

Self-Deprecation and the Habit of Laughter

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Jokes are funniest when played upon oneself.¹

Comedy can help us make it past something very painful, like death. Laughter gives us distance. It allows us to step back from an event over which we have no control, deal with it, and then move on with our lives.²

Humor, humility, humanity...we cannot work on one without working on the others. We cannot *have* one without *having the others*.³

Introduction

My father often said, “If you can’t laugh at yourself, you’ve missed the best joke of your life!” Though his perspective was not particularly original, he meant it, as he was always more apt to poke fun at himself than joke at another’s expense. Because self-deprecation worked so well in the diverse, urban community in which I was raised, I took for granted that this was, at least in part, what it meant to have a “good” sense of humor and that laughter came easily. Moreover, in my family, humor was not only used as a coping mechanism, providing relief from life’s troubles and insecurities, my siblings and I were fed a steady diet of irony and satire. Later, when I moved to a small, rural, relatively homogeneous ranching community, I found that my attempts at humor—especially the self-deprecating, ironic or hyperbolic kind—often bombed. What happened? Are jokes much more context-dependent than I’d realized? Was my sense of humor *that* out of sync with cowboy culture, or had I simply entered an “Irony and Hyperbole Free Zone” as one of my cousins speculated?

For instance, when I jokingly referred to myself as a “skinny old broad,” not only did many of my students take this hyperbolic self-teasing seriously, then earnestly expressed concern for my “low self-esteem,” peers and colleagues sometimes took offense as well. That was the most baffling of all—that putting *myself* down could put others off. I kept wondering why my off-the-cuff quips had not been taken as intended. Was there something wrong with me or my audience? Once I

started pondering these problems, my next question was, “Well, *what* precisely *were* my intentions?” At that point, I began to think that generous, easy laughter might be a character trait or disposition, as opposed to a merely reflexive or physiological response. In other words, instead of an entirely autonomic physical reaction, over which one has no control, laughter could be genuinely spontaneous in addition to being a habit or character trait acquired through cultivation.

At my mother’s memorial service, my oldest cousin was asked to share what he liked best about his aunt. Immediately, he said, “She laughed easily.” Speaking affectionately about the late Amy Winehouse, Yasiin Bey (AKA Mos Def) said, “She had a big, great laugh!”⁴ Although I had never before thought of these traits or habits as virtues, in the sense of moral or intellectual “excellences,” I now believe they are commendable qualities that should be encouraged and can be cultivated. Perhaps being quick to laugh is an attitude towards oneself and the world, or a disposition of character related to virtues like generosity and humility. If so, then it is something that is, at least partly, within one’s conscious control and more second-nature than biological or innate. This means it is the kind of characteristic that would originally be informed or determined by one’s upbringing, life experience, cultural heritage, and family traditions.

My objective here is to give an account of self-deprecating humor, examining what works, what does not, and why, and to reflect on the audience response. My guiding questions are: (a) What is the purpose or intention behind self-deprecating jokes, and (b) When are they most likely to be successful? Specifically, when does self-deprecation put people at ease, and when does it put them off? Is there a target or “butt” of these jokes, and how should an audience respond when “good” jokes “go bad”? For instance, does the listener have an obligation to respond with appreciative laughter to mere *attempts* at humor, or to accept a joke in the spirit in which it was intended? Finally, how much does context count, and to what extent can laughter be cultivated? I cannot fully or definitively answer all of these questions in this one essay, but I do hope to provide a few, provisional responses and some food for thought.

Two Theories of Humor and the Gallows Genre

Two accounts of humor will be most helpful here: First is Freud’s “relief” theory—the view whereby, “the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity.”⁵ The second is the “incongruity” theory. The view that humor is produced “by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect...and what actually takes place.”⁶ Notice that both views focus on the psychological, aesthetic, and/or pleasurable aspects of humor—the former by releasing or relieving pent-up emotional energy; the latter by providing delight or surprise in something unexpected.

There are some who argue that the relief theory is really “a form of laughter theory having little to do with humor.” That, “we laugh because nervous energy is no longer needed to repress or deal with something.”⁷ While I agree that laughter and humor are distinct phenomena, they are difficult to separate in every day experience. For example, I show up rather cranky and stressed for a doctor’s appointment and hear seventies dance songs playing in the office. As the nurse escorts me to the examination room, I say, “What is this—Disco Dermatology?!” He laughs, I smile gratefully, and we both breathe a little easier. When I make a similar crack to the barely thirty-year old doctor, she looks at us quizzically. I then resort to self-deprecation with, “Sheesh! I guess I’m the only one old enough to remember the Dog Days of Donna Summer!” Whether or not they got the cultural references, I received chuckles and smiles of appreciation from both. What these examples are meant to illustrate is the give-and-take involved in humor. This is what I want to explore in relation to self-deprecating jokes, including whether the audience has an obligation to respond in the spirit of generosity. In essence, I will argue that genuine attempts at humor should be acknowledged or that *some* sort of overt reaction is called for—if not the laughter of appreciation, at least a wink, nod or groan, even a look of mystification or curiosity.

