I Am a Clown But I Cry

Kennedy.L

English 11

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The What

Why are funny people sad? No really, think of all your favorite comedians. Names that come to mind may be Robin Williams, Chris Farley, Jim Carrey, Sarah Silverman, Rodney Dangerfield, Benny Hill, Jeff Dunham, all famous comedians that have dealt with emotional issues. Many come from abusive or otherwise broken homes. I don’t meant to toot my own horn but I consider myself a funny man. My good friend Brett once said “Please get out of my house I don't want you here” but I think what he really meant to say “Haha yes you are funny”. I myself come from a home life that’s rife with problems, but I don’t really use comedy to hide it. I draw attention to it, “Haha hey lads I am so sad all the time please help me”. I don’t actually tell jokes, I just tell the truth and then people laugh at me. But really, the humor is all laced in my actual issues. Is that a problem? I mean yeah maybe I am really sad like three fifths of the time but at least I can bust out a real knee slapper occasionally.

I’m not the only one to notice this seemingly contradictory pattern. Countless characters in fiction have these tendencies too (Spiderman, Deadpool, Xander Harris, etc). And why I wonder? Why are the brightest smiles hiding the darkest pasts? Even the legendary science has noticed this, and science is just about the best source you can get. According to a study, comedians often has psychotic tendencies. While psychopathy is obviously not the same as being said, it is still drawing attention to the fact that there is definitely more than just comedy behind the laughter. This study looked at 523 comedians, and when compared with the other jobs(364 actors, and 831 people with non-creative jobs) the comedians scored significantly higher in all psychotic personality traits.

As for the the tendency of funny people being sad, well the Laugh Factory(one of the biggest comedy clubs in LA) has an in house therapy program which for a comedy club seems...off. Two nights a week the resident comics meet with psychologists to discuss their problems, and clearly the average person does not need to do that.The owner of the club himself said “Eighty percent of comedians come from a place of tragedy. They didn’t get enough love. They have to overcome their problems by making people laugh.” Someone whos career brings them in consistent close contact with comedians is, without a doubt, a great place to look to.

Not only him, many other people in the field have said similar things. Chris Rock once said “Comedy is the blues for people who can't sing” and Tom Baker once said “Wanting to please people, to only tell them what they wanted to hear, became very deeply a part of me, as it probably did with most children who felt uncertain of the tactic needed to avoid a blow.” Even Mark Twain, famed now for his intellect, has said “The secret source for all humor is sorrow”. Many damaged hearts work in comedy, it doesn’t need to be a field of work. Even just telling consistent jokes to friends and colleagues can be a tactic of the downtrodden.

The How

And this pattern isn’t just superficial ‘tragedy behind the comedy’, it leads to very real consequences. In the book ‘Humor 1o1’ by Mitch Earleywine a study is discussed that discovered funny people(or at least those described as such by peers) died significantly earlier than their unfunny counterparts. Funny people are more likely to take part in dangerous activities (skydiving,hunting, flying, etc.) but that doesn’t fully explain how significant the link is. Funny people are also less likely to visit the doctor, ignoring potentially dangerous symptoms. An apple a day will keep anyone away if you throw it hard enough, believe me I’d know. Even I myself ignore things, like my shoulder is in constant dull pain, sometimes my knees randomly give out, I occasionally get pulsating headaches along with a burning sensation all over my skin, and I’m also sad like...a lot. None of those are very good signs, and only after dealing with every one of those for years did I actually decide to visit the doctor. I’m not even sure why, I just didn’t want to see the doctor. Perhaps it’s because those darn middle aged men in white suits are just too spooky for me to handle.

The Why

But the question I want to answer is why do funny people have such the common tendency of being sad? This very pattern seems to contradict itself, the ones who are the most social, the best at talking, the ones who laugh the most, well they can be the ones that suffer the most too.

