delight when you hear about it. Getting invited to a birthday party is nice, but it's kind of generic and not at all funny. Getting invited to an All Pickles, Only Pickles 29th Birthday Fermentation Bash is specific, memorable, and quite possibly hilarious (or terrifying, depending on your personal stance on pickles).

SOMETIMES THE KEY ELEMENT IS A LITERAL KEY

Over the years, many groups that I really enjoyed have slowly fizzled and faded out. Maybe a key member of the book club moved out of town, or maybe everyone just got busier with work. Professionally, as a writer, it's a huge help to me to have a writers group to share work with and get feedback from my peers. But writers groups, in my experience, tend to be some of the most transient of associations. They're amazing for a few months, and then they stop existing or drop from weekly to monthly to biannually, if the stars align. That's been true for every writers group I've been part of, except one.

The reason the Keystone Society^[*3] has endured, I believe, is because the hosts, Matt and Leah, created a series of silly rituals that go along with the gathering. Matt bought a large box of antique keys and gives one to each participant. At the start of each meeting, you're supposed to bring your old key back and exchange it for a new one. While holding the box, you introduce yourself and say what writing project you're currently working on. Another ritual is that the group gives a hearty round of applause to even the tiniest hint of an accomplishment. You remembered to bring your key back? That's going to get claps. You said that the main thing you're working on right now is figuring out how to format a table of contents in Microsoft Word? Pause for ovation.

None of the rituals are particularly time intensive or extraordinary. They just give us something unusual and goofy that we can all latch on to. It elevates the meeting from simply a space to share our writing to the beginnings of a good-natured writing cult.^[*4] The key to a good ritual is the key to a good inside joke: Find something small and fun, then repeat it over and over until it becomes part of the unique culture of your relationship.

And that's really the beauty of using humor in a group. Instead of celebrating or gathering in the same predictable way every year, or talking about the same surface-level topics, you can experience the joy of putting yourself out there a little bit. You create an environment in which everyone is a bit outside their comfort zone, and you're all building an experience together. The humor—and the human connection—will occur almost effortlessly.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} While we laugh by breathing out (“ha ha ha”), chimpanzees make their laughter noise by breathing both out and in, a “breathy pant.”

^{*2} They're doing great, by the way. Getting fat and collecting nuts for the winter.

^{*3} Named after the street where we would meet and also for the way that it sounds like a gathering of nineteenth-century explorers, several of whom will eventually be killed by polar bears.

^{*4} A cult of writers would largely involve, in my experience, increasingly more exotic ways to procrastinate actually writing.

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THE SECOND-BEST MEDICINE

Laughter's Role in Healing and Medicine

PROFESSOR MIMI TSE and her team of Hong Kong–based medical researchers were getting very concerned about elderly patients in their city. When looking at older adults, especially those living in nursing homes who had been suffering from pain, they saw consistent and troubling trends in physical and emotional health. “Many older people accept pain as part of their life and do not seek help until it becomes severe and unbearable.... They tend to become isolated and unwilling to go out and meet friends and family members; also, they are less likely to express their feelings and thus more likely to become lonely.”^[1]

Tse was eager to improve the patients’ quality of life but hesitant to prescribe yet another drug or suggest any sort of invasive treatment. She is a naturally ebullient person. She likes to laugh. When I interviewed her over Zoom for this book,^[2] she made me pause so she could put on a fun hat and take a selfie of us. “I’ll put that up for my friends on Facebook,” she explained.

Thinking about how jokes and silliness had improved her own life, Tse began to consider humor as a potential health intervention. With her team, she designed an eight-week study. Once a week, for one hour, her elderly study subjects attended a humor session featuring a joke of the day, a

reading of funny stories, activities designed to get them laughing, and a lesson on how to give higher priority to humor in their everyday lives. The participants were asked to keep track of humorous stories, shows, and anecdotes that made them laugh and to share them with the other participants.

At the end of eight weeks, the researchers were astonished by the results. The experimental group had significant decreases in pain and perceptions of loneliness, and significant increases in happiness and life satisfaction. The same findings did not apply to the control group, who were not offered the humor therapy program. Tse told me that this study changed the way she thought about patient treatment and challenged the conventional idea that the most effective treatment always involves pharmaceuticals or procedures. Here was a health intervention that addressed some of these patients' most pressing medical issues and had effectively no negative side effects.^[*1]

USE THE BASIL FOR PESTO, NOT FOR TRIAGE

Before we get too deep into talking about health, I feel the need to issue a disclaimer: It's easy, when discussing medicine and humor, to slide down a slippery slope that starts with me saying something like "Humor can improve patient outcomes" and ends with me going fully off the deep end into anti-science thinking and medical conspiracy theories.

I once took a tour of medicinal plants in a botanical garden. I expected to see some beautiful flowers and maybe hear how, if you brewed the leaves into a tea, it could help with muscle aches or nausea. Instead, Kevin, a white guy with dreads, described progressively more intense medical emergencies that could, in his words, "be cured entirely using herbs, without the need to visit a hospital."

Kevin's list started with headaches and then progressed to cataracts, liver disease, broken bones, and tumors.

At one point, he kicked off his sandals and let his toes dig down into the earth next to a large basil plant. “If you have a bullet or stab wound, the best thing you can do is pack it full of holy basil leaves,” Kevin informed us, a piece of advice that I truly hope no one on the tour ever put into action.^[*2]

My point is: Don’t be Kevin.

People say all kinds of things when it comes to medical advice. And most nonexpert advice is terrible! I want to be very clear that I think modern medicine has made near-miraculous advances. Life-saving drugs and surgeries are gifts to be grateful for, and there’s nothing Kevin can post on Reddit that will convince me otherwise.^[*3]

People often say that laughter is the best medicine. I don’t know! I still think they’re wrong, and I’m sticking with penicillin (or maybe the polio vaccine). Pretty great medicines! Definitely better than laughter. But laughter might be second-best? It’s definitely in the top ten, at least.

A number of papers and a growing body of evidence (including Tse’s study) suggest that humor and laughter can help improve our health. They can have a particularly strong impact on our experience of illness. Pain, anxiety, and hopelessness are serious medical issues that, as we’ll look at in this chapter, researchers increasingly believe can be mitigated through laughter.

RARE LAUGHS IN THE WORST TIMES

I’ve seen firsthand that humor can be a powerful addition to a treatment plan. But that lesson came from one of the scariest and least funny experiences I’ve ever lived through.

It started when my wife, Mollie, was dealing with chronic pain and several persistent injuries that made it a struggle for her to take care of herself. It was a shock for her (and me) to see how quickly she went from an independent, professionally successful adult in her early thirties with a busy social calendar to a person whose life became dominated by

frustrating doctors' visits and inconclusive test results. For years, she had loved going on a morning jog as a way to blow off steam and maintain her mental health. Now she couldn't walk a mile without excruciating pain.

In all the time that we were going through the medical roller-coaster ride, we never got a clear diagnosis. We never got an explanation or a label for what was happening. On top of the physical discomfort, the constant uncertainty and the struggle of dealing with insurance and healthcare providers who often seemed skeptical of the entire situation was too much to bear. Soon Mollie was spending hours crying on the couch and spiraling downward into anxiety, a deep depression, and suicidal ideation.

This was, without a doubt, the worst period of both our lives to date. I was watching the person I love the most suffer, not able to help her, and feeling desperate as things got worse and worse. It's a particularly acute form of torment to be the primary caretaker for a person who isn't receiving the care they need, and to not know what the right care might be. I sincerely thought I might lose Mollie. The metaphor I kept coming back to was that I was swimming as hard as I could, trying to keep us both above water, but a powerful current was sucking us down, and no matter how hard I swam, we couldn't get out of it.

I'm aware that we're in some pretty serious and dark territory here, especially considering this is a humor book. But the good news is that Mollie did survive. We made it out of the whirlpool and back onto solid ground. We were among the lucky ones. Mollie found medications and therapy and a mind-body program that worked for her. After a long period of everything getting worse, she finally figured out a few strategies that made things better, bit by bit.

We're several years on the other side of it now. In a good way, I sometimes find it hard to believe how different our day-to-day is from what it was then. When we were in the thick of it, I couldn't imagine ever getting back to a place where things felt normal and easy. But we have. I don't take that for granted.

The solution that worked for Mollie wasn't to simply laugh at the pain or to find the humor in the situation. There were many times when neither of us could even imagine laughing. There was nothing funny about what was happening. But occasionally a big, unexpected laugh would release a built-up explosion of tension. Once, I convinced Mollie to leave the house and go to our friend Zach Sherwin's crossword-based comedy show. I

remember the look of surprise and relief on her face as she cracked up at one of the jokes and was distracted from the pain for a moment.

Another time, when Mollie was grasping at straws to try to find a solution for herself, she suggested spending a month in a remote silent meditation retreat in the mountains. She'd found it online and discovered that you could live there for free if you washed dishes and cleaned the bathrooms. I told her I didn't feel comfortable, given her tenuous physical and mental health, with her going completely off-grid and me not being able to reach her in an emergency. She said, "No, you'd live at the silent retreat center too."

I was barely hanging on to my own sanity. I was stretched beyond capacity trying to keep our bills paid, house cleaned, meals cooked, and medical appointments attended. I am a lifelong extrovert and constant chatterbox. The idea of me inhabiting a silent retreat center sounded so horrible that I couldn't help but burst out laughing. Even Mollie had to chuckle at the idea of me being forbidden from telling jokes or chatting with the staff. We both had clear mental images of me desperately trying to use facial expressions and hand gestures to tell stories. Nevertheless, I told her I'd think about it. Fortunately for me, she found other solutions that didn't require me to take a vow of silence.

Humor might not have been the magic bullet for Mollie or for me. But it was an intentional part of her recovery. Making herself laugh helped her nervous system move from being chronically stuck in a fight-or-flight state into a rest-and-digest state. Intentionally laughing every day has been a keystone in maintaining her progress and in staying in her current good, healthy place. Every night after dinner, we lie down on the couch and find something to laugh at together. Sometimes it's a YouTube video of outtakes from *The Office*. Other times it's a viral meme or a funny text from a friend. It could be a comedy show on TV or a photo of our son as a baby making a ridiculous face while clearly about to poop. The source material doesn't matter. On days when neither of us has anything good to share, a reliable backup is scrolling through r/ContagiousLaughter on Reddit. True to its name, the subreddit is filled with user-uploaded videos of people laughing so hard you can't help but join in. Mollie and I often find ourselves in tears, laughing along with a stranger thousands of miles away.

That five to ten minutes of laughter most nights on the couch doesn't replace medication or therapy or doctor visits. But it is a very welcome

reset. Especially when we're in stressful periods or one of us is getting wound up with anxiety about health or work or kids, I've found, that daily dose of contagious laughter makes a big impact. It's the easiest thing to skip or put off, but we try our best not to. And so far, it's been working for us.

EXCUSE ME, DOCTOR, BUT I'LL NEED TO SEE YOUR NOSE

The idea that humor can be a daily therapeutic practice is central to Roberta Gold's work.^[3] As president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, she's spent more than three decades working with an international group of therapists, nurses, doctors, and other practitioners on ways to laugh daily and deliberately inject silliness into patients' lives.

Gold's view is that the physical act of laughter provides a plethora of health benefits, from lower blood pressure to a rush of dopamine and serotonin. "You need humor so you can force out the laughter," she tells me. "And it's the laughter that gives you all the physical benefits and emotional benefits."

In her own life, Gold has come up with all sorts of techniques to force out her own laughter even in the most challenging times. Whatever is happening, she insists on finding a way to get the laughs out. Many members of her family suffer from a genetic disease that causes colorectal cancer. Her father died from it, and she discovered that she, her brother, and her son all have the same condition.

For many people, being in the hospital for colorectal surgery would rank high on the list of "things that I can't find a way to laugh about." But when Gold's father was hospitalized, she attached a simple clown toy to his IV pole. The clown let out an infectious laugh when you activated it. There was nothing smart or clever about it, but the laugh it emitted was so ridiculous that she and her dad couldn't help but join in.

Before long, all the nurses were coming in and asking her dad to make the clown laugh. They'd say, "The patient in room 222 is making me

crazy.’ And they’d come in to get the laughter,” Gold told me. “My dad would laugh. They would laugh. My dad always went home from the hospital earlier than the doctors thought.”

Watching how even a canned laugh changed the atmosphere in her dad’s hospital room influenced the way Gold approached her own hospitalization when she needed the same surgery later on. She told me that she purchased and prominently displayed a book called *100 Ways to Poop* in her bathroom at home.^[*4] Before going into the operating room, she insisted that her surgeon, a very dry and serious professional, put on a red clown nose. In fact, she brought clown noses for the whole medical team. As a result, the first thing she saw as the anesthesia wore off was a group of clown doctors earnestly checking her vital signs.

That’s a pretty good way to force yourself to laugh (or to scream, if you’re one of the 6 percent of Americans who are terrified of clowns).^[4] But now when Gold talks to audiences, she tells them that even if they can’t find a way to make themselves genuinely laugh, they should experiment with a fake laugh anyway. The absurdity of making laughter noises often leads to a real laugh. She tells them, “Fake it till you make it. It doesn’t take long when you’re utilizing laughter like that.”

TAKE TWO TIC TACS AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING

Faking it until you make it has a long, illustrious history in medicine. Doctors have known about the power of the placebo effect for hundreds of years. As early as 1785, placebos were being commonly prescribed to patients, and in 1903 Dr. Richard Cabot of Harvard Medical School published a paper where he described how physicians were trained to use “bread pills” as part of their medical practice.^[5] I don’t know about you, but I would personally love to get prescribed bread by a doctor named after a particularly delicious type of cheddar cheese.

The placebo effect is extremely misunderstood in popular culture. Laypeople often think that *placebo* means a drug that does nothing. But that's not the case at all. In fact, placebos often do quite a lot. The key is that there is no biological mechanism for them to heal a person. Any improvement in a person's condition is not because of the ingredients in the pill but because of belief and the ritual of taking the medication.

In a fascinating overview of the power of belief, the psychologist David DeSteno describes how placebos have repeatedly been shown to “produce clinically significant improvement in a wide range of maladies.”^[6] But what's most fascinating is that the placebo effect endures *even if patients know the pill they are taking is a placebo*. Some of the emerging evidence in this field comes from a study of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). “Some patients,” DeSteno says, “took a capsule that they were told contained only an inert filler. Though they knew the pills had no therapeutic ingredients, those who took them twice daily for two weeks following a doctor's instructions reported a significant reduction in IBS symptoms. Open-label trials have also shown success with medical problems ranging from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), to migraines, to back pain.”^[7]

In order for placebos to be most effective, the patient needs to trust their healthcare provider, have a ritual for taking the pill,^[*5] and believe a placebo could help. It's possible that a mechanism similar to the placebo effect is part of what makes humor effective as a treatment. If you believe laughter is the best medicine, that may make it pretty good medicine!

If you feel better, less anxious, and in less pain, that alone is a very positive medical outcome. It's easy to imagine how that might give doctors the ability to address severe medical conditions without negatively impacting their patients' quality of life. As Mimi Tse and her colleagues in Hong Kong discovered, there's enormous value in having an additional safe, affordable, and side-effect-free tool to use when patients are experiencing pain and distress. The bar for taking laughter seriously as a medical intervention doesn't need to be that it's able to cure a bullet wound. Holy basil leaves can do that.^[*6]

THE ROBIN TO MEDICINE'S BATMAN

In medicine, an adjunct is an additional treatment used alongside the primary treatment to assist in helping the patient. Emergency room doctor Jeremy Faust told me he thinks this is a key role for humor and that it is “unbelievably underutilized.”^[8]

Echoing Roberta Gold, Dr. Faust told me that laughing, or even pretending to laugh, can be incredibly effective at distracting someone from their pain. If a patient can be distracted from their symptoms for “just long enough to spread out their doses on the painkiller, or so they don’t even need that dose, or it addresses the pain more effectively,” he says, “any of those outcomes is really, really powerful.”

To Dr. Faust, one of the best parts of humor, whether it’s a good joke or an inexplicably funny shared experience, is that it immediately builds human connection. As a doctor, he sees firsthand how crucial that is for health. “Laughter is so beautiful,” he told me, “in the sense that it’s a shortcut to [knowing that] we’re having the same thought.”

He also thinks humor has an important role to play “both on the practitioner side and also on the patient side.” Isolation and burnout are major issues affecting healthcare providers. But just as laughter can help patients, it can also help their caregivers. A Taiwanese study found that the top-three most meaningful predictors of nurses’ health were whether they had experienced recent significant life events, their degree of work stress, and their level of humor.^[9] When working in an inherently high-stress, high-stakes environment like a hospital, having the ability to create some mental space, connect with your coworkers, and relieve stress is essential.

