

Reading

Today's reading is from the 20th century philosopher, George Carlin.

Comedy's nature has two sides. Everybody wants a good time and a couple of laughs, and of course, the comic wants to be known as a real funny guy. But the language of comedy is fairly grim and violent. It's filled with punchlines, gags, and slapstick. After all, what does a comic worry most about? Dying! He doesn't want to die.

"Jeez, I was dyin'. It was like death out there. Like a morgue. I really bombed. "

Comics don't want to die, and they don't want to bomb. They want to go over with a bang. And be a real smash. And if everything works out, if they're successful and they make you laugh, they can say, "I killed 'em. I slaughtered those people, I knocked them dead."

And what phrases do we use when we talk about the comic? "He's a riot." "A real scream." "A rib-splitting knee-slapper." "My sides hurt." "My cheeks ache." "He broke me up, cracked me up, slayed me, fractured me, and had me in stitches." "I busted a gut." "I get a real kick out of that guy."

"Laugh? I thought I'd die."

Divine Comedy

I chose that reading from George Carlin's book partly because it talks about the relationship between comedy and death, which

I'll get into more shortly, but also because it's one of Carlin's few works which doesn't include any of the seven words you can't say in church.

When I first told people I'd be giving this sermon, a few of them seemed perplexed. "What does comedy have to do with spirituality?" Which is a difficult question to answer, because in a lot of ways they have nothing in common. One is very serious and personal and concerned with the serious topics of life and death and the meaning of existence... and the other is all that plus jokes. Religion and comedy are both ways of talking about the things that really matter, but that we don't usually talk about in other areas of life.

First, let me preface everything I'm about to say: The primary purpose of comedy is to be funny. The message in a joke is not the point, if there even is a message. If you're focusing on the point of a joke, you've already missed the point. The joke was the point.

Having said that, a joke is seldom just a joke. The impetus behind comedy is anger — at injustice, at hypocrisy, at our own inherent fallibility. However, a joke is seldom about what it's about. Like religion, comedy often employs metaphor to get the point across.

In the dusty attic where we keep the broken furniture of our discarded dreams and aspirations, religion is an iridescent blanket that hides the dirt and failure under a scintillating new reality. In that same attic, comedy is a disco ball. All the broken, damaged furniture of our lives is still visible, but now it's the ironic backdrop for an awesome party.

Because they employ metaphor, the true meaning of both

comedy and religion is often lost on dumb people who take things literally. Not everything in comedy is a metaphor, sometimes you just say exactly what you mean.

A large percentage of this sermon was written while listening to other sermons. In some ways it's probably impolite to admit how my mind wanders during church, but in another way it's appropriate in a *UNITARIAN* church. I'm up here telling you what I believe, but the purpose is not for you to accept what I'm saying as gospel, but to inspire you to examine and clarify your own beliefs. So in that sense, all those sermons I didn't really listen to were ultimately successful.

So what is comedy? Some people say comedy is tragedy plus time. Mel Brooks said "Tragedy is when I stub my toe. Comedy is when you fall down an open manhole and die." But what *IS* comedy? What makes something funny?

Comedy is a very nebulous topic to talk about. There's something in comedy similar to what a lot of people call Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle... but which is actually the observer effect, but enough people confuse the two that I decided to mention the more popular name before getting pedantic. The observer effect is when the act of measuring something changes the thing you're measuring. In particle physics, anything you do to detect the position of an electron will change the path of the electron.

In comedy, it's a little more blunt than that. Investigation destroys comedy. As soon as you start thinking about *WHY* something's funny, it's no longer funny. This is why comedians make terrible audience members — we sit at the back of a room

full of laughing people and quietly think to ourselves... "that was a pretty good joke." So I'm not gonna tell you what comedy is, because I can't. I'm gonna tell you some things about comedy, draw some parallels with religion and hopefully explain why I don't think being a comedian is a complete waste of my time.

Before I get to that, I'll answer a much simpler question: what is religion? And I'm going to talk about religion rather than spirituality, because spirituality is different for every person and is much harder to pin down. At least with religion, there's some agreement about what you're *SUPPOSED* to believe. I only have 20 minutes and one nebulous topic is more than enough.

