

THE ART OF JOKE TELLING:
WHAT MAKES US LAUGH

QUEST CLUB PAPER BY:

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As E.B. White once observed: “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies of it.” I have to admit that I was not real happy when I was assigned this subject; not at all. I was not even slightly amused. Bemused? Perhaps that.

I guess it is somewhat complimentary that the committee that assigned me this topic must feel that I have a sense of humor, which I do. After once having been assigned a paper on America’s Best Humorists for Quest Club, there does seem to be a pattern emerging.

When I was a teenager at South Side High School, I wanted to be elected Class Clown. I did not win that election. So at age 78, to realize that I must be regarded by Quest Club as something akin to Club Clown, that is a distinction I have neither sought at all, nor, upon receiving it, am I that grateful. Nonetheless, rather than appearing to be totally unappreciative of receiving this designation, let me state to you, with

all the sincerity I can muster, thank you for bestowing on me the honor that goes with the assignment of this topic.

Having thought about this , being regarded as Club Clown is not at all like being a King. If it were, I would instantly abdicate. Right here, right now. And, despite what I am going to say about him in a few moments, I would urge you to convey that title upon a fellow Questor, who , in addition to being a skilled attorney, has an extremely well developed sense of humor- Mark Thoma.

I guess , upon reflection, that is a rather dark and dismal beginning for what you anticipated to be a pretty entertaining paper. So to lead you all to something cheerier, I will now, out of necessity, digress.

Let us start with the Art of Joke Telling. It is not much of an art at all. A useful skill set for public speaking, perhaps, but not an art.

Jokes, at their essence, start with a series of phrases that end with a twist of incongruity or surprise, which does or should make the person or persons hearing the joke, laugh.

The best way to advise how to tell a joke is to enumerate the many ways NOT to tell a joke:

Rule 1: Try and remember the whole joke, not just bits and pieces. Once you start telling a joke, and you interrupt yourself by saying, “Wait, I forgot the first part of this joke”, you have lost your audience, and any humor attached to what might have been a decent joke, if told right, has utterly vanished.

Rule2: For God’s sake, remember the punch line. It almost always comes at the end of the joke. IF you forget the punch line, there is no joke. Period. Do not say, “Wait a minute, I forgot!” and start over.

Rule 3: If you perpetually violate rule 1 and 2, stop trying to tell jokes.
Ever. Please.

Rule 4: If you are good at joke telling, it is okay to smile or slightly laugh while you start to tell the joke, but if you forget part of it, much less the punch line, your smiles and laughter will be distracting, if not immensely annoying.

Rule 5: I guess it does help to have a sense of humor to tell a joke.

Rule 6: Even if you remember the whole joke and the punch line, and you do not tell it well, it will not be funny. In this regard, timing is everything. Everything.

An example of timing: In Fiddler on the Roof, If Tevye had said “You may ask me, how did this tradition get started and I’ll tell you, I don’t know.” Not much of a line.

Instead he says “You may ask me, how did this tradition get started, and I’ll tell you . . . I don’t know. But it’s a tradition.”

Without the pause before I don't know, there is no timing, and no humor.

Rule 7: Do not tell ethnic jokes. Do not make fun of someone's religion, or politics, or gender, or sexual orientation, or their country of origin. By way of example, I sat down to lunch at Quest one day and Mark Thoma proudly informed me he had just told a Jewish joke. I replied, don't ever do that again. Two weeks later he insisted on telling a "Jewish joke" to me and another lawyer who was Jewish. It was mildly funny, but, on the whole, offensive. But he told it well! And on a personal note, don't tell lawyer jokes . . . ever. Same goes for jokes about doctors, teachers, ministers, rabbis, priests, nuns, husbands, wives, or . . . judges.

Rule 8: When I began to write this paper in January, this rule stated "Do not make jokes about our new President. Give him a chance." Now that it is March, and the things he has done has provided so much

material, I still say do not tell jokes about him. The facts speak for themselves.

Rule 9: If you manage to remember the whole joke AND the punch line, and the people who hear it laugh, for God's sake do not start talking again until they stop laughing. If you do, you have stepped on your . . . punch line.

Rule 10: Resist the temptation to tell another joke. For most people, you are a one-joke person. Period. Stop while you are ahead and sit down.

In my life, the problem I have encountered is that most of the people who try to tell me jokes violate at least one, if not many, or in some cases, all of the rules I just set out for you. Listening trying to tell a joke, and not doing it well is tedious, and most significantly, not at all funny. I hope that there are some of you that feel the same way when you hear jokes that are not told very well.