While it’s a delicate line to walk, appropriately deployed humor can also help doctors and nurses improve their bedside manner. Dr. Faust told me that in many situations in his job, it would obviously be a terrible mistake to make a joke. One example was looking at a patient’s CAT scan and then saying, “Well, we really don’t like what we see on the scan, but the good news is I did just save fifteen percent on my car insurance by

switching to Geico.” In my opinion, that would be a very funny thing to say. In his opinion, it would be an unforgivable lapse in judgment.

However, in other important situations, not being completely serious can make a patient trust their doctor more or “de-escalate” the situation. “De-escalation for me, in the ER, is absolutely huge,” Dr. Faust says. “But the key is de-escalation without losing the validation of why they’re there.” As an example, when treating a wounded patient in the ER, Dr. Faust often injects the local anesthetic lidocaine, which can be painful while going in but then numbs the area, allowing him to stitch up or otherwise address the wound. Sometimes, to de-escalate, he’ll make a joke. Depending on the patient, he might play on the fact that the hospital is located in Boston. “This is going to hurt more than watching the Yankees win,” he’ll say. With other patients, he’ll strategically deploy an F-bomb: “I’m just warning you, this is going to hurt like a motherfucker.” At such moments, his being not totally dry and buttoned-up allows the patient to laugh and relax, thereby making the injection less painful.

TURNING “AH! AH!” TO “HAHA!”

There may be no group of healthcare professionals whose bedside manner matters more than mental health workers. In order to treat their patients, they need to create a safe, trusting therapeutic space.

Dr. Tracy Foose spent years as the director of the Anxiety Disorders Treatment Program at University of California–San Francisco.^{[\[10\]](#)} As a psychiatry resident, she had been struck by how often her willingness to make a self-deprecating joke could get her patients to feel more comfortable and open up. Early in her career, that might have meant acknowledging her relative youth and inexperience. Later on, it evolved to poking fun at the extremely beige color palette of her office decor.

“I started using humor early on to speak to the awkwardness of what therapy is,” Foose told me. “And how you’re going in to tell somebody

stuff and they're supposed to know how to guide you through it. And then probably in a more formal way, I started to think about humor as a form of delivering what we call 'interpretations.' ”

In Dr. Foose's practice, interpretations are how she conveys the patterns and beliefs that she has noticed her patients engaging in. Often she'll want to speak directly to a patient's behavior or self-talk. But to bring it up, or even to say she noticed it, can feel very loaded. Especially in a mental health care setting, it's easy to provoke feelings of humiliation and shame. Dr. Foose found that humor, when used thoughtfully and gently, can bypass some of her patients' defense mechanisms by showing them her ability to predict what they are likely to do next.

Suppose a patient's anxiety led them to push people away and prevent the formation of meaningful relationships, she said. In a session, she might acknowledge the pattern. “I bet your brain is saying, ‘That guy is never gonna call me. So I'm actually not even gonna give him the right number.’” More often than not, her patients laugh at how accurate her interpretation is. But crucially, “It's gentle and you're making them laugh at their defense structures or their beliefs rather than making fun of them as people.”

Like Dr. Faust, Dr. Foose cautions her students and mentees about the danger of using humor inappropriately. She also thinks about it in her personal life as the mother of teenage girls: “They are more sensitive to my humor than any patient is ever going to be.”

Together, Dr. Foose and I tried to come up with a definition for what makes humor helpful versus damaging in a mental healthcare setting. The conclusion we stumbled on was “therapeutic ambiguity,” which in my opinion holds just as true for Dr. Foose's interactions with her daughters as it does for her patients.

Done correctly, humor can inject a helpful dose of ambiguity into a patient's mind. If they are spiraling into a cascade of catastrophic thinking, a well-placed observation or joke can create a bit of space for them to think, *Huh, maybe my way isn't the only way to see things. Maybe things aren't 100 percent predestined to be a disaster.*

However, that same ambiguity can be unhelpful if the therapist aims it incorrectly. With a patient who is new to therapy and unsure about it, a psychologist making a joke about his own inexperience or the high cost is going to create exactly the wrong kind of ambiguity. *Maybe this isn't*

actually worthwhile or *This person maybe doesn't have a clue what they're talking about* are not helpful thoughts for a patient to have.

Similarly, if Dr. Foose's daughters come to her with a situation that they're feeling embarrassed or upset about, her cracking a joke might make them feel like their mother's respect for them is debatable rather than concrete. Again, not helpful.

Thinking about humor as a way to deploy ambiguity made my research for this chapter suddenly click. We laugh because we're seeing the world from a new angle. That's often wonderful and very much needed. Sometimes, though, people just want others to affirm that they're not alone in seeing the world the way they do. Both needs are valid, and ambiguity and affirmation are both valid as strategies. Depending on the situation, one may be more useful than the other. Either way, it's practically guaranteed that Dr. Foose's teenage daughters will find a way to feel like she messed up. But hopefully her patients won't! Ideally, they will have a breakthrough while sitting on a very beige couch.

A PRESCRIPTION YOU CAN FILL YOURSELF

Humor can be a tool for health—your own health and that of those you care for. You can't rely on humor alone, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't rely on it at all. While we often talk about mental health and physical health as though they're two separate and distinct ideas, they're not. Our brains are connected to our bodies. (Some might even say they're part of our bodies.)

[*7] That's why finding a way to laugh, to release mental tension, and to see your situation in a slightly different light can pay such big dividends in caring for your body. If I were to write you a humor prescription that you could fill all by yourself, it would have a few key elements:

Keep track of your laughs. A key part of the humor intervention that worked for Mimi Tse's patients in Hong Kong was paying attention to what made them laugh and collecting those sources into a file, one they could share with the group or refer back to when they needed it. Don't expect to find a good joke while you're in the middle of a painful moment. It's much easier to assemble your tried-and-true laughter sources ahead of time. Keep them in a document or a notebook and, ideally, find a partner or a group so you can all benefit from each other's research and share the best material. Don't be afraid to copy something you love from another person's file into your own humor folder.

Fake it until you make it. Much like influenza, laughter is contagious. So if you're struggling to find anything that strikes you as humorous, you can always try the noise of laughter itself. As Roberta Gold's father found with his little laughing clown toy, just pressing a button and triggering a ridiculous laugh can be enough. As I said, my wife, Mollie, is a big proponent of Reddit's [r/ContagiousLaughter](#) community, where new videos of infectious laughs get posted daily. You could also sign up for a laughter yoga class and guffaw at nothing in the company of strangers, or just force out a belly laugh alone while looking in the mirror. It sounds ridiculous, but you might just find it triggers real laughs.

Humor is a muscle; exercise it. Don't be too hard on yourself if this is challenging. Humor and laughter come more easily with practice and skill. That's the entire point of this book! When you're trying to get the health benefits, think of humor as a daily practice like brushing your teeth rather than as an intervention that you only do very rarely, like having an appendectomy.^[*8]

Power up the placebo. When you're building your own personal way of incorporating humor into your daily life, make it into a repeatable routine. Embrace a silly little ritual. That's part of what makes placebos work the way they do. Everyone's rituals are going to be different. Maybe yours will be lying on the couch and always starting your postdinner relaxation with a clip from a classic TV sitcom. Or maybe

it'll be looking into a mirror and saying, "Well, hello there! Do you come here often?" before you force yourself to laugh as loud as you can. Or maybe it's starting each day by drawing a self-portrait—with your eyes closed.

Connect and cool down. When you're a caregiver, whether in your professional life or your personal life, humor can be an important tool to connect and also to de-escalate. You have to be careful to use it correctly, but it is often quite powerful and underutilized. Think of humor and laughter as a way to bridge the gap between yourself and your patient or loved one and as a way to release tension. The key is to make it not about how clever you are but about how connected you are. Use Dr. Foose's "therapeutic ambiguity" to acknowledge that, no matter how much we wish we did, we never have all the information and can't perfectly predict what will happen next. In the best-case scenario, we can laugh at our own limitations and also use that laughter to see that the future always holds possibilities that we can't fully imagine in the present moment.

At the end of the day, there's no magical humor pill. Actually, there is—laughing gas—but I don't recommend using it for this purpose.^[*9] The best way to find your personal humor prescription is to experiment and discover what works for you. Even a subtle increase in daily laughter can accumulate over time, in the same way that you can slowly increase your flexibility by stretching a bit farther each day. Or at least, that's what I've been told. I haven't been able to touch my toes since I was about eight years old. But I can laugh about it!

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} Tse has also studied the effects of music and gardening on patient outcomes and found similarly promising results, leading her to believe that a variety of quality-of-life interventions should be implemented when working with nursing home patients.

^{*2} Because they would die.

^{*3} I can't emphasize enough that I am not a doctor! If you're getting your medical advice from a book about humor written by a comedian, your prognosis is not good. It may, in fact, be a step below getting your treatment plan from a Reddit post.

*4 Lisa, my extremely thorough fact-checker, informs me that she is not able to find any evidence that a book titled *100 Ways to Poop* actually exists. She suggests that Roberta may have been referring to a similar text called *Kama Pootra: 52 Mind-Blowing Ways to Poop*. Thank you to both Lisa and Roberta for giving me the opportunity to type that sentence into a book.

*5 *Ritual* meaning in the same way that you follow a ritual when you take an ibuprofen. You open the bottle, make sure you have the correct number of pills, swallow them with water, and then wait for the effect.

*6 They can't. This is a joke. Once again, please do not use basil to treat your stab and bullet wounds.

*7 The people who would say that are every single reputable doctor and anatomy professor.

*8 In fact, you should brush your teeth more than daily. At least twice daily is what my dentist tells me. While it's outside his direct realm of expertise, I feel confident my dentist would also recommend having only one appendectomy in a lifetime.

*9 Also, it's technically a gas, not a pill.

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MORE EXCITING THAN “EUREKA!”

Humor as Innovation

I’M LOST somewhere inside the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. MIT names many of its buildings and classrooms with numbers and dashes rather than words. I’m told this system makes navigating the campus far more logical, and I’m sure that’s true for the numerical and scientific geniuses that live here. My navigational skills are significantly lower than genius level. As a result, I’ve gotten completely turned around, and I’m wandering helplessly in the “Infinite Corridor,” a nickname given to a hallway that seemingly stretches on forever. Looking off into the infinite abyss of labs and classrooms, I start to come to terms with my fate: *I’m going to die here.*

Just before all hope is lost, I spot a group of Japanese scientists in formalwear. I follow them into an elevator and arrive at my destination: the 34th First Annual Ig Nobel Prize ceremony.^[*1]

If you’re not familiar with the Ig Nobel Prizes, they’re a lot like the Nobel Prizes. But instead of recognizing the most world-changing achievements in physics, chemistry, and peace, the Ig Nobels recognize the most hilarious or surprising discoveries of the year. Their slogan is “Research that makes people LAUGH, then THINK.”

As you can guess from reading this book, that's a mission that I was instantly on board with. The research they celebrate each year is truly stupendous.

Constipated scorpions. Gossiping algorithms. A crash-test dummy shaped like a moose. Those are just a few of the topics of award-winning scientific papers at the Ig Nobel Prizes in recent years.

An international team won the Ig Nobel Prize in Literature for studying the sensations people feel “when they repeat a single word many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many times.”

Georgia Tech scientists were awarded the Ig Nobel Prize in Physics for discovering a “universal urination duration.”^[1] Using fluid dynamics, they demonstrated that all mammals weighing over three kilograms take about twenty-one seconds to completely empty a full bladder.

It's not just science either. One year the Ig Nobel Art Prize was awarded to Don Featherstone for inventing the pink plastic flamingo that has graced many a lawn.

Despite the seemingly ridiculous subject matter, every year for more than three decades, hundreds of the world's most renowned scientists and academic thinkers—including many actual Nobel laureates—have crowded into a packed theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to witness (and accept) the annual tongue-in-cheek awards.^[*2] Why would the world's smartest people take time out from their busy schedules to fly across the globe just for a laugh?

I'm here to find out.

While I've been a fan of the Ig Nobels for years, this was my first chance to attend the award ceremony in person. It instantly became clear that I wasn't the only one who had flown in for this event. There were researchers from Australia, France, Japan, Germany, and many other places. The awards were given out by five actual Nobel laureates, but in a hilarious twist, there was only enough room on the stage for three chairs, so periodically throughout the ceremony, the organizers would pause the event and announce that it was time for "the rotation of the laureates." Then they would shuffle two of the laureates offstage and bring on a fresh two.

These academics have received the highest international honor in their fields. What could possibly compel someone, after winning a Nobel Prize, to sit in a large lecture hall and let hundreds of people laugh at their life's

work while strangers give them overly formal and awkwardly long-lasting handshakes?[*3]

The simplest answer is that these people are smart enough to know that when it comes to brilliant world-changing ideas, a laugh is never just a laugh. One of the most important discoveries in medical history happened because someone left out a dirty petri dish. When Alexander Fleming walked into the lab and saw penicillin for the first time, he didn't shout "Eureka!" Instead, his exact words were "That's funny," as he took a culture of the mold.[2]

A key part of a sense of humor is attention to patterns and unexpected details. It also works the other way around. Having a sense of humor makes you more intellectually open to new, surprising insights and revelations. So let's talk about how you can become more innovative through the sense of humor you've been cultivating.

THAT'S YOUR BIG IDEA? YOU MUST BE KIDDING.

Frans Johansson, author of *The Medici Effect: What Elephants and Epidemics Can Teach Us About Innovation*, has spent his career studying innovation. Johansson is specifically obsessed with what makes some ideas truly groundbreaking and others incremental improvements. One of the things that he's discovered is that it's easier to find social support for your ideas if you're making only small but consistent progress.

Let's say it's 1970, and you're working on making home telephones 10 percent more efficient. Everyone at the phone company is likely to be on board. But if you tell them you're working on an idea to make phones that can work outdoors and without any wires, you'll likely be out in the cold (both literally and figuratively). It's extremely difficult to get people to support a transformative idea until you've actually accomplished it. And yet looking back, we can see clearly which project was more valuable.

This is where I see humor most directly aligning with innovation. If you want to make a transformative change, you have to be willing to pursue an idea that seems somewhat ridiculous. While everyone is still getting around on horseback, it's pretty hilarious to suggest that you're going to come up with a cart that drives itself. There's comedy in looking up at a bird and then saying, "My brother Orville and I are going to invent a way to do that too."^[*4]

I've been trying to embrace that idea more in my own life—to take bigger swings, to aim for the unlikely. I make a list of goals at the start of every year, and I used to include things like "Sell a TV show" or "Sell out a weekend at a comedy club." Now, instead of focusing on the markers of success, which are often outside my control, I include things like "Get at least six big professional rejections" or "Have at least three live shows that are complete disasters." Flipping it around to deliberately pursue the failure lets me get off of the established, well-trodden path. It encourages me to try for big, ambitious goals that I'm most likely going to flop at. After all, that's the explicit goal that I've written down! I need to get some big failures under my belt every year, which means that I have to try for things that are outside my everyday.

The side effect of trying for disasters is that sometimes they end up as successes and things work out in ways I could never have expected. Johansson wouldn't be nearly as surprised as I always am, though. He argues that if you want to come up with novel solutions, you have to look past the first things that come to mind, the obvious answers.

So try something bizarre! It might be a bad idea, but as Johansson told me, "The single most important factor is that you are interrupting your default thought pattern."^[3] Johansson believes that one of the biggest impediments to innovation is the human brain's tendency to create "associative barriers" that quickly sort the world into patterns we're already familiar with. While that type of thinking can be extremely useful when an immediate reaction is needed, "researchers have long suspected that these associative barriers are responsible for inhibiting creativity.... Creative minds tend to make unusual associations because they engage in so-called divergent thinking."^[4] Or put another way, if you approach a tough problem with a sense of humor and a willingness to embrace the absurd, you're actually on a research-backed path to possibly generating an innovative solution.

Here's the kicker, though: It's a lot easier to generate a humorous idea than it is to generate an actual innovative breakthrough. But Johansson insists that they're not mutually exclusive. This is my favorite finding from his research. If you want to come up with a good idea, you've got to come up with a ton of terrible ideas too. I love that, because I am *so good* at coming up with bad ideas. I might even call it my specialty. I bet you're pretty good at it too. I love that when I write "come up with some terrible ideas" on a to-do list, I immediately feel like success is within reach.