My definition of religion is any doctrine or set of beliefs which is either unprovable or demonstrably false. The existence of God is unprovable. The idea that God created the heavens and the Earth 6000 years ago is false. This is why I don't really think of Unitarianism as a religion. We don't have any dogma which everyone *MUST* accept despite the lack of evidence in order to belong. We have principles, rather than commandments. Most of us probably do believe some unknowable things, but it's different for each of us, and it comes from in here... rather than... up here. Unitarianism is a church for people who don't like religion. People who don't like church... should just stay home.

So what is comedy? Comedy is a way of talking about the parts of life that are horrible. Comedy and religion both provide comfort in bad times, but whereas religion has something to say about just about every aspect of life, comedy only addresses the bad parts. Because there is nothing funny about good news. Did you ever hear the one about the guy who loved his wife, had a good job, and no disabilities or diseases? No. Of course not. There's nothing to laugh about because we don't *NEED* to

laugh about those things.

People who say you shouldn't joke about certain topics like cancer, suicide, racism and death fundamentally misunderstand the purpose of comedy. Those are the things you *HAVE* to laugh about, because the alternative is crying. All comedy, ultimately, is laughing in the face of death. Everybody dies in the end. There's nothing you can do to escape that reality, but you *CAN* choose how you react to it. You're still gonna die, but wouldn't you rather go out with a smile on your face? That, I think, is one of the strongest arguments in favour of both comedy *AND* religion. You can't change the facts; you *CAN* change how you feel about them.

Where I think comedy is superior to religion is that it creates no expectations, because expectations are the seeds of disappointment. A belief that God loves you and has a plan for you may provide comfort in difficult times, but that comfort will evaporate if you start to wonder why, if God loves you and is omnipotent, He doesn't help you pay off your student loan or heal your arthritis. God's plan for you may actually be more like His plan for Job, which doesn't seem like such a good plan when you're Job. The thing that was supposed to help you cope with injustice becomes, itself, yet one more injustice.

Comedy side-steps that entire problem by making you feel better without claiming that things aren't that bad. Yes, it is that bad. In fact, it's probably worse, and if not then it's definitely gonna *GET* worse, because you are going to die. Put up a disco ball, and enjoy yourself anyway.

In 2007, the comedian Irwin Barker was diagnosed with cancer, and he embarked on a Canadian tour which was filmed and

became the award-winning documentary "That's My Time". In it, he said "People are saying 'are you gonna do jokes about cancer?' Well... I dunno if I'm gonna do jokes *ABOUT* cancer, cancer's killing me, I don't think there's anything funny about it. I'm not gonna do jokes about it, I'm gonna do jokes in spite of it. I'm gonna do jokes *TO* spite the cancer."

It's often said that laughter is the best medicine, but if that's true then it's a homeopathic medicine, because the healing power of laughter is very hard to measure. It doesn't stop bleeding or reduce swelling or cure infections, but it does make you *FEEL* better. And as anyone who's ever suffered from depression knows, feeling better is no small thing. So often, worrying about something is worse than the actual thing. Laughter helps with that part, and for everything else there's Medicare.

Another aspect of comedy is that it's a shared experience. There are a lot of technical details that go into making a good room for comedy. You want low ceilings to reflect the laughter, you want a stage and a microphone so everyone can see and hear the comedian, and you want it dark, not only to avoid distractions but mostly because people will be less self-conscious about laughing when they can't see anyone around them, judging them for laughing. But the number one thing you need for comedy is the audience. Laughter is infectious: the more people laughing, the more people will laugh. And conversely, a perfectly designed room with only a handful of people in it is a terrible room for comedy. If a joke falls in the forest and there's nobody around to read it, was it actually a joke?

But more than just requiring that people come together, comedy **BRINGS** people together, in the spiritual sense. Much like a church service, people enter a comedy show individually or in

small groups, are melded into a unified whole through shared experience, and leave feeling better about everything. Unlike a religious experience, however, the feeling of connectedness that occurs at a comedy show is not something you can ever be consciously aware of, because much like comedy itself as soon as you start thinking about "the audience" as a semi-sentient entity, YOU are no longer part of the audience. You can only ever be aware of the mystical connectedness of the audience as an outside observer of it. And as soon as the show ends, the audience breaks back into its component parts with no lasting connection. 'Cause comedy shows don't have committees, and true community is built through shared suffering, not shared enjoyment.