I will also discuss the ways in which “gallows” humor is similar to self-deprecation. Jokes that fall into the gallows or self-deprecating category are, by default, instances of incongruity. This is because we do not ordinarily expect people to make fun of death, illness, injury, or themselves. To make a *self-deprecating gallows joke*—that is, to poke fun at one’s own suffering or demise—is even more likely to surprise or provoke laughter, if only the nervous kind. This is because the juxtaposition of life and death is both the ultimate incongruity *and* so absurdly real, but also because jokes about oneself in these contexts are almost never anticipated. We do not expect to hear humorous remarks made by a patient in the ICU or from someone undergoing chemotherapy. Richards too discusses the paradox of life and death: “Death doesn’t fit. It’s absurd. It’s a reality.”⁸ He goes on to point out that many folks react to this absurdity by falling into denial rather than confronting it directly, and I could not agree more. However, because it takes so much energy to maintain the walls of denial, the kind of humor that breaks through this psychic barrier can be a uniquely significant source of pleasure.

Gallows humor provides precisely this kind of relief for both jokester and listener. Consider the following: A couple, who were like a second set of parents to me, had one of the most enviable relationships I’ve ever witnessed. As I was preparing to leave for graduate school in New York, they were struck with tragedy when the husband was diagnosed with ALS. He had been a vital and successful artist, but began deteriorating rapidly. Despite their ten-year age difference, they had always shared a dark, dry sense of humor and a deep appreciation for the absurd. This remained intact even after she, the older of the two, took on the role of caretaker. I came to visit before leaving Los Angeles, walking in right after she had finished changing his catheter. Instantly, she

cracked, “What the hell? I marry this younger guy so he can take care of me in *my* old age and here he goes fuckin’ dyin’ on me!” To someone else this might have seemed like an extraordinarily cruel punch-in-the-gut, but she knew her audience. Seeing their eyes brighten, hearing the choked laughter through his crooked smile and feeling the warmth that filled the room, was, as my sister put it, “Well worth the price of admission.”

What then can be said about self-deprecating jokes? How do they work *as humor* or relieve tension, and why should an audience respond with laughter or appreciation of some kind?

Three Basic Ingredients

For self-deprecation to count as humor, providing relief or a pleasant experience, there should be three basic constituents or ingredients: One, the joke enables the teller to overcome a particular difficulty (“transcendence”). Two, it allows him to bond with the listener (“connection”). Three, it inspires both joker and audience to embrace their human foibles or find peace in the face of absurdity (“acceptance”). In spite of an upbringing that consistently valued the salutary role of humor—how it can be thought-provoking or cathartic, engender dialogue, cultivate intimacy or community, etc.—I learned more recently that jokes can also be cringe-inducing, tension-exacerbating, or irritating. This raises the question—how can humor promote emotional health and social connectedness in some circumstances, yet alienate or build barriers in others? Simply put, when it comes to self-deprecating jokes and/or gallows humor, what is the difference that makes a difference?

When the pulmonary specialist informed my father that he had lost over 75% of his lung capacity after forty years of smoking, he quipped, “Well Doc, over 75% of my life is shot, so that makes me about even!” As a Chinese-Russian immigrant who’d grown-up in Shanghai, he went on to remind his doctor that he preferred to be called by his “Chinese name, ‘One-Lung-Low.’” Despite their groan-inducing cheesiness, these jokes are excellent examples of self-deprecation as well as the gallows genre—those that entail, “making fun of life threatening, disastrous, or terrifying situations.”⁹

It might be argued that a Hobbesian theory of humor could account for the appreciative responses he received—*if* one assumes he was encouraging others to feel superior, or making it comfortable for them to gloat. However, there are various reasons to reject this: First, eliciting feelings of superiority does not allow for a bonding experience. On the contrary, it would be antithetical to connecting with others, inspiring reflection, or accepting our common humanity. Second, the relief and incongruity theories make much more sense in this context. I cannot imagine hearing a self-deprecating joke, made by someone who is dying or suffering from a debilitating disease, and feeling superior. Under these circumstances, I wholeheartedly agree with Richards when

he notes that, “the Superiority Theory is about what we sometimes laugh at, not about what is humorous,” and this is, “the laughter of ridicule.”¹⁰ Simply put, to gloat, ridicule or feel superior in this case would be nothing short of monstrous. Instead, jokes like these are successful when they relieve the listeners’ anxieties by reminding them of their own good fortune—namely, that someone else is in pain or facing imminent death, not you or I. Third, the incongruity of my father’s remark should be equally clear. Obviously, the joke equating lung capacity with life span was both unexpected, under the conditions, and meant ironically rather than literally. Finally, it was evident that he was being facetious about his ethnicity, not denigrating his Chinese heritage or suggesting that he was in any way inferior because of it.