TURN UP THE VOLUME

The University of California–Davis psychologist Dean Simonton wrote in his book *Origins of Genius: Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity* that the success of an innovator is directly tied to how productive they are.^[5] In other words, a higher quantity of ideas leads directly to higher-quality ideas. That makes intuitive sense to me. If you throw out a bunch of ideas, the odds are better that one of them is going to be a winner. If you come up with only one option, the stakes are very high. Sometimes when my friend Max is making fun of me for cracking yet another joke that doesn't make any sense, he calls me a "volume shooter." I have basically zero understanding of basketball, but I've been led to believe that this is a type of basketball player who throws the ball at the basket a ton of times and therefore ends up scoring a fair number of points, but only because they also miss a ton of shots. They're just constantly throwing that ball up there. When it comes to ideas, though, Simonton found that that's the origin of genius.^[*5]

Simonton discovered that the best predictor for having a grant proposal approved is the total number of grant proposals written. He found the same was true for artists. Classical composers produced the majority of their enduring masterpieces during the exact same years when they produced most of their complete flops. Simonton's book is, in my opinion, essentially

the most rigorous academic way of phrasing the sports movie cliché “you have to be in it to win it.”

THE MISSY ELLIOTT: FLIP IT AND REVERSE IT

One strategy to start producing more ideas and to open yourself up to divergent thinking is to practice what Johansson calls “assumption reversal.” That means you generate ideas by reversing one of your baseline facts, allowing you to “shake your mind free from preconceived notions.”^[6] There are three steps to the technique:

1. Think about a challenge you’re facing, and write down the assumptions associated with that situation.
2. Write down the reverse of those assumptions.
3. Think about what it would take to put those reversals into practice.

As an example, Johansson asks the reader to imagine coming up with a genuinely exciting and new concept for a restaurant. He starts by making some basic assumptions about restaurants: They have menus, they charge money for food, they serve food. Then he reverses them. Now he’s generated:

- a. A restaurant with no menus, where you order by ingredient and the chef custom creates a dish for you.
- b. A restaurant that doesn’t charge for food but instead serves free food and charges for the time you spend there.
- c. A restaurant that does not serve food but is just a beautiful setting, and people pay to rent a table and bring their own food and drinks.

When I first read that section in Johansson's book, I was struck by how similar the innovative restaurant concepts are to premises for a potential comedy sketch on TV. I can absolutely imagine an episode of *Portlandia* or *Saturday Night Live* where they have a field day with a restaurant that doesn't serve food or that charges you by the minute. But I think that's actually the point! Finding a divergent solution and finding the humor in a given situation are quite often the same thing. To me, that's a beautiful thing! You may not solve the issue, but you'll almost certainly find yourself laughing instead of beating your head against the wall. And, if you find enough ways to wring humor out of the challenge, you may very well discover a serious, unexpected solution buried in the laughs.

Don't take my word for it. Arthur Koestler, one of the first authors to do serious research on creativity, suggested in his influential book *The Act of Creation* that the process of creativity is almost exactly the same process that makes us laugh.^[7]

I'VE GOT A FEVER, AND THE ONLY PRESCRIPTION IS MORE PLAY

Stuart Brown is a medical doctor, a psychiatrist, a clinical researcher, and the founder of the National Institute for Play. Why would a serious medical professional, dedicated to physical and mental health, start an institution devoted to play?

In his bestselling book, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, Dr. Brown^[*6] argues that if we lack a "feeling of lightness in what we do it should be taken as a warning sign. It should be as alarming as chest pain or shortness of breath when we climb stairs, a high blood sugar reading, or anemia."^[8] He makes the case that play is foundational to our physical and mental health. It's crucial not just for humans but for many animal species as well. There's strong

evolutionary evidence that links play and intelligence. In fact, a team of scientists found that across the fifteen orders of mammals they studied, larger-brained orders had more playful species.^[9]

One example of animal play that I love and that makes me laugh a lot comes from a study of river otters. As Dr. Brown reports, the biologist studying the otters “decided to train some of them to swim through a hoop by offering a food reward for completing the task.” The otters quickly mastered the hoop swim and understood the reward. But in a twist that the biologist did not expect, the otters started mixing things up and doing tricks to see if they’d get even better rewards. They swam through the hoop backward; they swam in one direction, reversed, and came back through. They even stopped halfway through and just hung out in the hoop. Each time, “they waited expectantly to see if this version of the task would earn a reward.”^[10]

I love the image of otters trying to game the system. But it’s also a crystal-clear interspecies example of how play allows for experimentation and innovation. In fact, “the biologist ruefully noted that he had been trying for years to get his graduate students to use such playful investigation rather than rote learning and mechanical thinking in their research.”^[11]

Dr. Brown connects humor to the kind of playful investigation the biologist wants to see, noting that “we are most likely to say ‘That’s funny...’ if in fact we are open to appreciating something funny or unexpected. Otherwise we see only a very unfunny failed experiment.”^[12]

There’s a constantly growing list of incredible inventions and discoveries that happened only by accident. These world-changing innovations might have been missed forever if the people involved hadn’t been humble enough to learn from their original failures. Here are three of my favorites:

- In the late 1800s a Russian chemist working at Johns Hopkins University spilled a chemical on his hands but didn’t bother to wash it off. That evening he sat down to dinner and noticed a surprising and unique taste to the bread he was eating. Excited, he ran back to the lab and began to taste all the residues on his hands and lab clothes, and the chemicals in the lab, until he pinpointed this substance that was the source of the taste. Is it generally a good idea to stick random chemicals

in your mouth? Absolutely not. But this time it led to the discovery of saccharine (the sweet in your Sweet’N Low).^[13]

- The year was 1856. An ambitious eighteen-year-old British student wanted to help cure malaria by developing the first artificial quinine. Unfortunately, his efforts were a complete failure and resulted only in a thick sludge. However, when the sludge spilled onto a piece of fabric, something about the stain caught his eye. Within a few years he was extremely wealthy and had sealed his place in the history books. He had accidentally created the color mauve and the first-ever artificial dye.^[14]
- During World War II, a self-taught engineer from Maine was fiddling with energy sources for radar equipment. When he reached into his pocket, he realized he’d unintentionally melted a candy bar in his pants and created a pocket fondue. But he’d also made an important discovery. Thanks to that man’s chocolate pockets, we can all now heat up a meal in a microwave oven.^[15]

GRAB YOUR LASSO AND HOP INTO THE INVISIBLE JET

At MIT, the role of humor in research and innovation is so well understood and valued that the university has a specific grant program to fund projects related to humor. Jay Keyser, professor emeritus of linguistics and former Peter de Florez Chair for Humor,^[*7] was once asked why scientists and engineers would need a sense of humor. He replied, “A sense of humor is to an MIT student what the magic lasso is to Wonder Woman. You can survive without it, but boy does it come in handy.”^[*8] ^[16]

As I dug deeper into why humor is such an important tool in research and innovation, I came across the emerging field of psychology known as “intellectual humility.” I’d never heard the term before, but it basically means being willing to accept that you might be wrong and being open to changing your mind. It’s a relatively new area of study in psychology.

As a result, I found myself one spring weekend heading up to the campus of the University of California–Berkeley for a conference on

intellectual humility. Never could I have imagined a scientific event entirely focused on the practice of admitting when you are wrong. Who sponsored it, the Coalition of Scientists' Spouses?[*9]

This gathering was bringing together scientists and journalists to talk about the latest research, how to use it, and where to go next. I was very glad to be invited since it sounded interesting, and because I'm glad to be invited to any event that includes free food. It was a little funny for me to be there because I'm certainly not a scientist, and while I'm often wrong about many things, I rarely admit to it.

But as I learned more about the concept of intellectual humility, I started to see more and more ways that having a comedian in the room made sense. One reason people are often afraid to be open to new ideas or to admit they don't know something is that they don't want to look foolish or be laughed at. As we've already discussed in earlier chapters, I personally love that. That's my goal when I wake up every day. I'm a big believer in looking like a fool. I'm desperate for strangers to laugh at me! I'm very willing to throw myself under the bus.

Also, the people I know with the best senses of humor always come from a place of curiosity. During one panel, a scientist said that essentially you can't be judgmental and curious at the same time, and so curiosity is a key piece of being able to learn and grow (whereas being judgmental keeps you mired in your current beliefs). An expert in political depolarization echoed that idea, talking about how a key element in getting people to communicate across partisan divides is to build trust and create an environment where it feels safe to be curious about what the other side believes (even if you don't agree with their views).

If you have too little openness to changing your mind, that's intellectual arrogance. If you have too much, that's intellectual servility—you'll back down from your beliefs immediately without any evidence. Intellectual humility is having the “right size” of confidence in your beliefs while still being open to changing them when you're presented with compelling evidence.

You can be intellectually humble in one context (or with one group of people) and arrogant in another. It's not a fixed state, even within an individual person. In relationships, there's something called the “social oil hypothesis,” which says that humility may “buffer wear-and-tear generally caused by traits that promote competition.”[17] In other words, during a

conflict, if your partner is humble and open to the idea that they might not be correct, that leads to relationship growth. If they're not humble and are unwilling to consider that they might not have all the information, that leads to deterioration of the relationship.

BACK TO THE 'BELS

The more I think about it, the more I realize that the spirit of intellectual humility is at the heart of what makes the Ig Nobel Prizes so much fun. Marc Abrahams, the founder of the Ig Nobels, told me in an interview that from the very beginning, he tried to involve “a lot of very famous scientists in the ceremony.”[\[18\]](#) That's partly because he framed the event, for participants, as researchers laughing at themselves, not being mocked by people outside their field. But it's also because it showed the world that smart, distinguished academics could celebrate how ridiculous their work sometimes looks to others.

A willingness to laugh about a study you spent years completing is a great example of a willingness to accept that you might sometimes make mistakes. Maybe you wasted your time! But not always. This is where the Ig Nobels are a road map for the rest of us who want to come up with more interesting, clever, unique ideas. These are some of the guidelines I took away:

1. Get curious about what tickles your funny bone.

Abrahams thinks one of the most important pieces of the Ig Nobels' success has been the slogan “Research that makes people LAUGH, then THINK.” He told me that when people are laughing, “they're also paying attention, at least for a few seconds. So now suddenly...they're curious about something they would have worked hard to stay away from.” It's fun to explore what makes you laugh. It can also reveal ideas you wouldn't have expected.

Many winners of the Ig Nobel Prize, Abrahams told me, have gone on to make extremely important and impactful discoveries. They've won awards that are not jokes in any way. But the through line that he sees in all their research is that they look hard at something they're laughing at, whether it's wombats that make square poop or woodpeckers that don't get headaches, and then try to figure out why that is. "The more they think about it, [the more] they realize, well, there's got to be a reason here. Let's see if we can figure it out.... That's really almost the entire history of science, is how things start. But it's not the way we think of...science because that's not the way [inspiration and innovation are] described in schools."

2. If you want to be smart, don't be afraid to look stupid.

Several times throughout the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony, audience members were instructed to make paper airplanes and throw them at the stage. The room was filled with MIT engineers, some of whom literally study aerodynamics. As you might imagine, their paper airplanes were awesome. Both my paper airplanes did a U-turn as soon as I tossed them and ended up in the lap of the man sitting behind me. My normal reaction would be to feel ashamed of my lackluster skills and avoid eye contact with any witnesses. But in the context of the Ig Nobels, I couldn't help wondering if something interesting might be discovered in how to make an airplane that spontaneously reverses direction.^[*10]

3. State the obvious.

One of my favorite traditions at the Ig Nobels is the way the organizers keep the ceremony on schedule. As anyone who has produced (or attended) a large event knows, speeches often run long. The innovation that the Ig Nobels introduced is that instead of having music play when an award winner is taking too long at the podium, they have an eight-year-old child^[*11] walk onto the stage, stand directly in front of the speaker, and repeat "I'm bored, please stop," over and over again, until the speaker wraps up their remarks. I've never seen a more effective timekeeper. It

works because instead of trying to avoid embarrassing a speaker for being long-winded, the ceremony leans into it. We all know the message when the orchestra starts to play, but this is far more fun because there's a kid saying it explicitly. Don't be afraid to state the comedically obvious!

4. Reverse your assumptions.

One of the winners who made me laugh the most was the recipient of the Ig Nobel Prize for Demography, Saul Justin Newman. His research demonstrated that contrary to all the press that “Blue Zones” have received for containing the secrets to human longevity (Blue Zones are geographic regions where many people live past one hundred years old), one thing they all have in common is an almost complete lack of official birth and death records. In other words, most people who have been studied because they were believed to be over 110 years old were likely just committing pension fraud or were mistaken about their birth year.

To me, that's a delightful example of how great ideas can come from experimenting with reversing your assumptions. While everyone else was trying to figure out what diet and exercise routine these magical 110-year-olds were following, Newman was trying to figure out where they were storing their birth certificates. Reversing the assumption that supercentenarians were actually as old as they said they were turned out to be a very important step that almost everyone else missed. But not me. Even at the age of 163, I'm sharp as a tack.^[*12]

Another fantastic paper was one by the winners of the botany prize, who found “evidence that some real plants imitate the shapes of neighboring artificial plastic plants.”^[19] I love knowing that even Mother Nature gets fooled sometimes, with plants thinking they'd better copy what the healthy-looking replica next door is doing. Whether you're a succulent or a scientist, paying attention to your mistakes can lead to big breakthroughs.

5. Sometimes it's a numbers game.

There's something funny about the rule of three, as we saw in chapter 4. And there's also something hilarious about the fact that the winners of the Ig Nobel Prize for Probability, a team of fifty researchers, performed

350,757 experiments to show that “when you flip a coin, it tends to land on the same side as it started.”^[20] That level of dedication made it almost impossible for them not to discover *something*. As numerous experts I talked to for this chapter explained, the key to finding one great idea is often just generating a lot of ideas, many of which are going to be garbage.

In other words, it’s always possible that you’re just one more terrible idea away from your next great idea. And I think that’s at least a little bit hopeful, as long as one of your terrible ideas doesn’t kill you first.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[*1](#) That’s not a typo. Every year it’s the first annual Ig Nobel Prizes, but after thirty-four years, it’s the 34th First Annual Ig Nobels.

[*2](#) At one ceremony, each winner also received “a (now defunct) 10 trillion Zimbabwe dollar bill and a pack of ‘Ig Pseudo Cola,’” according to a report by CNN.

[*3](#) Both long-established traditions at the Ig Nobel ceremonies.

[*4](#) For what it’s worth, Orville and Wilbur are also two definitively funny names to name your kids.

[*5](#) Max, if you’re reading this: Yes, I am calling myself a genius.

[*6](#) As far as I can tell, he’s no relation to the soda manufacturer or the baby bottle brand.

[*7](#) That is a real endowed chair and a real position at MIT!

[*8](#) The way he uses “survive” in this quote makes it sound a bit like he’s executing MIT students who don’t make him laugh. But I’m almost positive that’s not the case.

[*9](#) In fact, it was organized by the Greater Good Science Center, a name that instantly strikes shame into the hearts of scientists working on lesser good science.

[*10](#) If you do discover something valuable based on that idea, please pay me royalties.

[*11](#) A new “Miss Sweetie Poo” is named each year.

[*12](#) Don’t fact-check either part of that sentence. Actually, speaking of fact-checks, my conscientious fact-checker, Lisa, has informed me that there is currently an active battle between Newman and the Blue Zone scholars that has been described as “demographers at war.” She told me I might want to be wary of what I’m wading into here, and I just want to say that I am a pacifist and a conscientious objector in demographic war, so please do not drag me into your battle.

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PUNCHING UP

Humor as a Driver of Social Change

MIRACLE JONES was only thirty-five years old at the time I interviewed her, but she was already a power player in her native Pittsburgh. She's an attorney who leads get-out-the-vote efforts. She was a member of Pittsburgh mayor Ed Gainey's transition team. She volunteers with community members dealing with mental health crises by connecting them to services, and she provides resources for her unhoused neighbors. And that's all on top of her day job as director of policy and advocacy for 1Hood Media, a nonprofit devoted to "art, education, and social justice."