As someone who is the (wannabe) funny man I have personal experience with that clown mask. It’s not that I’m just slapping the mask over top of my sorrows, rather the two are hand in hand. I call attention to my poor self-esteem, or my fractured home life. My sorrow can bring other people joy, when phrased simply it sounds dark but I think it’s a beautiful thing. But still, a lot goes into my humor. It’s not just risen from my selfless desire to make people happy though, in fact many of the reasons are quite selfish. Humor makes you more charming, and since I’m heavily lacking in the looks department I thought maybe I’d get some ladies that way. So far it has dramatically failed and the one women I’ve ever asked out completely cut contact with me which is...a bad sign probably. Maybe she’s just playing hard to get by avoiding me though, or maybe I’m deluding myself because I can’t handle rejection. Yeah probably that second one.

Some reasons are deeper than getting that sweet sweet love I desperately need because I’m so alone all the time. The real truth of the matter is that I don’t like myself very much. I know this is a huge shock, I mean it’s coming from Mr.”Makes Too mMany Self Deprecating Jokes”(my full legal name) himself.And I don’t mean I dislike the funny man persona I put on, that guy is alright. Bit obnoxious and unfunny but...okay yeah I kinda dislike him too. But I especially dislike the me that’s underneath that, the mopey self obsessed sad sack. I sit around in my room wallowing in pure self pity for hours because of whatever went wrong in my life this week. I think that if I show that side of myself then people will hate me too. And am I really wrong? I mean how many of us are BIG fans of people who get angry really easily, rarely talk, and look like they’re about to cry constantly? I don’t even think I know anyone that awful, besides well...me. But what’s someone everyone does like? Humor. Humor is one of the very few universal joys, not everyone likes movies, not everyone likes books, but everyone can appreciate a good joke. Of course what qualifies a good joke varies a lot from person to person, more than once I’ve been told I take my humor too far. But that’s a good way to get to know someone, to see what makes them laugh and what doesn’t.

Humor is something involuntary, we can’t just not find something funny if it appeals to our sense of humor. We laugh, we chuckle, we giggle. And that’s a great way to express approval without having to *really* express any approval. When I make people laugh that makes me feel good about myself, and that's a rare feeling. People generally don’t take me aside and say “Hey Kennedy I appreciate you as a friend” but if they laugh at me it’s almost like they are saying that. In some form they are I think, we value those that make us happy. Even if it’s something as simple as offering in a mint during a bad day. So basically my point is that I’m a damn hero, move aside Superman there’s a new guy in town. And his power is turning his suffering into a joke so often that he’s not even sure if it’s actually suffering anymore.

Humor is a form of defense mechanism, I think Spiderman summed it up best actually. “I lose a lot, guys. No matter what I do, I always seem to lose. But I refuse to be beaten. So I make jokes. I get up right in life's face and mock it into oblivion. Because when I do that, I show life that it won't beat me.” He mocks life because otherwise life would beat him, and I think that applies to many people. Not everyone risks their lives fighting super villains everyday, but a lot of us have issues with family or friends. Romance, work, you name it and I’ve got issues in it. Well with romance there’s no issues because there is no romance in the first place, so that’s good. But I mean really, a lot is on my shoulders. I’ve got tons of issues and I’m sure that surprises no one. But being able to joke, being able to look in the eye of the monster that is life and let loose a real knee slapper makes me feel just that little bit better. It helps to almost avoid thinking about how awful everything really is, because if you’re able to joke about it how bad can it be? Still pretty bad but...well at least you’re having a bit of fun with it.

Of course everyone has at least slightly different reasons for humor, but I think Robin Williams best says my next point. “I think the saddest people always try their hardest to make people happy. Because they know what it’s like to feel absolutely worthless and they don’t want anybody else to feel like that.” The saddest people can smile the brightest, the last thing they desire is for someone else to know their suffering. When I look at my friends and see myself in their eyes I do my best to get them to crack a smile, and I smile too. But my smile isn’t quite the same, it’s not born of joy nor laughter, it’s a hollow smile. Happiness does not stand behind my laughter, rather sympathy does. People have it worse than me all over the world, and I’m sure some of my friends are also secret sufferers. If I can just slightly improve one person’s day every day then I’ve done something. In a small way I really do matter. On some of my own darkest days a friend making me laugh can drag me back up, and I hope that someday my friends look back at these old memories of me and it cheers their day up. I know a few friends have told stories of me to their family, which I think is a bit odd. “Oy mom that fat kid said he’s sad again and everyone laughed at him” just doesn’t seem like a normal conversation. But maybe that’s because my family and I don’t ‘remotely like each other or speak very often’.