Watson on Gallows Humor

Much has been said already regarding the power and use-value of dark or macabre humor—how, when one is angry, anxious, frustrated, or conflicted, a bit of wry levity can diffuse an intense or otherwise stressful situation. In fact, gallows humor is something that medical professionals, social workers, and police officers frequently rely upon for precisely those reasons. For example:

It was 3:00 AM and three tired emergency room residents were wondering why the pizza they’d ordered hadn’t come yet. A nurse interrupted their pizza complaints with a shout: “GSW Trauma One—no pulse, no blood pressure.” The residents rushed to meet the gurney and immediately recognized the unconscious shooting victim: he was the teenage delivery boy from their favorite all-night restaurant, and he’d been mugged bringing their dinner. That made them work even harder. A surgeon cracked the kid’s rib cage and exposed his heart, but the bullet had torn it open and they couldn’t even stabilize him for the OR. After forty minutes of resuscitation they called it: time of death, 4:00 a.m. The young doctors shuffled into the temporarily empty waiting area. They sat in silence. Then David said what all three were thinking. “What happened to our pizza?” Joe found their pizza box where the delivery boy dropped it before he ran from his attackers. It was face up, a few steps away from the ER’s sliding doors. Joe set it on the table. They stared at it. Then one of the residents made a joke. “How much you think we ought to tip him?” The residents laughed. Then they ate the pizza.¹¹

For some, joking about topics that are not normally funny is merely upsetting. However, these are cases where incongruity and relief views of humor fit best. Jokes like my father’s and the one above are meant to provide relief, not prompt or promote laughter at the expense of some sick, suffering

soul or, in this case, the dead delivery boy. As Richards claims, the sense of humor is a “psychological tendency”—that is, the kind of disposition whereby one actively and deliberately makes a habit of looking for incongruities in order to appreciate them. Many people, he says, “do not habitually notice incongruities” but experience them as “annoyances,” something to be feared or ignored. Therefore, “it is up to the person or persons to transform an incongruity into humor” or a pleasurable experience.¹² Because gallows humor appears to be an acquired taste and is so often dependent on context or culture, it is often misunderstood or censured. Thus, those who have a penchant for dry or macabre jokes tend to invite criticism, and are sometimes regarded as cold or insensitive. This is usually a mistake. When gallows jokes succeed, it is because they are grounded in or accompanied by empathy and compassion, facilitate or reinforce connections, and/or allow us to more readily accept the absurdity of our finite lives. As I have argued above, and will detail below, the same holds for self-deprecation.

In sum, gallows humor, “treats serious, frightening, or painful subject matter in a light or satirical way”.¹³ Alternatively, according to Richards, “it exploits a very creatively constructed or discovered incongruity regarding painful subject matter.” It “works on the incongruity between the seriousness of the situation which everyone, or almost everyone, expects to have respected, and the lighthearted or joking response. Thus, a well-chosen incongruity can provoke rather profound reflection leading to a whole host of deeper insights.”¹⁴ I recall learning this lesson as a teenager while working for a group of veterinarians: Animals that had died despite our best efforts, or pets we had euthanized, often remained unclaimed by their owners and were kept in a freezer until they could be picked-up for cremation. Without hesitation, we referred to them as “pup-sicles” or “snow cats”—not because we were callous but because we could not have done our jobs if we had been in a constant state of sadness or grief. Clearly, making light of debilitating illness or mortality falls into the gallows category, and Watson is not alone in invoking the relief theory to explain how and why it succeeds. As comic Ricky Gervais insists, humor “gets us through the bad stuff. It’s an anesthetic and it works.”¹⁵ While I agree with Richards, Gervais *et al*, it was Watson’s work that originally inspired me to come up with a framework of my own in relation to self-deprecation.

Successful Self-Deprecation

Like gallows or macabre humor, I believe self-deprecating jokes function best or are most likely to succeed when they provide insight via incongruity and contain the three constituents mentioned above. More specifically, successful self-deprecation requires:

- 1) Transcendence: To “transcend” is to move beyond, surpass or rise above something with transcendent humor representing one of “the soul’s weapons”.¹⁶ It is the kind of weapon or

skill that enables one to detach from her own suffering by making light of it, allowing for a unique sort of “aloofness” from unavoidable yet painful circumstances.¹⁷

- 2) Connection: To “connect” is to cultivate or re-establish intimacy with another person or persons. For instance, if the audience laughs at my joke, it means we have something in common, recognize a kinship, etc. Jokes that foster such connections make community possible or reinforce it.
- 3) Acceptance: To “accept” is to come to terms with or embrace a difficult but inevitable reality. Jokes that inspire acceptance are those that enable us to acknowledge and integrate life’s “painful absurdities” or “existential incongruities.”¹⁸

Watson herself does not use these three terms in her discussion of gallows humor. She also neither mentions self-deprecation nor devotes any time to jokes of that sort. Still, I believe these three conditions follow from or are implied in her explication, and it was her work that inspired my own elaboration. What Watson does say, however, is that it is important to draw a distinction between gallows humor and “derogatory” types. Stating, though not “a feel-good, Patch Adams kind of humor...it is not synonymous with...cruel humor either.”¹⁹ I believe this holds for self-deprecating jokes as well but, once again, depends on intention. Mr. One-Lung-Low was obviously engaging in self-deprecation by joking at his own expense, just as making light of a terminal illness place his quips firmly in the gallows category. But how did his jests manage to avoid being derogatory or degrading? Given his frail condition, should he not have treated himself more gently, instead of volunteering to be the butt of a joke or making himself a target?