You might expect someone dealing with such weighty issues in her day-to-day to be extremely serious. Yet Miracle is anything but. She's light and joyful and has a big laugh that comes easily. She tells anyone who asks that her sense of humor is a big part of why she's able to do what she does. "I hope people would say that I show you can be yourself, have fun and make a difference, [that you don't] always have to be serious and stressed out despite fighting back against white supremacy and violence."^[1]

Miracle has experienced more than her fair share of struggles and oppression in life. But to her, a sense of humor is so crucially important "because joy is a part of protest. Joy is a part of pain. We don't live in these siloed lives where we pick either or.... Joy is how we are able to engage

and strengthen and support each other.... That's why joy and happiness is infused into revolutionary work." When Miracle is working with fellow organizers, she makes sure to intentionally allow space for singing, dancing together, watching a movie, or just goofing around. No matter what is going on, she told me, she knows she has to make time "just to laugh...and to keep that joy flowing."^[2]

We live in a time when the world can feel quite a lot like a horror movie. When there are no cataclysmic floods, there are rampaging wildfires. When there's no deadly heat wave, there's an unprecedented ice storm. One day it's horrific violence, the next it's a slide into autocracy. And through it all, multiple overlapping systems of oppression not only remain but seem to entrench themselves deeper each year. It's overwhelming to even write about, much less to live through.

Having a sense of humor doesn't solve any of these issues. It's not a magical quick fix. But what a sense of humor *can* do is relieve some of the tension. It can make the work of achieving justice feel a little bit less like a horror movie and more like a comedy. Humor is a powerful tool in combating cynicism and burnout and in developing a vision for a better world. Instead of causing the work for social change to feel draining, it can make it empowering.

IT'S SO TRUE!

The first step in any movement for social change is to get people to understand the reality of the current situation. If you're unaware of an issue, you're probably going to be pretty terrible at solving it. As we saw in chapter 1, one of the strengths of humor is getting us to pay closer attention to the world as it is. When people laugh hard, one thing they often say is "It's so true!"

Comedians can sometimes be eerily accurate in the way their jokes predict the future. The Yugoslavian sketch comedy group Top lista nadrealista (TLN, or Surrealists' Chart Toppers) was hugely popular and

influential during the late 1980s and early '90s in Sarajevo. The group had a dark, punk-rock-inspired style, and their sketches often skewed political and satirical. Before the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars in the Balkans, TLN sketches identified the societal fault lines that would come to be central in the violence.

In one sketch, a husband and wife decide to get a divorce due to irreconcilable political differences. The family dispute soon escalates into entrenched urban warfare as they destroy the apartment with explosives and heavy artillery. At one point, the wife, taking cover behind a partially destroyed wall, yells about how she deserves ownership of the kitchen and bedroom because “it’s my historical right!”^[3]

In another sketch, a man and a woman are on a date at a nice restaurant. But the woman speaks Serbian while the man speaks “Herzegovinian.” Throughout the dinner, the couple use a translator to communicate. However, since the languages are identical, the interpreter just repeats the exact same words verbatim after each line.^[4]

TLN’s sketches are funny and surreal, and yet just months later, those same types of artificially created divisions and historical arguments would be used as justifications for violence between neighbors who had previously lived peacefully side by side. The laughter their sketches were getting was based on the audience’s realization of just how charged these issues were. But the comedians also used those laughs to reveal the fundamental absurdity of violence and conflict.

Here in the United States, the writer and filmmaker Mike Judge has garnered praise over the course of his career for getting laughs out of broken systems and absurd ignorance in American culture. His 1999 movie *Office Space* is a cult classic, in large part thanks to the ways it satirizes the soul-crushing, paper-pushing uselessness of many corporate jobs. Judge’s follow-up, the 2006 movie *Idiocracy*, pushes even further. In the year 2505, protagonist Joe Bauers wakes up from hibernation to discover an America dominated by corporations and led by profoundly anti-science and anti-intellectual politicians. The country is facing a massive food shortage because the government is spraying a corporate sports drink instead of water to irrigate the nation’s farms. It’s bad for growing the crops they need to live on but great for the stock price!

At another point, Bauers enters a hospital only to be arrested and sent to prison for not having a barcode tattoo to pay for treatment. And in a scene

that predicted the conservative legal insistence that “corporations are people,” a woman whose children are starving loses custody of her kids to a fast-food vending machine, being told, “Carl’s Jr. believes no child should go hungry. You are an unfit mother. Your children will be placed in the custody of Carl’s Jr.”

Judge’s movies are cult classics, popularized by word of mouth and rewatched endlessly for the way he pinpoints some of the exact spots where society is currently broken. Very few people want to buy a ticket for a lecture on overconsumption, corporate exploitation, and the dumbing down of public discourse. But when Mike Judge wraps it up in humor and casts Terry Crews, Maya Rudolph, Luke Wilson, and Dax Shepard, audiences not only gladly sit down to hear his message, they also pass it along to their friends and family.

Roy Wood Jr., the acclaimed stand-up comedian and former correspondent on *The Daily Show*, told me that “comedy is journalism.” In his view, whether you’re making explicitly political jokes or mining laughs from your personal life, successful humor comes from honesty. “You’re just reporting on either what’s happening to you personally or what’s happening to all of us collectively. And I think once you’re in a truthful space, then you have an opportunity to truly connect with people.”^[5]

Roy’s father was a legendary civil rights journalist who reported on stories like the Soweto uprising against the apartheid government in South Africa and the dire and dangerous conditions facing predominantly Black platoons during the Vietnam War. Roy grew up watching the local news, he told me, and his father “would yell at the news the way people yell at football.” As a result, even from the earliest days of his career as a comedian, Roy has been thinking deeply about the impact and the focus of his comedy. But as anyone who has seen him perform live or watched one of his award-winning comedy specials can attest, that’s never come at the expense of genuine laughs.

One of my favorite jokes that Roy tells onstage is about what he thinks when he sees a lot of American flags in the same place:

You know how something ain’t racist, but it feels—it’s got the residue of racism on it?...Have you ever been somewhere and it’s too many American flags? It just feels...there’s a little too much freedom in this space. And it just don’t feel right. Like, how many American flags equal one Confederate flag? I don’t know what the number is, but there IS a number.^[6]

There's so much that I love about that joke, both in its relatable construction and in the way that it highlights a granular type of political weirdness that I'd never thought deeply about before.

Roy thinks it's foolish to deny that jokes can have real power. "You could write a joke that could destroy somebody and make them feel inhuman," he told me. But when he's getting laughs out of big issues like politics and race relations, "it's naïve to think that you can make a joke and speak truth to power and the establishment, and the government will change with this joke." So what role does humor play in making big, systemic changes?

Caty Borum, author of *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious: Comedy for Social Change and Civic Power*, describes uses of humor like Judge's films and Roy's stand-up as building "narrative power," an idea she attributes to the labor organizer Ai-jen Poo. Borum writes that "structural policy change cannot happen—or be maintained—without narrative change, a fundamental shift in a culture's feelings and beliefs about people and their fundamental humanity."^[7]

As an example, Borum cites the story of Amanda Nguyen, who in her early thirties had already been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and was named one of *Time's* Women of the Year. Nguyen has used humor and her personal story to build narrative power and use it to enact real world change. A sexual assault survivor, she was instrumental in proposing and drafting legislation that would allow survivors access to their own medical evidence to seek justice. Thanks to her work, the Survivors' Bill of Rights Act of 2016 passed unanimously in the U.S. Congress. Even with an issue this serious, Nguyen was able to use the power of humor.

How did she do it? She partnered with the Will Ferrell–founded Funny or Die production company and made a series of short videos, including one called "Even Supervillains Think Our Sexual Assault Laws Are Insane." Nguyen's use of comedy, Borum reports, helped "unlock stalled legislation and capture the imaginations and attention of policy makers, the public, and media."^[8]

For Nguyen, the key element is getting people to pay attention, and humor is a power tool. "It's like taking your vodka with a chaser," she told Borum. "It is my personal belief that social movements cannot be sustained on anger. Anger will burn out."^[9]

I'LL TELL YOU THE TRUTH, BUT PLEASE DON'T CHOP OFF MY HEAD

The idea that humor allows for a uniquely honest and effective type of truth telling goes all the way back to the role of the court jester.^[*1] In her book *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World*, historian Beatrice K. Otto describes how, across many different cultures and time periods, jesters did much more than just tell jokes:

Of at least equal importance with his entertainer's cap was the jester's function as adviser and critic. This is what distinguishes him from a pure entertainer who would juggle batons, swallow swords, or strum on a lute or a clown who would play the fool simply to amuse people. The jester everywhere employed the same techniques to carry out this delicate role, and it would take an obtuse king or emperor not to realize what he was driving at, since "other court functionaries cooked up the king's facts for him before delivery; the jester delivered them raw."^[10]

I love how medieval jesters, Eddie Murphy, and a sizable percentage of podcasters all described their comedy in the same way: raw. Despite being dead for hundreds of years, some of the jesters from history have left behind bits that still feel edgy and can make me laugh.

Here's one from the court jester of Philip VI of France. The Battle of Sluys had just ended in a humiliating defeat of the French navy by the English. It was an unprecedented and complete rout. No one in the court wanted to tell King Philip the bad news, so they forced the jester to do it. The jester presented it as a positive, saying that the English were clearly cowards because "they did not jump overboard like our brave Frenchmen!"^[11]

In the court of nineteenth-century Persia's autocratic shah Naseredin, all the courtiers lived in fear except the jester Karim Shir'ei. Karim Shir'ei "would ridicule the whole court, including the shah," Otto writes. "Once the shah asked whether there was a shortage of food, and the jester said 'Yes, I see Your Majesty is eating only five times a day.'^[12]

And in tenth-century China, the jester Jing Xinmo was able to use humor to sway the emperor away from disastrous policies. “A local magistrate once requested that the emperor stop trampling farmland during his hunting sprees,” Otto reports. “Infuriated, the emperor had the magistrate hauled before him. Jing facetiously suggested that the magistrate be put to death immediately and that the emperor let the peasants starve instead of harvesting the land and paying taxes, all so he could gallop about freely. Presumably seeing the absurdity of his own behavior, the emperor laughed and pardoned the magistrate.”^[13]

Why would powerful people throughout history have been willing to accept criticism from a jester? Otto suggests that jesters provided several public benefits to rulers, beyond advice and entertainment. A monarch with a court jester might look, to the general public, like they were more tolerant and forgiving. The presence of a jester could also contribute to the impression that the ruler wasn’t surrounded only by sycophants and yes-men. (One of the jesters working for Queen Elizabeth I was reportedly chastised by her for not being harsh enough.)

But on an emotional level, I think that humor and laughter’s nonthreatening nature are at the very core of why this type of behavior was tolerated. Otto writes that:

The foolishness of the jester, whether in his odd appearance or his levity, implies that he is not passing judgment from on high, and this may be less galling than the “holier than thou” corrective of an earnest adviser. One of the most effective techniques the jester uses to point out his master’s folly is allowing him to see it for himself. Rather than contradicting the king, the jester will agree with a harebrained scheme so wholeheartedly that the suggestion is taken to a logical extreme, highlighting its stupidity. The king can then decide for himself that maybe it wasn’t such a good idea after all.^[14]

Humor creates just enough mental space and perspective^[*2] for a queen or an emperor to see and laugh at themselves, an ability so valuable that the role of jester developed independently all over the world.

WHY DON'T YOU PICK ON SOMEBODY YOUR OWN SIZE?

The jester is no longer an official role, having been replaced by actors, comedians, and all manner of other commentators, but their spirit of humor is still very much around. One defining element is that a jester's humor was always "punching up." That's a term that you may have heard before. It means that the target of the humor is more powerful or has more social capital than the person making the joke.

In other words, the archetypical high school nerd who makes fun of the popular quarterback is punching up. The quarterback who makes fun of the nerd is punching down. Mocking someone who is already socially isolated and weaker than you is bullying. Making fun of the person who has it all is a funny way to level the playing field.

But what if the nerd comes from a rich family and is making fun of the quarterback for being poor? Now all of a sudden that doesn't feel so good anymore. (It's also a plot point in the movie *Dirty Dancing*.) Or what if they're actually siblings and are both comfortable in their own skin? Wouldn't they be punching sideways? Why are we doing so much punching in the first place? Shouldn't we be practicing nonviolent conflict resolution? The point is: What exactly qualifies as "punching up" is subject to interpretation.

Despite those nuances, the phrase is often used as a litmus test for whether a comment or a joke is in good humor or bad humor. And while overanalyzing what makes a joke funny often kills the punch line, putting some thought into where your humor is directed, I find, can often unveil deep structural forces and lead to insights (and bigger, more authentic laughs).

Author Andrew Leland, who is blind, told me he draws a clear distinction between "good blind jokes" and "bad blind jokes." "Unacceptable blind humor trades on stereotypes," he said, citing examples like Mr. Magoo, the nearsighted cartoon character who frequently crashes his car and creates mayhem by not being able to see. To Leland, that kind of

joke “is perpetuating a stereotype of blindness as buffoonery, as ignorance.”^[15]

On the other hand, “acceptable blind humor...trades on absurdity.” As an example, Leland told me a joke where a blind man walks into a department store with his seeing eye dog, then suddenly starts swinging the dog around his head by the tail. A clerk runs over and yells, “Oh my god, what are you doing?” The blind man calmly responds, “Just having a look around.”^[*3] The key difference is that we are laughing at an absurd situation rather than at a person.

Just because something is funny doesn’t mean it’s morally good. Punching up is a framework that helps us check that our humor is on the right side of history. So I try to think about where I’m aiming my humor and who I’m aiming it against. I make mistakes with this all the time. That’s a part of the process too.

LIKE A FUNNIER ENERGIZER BUNNY

Telling the truth in a way that people actually listen to is one way that humor can be effective, but it’s far from the only one. Sometimes the most helpful function of humor isn’t in delivering a message but in relieving tension. Working on urgent, important causes can be draining. Whether it’s war, hunger, disease, poverty, political divisions, or any other issue, the solutions are almost never simple and easy to implement. If they were, the problem would already be fixed.

Having a sense of humor and finding ways to laugh can make the long, slow work of change more bearable. It can actually make it fun. The cliché “laughing to keep from crying” has some truth to it. When you’re surrounded by disaster and suffering, laughing can be one way to keep yourself moving forward.

Miracle Jones and her colleagues in Pittsburgh spend the majority of their time focused on nonfunny ways to deliver their message. Jones’s

strategy isn't to try to write a hilarious sketch about alternative visions of public safety and community development. Her strategy is to try to laugh. She's trying to have fun with her coworkers. She's trying to make sure they experience joy while they're tackling the big issues facing their city and communities.

“As many dumpster fires as there are, as many negative things as there are in the world, [laughter] is a reminder that there are still some positive, good things worth fighting for,” Jones told me. “It took me a long time to be able to laugh and be able to enjoy life. To enjoy moments without pain and frustration. So for me, I always try to make sure that I'm taking time out of my day or my week, no matter what's going on, just to laugh.”^[16]

One of the lessons that Jones has learned in her life and her work, and one that I am constantly having to relearn myself, is that we don't live in a world where things are siloed into “tragedy” or “comedy,” “funny” or “serious.” As Jones put it, sometimes society makes us feel like we should be ashamed if we find humor and happiness despite the tragedies going on in the world. “But you have to have joy, no matter how minuscule it might be to you, because joy is how we are able to engage and strengthen and support each other.”^[17]

At the same time, Jones is not endorsing turning away from challenges or big societal problems because they don't feel fun enough. Far from it! “I'm not talking about avoiding what's going on in your life. I'm talking about taking a moment, even in the darkest of times, to sit there and say, ‘I deserve to be happy, I deserve to be okay. I deserve to have a laugh. I deserve to have peace of mind.’ I deserve it, and I'm going to claim it and not feel guilty about it.”^[18]

WHOSE LINE IS IT ANYWAY?

It feels a little presumptuous of me to summarize how you can incorporate more laughter and humor into your work to make the world a better place. ^[*4] I mean, you might not be trying to make the world a better place! You

might just be some person reading this book while lying down on a couch, trying to relax. I'm not trying to put solving all the world's problems on you.

That being said, if you *are* trying to improve the world, even in a tiny way, even if it's only every once in a while, I do think you can glean some lessons from my interviews.

The first one is that it's okay to spend some time fully horizontal on a sofa! It's not possible to work on complex issues nonstop 24/7/365. And the combination of humor and rest is a powerful tool to prevent burnout. It also makes it more likely that other people will want to join in and help you along the way.

The second lesson, and the bigger one, is that humor as a tool for social change involves thinking a lot about drawing lines. You need to draw a line between the seriousness of the issues that you're trying to change and the seriousness of the people working on them. It's okay to laugh and to have fun! That doesn't trivialize the work. People can be light and joyful while working on heavy topics. Miracle Jones and her coworkers consciously create time and space to laugh together. So schedule that comedy movie night, have a silly costume party, or just embrace the spontaneous laughs when they come (and put them in your humor folder!) rather than trying to tamp them down out of some misguided idea of what's appropriate.