But that's not to diminish the value of the connection that's formed by laughing together. Laughing together is a very primal way of communicating the idea that we are part of the same tribe, and it's ok to let your guard down. No two people have ever fought immediately after sharing a joke. It's only when the joke excludes somebody that there's a possibility of conflict. Imagine a dinner party where nobody laughed. How long do you think you could stand it before you'd make up an excuse and flee for the car?

Humour is quite possibly the best way to defuse tension. Certainly, it's one of the quickest, because it's instantaneous. You could talk seriously and calmly for ten minutes and not pacify a situation as completely as a well-placed joke. In fact, defusing tension is such an integral part of comedy that part of the craft of performing standup is artificially creating tension to defuse, in a room full of people who are there expecting to enjoy themselves.

So now we get to the part where I try to explain why I think comedy can be a spiritual endeavor. And I'll admit at the outset that I am *FAR* from unbiased on the subject. I am a comedian. That's not a statement of occupation, it's a description of who I am. I was a comedian before I ever got paid for performing comedy and even, I think, before I got on stage for the first time.

Everybody wants to laugh and make other people laugh, but for most people that's something they do by telling amusing stories or repeating jokes they've heard other people tell. Much like everybody enjoys listening to or playing music, but very few compose it, a comedian's relationship to humour is different from the average person.

Probably the most common question I get asked is "how do you come up with your material?" And that's not a question I can answer, because it's innate. It's impossible to say where comedy comes from when I can't even tell you what comedy is. I *CAN* tell you that it's not a choice.

The way I think about things is just the way I think, and the way I think is to see the humour in everything. Weird connections, comparisons, metaphors and turns of phrase... like the absurdity of putting an allergy warning on ant poison, the inherent hyperbole in the phrase "worst case scenario" or the irony of a bumper sticker that says "What Would Jesus Do," I don't come up with anything, I just notice it. For me, the humour is all around, all the time. I can choose not to *SHARE* the things I'm thinking, but I'm still thinking them. When I sit down and do the hard work of crafting an idea into a joke I can present on stage, I'm not creating something funny so much as explaining to other people why this thing I noticed is funny already. I didn't add jokes to this sermon to make it fit the theme, I took most of the

jokes *OUT* to preserve the tone.

A comedian I know said that comedians should think about things most people don't think about. He was talking about the difference between good comedians and hacks, but that's also a pretty good definition of a philosopher. And this is where I get pretentious.

Part of a comedian's job is to talk about the things we don't usually talk about, whether because of embarrassment, politeness or fear of reprisal. Comedy magicians Penn and Teller based an entire television series around the fact that you can be sued for slander for calling somebody a liar or a fraud, but juvenile name-calling is not legally considered defamatory. For many people of my generation, our primary source of news is The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, because the non-comedic news media is no longer courageous enough to be reliable.

It's not enough that comedians are already thinking about things other people don't think about, we also have to say it. Comedy provides a vector to make people listen to ideas they might otherwise reject, because of the inherent tension-releasing nature of a joke. I don't think I should have to explain to a room full of Unitarians the value of listening to ideas you don't agree with.

Whatever value humour has in society, whether it's the cutting social satire of The Daily Show or This Hour Has 22 Minutes, the brief spiritual connectedness of a comedy show, or just the simple bonding of a joke passed from person to person at parties, somebody has to be the composer. You can no more have a comedy show without a comedian than you can have a church service without someone to deliver the sermon.

This is why I believe comedy is a form of ministry. I talk in front of a room full of people who all have their own tapestries of joy and woe, their attics filled with broken, dust-covered regrets, and if I do my job they leave feeling better about themselves and the rest of the world. I firmly believe that if we laughed more, we would fight less. A joke can't heal the sick or feed the hungry, but it can make people feel less isolated and fearful, more connected and optimistic, which in turn will make them more willing to help the sick and the hungry. I don't usually get paid to perform comedy, but I don't think of myself as an amateur. I'm a volunteer comedian. This is my ministry, and I believe it has value. Thank you.

Closing Words

I've said about all I wanted to say on the subject, so I'll leave you with the words of Christopher Fry.

"Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair; a narrow escape into faith."