Not at all—given his personal history and cultural background, this was probably the only way he could have found relief. Furthermore, because gallows humor and self-deprecation work for similar reasons and along similar lines, these jokes contained all three ingredients: First, they alleviated his tension—he laughed at himself and, at least shortly, forgot how serious his condition and how imminent his death. Without these brief respites of laughter or comic relief, it is unlikely he would have been able to cope with or process the ever-increasing bad news. Second, these jokes succeeded in engendering and reaffirming the connection he had with his medical providers. Despite the groaning and eye rolling of the physician and palliative care nurse, they always smiled, got a kick out of his repeated willingness to play-the-fool, and were relieved that he accepted his deteriorating condition so good naturedly. Third, and most significantly, these jokes produced a unique kind of solidarity, an ever-deepening bond of acceptance and camaraderie—making it possible for those present to embrace the absurdity of his situation, the inevitability of death in general, and the limitations of medical science in particular. In sum, because he had accepted and was at-peace with the reality of his condition, he was strong enough to make his illness and untimely demise the butt of the joke, *not* his person.

It is at the level of acceptance that transcendence and connection become more profound. Although transcendence and acceptance are similar, insofar as both manifest an overcoming or a coming-to-terms with some particular limitation, acceptance is less fleeting. Thanks to these jokes, all of us were able to integrate the painful absurdities and incongruities, not only of my father's situation, but of our own life circumstances as well. For it is acceptance that intensifies our connection to others and allows each of us to embrace a common humanity and mortality. Laughing at oneself and shared existential anxieties, especially with others, makes it possible "to live with what we cannot understand or subdue."²⁰ In this case, the medical professionals may have understood Mr. One-Lung-Low's illness better than he, but we all knew it could not be subdued. His physician and nurse could only do their best to make him comfortable—a man they had grown increasingly fond of who always did his best to make their jobs easier. And what an absurd and incongruous situation it was—bearing witness as this quick-witted, lively-eyed man joked through his suffering and increasingly inhabited a body more corpse-like than corporeal. To laugh at such painful realities—briefly rise above them, connect with others and, ultimately, embrace the absurdity of our finite, human existence—can be an extraordinary, perhaps even spiritually fulfilling, experience.

Jokes and Their Targets

So, if my father himself wasn't the butt of these jokes, who or what was the target? Whether self-deprecation is macabre or merely mundane, is there not just a hint of disparagement or derogation? No. What Watson says about gallows humor applies equally to the self-deprecating kind. For, as she puts it, patients are never the target—death is. In cases both "horrific and absurd," death itself is almost always "the bad guy." Thus, "a joke is the rock you throw after the bad guy's already gone—an admission of loss, and a promise to fight again another day."²¹ In the context of medicine, Watson calls a "psychic survival instinct"—pup-sicle and snow cat jokes representing perfect examples of this for those working at the veterinary clinic. However, this instinct is manifest in many cases of self-deprecation too. My father, for instance, was throwing a stone of his own—not at himself in his compromised, vulnerable condition but at death and disease in general. Or, perhaps he was admonishing his younger self who had treated his body so poorly and lived his life so cavalierly?

This is similar to the ways in which Joan Rivers used self-deprecation, insisting that humor and laughter "wasn't necessary to survive as a comic—it was necessary to survive *as a person*."²² Having married relatively late in life, she repeatedly made fun of how desperate her mother had been to marry her off—to the point of considering a serial killer a potential suitor! Later, Rivers said, "I have no sex appeal. If my husband didn't toss and turn in bed, we'd never have had the kid."²³ These wisecracks are quintessential self-deprecation, but Rivers is no more the personal target of the jokes than my father. She, too, is simply "rock-throwing." In these cases, Rivers may have been

hurling boulders at narrow, traditional notions of women, marriage and sexuality, perhaps even motherhood or, like my father, at her younger self. Still, despite shedding light on the fiction of fairy tales, it is also evident that she neither gave up on relationships nor gave in to cynicism. Rather, she repeatedly demonstrated that she could accept the absurdities of life and love while vowing to soldier on. Simply put, admitting one's imperfections or frailties may be the first step in rising above and, ultimately, accepting them.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus also suggests that acknowledging how bad things are allows the hero to rise above his fate. However, he identifies this mechanism as "scorn" or "disdain" which, I believe, is quite different from self-deprecating humor. So, perhaps this is the direction to look in order to understand why and how it goes wrong? More specifically, when is self-deprecation likely to be interpreted not as dark humor, manifesting humility and an acceptance of life's absurdities, but as a scornful or bitter rejection of them? To explain this, along with the failure to land dark or self-deprecating jokes, it will help to dig further into the matter of intention. For this, I turn to David Denby and Harry Frankfurt.