Humans are complicated, and our interpersonal dynamics and structural forces are always shifting, so you also need to find a way to draw a line between laughing at people in a way that flattens them and laughing at people in a way that acknowledges them. Andrew Leland would be the first to tell you that it's ridiculous to say that blindness should never be laughed at. But he'd also explain that there are huge and important differences between the laughs that make him feel recognized in his humanity and those that make him feel like he's being treated like a helpless buffoon.

Finally, you need to draw a line between what you're "supposed to say" and what's actually happening. From medieval jesters to the age of social media and artificial intelligence, humanity has never stopped needing people to call out the truth. Maybe you're supposed to say that the emperor looks great in his new suit, but you have to admit that it's funnier to point out that here is this guy walking through the city with his full dong out and flapping in the breeze. It can be a risk to call out what others choose to ignore. But the beauty of humor is that, if you do it right, you can actually

get people to listen to the truth. Humor, at its best, is able to cross the line between what we tune out and what we pay attention to. Unfortunately, it does sometimes lead to the emperor calling for your execution, but I'm pretty sure I can't be held liable if that happens to you.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[*1](#) In medieval times, this would absolutely have been my profession. But I believe I would have died from infection after a minor injury almost immediately. I probably would have tripped on some sort of tapestry even though everyone around me was yelling, "Careful of the tapestries, little jester boy!"

[*2](#) Or therapeutic ambiguity, if you want to imagine the royals in a time-traveling therapy session with Dr. Foose!

[*3](#) Leland is quick to note that he doesn't condone violence against animals. To him, the joke is funny only because he can't imagine any blind person ever doing anything like it. The absurdity works only if it feels impossible. Otherwise, it slides over to the unacceptable side.

[*4](#) Don't worry, I'll still do it. I'm just acknowledging how it might come off. But I'm nothing if not presumptuous. I mean, I'm currently writing a footnote! And I expect you to read it!

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LAUGHING AND CRYING

Humor's Role in Grief and Resilience

I SOMETIMES feel like the most significant dates in my childhood all revolve around terrorism. My dad worked at the World Trade Center, for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, for his whole career. On the morning of September 11, 2001, he just barely missed the last subway train that made it into the twin towers. However, he had been inside the buildings during the bombing in 1993, when I was six years old. I remember that night, when Dad walked into our apartment, his face jet-black with soot, his suit covered in ash. He looked so preposterous standing in the doorway, like an overdressed chimney sweep, that we burst into laughter as we ran to hug him.

In April 2013 I was at the Boston Marathon waiting to watch my roommate run past. I was standing a half mile from the finish line when the bombings happened. That night I sheltered in place as we heard sirens in the street and helicopters overhead searching for the bombers. It's the only time I've ever felt brave to be eating an entire pot of spaghetti in my underwear.

When terrible things happen in the world, sometimes my job as a comedian feels irrelevant or even inappropriate. How can I go out and tell jokes when there's blood on the ground? Ignoring naked human suffering feels offensive. Trying to make people laugh feels insane.

The sheer horror of these kinds of events is almost impossible to put into words. But I think one of the most important functions of humor is to communicate what we can't express otherwise. Humor provides a way of dealing with our most powerful emotions and feelings. And the more I think about and live through tragic moments, the more I see that humor can play a crucial role in grief and resilience.

LAUGHING WITH LEONARD

The musician Nick Cave has suffered more than his fair share of tragedy. When he was a teenager, he lost his father in a car crash, and later he lost his fifteen-year-old and thirty-one-year-old sons in separate incidents. Cave would be, in the opinion of many people, fully entitled to be bitter and crushed by the weight of their deaths. But he still finds faith and hope, and in responding to a fan's question about how he does it, Cave wrote that his answer lies in one of Leonard Cohen's most famous lyrics: "There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."^[1]

For years, those lyrics had struck Cave as a trite platitude. But after his son Arthur's death, he came to understand their true significance. He wrote, "I have realised that it is a moral error to compulsively fixate on the world's troubles, to elevate 'the crack in everything' and not acknowledge 'the light getting in.' Our pleasures and joys are not a negation of humanity's suffering, a betrayal of those we have lost, or the denial of our various griefs. They are the bright, necessary, God-filled articulations of our humanness. We humans are our own howling voids—cracked and beautiful things pierced by light."^[2]

The idea that "joy ultimately declares itself most intensely through our heartbreaks" came up again and again in my interviews and research for this book. There's an old comedy adage that comedy is tragedy plus time. To me, that's part of what Cave is getting at. That while we may have this image in our heads of what grief is "supposed" to look like, those who are actually in the trenches often discover that it's far from a monolith. Tragedy

can shatter us, but it also creates the spaces where the light gets in. Sometimes humor is there, unexpectedly, from the start. Other times it may take months or years before enough time passes for a tragedy to contain any comedy. But I believe strongly, as does Cave, that finding humor and laughter in the most challenging of times is not a negation of suffering but rather a necessary, triumphant act.

SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS

Michael Cruz Kayne, comedian and writer for *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, says that the most discombobulating thing about grieving is that “everybody dies but nobody talks about it.” After the death of his infant son, Fisher, Kayne struggled to understand how to relate to his comedy peers who hadn’t experienced a tragedy of that magnitude. But he also wanted to talk about Fisher. He wanted to discuss the experience. He didn’t want people to suddenly stop talking and avoid the topic forever. Because, in his view, there was so much to say. As he put it, “Grief is not one thing. It is a galaxy of emotions, most of which are put in orbit by the loss of someone you loved, and the harrowing (or not) circumstances surrounding that loss. But we only get to talk about one part publicly: the sadness.”^[3]

As a comedian, Kayne felt like after his son’s death he would never find anything funny ever again. But then he and his wife found humor unexpectedly in the darkest of times. Kayne told me that he’s been surprised that the parts of his experience that often resonate with people the most are the ways he has been able to “look at a horrible situation and go, ‘Okay, this is incredibly sad. But also kind of funny that that guy said that.’”^[4]

When I asked for an example, Kayne told me that on the day of his son’s cremation, the funeral home handed him a receipt that said “Thank you, come again” at the bottom. He and his wife couldn’t help but laugh. There was no place in the entire universe that they would less want to come back to.

Kayne's advice to anyone going through a similar loss would be to give themselves the grace to not fit into the box of how they think they're supposed to feel at any moment. Of course, there will be many moments when things are only serious and heartbreaking and horrible. But that's not all there is. Kayne says, from experience, that it's also possible to see "the ludicrousness of death."

He also said that many people cannot and will not get it. But some people who have gone through similar experiences have made him feel less alone. Even then, "everybody's different and everybody's tragedy is a different depth and width and length.... But it helped immensely when I started talking about it and people secretly had stories like mine. Perversely, their sadness made me feel better. Sadder. But also better at the same time."

FUMBLING WITH LASAGNA

In both humor and grief, some people just get it, while other people, a lot of other people, do not. Jo Firestone, in an essay about the death of her best friend Adina, wrote, "If you also grieve, I am sorry. Because it's not only that someone has died, but that no one alive seems to know what to do about it. Some people will disappear or will silently drop off lasagna, while others will push you too hard to try Zumba. The bottom line is that people hate to see you broken and will fumble to help you get through it."[\[5\]](#)

In many ways, I think this is the ultimate argument in favor of having a sense of humor—the ability to help you fumble through it, to reach out to other people who are also fumbling and suffering, and to find laughter even during the most horrible of human tragedies. A sense of humor can give you the power to come to terms with death. Because ultimately, it's pretty ridiculous, isn't it? We're here for such a short time. We care so deeply about staying here. We try everything in our power to make sure we and our loved ones stay alive. We try our hardest to forget that we're all going to die. But then one day they're gone, and one day we're gone. It's

unavoidable and inevitable, but if you want to keep getting invited to parties, you're not supposed to talk about it.

Writer Nora McNerny says grief is “so uncomfortable, especially if it's someone else's grief.”^[6] But humor, she argues, can make talking about grief and connecting with others less uncomfortable. After losing her husband to brain cancer, she and a similarly bereaved friend started a group called the Hot Young Widows Club. That always gets a laugh. They had membership cards and T-shirts and everything. The Hot Young Widows Club was a series of small group gatherings where people could have a space to share their feelings and ask the questions that other people in their lives weren't comfortable discussing.

In McNerny's words, the groups allowed for a “huge range of conversations. Like, ‘My husband died two weeks ago, I can't stop thinking about sex, is that normal?’ Yeah [that's normal]. ‘What if it's one of the Property Brothers?’ Less normal, but I'll accept it.”^[7]

Death is the punch line that's coming for us all. McNerny has looked into the numbers, and she says, “The research that I have seen will stun you: everyone you love has a 100 percent chance of dying.”^[8]

HERE FOR A GOOD TIME, NOT FOR A LONG TIME

At first glance, you might think that an acceptance of death's inevitability would make a person extremely serious. But in many cases, it actually has quite the opposite effect. Clinical psychologist Jordana Jacobs often has couples in her practice go through an exercise where they vividly imagine their own death and the death of their partner.^[9] She's found that when her patients engage with mortality, they often find themselves much more deeply connected to each other and joyful in their lives. Petty resentments and day-to-day frustrations fall away when we are faced with the truth that

we don't know how long we have here, but we know for certain that our time together is temporary.

I asked Jacobs if she felt that contemplating one's spouse's death was romantic, and she told me that, yes, she did consider it to be an act of romance.

You know, I'm not thinking about death in terms of, like, decaying bodies or anything like that. I'm thinking about death in terms of this general truth of the transient nature of life, of love, of all things. When we don't keep that in mind, we view people and things as permanent and secure...in order to give us a sense of safety in a world that is constantly changing. We want to feel like people are secure and that our lives are safe. [But] it actually drains passion out of the experience of connecting with somebody. Because what makes love so rich and so intense is actually the knowledge that you're not going to have it forever.

People toss around the line “ ’Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all,” but Jacobs believes we all need to engage with it more deeply. To her mind, “We have to accept loss in order to have better love.” And maybe part of accepting loss is also accepting Jo Firestone's lasagna or Nora McInerny's invitation to the Hot Young Widows Club. When you're in a moment of pain or suffering, allowing other people to love and care for you can be difficult. But it opens the door to the cathartic relief and connection of humor.

I heard that idea echoed when I interviewed death doula Alua Arthur about her career. Arthur works with individuals who are at the end of their lives, as well as with their families, to make sure their affairs are in order and that they experience, emotionally and logistically, what they need when they die. People are often surprised by how much laughter is present in her work, she told me: “There is a lot of joy at the end of life. There's a lot of beauty. There's a lot of laughter.”

Of course, there's often sadness and struggle and fear, she said. But death is also one of the most honest and authentic moments, which naturally lends itself to humor and laughter as well: “Our whole humanity is really just [there] in our faces as death is occurring, and that means the entire spectrum of it. So there's also a lot of joy, a lot of love, a lot of moments of tenderness and...connection.”^[10]

IT'S NOT JUST DEATH THAT'S FUNNY—SUFFERING IS TOO!

If you're looking for a group of people with a great sense of humor, historically one of the best ways to find them is to identify a group that has been oppressed and experienced suffering. When external forces try to crush a people, an irrepressible opposing force of humor and comedy often emerges to allow them to maintain their humanity.

From Irish folk having a craic to Jewish Borscht Belt comedians to the long, influential history of Black humor in America to the outrageous wit of drag queens, as far as I can tell, it's a universal truth that oppressed groups are funnier than oppressors.

North Koreans have long suffered from repression, isolation, and deprivation under almost complete state control. In 2021 residents reported that the government had even banned all laughter for eleven days during a mandatory period of mourning for the tenth anniversary of former leader Kim Jong Il's death.^[11] Yet despite their suffering and the risks, North Koreans who have fled the country have reported several (in my opinion, very funny) jokes that are shared surreptitiously:

North Korean Joke #1: Long Live Kim Jong Il!

Chang Man Yong works on a collective farm in North Korea. He goes fishing, gets lucky, and brings a fish home. Happy about his catch, he tells his wife: "Look what I've got. Shall we eat fried fish today?"

The wife says: "We've got no cooking oil!"

"Shall we stew it, then?"

"We've got no pot!"

"Shall we grill it?"

"We've got no firewood!"

Chang Man Yong gets angry, goes back to the river, and throws the fish back into the water. The fish, happy to have had such a narrow escape, sticks its head out of the water and cheerfully yells: "Long live General Kim Jong Il!"

North Korean Joke #2: The Workers' Paradise

At an art museum in Europe, an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a North Korean stand before a painting of Adam and Eve holding an apple in the Garden of Eden.

The Englishman says: "The man has something tasty to eat and is eager to share it with the woman. Based on that, I would conclude that they're rather

obviously English.”

The Frenchman says: “I disagree. They’re walking around entirely naked, so they must be French.”

The North Korean says: “There is no doubt in my mind that they’re North Korean. They have no clothes to wear, barely anything to eat, and they still think they’re in heaven!”

North Korean Joke #3: Bear Hug

Kim Jong Il and Vladimir Putin are having a summit meeting in Moscow. During a break, they’re bored, and they decide to make a bet to see whose bodyguards are more loyal.

They’re meeting on the twentieth floor. Putin calls his bodyguard Ivan, opens the window, and says: “Ivan, jump!”

Sobbing, Ivan says: “Mr. President, how can you ask me to do that? I have a wife and child waiting for me at home.”

Putin sheds a tear, apologizes to Ivan, and sends him away.

Next, it’s Kim Jong Il’s turn. He calls his bodyguard Lee Myung Man and yells: “Lee Myung Man, jump!” Not hesitating for a split second, Lee Myung Man is just about to jump out the window.

Putin grabs Lee Myung Man to prevent him from jumping and says: “Are you out of your mind? If you jump out this window, you’ll die! This is the twentieth floor!”

Nevertheless, Lee Myung Man is still struggling, trying to escape Putin’s embrace and jump out the window: “President Putin, please let me go! I have a wife and child at home!”^[12]

In the United States, humor and the culture of comedy have been profoundly influenced by Jewish Americans. “When large waves of Jews from Eastern and Central Europe flooded into America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were quickly initiated into the American brand of racial humor,” writes Julie Yue in her investigation of the roots of Jewish comedy. Jewish immigrants, she explains, were mocked for their clothing, their physical features, and the way they spoke. “Their Yiddish, by many accounts, sounded comical too. It is from their Hebrew-German linguistic brew that we get some of English’s most phonetically apt words like *schmuck*, *glitch*, and *chutzpah*.”

Rather than allow this mockery to shame them, Jewish entertainers decided to capitalize on it. As Yue reports, they decided “that they would be better at making fun of themselves than anyone else. Jewish comics honed their skills first to Jewish-only crowds in New York City, then later in the Jewish-dominated resorts of the Catskills, known as the Borscht Belt, and finally into mainstream American consciousness.”^[13]

Jewish humor not only allowed Jewish immigrants to turn bigoted attacks on their head, it also allowed them to reframe and re-create the subject matter. For example, instead of only mocking the looks and language for which they were mocked, Borscht Belt comedians developed the lasting comedic trope of the Jewish mother.^[*1] Some examples:

Q: Why don't Jewish mothers drink?

A: Alcohol interferes with their suffering.

Q: How many Jewish mothers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

A: (Sigh). Don't bother. I'll just sit here in the dark. I don't want to be a nuisance to anybody.

Q: Why do Jewish mothers make great parole officers?

A: They never let anyone finish a sentence!^[14]

Jewish humor was not alone in shaping laughter in the United States. Black Americans played an enormous role, with a legacy that can be traced all the way back to West African storytellers and entertainers. The African history of Black comedy doesn't often get attention, eclipsed by the sordid American history of blackface and minstrelsy, where the humor was at Black people's expense and rooted in racist depictions.

Interestingly, Darryl Littleton, a comedian and the author of *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us to Laugh*, argues that minstrelsy was born out of a misappropriation of Black culture. "Minstrelsy came from slave owners watching slaves on their off hours allegedly being in natural behavior," he says. "However, what the slaves were doing was making fun of the masters."^[15] So minstrel shows and blackface originated in slave owners not understanding that they were the ones being made fun of.