Having served you this bit of verbal appetizer, I have not, indeed, forgotten the main course: What makes people laugh. I will get to that shortly.

I learned when I did the paper on 'America's Best Humorists' that there is a difference between a comedian and a humorist.

One of the things I also learned is that almost all of the people who are entertainers and make us laugh do not do so by telling us jokes. Robin Williams, God rest his soul, made us laugh by riffing quickly from topic-to-topic, accent to accent. I saw him once a late night television program talking quite intelligently about the Viet Nam War, and suddenly shifting to the voice of an old Jewish man in Florida to describe Debby Wasserman Schulz , a member of Congress. Consider all of the voices he used in Good Morning Viet Nam, the language he invented for 'Mork from Ork,' and the facial expressions and physical antics he used to make us laugh. He was an excellent impressionist as

well. His mind was, well, weird. But he did make us laugh . . . a lot. But not by telling jokes.

Late night comedians discuss current events with humor and insight. They are clever and adroit. Sometimes they sing and dance and do impressions, tweak their guests on the show, sometimes unmercifully; but they do not tell jokes.

The opening monologue on Saturday night is biting and funny, usually, but the person delivering it is not telling jokes. To be sure, the content comes from extremely talented comedy writers, but it is not at all telling jokes.

In the old days, people like Jack Benny delivered clever and funny one-liners, proceeded by a raised eyebrow or a great sidewise glance, or the folding of his arms, but, again, was not telling a joke as we know it. The delivery of one-liners is perhaps, a shortened version of telling a joke,

but is not telling a joke as I have described it in the first part of this paper.

Did Steve Martin or Jonathan Winters tell jokes? No. They used voices and facial expressions to deliver their humor.

Common to all of the men and women who make us laugh is the different way they each see life and people and the way they deliver those observations. Yes, they have a well-developed sense of humor. And most of us who have a sense of humor, do see the world just a bit differently than the rest of the world. And the best among them display timing in their delivery. It is redundant perhaps, but in the world of humor, timing is really everything.

In the end, as I have said, there is no art of joke telling. A good speaker, if it is natural for he or she to do so, can use humor to hold your

attention. But telling you a joke is not a prerequisite for good public speaking. That is enough about the so-called art of telling a joke.

I will now try, in the rest of this paper, to do my best to answer the question in the second part of the title, “What makes us laugh?” To find the answer, I first read an article by R. Morgan Griffin, in WebMD. He asks “Why do we laugh?” and states “The answer may seem obvious: We laugh when we perceive something funny. But the obvious answer is not correct, at least most of the time.”

“Most laughter is not in response to jokes or humor” says Robert R. Provine, a Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Provine should know. He has conducted a number of studies of laughter and wrote a book Laughter: A Scientific Investigation. I bought the book and read it. One of his central arguments is that humor and laughter are not inseparable.

I also watched Provine on a couple of talks he gave on YouTube. He was fairly entertaining, and yes, he did make me laugh.

From his introduction to the book: “Stripped of its variation and nuance, laughter is a regular series of short, vowel-like syllables that are usually transcribed in English as “ha-ha,” “ho-ho” or “he-he.” These “words” are part of the universal vocabulary, produced and recognized by people of all cultures. Laughter is instinctive behavior programmed by our genes, not by the vocal community in which we grow up.”

In laughter, we emit sounds and express emotions that come from deep within our biologic being-grunts and cackles from our animal unconscious.

Laughter can serve as a bond to bring people together or as a weapon to humiliate or ostracize its victims. Despots have rightly feared its

power and have savagely repressed it. Plato thought that undisciplined laughter could threaten the state.

Laughter, I found, states Provine, “is an ancient vocal relic that coexists with modern speech - a psychological and biological act that predates both humor and speech and is shared with our primate cousins, the great apes. Because laughter is largely unplanned and uncensored, it is a powerful probe into social relationships. It turns out, for example, that speakers laugh more than their audiences, that women laugh at men more than men laugh at women, and that laughter has more to do with social relationships than with jokes.”

Provine devotes several pages about what Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Ben Johnson, And Darwin have to say about laughter. I skimmed that part. Provine concludes: “From philosophers we have learned a lesson about laughter that they did not intend to teach,

namely that intellectual prowess, however formidable is limited to what it can tell us about this tantalizing behavior. To learn more about laughter, we must stop talking about it and start listening to the ultimate experts, laughing people.”

He put people in his laboratory to individually listen to audio and video recordings of comedy performances. And no one laughed!