Denby on "Snark" and Frankfurt on "Bullshit"

Denby distinguishes between snark, or hurtful sarcasm, and satire or irony; the latter is amusing and/or socially responsible, while the former is, "the bad kind of invective—low, teasing, snide, condescending, knowing."²⁴ Snark, "pretends to be all in fun, [but] seizes on any vulnerability or weakness it can find...When there are no vulnerabilities, it makes them up".²⁵ Among other things, snarky journalists deliberately "attack without reason" and appeal to "hackneyed" prejudices while refusing to hold themselves accountable.²⁶ Denby characterizes Maureen Dowd as, "the most gifted writer of snark in this country".²⁷ On the other hand, he insists that Keith Olbermann's show on MSNBC represents "satirical political commentary," and describes Stephen Colbert's 2006 roast of President Bush as "a classic case of comedy and citizenly virtue".²⁸ How does Denby account for his razor sharp distinction?

Denby illustrates the differences between snark and satire with examples rather than with explicit arguments. Still, consciously or not, the distinction he makes is based on intention. He explicitly asks whether the journalist in question is taking a specific political stand or defending a particular perspective. For instance, does Dowd have any ties to the community or national allegiances? Is she committed to any specific public policies? Does she have any clear, socially relevant objectives? Or, is she simply spewing mean-spirited invective for her own private purposes? Denby responds affirmatively to the latter, but what seems to bother him most is Dowd's "disengagement."²⁹ Specifically, "she has not—as far as I can tell—a single political idea in her head. Not a policy she wants to advocate or defend, a direction she thinks the government and the

country should be heading toward...She writes as if personality, appearance, and attitude were all that mattered;" in other words, "she's essentially sour and without hope."³⁰ On the other hand, he Olbermann is, "a passionate and committed fellow," while Colbert's roast was "courageous" because he spoke directly to the President, thereby risking the "freezing disapproval of the audience."³¹

In essence, it is not that snarky journalists lack the courage of their convictions; it is that they have none to begin with and take no responsibility for what they say. They also appear to have no humility, their aim is personal, and they exhibit no empathy. Differently put, they are indistinguishable from the "bullshitter," described by Frankfurt: Someone that "does not really care what his audience thinks," for "it is not an interest in what anyone thinks of these matters that motivates his speech; rather, "what he cares about is what people think of *him*."³² In sum, both snark and bullshit are motivated more by personality than principle—they are designed to make me feel good about myself, not provoke thought or reflection, cultivate connection, facilitate dialogue or engage with others on a basic, human level. Perhaps snark and bullshit are simply Hobbesian laughter representing the superiority view—namely, humor that is cynical and scornful, divorced from humility, compassion, or social responsibility.

Self-Centered Self-Deprecation

If satire and irony are thus distinguishable from the "poison arrows" of snark and mean-spirited invective, can a similar distinction be drawn between funny, relief-generating self-deprecation and the snarky or scornful solipsistic kind? Yes, in two fundamental ways: One, like snark and bullshit, self-deprecation misses when the joke-teller's motives are entirely self-serving, even if that egocentrism involves self-denigration. For example, after some minor surgery on my nose, I unexpectedly found myself wearing a rather obtrusive bandage and sporting a black eye. Because I was uncomfortable with the stares and attention these drew, I would sometimes point to my face and say, "No, I wasn't socked in the eye...Even though I know *some* folks who'd *like* to!" Despite several attempts to make this joke work in casual encounters, it never did. This is most likely because I was merely trying to relieve my own discomfort without giving much thought to anything or anyone else. In some cases, my wisecrack seemed to add to the awkwardness. This leads to point two: Under the relief theory, jokes that increase tension fail by definition. In other words, if the sole purpose of my joke is to assuage my own uneasiness, it would be better to bite my tongue and allow some time for reflection or introspection. For instance, if I am already feeling anxious, vulnerable, or defensive—whatever the situation—my motivation may best be described like this: "I'll insult myself before someone else does, thereby preempting criticism or judgment." As a classic case of the old

adage “the best defense is a good offense,” it should thus be no surprise when, indeed, my audience is offended or fails to respond appreciatively.

The same holds when self-deprecating jokes are used to deflect sincere compliments or minimize genuine praise. In other words, one can intentionally make oneself the butt of a joke in a way that offends others or puts them off. Under these circumstances, self-deprecation fails because the joker is merely exploiting the power of humor or, rather, the *pretense* of humor strictly for her own benefit. As odd as it sounds, if my sole or primary objective is to put myself at ease by putting myself down, without any regard for how this might appear to others or makes them feel, I am misusing my talent for self-deprecation. Just as bullshit expresses not only a disregard for truth but an “indifference to how things really are”; and snark functions neither as wit nor humor but “as an enforcer of mediocrity and conformity”; so too does self-deprecation fail, *qua* humor, whenever it is motivated exclusively or primarily by self-interest, ignoring any larger context or farther-reaching effects.³³ Under these conditions, self-deprecating jokes are no longer a humble vehicle for connection, camaraderie or community but a way to maintain distance or protect oneself via snark or self-derogation.