The humor that Black Americans used interpersonally and as a way of coping with the trauma and deprivation of slavery and its aftermath was of an entirely different sort. In his book *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*, Mel Watkins writes about the parallels between Black humor and Jewish humor in the United States: "The outsider or 'shadow' position of Jews and blacks in mainstream American society has given them a unique perspective on themselves as well as on the dominant or majority culture." Both Jewish and Black humor may often be self-effacing, but it's

not masochistic. Instead, it's a way for an outsider to deflect and diffuse dangerous anger and prejudice into laughter.^[16]

This type of humor was often a way to safely express feelings of frustration or rage by masking them in a joke. Watkins shares a legendary story by the comedian Dick Gregory from the 1960s: "A black man enters a Southern restaurant and is told, 'Sorry, we don't serve colored folks here.' His reply, 'Fine, I don't eat them, just bring me a medium rare hamburger.'"^[*2] ^[17]

EVERYONE'S GONNA SUFFER, BUT EVERYONE CAN LAUGH TOO

Racial, ethnic, and religious groups are not alone in using humor to build resilience and cope with suffering. There's a long tradition of "gallows humor." Soldiers at war joke about death and the terrible food. Doctors joke about the difficult patients, stress, and sleep deprivation. Gravediggers joke about, I'm assuming, the graves? The point isn't the jokes themselves but the broader idea. When you're in a moment of intense grief or suffering, it can feel unspeakable. Done poorly, humor can mask or minimize. It can be a defense mechanism to push other people away. But the kind of humor I've been advocating throughout this book creates connection and serves as a pressure release valve. It shows a way to speak about the unspeakable and, even for a moment, to laugh about it.

To leave you with some parting principles, let's go on the road with Michael Cruz Kayne. He's toured the United States with a one-man show about the death of his son called *Sorry for Your Loss*. It's one of the most expertly crafted pieces of live theater I've ever seen. At many moments, I was laughing hard at a perfect joke, and then, minutes later, I'd be sobbing in my seat. Kayne has spoken with audiences after the performances and

heard the myriad ways they connect with his story; that combination of cathartic humor and grief is what moves people the most.

Kayne's advice for how we can put his skills into practice comes in two parts:

1. The jokes that resonate the most about grief, for me, are the ones that poke fun at all the weird stuff around it. Your uncle got drunk at the funeral? Your stepsister's condolence card had a link to her online jewelry store? There is such Performance of Seriousness around grief that people forget how weird they are. Just acknowledging the weirdness is a huge relief. As for the jokes that make it worse? Anything that hints at minimizing or delegitimizing the grief ("Are we still doing this? Get over it already!") or telling you how to feel ("Smile!") is a big no-no as far as I'm concerned.
2. For me, humor is easy to find. Notice things (internal and external) and talk about them. That's 80% of it. Among many services it provides, humor is a release of anxiety and tension, a release that comes from sharing the anxiety. "I also notice that the rabbi is falling asleep," etc. The spark of recognition that observation sets off in you and your friends is the beginning of humor.[\[18\]](#)

To me, that's a perfect idea to end this chapter with: Even as we navigate through our darkest moments, we can be looking for a spark of recognition. And please, dear god, do not use your condolence card as an opportunity to drive traffic to your online boutique.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[*1](#) True story: You'd never know it from my name, but my mother is Jewish. Not until long after I was officially named did she realize why no other little boys at her synagogue were called Christopher. We'll mark my name down as a clear victory for my Protestant father.

[*2](#) There's much more to say about Black humor, its history, and its influence than I can fit into this chapter. But luckily there are several excellent books on the topic if you want to dive deeper. I'd recommend both Littleton's and Watkins's work.

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THE ONLY THING WORSE THAN NO SENSE OF HUMOR

How to Avoid Bad Jokes, Bullying, and the Dark Side

I'VE SPENT this whole book arguing for the importance of having a sense of humor and the many different ways that humor can improve your life.

But if you think not having a sense of humor is bad, I've got news for you: There's something worse. It's having a bad sense of humor. Offensive jokes, harassment, bullying, and all sorts of other vile slime often masquerade as humor. But we're going to dismantle the idea that "I'm only joking" is an acceptable excuse once and for all. More important, we'll talk about how to avoid the dark side of laughter and how to recover if you've accidentally strayed into that murky swamp.

One of the trickiest parts of humor is how context dependent it is. The exact same sentence can be funny and playful when spoken by one person and completely unacceptable when said by someone else. For example, if I look at my baby son and say, "I'm going to eat your little fat toes," that's just me talking lovingly to my kid. If a strange man in the park pops out of the bushes, grabs my shoulders, and says to me, "I'm going to eat your little fat toes," I'm running as fast as I can.^[*1]

To be teased by a person who loves and cares about you is far different from being teased by someone you're not close with. If my dad says, "Chris loves to tell a story," I hear that simply as a statement of fact. I do love to

tell a story! But if I'm talking to a group of new people, and one of them says, "Chris loves to tell a story," I'm going to worry that I've been dominating the conversation, overtalking, not listening enough. *Do I love to tell a story too much? Am I a conversation hog? Am I a terrible person? Should I just shut up?*

Even between the same two people, a joke can either build a bridge or hurt feelings, depending on the moment and the emotion/tone in which it's delivered. Let's say my wife, Mollie, comes home from a night out with her friends and sees me sitting on the couch watching television in my underwear while eating macaroni and cheese directly out of a pot. This, of course, is a purely hypothetical scenario that I have invented for the sake of this book. It is not based on real events that have occurred multiple times over the course of our marriage.

If, in that hypothetical scenario, Mollie sees me and starts laughing, then comes over and kisses me and says, "You're a ridiculous human being," we both laugh together, and the humor builds our connection.

If, on the other hand, Mollie sees me, lets out a sigh of disgust, and says, "You're a ridiculous human being," while shaking her head and walking away, I'm going to feel ashamed and judged. And there's nothing worse than suddenly sinking into a pit of self-loathing and shame when you're only midway through your pantless pasta party.^[*2]

All of which is to say, good humor is complex, nuanced, and situation dependent. There are very few universal rules, and even those have plenty of exceptions. I don't have a secret formula for how to always make people laugh but never offend anyone while also being kind and charming. If I did have that formula, I would be teaching those tricks in an online course for several hundred dollars and living on a private island funded by my humor university.

Instead, let's allow things to be a little bit messier, more nuanced, and more complicated. In other words, let's let things be more realistic. I'll get into several of the frameworks and tests that I use to think about these issues, and I'll share how smart, thoughtful people I know approach them as well.

The first and most important principle is: Just because people are laughing, that doesn't mean it's a good thing.

THE BULLY PULPIT

Here's a truth about bullying that people don't often mention: Bullies are often very funny. There's a reason why the archetypical image of a kid being bullied is everyone pointing and laughing at them. Bullies can be very adept at using humor. They're just using it as a weapon. There's an episode of the TV show *30 Rock* that I think about a lot. Tina Fey's character, Liz Lemon, goes back to her high school for a reunion and discovers that while she always thought of herself as a nerdy outcast, in fact she was the class bully. Flashbacks show high school Liz making cutting remark after cutting remark.^[*3] Her classmates at the reunion treat Liz like a villain. Liz's boss, Jack Donaghy, confronts her in a custodial closet, telling her that she hides behind her sense of humor "instead of engaging in a real way...when you feel threatened, you attack."^[1]

30 Rock is a comedy, and I think "Reunion" is one of its funniest episodes. But Liz's revelation about her place in the social pecking order contains a serious truth. Bullies don't have to be mean-spirited, sadistic jerks to the core. They often don't think they're bullies at all. Frequently they're people acting from a place of insecurity or chasing the feeling of being accepted by the group.

I'm certainly not going to argue in favor of bullying. (Imagine if I did that! What a wild turn that would be for the end of this book.) But it's important to admit that making fun of someone who is different or seems strange is an easy way to make other people laugh. Bullies can get a reaction from bystanders that seems to prove they have a sense of humor, but that doesn't mean it's good humor. It can be easy to misinterpret that laugh without thinking about how it makes the other person feel.

In my own life, I've had to figure out where to draw this line, and I'm still working on it. What's hard for me is that I love making people laugh. It's addictive. Many times over the course of my life, I've taken a joke too far. At one point in high school, I made a joke about putting one of my friends in an invisible box. I mimed the walls around her and then pretended I couldn't hear what she was saying. It was not a very clever or complex joke. But I'm pretty sure the first time I did it, we both laughed. The problem was that I kept doing it over and over, saying that she was in a

box and I couldn't hear her. Predictably, she stopped thinking it was funny and got upset with me. At the time, I couldn't wrap my head around the idea that I was being mean by pushing a joke over and over. It was funny the first time, right? We're friends, right? How could doing it one hundred times not be one hundred times better than doing it just once?

I understand now that I was being a jerk and a bully. I feel terrible when I think about that invisible box. To me, it's a classic example of how humor can start off as building connections and having fun together, then quickly turn sour. It's cruel to pretend you can't hear a friend speak and to ignore the fact that they don't enjoy the joke. If anyone deserved to be sent to a silent jail cell constructed by mimes, it was me.

I'm not the only one who has ever laughed at or made a hurtful joke at some point over the years. It's almost impossible to avoid completely! As humans, we have a natural desire to be part of a group. When we're thinking only about ourselves, one of the simplest and easiest ways to define who's in the group is to declare who's out. When a bully makes fun of someone, they're sending a clear sign that this person is out of the group. Often the bystanders laugh. That's because we tend to laugh at transgressions and boundaries being crossed. We also laugh when we're surprised, and we laugh in relief at being included in the group rather than being targeted as the butt of the joke.

The wrong type of humor is a double-edged sword. Children with better senses of humor tend to navigate school and social situations more easily. But the type of humor they use matters enormously. Minela Kerla, a teacher and education researcher in Sarajevo, found that students with higher levels of "affiliative humor," or the tendency to "engage in spontaneous, witty jokes, entertain others, facilitate relationships and [try] to reduce interpersonal stress," were more prone to be able to motivate themselves in school and to have "higher levels of self-esteem and self-reported competence."^[2]

But just as important, Kerla found that other students, who also had active senses of humor, had very different outcomes. That's because they were using humor that was not affiliative but aggressive. Aggressive humor will "hurt or alienate other people."^[3] Students making those kinds of jokes, Kerla found, tended to also direct those negative judgments inward, leading them to have lower self-esteem and feel less capable of succeeding in school and friendships.

As I always say, if it's true in Sarajevo, it's true everywhere.^[*4] If you're cultivating a sense of humor that's judgmental and mean, you're going to use those sharpened knives to cut yourself down to size as well. But if you cultivate a sense of humor that's generous and creates connections, you'll build yourself up and smooth over your faults the same way you ease tensions and create belonging with others.

I'M STILL A PIECE OF GARBAGE

Of course, you can turn humor on yourself in a negative way without bullying others first. Bill Wurtz is a musician and animator who makes some of my all-time favorite comedy videos and songs. His video that crams the entire history of Japan into nine minutes has more than 83 million views on YouTube and is somehow both factually accurate and hilarious.^[4] But another video he made that's just slightly less popular only lasts for five seconds. It's set to a bouncy keyboard score, and the words are "Oh hi, thanks for checking in. I'm still a piece of garbage."^[5]

There's a reason that video has been watched by millions of people. The YouTube comments are filled with variations on "Therapist: 'How are you doing?' Me: [this video]"^[6] or "Alright class, next Tuesday bring in a song that describes you!"^[7]

There's nothing wrong with being jokingly self-deprecating. In fact, it can often be a great way to disarm people and make yourself more approachable. But there is a line between self-deprecating and self-insulting. If you make a joke about being a piece of garbage once, it's probably fine. If you're making that joke every day and repeatedly sending the message to the people around you that that's how you see yourself (and how they should see you), it starts to feel less than okay even if it's still getting laughs. So one way to stay on the healthy side of the line is to look at how frequently you're making these jokes and comments.

Another test to think about is whether you're poking fun at an element of yourself that you're comfortable with or one you're insecure about. If I

make a joke about being bad at sports, that's not a tender, sensitive area for me. I *am* bad at sports. In high school, I tried to join the Ultimate Frisbee team (famously a sport that embraces the spirit of the game rather than alpha male competitiveness), and they had to create a bench for me to sit on so I wouldn't make the team lose. But when I tell people that story, I genuinely think it's funny. It's not hitting a deep-seated insecurity, so it doesn't bother me to laugh about it.

On the other hand, sometimes people make self-deprecating jokes about elements of their appearance or personality that are genuine sources of pain and insecurity. In that case, it can seem like a smart strategy to make the joke about yourself before anyone else can make fun of you. You take the power away by doing it to yourself. But you're still doing it to yourself.

There's no bright line or universal test for when it's self-deprecating versus self-insulting. As comedian Aparna Nancherla taught us in chapter 2, you have to pay attention to how you feel in the moment and afterward. If you get that queasy feeling of shame or embarrassment, it might be worth rethinking where you're getting your laughs.

The actor and stand-up comedian Joel Kim Booster told me that early in his career he would talk onstage about how sexually undesirable he was: "It got a big laugh and so then I leaned into that."^[8] It wasn't truly how he saw himself, but as other people kept laughing at it, Booster found, it started to creep into his own self-image. "I started to believe it. I started to internalize [that I was unattractive] after a while because it was the center of a lot of my jokes, and it really was this thing where I sort of reverse-engineered low self-esteem in a way."

Booster couldn't help but feel that the predictable laughs meant there was "a kernel of truth" in his negative talk about his own appearance. He sees a similar phenomenon among non-performers because of social media.

You'll notice on TikTok pages, people will have a variety of different kinds of videos...and then the one that pops off is the video where they talk about their depression. And then, you notice a change in their feeds, where now every video is about that. I don't think that's healthy to center any one part of yourself comedically or in the content that you're creating because then you suddenly believe that, okay, this is [the only thing] people really want to hear me talk about. And I think [you can] develop a lot of really unhealthy relationships to whatever that thing is. And that's whether it's ADHD or depression or if it's self-deprecating humor.

Booster made a conscious decision to stop talking negatively about himself. He started telling jokes about how incredibly attractive he was instead. Those jokes got big laughs too, despite the fact that, as Booster told me, “I started to do that material before I or the audience believed it was true.” But eventually, even the hot-guy jokes started to feel like something Booster didn’t want or need to make the center of his act. “In the same way I gave myself a complex, I reverse-engineered self-confidence before I had it. Now, I believe it and it doesn’t seem so interesting to talk about my appearance much anymore at all.”

I AM RUBBER AND YOU ARE GLUE

I believe strongly that humor can be an incredible tool for building connection, community, and relationships. But it can also be used to deflect intimacy and keep people at arm’s length. I once crossed paths with a woman who I’ll call Susie for the sake of this story. Susie was hilarious and had me laughing so hard that I was in tears.

But as I spent more time with her, I realized that she responded to everything with a joke or a bit. It didn’t matter what question I asked her, she was going to find a way to get a laugh out of the interaction. I asked her where she was from, and she launched into a full character, pretending to be a German tourist visiting the United States on holiday.

It was hilarious. After she was finished, I still had no clue where she was from.

I asked Susie what she did for a living. She told me about her first job after college, where she sold snakes at an exotic animal store.

These unexpected answers were fun at first. After a while, they became kind of exhausting. I saw that our conversation was never going to get past a superficial level, that we couldn’t become actual friends, because she was using jokes to avoid any hint of vulnerability or genuine connection.

People often use humor to deflect in this way when they're trying to protect themselves. Sometimes that can be healthy. If there's a topic you're not ready to discuss or if you need some emotional space, humor can be a low-stakes way to create a bit of distance. The risk comes from people who never drop their guard. They're always keeping people away with bits and not allowing anyone to get inside.

TAKE A BREATH, SIR, YOU'RE HOGGING THE MIC

The last interpersonal mistake people make with humor is to make it all about them. If you're a comedian and you're performing live, it's totally fine and expected for you to be the one speaking and for everyone else to shut up and listen.

That's a very specific scenario.

Most human interactions do not take place in a comedy club. If there's no stage and no show, it's very important for you to realize that the people you're interacting with aren't your audience. They're just other people. And they have things to say too!

The journalist Anne Kadet once wrote a piece about people who were "self-admitted long-talkers."[\[9\]](#) She was inspired to report on the phenomenon because of a friend she had fallen out with, Gabby, who was fascinating but also completely dominated conversations. In Anne's words, "a transcript of our conversations would show Gabby did 95% of the talking. While I love to listen and ask questions (to the point I made a career of it), this was a bit much."

When Anne interviewed other long talkers to understand why they dominated the conversation, she found that many believed that if their conversational partner had something they wanted to say, they would just jump in. Maybe long-talking was due to a difference in conversational styles? Some people interject, while others wait until they're asked a question. But other people, especially funny ones, can get carried away

because it seems like they're entertaining. And they often are! But that doesn't mean the other people wouldn't like to speak too.