As Provine noted, “My failure to elicit laughter was actually a success in disguise. By not laughing, my subjects were announcing that laughter is a social behavior that virtually disappears in isolated people being scrutinized in a laboratory setting”

Provine left the lab and did a survey of laughter in the wild. He and some graduate students listened in on average conversations in public places and made notes. A survey of 1,200 “laugh episodes” found that only 10-20% of laughs were generated by anything resembling a joke.

The other 80-90% of comments were dull, non-witticisms like “I’ll see you guys later” and “It was nice meeting you too.” SO, why laughs?

Laughter is instinctual, says Steve Wilson, a psychologist and laugh therapist. Infants laugh almost from birth. People who are blind and deaf still laugh.

But perhaps, because laughter is so ancient, it’s much less precise than language.

“Laughter isn’t under our conscious control” says Provine. Seeing someone in hysterics - even if you don’t know why he or she is laughing can set you laughing, too. Why?

The answer is in the evolutionary function of laughter. “Laughter is social; it is not a solo activity. We laugh 30 times as much when we are with other people than we do when we are alone” says Provine.

The ingredient for laughter is not jokes with snappy punchlines, but other people. To understand laughter, Provine showed that laughter is used to punctuate speech. It doesn't just interrupt at random. Perhaps the most important social feature of laughter is how contagious it is. What these observations show is that laughter is both fundamentally social and rooted deep within. We laugh because we feel like it, because our brains make us, and because we want to fit in socially.

Some researchers divide laughter into two groups . . . spontaneous laughter and less spontaneous laughter . . . fake laughter or nervous laughter. Spontaneous laughter originates in part from the brainstem, an ancient part of the brain, so it might be a more original form of laughter. The other type of laughter comes from parts of the brain that developed more recently in evolutionary terms.

The chimpanzee-like laugh/speech mechanism with its high degree of respiratory-vocal coupling is the ancestral form. The human variant with its looser respiratory-vocal coupling evolved sometime after we branched from the chimpanzees about six million years ago.

The evolution of speech and bipedal locomotion are causally related. The common link between both acts is *breath control*. The evolution of bipedalism (standing and walking on two feet) set the stage for the emergence of speech by freeing the thorax of the mechanical demands of quadrupedal locomotion and loosening the coupling between breathing and vocalizing.

Bipedalism was a necessary, although probably insufficient condition for the evolution of speech in primates. Further embellishments for the vocal system were necessary, but bipedalism was a critical first step.

Adult humans laugh mostly during conversation. Chimps, in contrast, laugh most when tickled, during rough and tumble play, and during chasing games.

Whatever the style of humor, alcohol primes the laugh mechanism of chimpanzees as it does in humans.

Solo tickle is even emptier than solo sex. He spends many pages on tickling. To cover all of what he said would take another full hour.

“Contagious laughter is a compelling display of *Homo sapiens*, the social mammal. It strips away our veneer of culture and language and challenges the shaky hypothesis that we are rational creatures in full conscious control of our behavior” observes Provine.

He also discusses Holy laughter while praying - Sardonic laughter, laughing gas and marijuana. He spends a whole chapter on whether

laughter is the best medicine. Ask your primary care physician. He also observes that bad drama is boring. Bad comedy is obnoxious.

He offers ten tips for increasing laughter in our lives and notes: No advice is offered about laugh suppression. It is easy to kill laughter and many people and enterprises already have mastered this more modest art.

1. Find a friend or personable stranger;
2. The more the merrier;
3. Increase interpersonal contact;
4. Create a casual atmosphere;
5. Adopt a laugh-ready attitude;
6. Exploit the contagious laugh effect;
7. Provide humorous materials;
8. Remove social inhibitions;
9. Stage social events;

10. Tickle is most appropriate for children, close family, friends and lovers-never strangers. Indiscriminate tickling brings social and physical risk.

He adds a 22-page bibliography including Levine, J (1979) Humor and Psychopathology. I can state with absolute certainty that the author noted was not my father!

The “ha, ha” noise of human laughter “ultimately has its origins in the ritualized panting of our primate ancestors. Animal laughter follows tickling, rough and tumble play, or chasing games, like what makes babies laugh. In all likelihood, early-adult humans, before they started telling jokes, laughed at the same thing.”

As Griffin observes “Which leads us to an interesting conclusion: since laughter predates speech, the first human laugh predated the first joke

by hundreds of thousands of years, if not millions. It's a long time to wait for a punch line."

And, that, fellow Questors, is a perfect way to tie together the two aspects of my talk today. I hope it was informative as well as entertaining. And I hope that I kept you interested. And, no frog died.