Humor without Humility or Empathy—Two Cases of Self-Derogation

Nineteen year-old Justin Carter was taken to task for a sarcastic, snarky Facebook posting, after responding to a comment that he was “messed up” with: “Oh yeah, I’m real messed up...I’m going to go shoot up a school full of kids and eat their still, beating hearts.”³⁴ Yes, Carter’s so-called joke concluded with “lol” (laughing out loud) and “jk” (just kidding), but is it any surprise it failed to amuse? Despite the obvious hyperbole, this is snark at its most crude and mean-spirited. It represents the kind of self-deprecation or, rather, *self-derogation* that is more cringe-inducing than relief-generating, especially in light of the school shooting that occurred just weeks prior. Moreover, if the goal was mainly for Carter to transcend his own insecurities or dis-ease by causing others to squirm, then his joke is as unfunny as it is ill-mannered and inept. Thus, it is highly unlikely that smiles or appreciative laughter would be the expected, much less desired, response.

Consider a less morbid, personal example: In my first year as a college professor, an older faculty member mistook me for a student. Not sure how to take this, I reflexively shot back, “Hey, I’m not as dumb as I look—I *teach* here!” Since I had already been feeling out-of-place, a bit anxious, and barely knew the man, my delivery was far from ideal. Is it any wonder this *faux-joke* failed to amuse and he reacted with chagrin? It bombed not only because it created further tension, it lacked all three ingredients of successful self-deprecation: One, it prevented me from taking an innocuous observation as a compliment. Two, it sabotaged any possibility of connecting with him, as a colleague or simply as an individual person, in that moment. Three, my defensive, knee-jerk remark

precluded the possibility of coming to an understanding and accepting our shared human limitations—specifically, my comment undermined an opportunity for us to acknowledge how susceptible human beings are, in general, to error and misperception. Therefore, once again, if I am putting myself down in order to numb or alleviate my own discomfort, or being reflexively defensive, I should expect to displease.

Rather than provoking laughter and understanding or establishing some sort of empathic human connection, snarky sarcasm and self-centered self-deprecation tends to put people off and has a distancing effect. This is because authentic self-deprecation has its roots in humility, not humiliation or derogation of oneself or another. Humility “involves learning how to live with (and even rejoice in)...the reality of our mixed-up-ed-ness,” “imperfection,” or “shared weaknesses.”³⁵ In the cases above, neither Carter nor I were expressing humility or attempting to bond with others in an acceptance of shared weaknesses. However, it is also true that, “at certain moments in our lives...the most fundamental choice each of us has is between *fighting* ourselves and *laughing* at ourselves.”³⁶ So, even though these snarky jests were more self-centered than self-deprecating, motivated by inner turmoil rather than an effort to transcend, connect with or amuse others, telling bad jokes at one’s own expense is hardly a capital crime.

Ultimately, I believe the purpose of humor, self-deprecating or otherwise, is to open up space for “homecoming”—“home” being “the place where we can laugh *and* cry, where we can find some peace within all the chaos and confusion, where we are accepted and, indeed, cherished by others precisely because of our very mixed-up-ed-ness.”³⁷ In this respect, self-deprecation succeeds under the same conditions as gallows humor. For, where else can those facing chaos and confusion, death and dying, human limitation and liability find acceptance except among others who can understand, empathize, and laugh appreciatively along with them? Considered in this light, there seems to have been neither humility nor humanity in Carter’s comment or my own defensive remark. Therefore, these jokes were not genuine cases of self-deprecation, and it is not surprising that listeners failed to respond graciously or were offended. Nonetheless, when it comes to the give-and-take of humor, audiences do have a role to play too.

Generosity and the Courtesy Laugh

The focus on and analysis of intentionality should not be taken to imply that tellers bear full responsibility for the success or failure of a joke. On the contrary, there are some fair and legitimate expectations to have of the audience. If one accepts the assumption that listeners are not completely passive in the joker-jokee relationship, what does this responsibility entail? When it comes to self-deprecating quips, I believe listeners have an obligation to respond in some manner—especially if it is reasonably clear that the teller intended to lighten the mood or was making an honest effort to be

funny. After all, the use of self-deprecation, like gallows humor, almost always runs the risk of judgment, of being taken seriously or literally. This is why a generous or gracious response of some kind should be expected.

When I was teenager and young adult, respecting the intention of joke-tellers was known as a “courtesy laugh.” It was a way of recognizing an effort to add humor or levity to a situation, whether the joke landed or not. While Aristotle refers to generosity or “liberality” strictly in the context of wealth or “material goods,” I believe the concept also applied here—that is, responding appreciatively or graciously to a joke represents “the mean” with respect to “giving and taking.”³⁸ Specifically, if finding the mean is commendable, an emotionally generous reaction would fall somewhere between the deficiency of stinginess or “meanness” on the one hand, and the excess of extravagance or “prodigality” on the other. If not laughter, a smile, nod or wink, even a groan, wince or eye-roll could count as magnanimous or courteous. In many respects, this is akin to good sportsmanship, especially if the joke was rather cliché or not that funny to begin with. In another attempt at self-deprecation, made while pointing to my surgically battered face was the banal, “Think this is bad? You should see the other guy!” Fortunately, most people were gracious enough to smile or chuckle—after all, my only crime here was lack of originality. Failing to take a joke in the spirit in which it was intended is not necessarily wrong or unvirtuous, but I do think it is “unsporting.” In other words, just as I was instructed to be gracious whether I won or lost at a game or sporting match, so too was I taught to be generous in the give-and-take of humorous exchanges. As my father repeatedly admonished, “Come on! What would it cost ya’ to *just be a good sport?*”