Anne interviewed Harry, a self-described “monologuer” from Brooklyn. She described him as “quite fun—he got me laughing a lot on our call—so it's no surprise he's had little trouble finding a willing audience.”^[10] Harry reported that on one “pandemic-era group Zoom call [he] was rattling on once again about his new crush. One friend held up a phone with the timer displayed. ‘Not to offend me or twist the knife, but to make a joke with each other,’ he said. ‘It was ‘Oh my God, he's doing it again!’ They literally timed me. It was eight minutes, 30 seconds.’”

I'd argue that Harry is too far on the comedy side of the spectrum (too focused on entertaining) and not enough on the good humor side (bringing his friends and conversational partners in, so they're all laughing and contributing together).

Don't be a Harry! No matter how many laughs you're getting, that's eight minutes and thirty seconds too long. Actually, you know what, let's give him thirty seconds. That's totally fair. But he's still eight minutes too long after that!

PUNCHING UP, PUNCHING DOWN, PUNCHING ALL AROUND

When it comes to humor, people can unintentionally stumble onto the wrong side of a fuzzy line. Some lines are brighter and less fuzzy. People sometimes say prejudiced, ignorant, or stereotypical things and then try to hide behind the argument that they're “only joking” and it's poor humor to call them out.

I don't buy that. Words have power, and it's our responsibility to think carefully about what we're saying. It's unavoidable that we're going to

make mistakes and say things we shouldn't. To me, the important part is to learn what to do when you stumble.

I don't believe in some sort of purity test where you're never supposed to have said something wrong. But you shouldn't keep saying the wrong things over and over and over again. The trouble is that there's no official handbook that we've all agreed on about what constitutes "the wrong thing to say." What I believe to be prejudiced, ignorant, or stereotypical may not be the same as what you believe.

A solution to this problem that many comedy people use is the punching up versus punching down framework we discussed in chapter 9. As a refresher: Humor that punches up is directed at groups and individuals who are more powerful and privileged than you. Humor that punches down is directed at marginalized or less powerful people. For example, laughing about Bill Gates not having the cash to pay for his meal at a restaurant is punching up. Laughing about a family living on the street who don't have the cash to pay for their meal is punching down.

The framework of punching up and punching down can be helpful, but it still lacks nuance. Indian comedian Vir Das has a brilliant section in his Netflix comedy special *Landing* about this:

These are the rules of comedy that you have set in the West, right? Always make fun of people who have more privilege than you do. That is called a punch up. Never make fun of people who have less privilege than you do. That is called a punch down. Have you heard of this, yeah? What a bullshit Western construct this is. Because in the West, your privilege is consistent. Indian privilege is very volatile, up and down, like a feather fluttering on the wind. One moment you're Forrest Gump, next moment, you're Laal Singh Chaddha.^[*5] Up and down, up and down.

Plus, honestly, I feel like in the West, most of you are calling out your own privilege before other people call out your privilege so that you can go back to quietly enjoying your privilege. Some of you look confused. The white people are like "Uh! He knows!"

The minute you add nuance to the privilege conversation, it falls apart. Like, okay, could I, a brown man from India, make fun of Ivanka Trump? Is that a punch up? Yeah? Allowed? Let's add layers. What if Ivanka Trump has a baby with a Syrian Muslim refugee? It could happen. Love is love. Could I make fun of the baby? You weak bastards. Guys, come on, Muslim refugee Trump baby is hilarious, guys. Just think about this baby. Inzamamul Trump. Think about him, all right?...He owns seventy-five buildings in Manhattan but has no homeland. Come on, come on! I know. Uncomfortable! I'll pull back. Vladimir Putin. Could I make fun of Vladimir Putin? Punch up? Let's add layers. What if Vladimir Putin

had alopecia?...He's just sad, sitting in the Kremlin, rubbing his head. Nothing grows in Russia.^[11]

To me, Das's point about the nuanced, variable nature of privilege and power is an important one that I almost never hear in the conversation about what is acceptable to joke about. The shifting lines are just as applicable to regular people as they are to internationally touring comedians like Das.

But another reason I find Das's perspective more interesting than that of the many American comics who rail against "cancel culture" is that Das has faced real consequences for the jokes he makes. During a show at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., Das joked about the "two drastically different sides of his native India: rich and poor, united but also divided over politics, women's rights, Bollywood films and cricket teams."^[12] Afterward powerful Indian politicians from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party were outraged by Das's critiques of democratic backsliding and sexual violence. They filed several police complaints against him. Facing violent threats and lawsuits, you can imagine how little patience Das has for American comics' fear of negative comments online.

In his Netflix special, Das says it directly: "Please don't cancel me. I apologize. Please. I don't want to get canceled. It would really interfere with my incarceration." He continues by quoting a Western comic who is complaining to him. "He's like 'Vir, cancel culture is insane. The other day a mob came after me. A mob on Twitter!'" Vir pauses for a huge laugh from the audience. He gives them a knowing look. "It's like telling the freshly castrated that your balls itch."^[13]

WITH GREAT HUMOR COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY (OR AT LEAST MEDIUM RESPONSIBILITY)

Punching up versus punching down isn't a one-size-fits-all litmus test for humor. Nothing is. But a framework I try to use personally and that I find helpful is to think about whether a person (or piece of work) is good for the world and good at making people laugh. Here's a chart:

	Good for the World	Bad for the World
Laughter	Great! Love this square.	Dangerous and scary!
No Laughter	Painful to endure but good-hearted.	Oof. Terrible on all counts.

The ideal scenario is that we're all laughing, and what we're laughing at is good for the world. It's bringing people together, it's making us think about ideas and issues in a new way, we're having fun and building connections, and everything is going great. Second best, in my mind, is when we're doing something good for the world but we're not laughing. At least we're not hurting anybody, but it could be better and more fun. Often these scenarios feel a little preachy or sanctimonious. At the very least, they're probably more boring than they have to be.

On the bad side, we've got the scenario where it's not funny and it's not good for the world. That's garbage. You know what's even worse than a racist joke? Just a racist statement. But a racist joke isn't much better. In fact, many of the most dangerous and corrosive situations and interactions arise when there's quite a bit of laughter. Journalist Andrew Marantz, who covers online extremism, told me that he often sees violent and hateful rhetoric being defended with the phrase "it's just a joke."^[14] The American media in 1936 often covered Hitler with that exact attitude, he told me, arguing that anyone who was so clownlike that he could be mocked by Charlie Chaplin couldn't possibly be a real threat. The humor can sometimes mask the fact that what's underneath is very bad for the world.

We're still left with the question, though, of what it means to be good for the world. What does it mean to be a good person? What does it mean to use humor in a good way? These are big questions that people much smarter than I am spend their whole lives wrestling with. Once I figure out my answer, I plan to start a religious sect, and you'll be welcome to join. All readers of this book can get 50 percent off new member initiation fees in my cult of personality. Until then, the best test I have to offer you when it comes to good humor versus bad humor is: Does it bring people in, or does it push them out?

My understanding of the core goal of humor is simple: It's to make people laugh and have a good time. All the other benefits that I've explored over the course of this book flow from there. So if you're doing things right, humor is going to bring people in, welcome them, and make them have a good time. If you're doing it wrong, it's going to push them away, create distance, and shut down the connection. That's not to say that there will never be moments of friction and tension. Of course, those are unavoidable in any human interactions and relationships. But is the humor helping to smooth those bumps, or is it creating deeper potholes?

GOOD HUMOR MEANS GOOD APOLOGIES

Inevitably, sometimes you're going to say the wrong thing. Maybe you tried to get a laugh at someone else's expense without thinking about how they'd feel about it. Maybe you took a joke too far. Maybe you didn't realize the connotations of the words you were saying. One time I was moderating a live interview with a public health researcher who mentioned, in passing, how prejudice and certain health conditions are tied. She gave sickle cell disease as an example. I immediately tried to make a joke about how ridiculous it would be for someone to say, "No child of mine is marrying someone who could get sickle cell anemia!" I paused, expecting the

audience to laugh. They were dead silent and, I could tell, a little appalled. I didn't understand why the energy in the room had shifted.

A fellow comedian who was onstage with me very graciously threw me a lifeline by saying, "Chris, it seems like you might not know that sickle cell is something that happens more to Africans."

He was right. I had no idea. Instantly, I understood that prejudice against folks more likely to have sickle cell disease was actually very much a fact. Not a good joke! My attempt at humor failed due to my ignorance. I immediately apologized from the stage to the audience, admitted that I had had no clue what I was saying, and never made that joke again.

In the moment, that seemed to be enough for the people in the room. But maybe you would have felt differently if you'd been there. What it takes for a comedian to get back into listeners' good graces after crossing a line, even humorously, depends on the people involved and the specific situation.

Maybe it's because I started out as an elementary school teacher, but I think the best advice on what to do when you mess up is often the advice that we give to kids: Try to treat other people with kindness, and when you do something mean, apologize and make it right. The adult world would be a much safer, more caring, and more respectful place if we treated each other the way we ask third-graders to treat their classmates.

The parenting expert Dr. Becky Kennedy once told me in an interview that the most important skill any parent or caregiver can master is the art of repairing a relationship when you've made a mistake.^[15] I couldn't agree more. And that's exactly what's happened when you've crossed a line with your attempt at humor. You've damaged the relationship, and you need to repair it. So how do you do that?

Dr. Becky says that saying "I'm sorry" is often not the best move. Suppose a parent is late to pick their kid up from soccer practice. "A kid who's picked up really late," she says, "gets very anxious 'cause their whole survival depends on their parents, right? And I picture a parent who's like, 'Look, I'm sorry, traffic was really bad. I'm sorry.' And in some ways that 'sorry,' it looks to shut down a conversation."^[16]

In such cases, the unhelpful reaction "I'm sorry" parallels the common unhelpful reactions people have when they've made a tasteless or offensive joke: "I was just joking!" or "I'm sorry if you were offended" or "Lighten

up! I wasn't being serious." They're all variations on the same theme: Let's just move on and forget about this.

That doesn't work. It doesn't repair the relationship. Dr. Becky's advice, instead, is to include three elements in whatever conversation or approach you take. Here are those elements and how to use them to repair a relationship with the hypothetical soccer child:

1. Acknowledge what happened. Name it. *I was late to come pick you up. That must have been scary. You might have thought I forgot about you. It felt bad to be waiting here for so long and to not know where I was.*
2. Take responsibility. *I didn't plan enough time to make sure I made it to your pickup on time. I was supposed to be there at 5:15, and I was not there when I was supposed to be.*
3. Say what you'll do differently the next time. *In the future, I'm going to check the traffic report an hour before I'm supposed to be at pickup, so I'll know how long I need to leave myself. And I'll make sure that if I'm going to be late, I call and make sure that someone tells you, so you know what's happening.*

One person who has put Dr. Becky's repair steps into action is the comedian Bo Burnham. He started putting videos online when he was a teenager and was part of the first wave of huge stars to emerge out of YouTube. Several of his early videos and songs featured crude gay jokes and racially fraught punch lines. When he's asked about them now, Burnham doesn't get defensive or make excuses. I don't know if he's ever met Dr. Becky or even heard of her, but what he does is a solid example of acknowledging what happened and taking responsibility.

Here's what he says: "I messed up. I look back at old material and I'm really embarrassed by it. It does not hold up. I just ask people's forgiveness."[\[17\]](#)

He's echoed that theme in several interviews. He told journalist Lauren Duca that he started his career by putting up what he thought were "funny, edgy" videos:

The "edgy" comedy of a sixteen-year-old in 2006 does not really square with the cultural moment of [today], pretty clearly. Or really square with me personally

now. So I've tried to be pretty transparent about that.... I apologize for being an idiot at sixteen. I totally do. I'm not going to delete the videos because I just actually feel like that's me pretending like I wasn't that. And I want to be an example for people, to show that you can start here and get there. I mean I disavow these...I would publicly trash-talk my old stuff.^[18]

Here's the power and the beauty of humor. Burnham is able to take responsibility, own up to his mistakes, and to do better in his future work. But he's also able to use the experience to get a big laugh from the audience and make them think about what it looks like to simultaneously hold people accountable and have forgiveness and the grace to allow people to grow. "I try to be forgiving of myself [too]," he says. "We're going to get to a moment where every presidential candidate has the embarrassing stuff they did when they were fourteen to fifteen all over the internet. And we're going to have to do some sort of amnesty program."^[19]

So what's the answer? I think that's pretty close to as good as we're going to get. Do your best to not be an ignorant jerk. When you make a mistake, which you will, admit it, take responsibility, and do better in the future. And when you run for president, hope they've already got the amnesty program in place.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} In this hypothetical scenario, I would be relying on my little fat toes running fast enough to save me from the danger of my little fat toes being eaten. Godspeed, little fat toes!

^{*2} Luckily for me, Mollie does not sit in judgment of these occurrences, which again are made up and have never happened.

^{*3} For example, a girl walks up to Liz in science class and asks her, "How's the telescope?" Liz immediately replies, "I don't know, Kelsey. How's your mom's pill addiction?" Another woman sees Liz at the reunion and confronts her: "This is a beauty mark. But you thought it was funny to say that God pooped on me."

^{*4} I've never said this before.

^{*5} *Laal Singh Chaddha* is a 2022 Hindi-language film that's an Indian remake of *Forrest Gump*. The main actor's performance was panned by critics, and it was a box office flop in India.

CONCLUSION

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THE SECOND-FUNNIEST PERSON I'VE EVER MET

What Does a Life Filled with Humor Look Like?

I OPENED THIS BOOK by telling you a little bit about the funniest person I've ever met, my former fifth-grade student Gary. To wrap things up, let me tell you about the second-funniest person I've ever met. She's a 103-year-old world champion swimmer who goes by the name Mighty Mo.

I first met Mo soon after my wife and I moved to Los Angeles in 2019. I was thousands of miles away from my parents and the friends I'd grown up with. We were trying to navigate a sprawling new city, a place that I would come to love dearly but that's famously difficult to understand at first. To put it more simply: I was lonely, and things were hard. But I knew myself well enough to know that if I stayed inside debating whether our cross-country move was a mistake, I was only going to kill my chances of finding a way to like L.A.

I decided to lean into the Southern California lifestyle. My theory was that if I ended up hating it here and moved away, I might as well have done all the things that I could do only while living in this place. I also figured that I'd have a better chance of enjoying myself if I tried new activities and new ways of going about my day. L.A. was not going to become the East Coast, where I'd been born and raised, but I might be able to discover a surprising L.A. version of myself.

First, I made a few small fashion changes: I started wearing sunglasses more often and the color black less. I put away my sweaters and bought overshirts instead, since Southern California changes temperature not so much season to season as hour to hour. You wake up, and it's frigid winter

inside your house, and then four hours later you're roasting in the center of the sun, and then it's back to arctic tundra.

For my lifestyle, I swapped out pizza slices for tacos. I ate dinner with friends outside and went to open-air concerts and movies. I stopped asking people if they'd read an article in *The New York Times* and instead asked "Are you working on any new projects?" When I walked past a stranger on a hiking trail, I smiled and said hi. I did activities such as "walking on a hiking trail."

But no new activity loomed larger than "having fun in the water." I bought a discount foam surfboard at Costco and started going to the beach. I'd say that what I was doing there was learning to surf, but more accurately I was there to do a hardcore sinus cleanse with ocean water. Around this time, I discovered that Los Angeles has an extensive network of outdoor public pools. That was where the magic happened.

One day while I was doing my best impression of swimming laps, an older woman in the next lane beckoned me over. She gave me some tips on my stroke and then sent me on my way. The next week I saw her again, and she once again helped me look more like a swimmer and less like a man who might need to be rescued by one of the teenage lifeguards on duty.

Over time we started chatting. I learned that her name was Maurine, but everyone called her "Mighty Mo." While Mo would never brag about her own accomplishments, another regular at the pool clued me in to the fact that she held numerous world records and had been inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame. At the time I met her, she was nearly one hundred years old and was still competing (and winning) regularly at swim meets. She was often setting new records simply by finishing because she was in an age category all her own. But don't let that make it sound like she wasn't a fierce competitor. She was swimming faster and better than I could at any age.

As our friendship developed from brief chats in the pool to visits at her home, what impressed me most about Mighty Mo wasn't her newsworthy accomplishments or her athletic prowess. It was that she was hilarious. Mo is as quick as a whip. She's got a mischievous streak and a razor-sharp wit. She often makes me laugh just by the way she phrases an observation, with the vocabulary of a vaudeville comedian or maybe a charismatic gangster from a film made in the 1950s. She described one night as "darker than the inside of a cow" and a clear morning as "clear as a hound's tooth."

Sometimes, when I stop by her house for a visit, she'll greet me from the front porch by saying "Whaddya know? I don't know much, and I'm trying to keep it that way!"