Among my people, not only were wide smiles and loud laughter common occurrences, so too were grimaces, grunts and eye-rolls whenever someone made a weak joke or was being stupidly silly. Such responses were neither stingily silent nor overly extravagant, as forced laughter might be, and appeared totally natural. I now see these behaviors more as a product of cultivation and habit than something innate or essential to the human condition. If this is the case, does it not then follow that genuine, appreciative laughter can be learned? Insofar as most human interactions or communications usually involve a *quid pro quo* of some kind, is a cold, stony non-response any less unsportsmanlike or ill-mannered than a phony cackle or feigned laughter? I think not.

Sportsmanship When Good Jokes Go Bad

Finding the Aristotelian mean or “right” response is hardly an exact science but, surely, being emotionally generous in some way is preferable to a blank stare or an exaggerated guffaw. If someone is sincerely offering this “gift” of humor, responding graciously seems very little to ask. After all, how hard is it to acknowledge, if not appreciate, that an effort has been made and react accordingly? Is the listener really risking anything if she responds magnanimously to a bad joke, or

assumes that humor and laughter were the desired effect even when it is not entirely clear what the teller intended? Because “virtue” is both too strong and too limiting, I prefer to use sports, game or “play” analogies. Specifically, to the extent that witty repartee or a humorous exchange can be considered a sport or game, not in the competitive sense, but in a recreational one, should there not be a sense of fair-play or sportsmanship? In my extended family, most conversations, even political or religious debates, were regarded no differently than tennis or chess—as challenging games played in the spirit of fun for the sake of entertainment and/or edification. Just as we expected good sportsmanship from each and every tennis or chess player, so too were there unwritten rules of give-and-take when it came to sharing jokes or funny stories. For one, a reaction of *some* sort was expected if not obligatory. Moreover, when an audience respects this “rule,” looking for or accepting the humor intended, what follows might be even funnier or more tension-relieving insofar as a lot of humor can be found in failure. When both parties end up laughing at the lameness of a joke, for example, or start “riffing” on what went wrong, a connection is more likely to ensue. A bad joke often provokes conversation as to why or how it bombed, thus reinforcing feelings of intimacy or an acceptance of shared human foibles. Comics like Gervais openly admit to taking audiences to “uncomfortable places” on purpose in order to “guide them through it;” claiming, “I embrace the gasps as much as the laughter.”³⁹ In sum, when both teller and listener accept their role in the relationship, even failed jokes can land.

Humans, Humor and Humility

As with other habits or dispositions, generous responses can and should be cultivated. As Aristotle claims, “states of character arise out of like activities” and actions performed repeatedly become habitual or second-nature.⁴⁰ One becomes kind or compassionate by frequently and consistently acting in a kind or compassionate manner. One becomes dishonest or cruel by repeatedly lying or engaging in acts of cruelty. I think the same principle applies here: Namely, a good or well-cultivated sense of humor arises out of habitually accepting jokes in the spirit in which they are intended and responding appreciatively. Why not encourage this as much as possible? In addition, having the right sort of upbringing or familial and cultural background is no minor matter either. As Aristotle states, “It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference.”⁴¹

I suggest actively encouraging an appreciation for humor, self-deprecating jokes, and generous laughter—particularly among the young. Why not make it easier to be human by poking fun at ourselves and responding graciously when others do so? Seek out opportunities for humor by cultivating a lighthearted attitude towards oneself and our shared, all-too-human imperfections. Make an effort to transcend the absurdities of life by playing with or joking about them. In response,

listeners can be quick to laugh whenever a joke is made or someone tries to lighten the mood, however feeble the attempt. At the very least, audiences can cringe or groan when a joke bombs, or “dish” on how and why it missed its mark. In sum, when we laugh at ourselves, we make it easy for others to laugh with us, inspire reflection and/or establish connections that may endure beyond our wildest imagination.

One of my fondest memories involves exactly this kind of scenario: Over lunch one day, my father asked my favorite cousin a question that I recognized as a set-up for a joke. I begged him to stop, having already deemed it, “incredibly lame.” Undeterred, he forged ahead, and out came the “Chicken Teriyaki” punch line. When it fell flat, failing to provoke the desired reaction, he started to explain. She interrupted with a deadpan reply: “Yeah, I know. *I get it*. It’s...just...*not*...funny.” At this point, my cousin and I cracked-up, laughing with abandon at the look on my father’s face as he suppressed a smile and pretended to be crestfallen. Thus ensued further discussion regarding why we thought the joke was bad, what made him think it was funny or worth re-telling, etc. Despite the awfulness of the joke, or perhaps *because of it*, our feelings of closeness and kinship were reinforced if not permanently cemented. And the legend lives on: “Chicken Teriyaki” has now become a colloquialism or code for the Platonic Ideal of “Worst Joke Ever!” I am deliberately not describing the joke here—the specifics of it are irrelevant and some readers might actually find it funny, as my father did. The point is jokes can be fun without being funny, even unfunny cracks deserve a response and the pleasurable effects can last a lifetime. Nowadays, when a friend or family member reports hearing a particularly terrible joke, someone else inevitably asks, “Was it worse than ‘Chicken Teriyaki?’” More often than not, it never is.

Humility, which goes hand-in-hand with a sense of humor, is evident in this anecdote too. Simply put, if being humble means playing the fool, or running the risk of one’s joke being deemed *unfunny* despite one’s best efforts, so be it. Among the most treasured compliments a comedian, professional or otherwise, can receive is to be called “fearless” and it is this kind of fearlessness that requires humility. We can all use comic relief now and then or a lightening of our loads—especially when we are feeling overwhelmed, if things have not gone our way or turned out as we had hoped. Thus, we should be grateful to the courageous, humble, more often than not unsung or unrecognized, comedians who make this possible.

I will conclude with a story from another groan-inducing scenario, the awkward family gathering: One of my uncles was recovering from some serious personal challenges. He had gone broke, destroyed his marriage, and had recently been paroled from prison for, basically, trying to live like a millionaire when he was not. During a holiday dinner, several family members were extolling the benefits of shopping at “99 Cent” stores. Listening attentively my uncle hijacked the conversation when he drily interjected, “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t be caught *dead* at a *99 Dollar* store!” Everyone laughed. He had reminded us of our frustration with him and our own regrets, but

we were relieved to hear such lighthearted resignation. His predicament was pathetic, particularly because it was self-inflicted and totally avoidable, and we had been forced to stand by helplessly as he flailed. So, it was comforting to know that he had surrendered to his fate, without giving up the fight completely, and had found his way *home*—back to where he could be accepted as, “both saint and sinner, both beast and angel.”⁴² Would my uncle’s self-deprecation have gone over among casual acquaintances, provoking appreciative laughter? Given his intelligence, athleticism, and law degree, would the incongruity and absurdity of how his life had turned out have promoted pleasure and laughter, as opposed to contempt and derision? Or, among those less familiar with his history, would his playful irony have been mistaken for arrogance, inspiring only annoyance and irritation? I will never know, but I do hope that others would have been gracious or generous enough to respond with a laugh, or at least a wince and a wink, because the self-deprecating humor at the heart of that happy exchange allowed us to transcend, connect, and accept a difficult situation. It did much to improve all our moods and, at least momentarily, my uncle’s absurd, mixed-up, rather tragic existence.

Endnotes

¹ Martin 2007, 18.

² Newhart 2006, 232.

³ Kurtz and Ketchum 1992, 191.

⁴ Amy 2015.

⁵ Critchley 2002, 3.

⁶ Critchley 2002, 3. See also Richards 2013 and Atkinson 2006.

⁷ Critchley 2002, 45.

⁸ Critchley 2002, 123.

⁹ Watson 2011.

¹⁰ Richards 2013, 43.

¹¹ Watson 2011.

¹² Richards 2014-15.

¹³ Watson 2011, 38.

¹⁴ Watson 2011, 38.

¹⁵ Wright 2013, 71-72.

¹⁶ Watson 2011, 41.

¹⁷ Frankl 1984, 63.

¹⁸ Watson 2011, 41-42.

¹⁹ Watson 2011, 38.

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- ²⁰ Watson 2011, 41.
- ²¹ Watson 2011, 44.
- ²² Nachman 2003, 609, my italics.
- ²³ Nachman 2003, 617.
- ²⁴ Denby 2009, 1.
- ²⁵ Denby 2009, 57.
- ²⁶ Denby 2009, 58-86.
- ²⁷ Denby 2009, 109.
- ²⁸ Denby 2009, 118 and 121, respectively.
- ²⁹ Denby 2009, 118.
- ³⁰ Denby 2009, 109.
- ³¹ Denby 2009, 118 and 122, respectively.
- ³² Frankfurt 2005, 18-19, author's italics.
- ³³ Frankfurt 2005, 34; Denby 2009, 7.
- ³⁴ Grenoble June 2013, Web.
- ³⁵ Kurtz and Ketcham 1992, 190 and 198, respectively.
- ³⁶ Kurtz and Ketcham 1992, 190, author's italics.
- ³⁷ Kurtz and Ketcham 1992, 191-192. Italics indicated by authors.
- ³⁸ Aristotle 1941, 984-988.
- ³⁹ Wright 2011, 71.
- ⁴⁰ Aristotle 1941, 952.
- ⁴¹ Aristotle 1941, 953, my emphasis.
- ⁴² Kurtz and Ketcham 1992, 190.

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