One time I told her I'd be going out of town for a friend's wedding, and she said, "You've got too many weddings. Isn't anyone living in sin anymore? This mess is getting expensive!"

Whenever she invited me to go swimming or out to breakfast and I told her I couldn't because I had to work, she'd immediately reply, "Careful with your language. 'Work' is a four-letter word."

The Mo-isms that make me laugh the hardest are those I don't expect at all. She'll swim up to me to deliver a devastating one-liner, then backstroke away. Once a bald man with a particularly thick beard was getting into the pool. Mo instantly made eye contact with me and said, "Looks like the hair on his head got a deal on property in the chin."

Once Mo asked me to explain podcasts to her. She listened for about five seconds, then said, "Never mind, I don't want to know."

The first time I drove Mo to the pool so we could swim together, she insisted on soaking in the hot tub afterward: "What we need is to cook like lobsters." Then, as we were chatting and enjoying our soak, she reached into her bathing suit top and pulled out a rubber ducky that she had stashed in there just for the occasion. She nonchalantly dropped the ducky into the swirling water. I was amazed and delighted and deeply amused. To me, that's a perfect bit of physical comedy.

LIVE LIKE MO

So how can the rest of us live more like Mo? I can't guarantee that it'll get you to 103, but I can guarantee that if you use Mo as a role model, you'll enjoy the years you've got.

Interestingly, most of the elderly folks I've known well got better at the three pillars of humor over the course of their lives. Aging and understanding their mortality made them live more presently in the moment. My great-aunt Suchie liked to joke that she was so old she'd

stopped buying green bananas. She didn't know if she'd still be around by the time they got ripe.

Older folks are often quite good at laughing at themselves. They're very aware of their own limitations and that they're not as strong and nimble as they used to be. That knowledge comes with permission to laugh about it. Who are they trying to impress by pretending to be in the same shape as they were when they were younger? Nobody's going to buy it, so they might as well laugh about the changes. I did a calisthenics workout with a group of seventy- and eighty-year-olds and my favorite part was when they all, on cue, tried to touch their toes and let out a synchronized "ughhhhhh." Everyone laughed together at the groan, as much a part of the routine as the movements, which made them all (and me) feel better about the effort it now takes us to get our hands down toward our toes.

And when it comes to taking social risks—well, older folks are notorious for saying what's on their minds without giving two hoots about what the rest of the room is going to think.

I started this book with advice from a kid, and I'm ending it with advice from a centenarian. The reason is simple. Both at the start of life and at the end, we let go of our ego a little bit. We don't take ourselves as seriously or try to appear to be perfect and flawless. Instead, we let ourselves laugh more. We have a sense of humor about our foibles and our failures. It's only in the middle of our lives that so many of us feel the need to "act like a grown-up."

In my opinion, acting like a grown-up sucks. Grown-ups are not having the most fun. I know that I have responsibilities and chores and work that I need to do. I'm not suggesting that you abandon your duties. But I am suggesting that it's okay to laugh when you hear someone say the word *duties*. Or if your sense of humor is more sophisticated than mine, finding the things that tickle your funny bone and letting your funny bone get tickled.

OKAY, HOTSHOT, HOW DO YOU DO IT?

Since I started working on this book, I've tried to make small tweaks in my day-to-day life that reflect the lessons I've learned in my interviews and research. They're not big changes. Many of them are somewhat obvious shifts that I'd thought I should probably make but had procrastinated over for years. Others are simply mindset shifts. But when I put them together, I've found that I'm laughing a lot more, making positive memories more frequently, and connecting more deeply with the people in my life.

The first shift, and the one that's had the biggest impact, is spending less time on my phone. I hate when people give this advice. It's so common and so cliché. It's also really hard to do because have you seen my phone? It's really fun and useful, and it's filled with everyone I've ever known and all the accumulated knowledge of humankind and also videos of people unclogging drains and clearing overgrown lawns. I didn't know that I was very into those kinds of videos until my phone started showing them to me, and now I've learned that I can watch two hours straight of a man on a riding mower clearing abandoned properties of overgrown grass and weeds. If it wasn't for my phone, would I have opinions on the best industrial-strength weedwhacker? I don't think I would!

The phone is good. It's useful. It's addictive. I've been trying, recently, to stick to the screen time limits that prevent me from logging back into social media apps after I've had an hour each day. I'm embarrassed to say that that's a big challenge for me. But the more I'm off my phone, the more I notice the details in the world around me. So much of humor is simply being in the moment. I can only laugh at the funny things my friends and family are saying if I actually hear them and I'm present in the moment with them. And the most satisfying way to make them laugh is to point out or joke about something that we're all experiencing or seeing together. When I'm in my own little technological bubble, it's harder for me to do that. So I regret to inform you that I am yet another person saying "Maybe we should try being on our devices less." If it helps, at least know that I'm not having an easy time doing that either.

Another small shift that I've made that has paid big dividends is keeping track of the things that make me laugh. Like the patients that Mimi Tse studied in the nursing home in Hong Kong, I keep notes on my phone with the stories, moments, images, and videos that get me going. Some recent entries in my humor file have included: a video of a baby eating ice cream for the first time, several memes from the Tim Robinson Netflix show *I Think You Should Leave*, a screenshot of a baffling message my mom sent the family text chain, and quotes I overheard while waiting in line at the post office. At night my wife and I share what we've laughed at that day, and some nights we share hilarious, amazing things. Other nights the pickings are slim. Either way, knowing that I'm going to bring moments of levity to her at the end of the day makes me pay closer attention and hunt out laughter in a way that I wouldn't have otherwise.

Many of the other lessons that I've put in place in my own life from this book aren't necessarily day-to-day changes but rather shifts in the way I approach situations around me. I've been thinking a lot about what it means to take social risks more, and one big way I'm trying to do that is by saying yes more often. If you invite me to an event that sounds strange and unusual, I'm going to say yes. You're having a backyard music festival featuring an experimental harp band from South America? I'll be there. You're doing a DIY film festival where people submit embarrassing home videos of themselves as children? I'm uploading the footage now. Pretty much any type of festival you're organizing, you can count me in. The world feels a lot more magical and a lot more hilarious when I get out of my normal routines.

I'm also trying to appreciate and get better at remembering inside jokes. Once I started thinking about them for this book, all sorts of extremely random and specific phrases popped back into my head that I hadn't thought of for years. It's been a joy to text friends out of the blue with an indecipherable sentence that I know they will appreciate. "Nothing has changed, Erik." "Boonyakka yint, Tommy." "Hello, Lily. Turtle pond." These sentences mean nothing to you, yet they are very funny to exactly one reader each.^[*1]

When I need to come up with a good idea, I've embraced the strategy of generating as many bad ideas as I can. They make me laugh and sometimes lead me down a helpful path. I always have the hardest time with names, so settling on a title for this book was about as fun as having a root canal.

When I switched things around and instead tried to come up with terrible titles, I had a lot more fun. Be grateful that you're holding *Humor Me* in your hands and not *Look at Me, I'm a Little Clown Boy* or *Hahahahahahahahaha: The Book*.^[*2]

Last, but certainly not least, I've been making a conscious effort to incorporate more silliness and laughter into serious places and serious issues. I used to feel like I needed to draw a bright line between my work as a comedian and my life outside comedy. When I started volunteering at the food pantry,^[*3] I focused only on sorting food and packing bags. No joking around from me! I used to think it would be insensitive or rude to try to find ways to laugh when tackling serious issues like food insecurity and poverty. Now I'm convinced that humor and laughter is one of the only ways to keep volunteers coming back every week and to make the work sustainable.

These days if you visit the food pantry, we're cracking up nonstop. We laugh about the unique noises that each of us makes when we discover a particularly bad-smelling rotten fruit while sorting the produce. We laugh about who can (and can't) handle spicy foods for lunch. We laugh about the fact that when I ride my bike over, I'm wearing a huge helmet and bright yellow reflective safety vest. (This is not mean; I agree I look ridiculous.) We laugh about the time one volunteer was trying to tell everyone to "focus, focus" but we all heard "hocus, pocus" and thought he was casting some sort of a spell. In short, we laugh a lot.

And you know what? It's a lot more fun that way. I know, intellectually, that I'm showing up at the food pantry to work for free as a volunteer. But it feels like I'm coming to visit my friends and have fun. Working my shift there is genuinely the highlight of my week. I know I'm not the only person who feels that way. That's the power of humor. That's the point of *Hahahahahahahahaha: The Book*.

THE FINAL WORD

You've heard more than enough from me. To wrap things up, here's Maurine "Mighty Mo" Kornfeld.^[1]

"It's pretty easy to focus on things that aren't going well. Feeling sorry for yourself, which we all do. And I do. Too much. Humor takes you out of yourself and gives you a better, different perspective."

Mo's advice on how to improve your life? "Laugh.... You can't get in too much trouble unless you laugh at the wrong time or the wrong person. Then you might get thrown into a ditch or something."

There you have it. Have a sense of humor, don't forget to laugh, and when you end up facedown in a ditch, at least you'll know how you got there.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} Erik, Tommy, Lily, if you're reading: Thanks for buying my book, and you're welcome for this paragraph.

^{*2} I was told this was "not search engine optimized."

^{*3} I know. I'm a hero. That's why I'm casually dropping this information again here at the end of the book, so your final impression of me will be of a selfless humanitarian. I'm basically Amal Clooney if she weren't married to a movie star and instead wrote a book about humor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I love reading the acknowledgments and thank-yous when I finish a book because it's a nice little gossipy chaser to the text. You get to see which famous authors they know, how they talk about their family and friends, and whether they describe their agent as "fighting for me every step of the way" or "having a vision for this book before even I did." And look at me now! Writing an acknowledgments section of my very own. What a treat!

I need to start by thanking my earliest readers, the folks who read every draft and helped shape a random pile of words into something resembling a book. Barack and Michelle, Reese, Dua, Abraham and Mary Todd, and of course, Oprah. Spending long nights around the table discussing this idea with you all made this not only possible but fun. I love our crazy little book club. Pass the merlot!

I'd also like to thank Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City. If I had not been born, I would not have been able to write this book. Credit where credit is due. Relatedly, thank you to my parents. If it wasn't for you, Lenox Hill Hospital wouldn't have even been necessary.

Thank you to Proto-Indo-European nomads for roaming the southeastern European steppes and allowing for the creation of the English language. I also gotta thank Gutenberg ("The Gute!") for everything you did to make this book possible.

Thank you to Mollie, who just heard me yell "The Gute!" while sitting all by myself in a room. It's no exaggeration to say that not only this book but also everything else I do that is at all worthwhile would not exist without you. It's quite possible you will read this and point out that, in fact, that *is* an exaggeration, but I still believe it's true. Thank you and I love you and I love laughing with you and knowing your surprisingly twisted sense of humor. Thank you to our toddler for being a toddler and our baby for, at the time of writing, still being in utero. Thank you to Zach and Anne, Judy, Joan and Frank, Laura and Eric, Kate, David, Jackie, Steve, Lynn, and the Michigan Duffys for being my family. I'm not going to list everyone else

who is farther out on my family tree, but please rest assured: I thank you as well.

Thank you to all the groups that I am a part of: Writers Clump, the Keystone Society (the writing group, not the entrepreneur association), the American Automobile Association, the L.A. Breakfast Club, Men's Breakfast, the Rancho Bowl, the Holy Metolius Polar Plunge Society, Fam D, Book Club Kids, Book Club Adults, Pop-Up Magazine, JetBlue TrueBlue Members, Nefesh LA, SELAH Neighborhood Homeless Coalition, the Silver Lake Food Pantry, and Enterprise Car Rental Plus.

Thank you to my book agents, Albert Lee and Pilar Queen, for fighting for me every step of the way and for having a vision for this book even before I did. Thank you to Adam Grant for helping me find Albert and Pilar. I'd say you should write a book about the power of giving, since you're so unbelievably generous with your time and connections, but you already wrote that book! An equally large thank-you to Gretchen Rubin for being so kind and helpful to a man who was essentially a stranger emailing you for book advice. Gretchen and Adam, I hope that including you in these acknowledgments does not encourage more random people to send you unsolicited emails.

Thank you to my manager, Anna Weinstein, the only person in Hollywood who I've never heard anyone say a single bad thing about, which means either she's truly as wonderful as she seems or she has an unbelievably powerful amount of blackmail material at her disposal.

Thank you to all the assistants who answered my phone calls, responded to my emails, and scheduled meetings when I was trying to get in touch with your bosses. Specific thanks to Ana, Geritza, Harry, Rachel, and Grace. I hope you all become wildly successful moguls and one day I can beg you for work.

To round out the Hollywood section of these acknowledgments, I'd like to thank my top-notch entertainment lawyer Marcie Cleary, the wise David Martin, and the delightful Nikki Haririan at Avalon, and Tom Hanks, who I've heard is an absolute pleasure to work with.

The main reason anyone was interested in working with me on a book was because of the success of the *How to Be a Better Human* podcast, so a big thank-you to everyone who has ever listened to the show. Thank you to Cloe for recruiting me into the TED universe and changing the course of my career. Thank you to Freddie, Daniella, Abhi, Jocelyn, and Sandra for

creating something very special, and thank you to everyone at TED and PRX for keeping it going, especially Roxanne, Michelle, Ban, Morgan, Noor, Matheus, Valentina, Janet, Arlissa, Pedro, and Patrick. Jocelyn, I'm actually going to thank you again individually because you deserve it.

At this point, I'm just thanking people from other areas of my career, so let me say that I love that, over the past decade, I've gotten to talk to hundreds of scientists about their work because of the shows *You're the Expert* and *Wrong Answers Only*, so thank you so much to Julie Smith Clem, Lisa Tobin, and the folks at LabX (especially Keri, Ann, Kate, Nawar, and Jeff) for making that happen. It's an unexpected twist for an English major turned comedian, but look at how much science somehow made its way into this book! And it's mostly accurate!

Speaking of accuracy, thank you to Lisa Dusenbery for her care and thoughtfulness in fact-checking this book. She even checked the thank-yous to help me avoid looking like I'm endorsing an online association of high-achieving entrepreneurs. Any factual errors that still made it through to publication are most certainly my fault, and any passages that stand up to scrutiny are thanks to her.

Thank you to everyone who worked on this book at Doubleday. Not only did you actually make this book happen, but you made it much better, more readable, and less typo-filled than it would have been if I had self-published it on my own imprint, Chris Duffy Books (currently no titles available). The team at Doubleday are in complete control over which of the words I'm typing now will make it into the printed book, so go ahead and write something nice about yourself in my voice. You have my permission. Kris Puopolo is brilliant and deserves a raise. Faith Griffiths is also brilliant and also deserves a raise. Laura Cherkas, the production editor in charge of copyediting and proofreading is brilliant. The marketing team is *brilliant* and you can quote me on that! The production team is [insert image of brilliant here].

Thank you to Matt, Dylan, and Greta for reading early drafts of this book and giving me honest feedback but also not telling me to get a day job (and then not quit it). Thank you to Greg Dorris and Doug McGray for talking me through these ideas (and Doug, thank you for inviting me on Pop-Up Magazine for some of the best creative experiences of my life).

Thank you to Josh Gondelman for recommending me for my first job in television. Josh, if you're reading this, it would be really cool if you got me

another job in television in the next months. I could really use the health insurance.

Thank you to everyone who has ever let me perform on a stage or send them a newsletter or talk into a microphone or sit next to them on a crowded train.

Thank you to everyone who let me interview them, quote them, talk to them, or bounce ideas off them about this book. This thing you're reading right now...it's the book! We did it! And actually, thank you to everyone who has ever let me interview them or talk to them about anything ever. You are the real heroes.

I know that I have inevitably forgotten to thank many important people whose names I definitely should have included in this section. If you are one of those people, guess what? I didn't forget, it was actually a fun new inside joke between us that I am trying out. You're the "you" in thank you! Thank YOU.

Finally, I'd like to thank you,^[*] the reader. There are so many things you could have done with your time, and you chose to read this book. You could have been learning to fly a dangerously small plane or base jumping or swimming the length of the Amazon without doing any training beforehand. When you think about it like that, this book basically saved your life. You should be thanking me!

You're welcome.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*} Not to be confused with the "you" that is the people I forgot to name. This time, the "you" is you, the person reading this footnote. Hello, you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRIS DUFFY IS a comedian, television writer (*Wyatt Cenac's Problem Areas* on HBO), and radio/podcast host. He currently hosts TED's hit podcast *How to Be a Better Human*. Chris has performed live in venues as big as a sold-out Lincoln Center and as small as a walk-in closet (also sold out). He has appeared on *Good Morning America*, ABC News, NPR, and *National Geographic Explorer*.