Humor is a way to open without actually opening up, I can talk about my problems to people with some degree of honesty. It can be a good way to get things off my chest without putting that weight on someone else’s shoulders instead. Of course having a good serious sit down talk can still be helpful, but last time I tried that I got yelled at for being an ungrateful disappointment for twenty minutes while I cried so it uh….went less than good. Sometimes if I’m really lucky a friend will pick up on the fact that all of my jokes are actually incredibly sad and worrying, of course I usually just turn that itself into a joke. There’s real layers to my comedy, I even sometimes go as far as to joke about joking about turning all my life problems into a joke. That’s like four layers of jokes right there, deep stuff. Chris Farley’s work is upsetting in retrospect, especially his song ‘I Am a Clown But I Cry’. It is fully intended to be comedic, but it’s basis in reality is apparent. We can almost feel cruel for laughing at it. But I think the lesson we should take from people like that isn’t guilt over not seeing, it’s that we should start trying to see more. Sneaking a glance past even the grandest of masks if we can.

The true root of all comedy is misery. On some level, all jokes are based off of suffering. Some jokes less than others of course, but still. Think of any joke, really...any joke. It has a victim. I’m always the victim of my own jokes, that was the risk of offending anyone is slim (but I still manage that occasionally). Even the classic “why did the duck cross the road?” joke has a victim, and that victim is the person being told the joke. Expectations of a witty pun or some other unique observation are set up in the premise of the joke and then shot down. Now of course that is not bad suffering, it might be enough to invoke an annoyed grunt. However, minor though it is, the humor still comes from some form of suffering. Many comedians or otherwise funny people have dealt with more suffering than the average person has, so they have even more material to play with. With how common suffering can be in their lives they almost grow more descentized, the average person might be unable to joke about certain experiences they’ve had but if you’ve had enough bad it also becomes normal. The sad(but also somewhat hopeful) truth is humans are resilient enough to accept absolutely awful circumstances as a normality, and live with that day to day. If it’s something that happens constantly then maybe it isn’t so bad, at least that’s what our brain can tells us. But our brain is a lying asshole, it’s wrong about that. We can deal with something everyday that morphs us, changes us. It’s strange how looking from yesterday to tomorrow nothing changes, but if you back far enough it seems that everything has.

The Conclusion

In the end of it all, what does this really mean? Well I think it’s the classic ‘don’t judge a book by it’s cover’ scenario. The jolliest man, the wittiest girl, the funniest people, they can suffer just as much (and sometimes more) than the rest. But all we see sometimes is the clown, the mask. We take that as the real person, but nobody is happy all the time. Not a single person is always smiling and laughing on the inside. Outside they can deceive, they can trick, but a broken heart can roam benough the surface of an artificial personality. Maybe you can take your good’ol buddy Bob and ask him how he really is, get him to open up. Not all jokesters are sad, but it can’t hurt to check on a friend. And if you yourself put on an act, not even necessarily a funny one, maybe let mask slip just a little to someone you trust. You don’t need to pour your heart out in one go, but you can let someone get to know the real you in small pieces. Not many people can survive all alone, and that’s not a pressure anyone really deserves. Not being able to talk, not being able to alleviate any stress by talking to a friend, that’s something I’m all too familiar with. Even now I don’t open up right away, I let things build up until I absolutely cannot handle it and break down. Thankfully these breakdowns usually happen in 2AM while I am completely alone, so I don’t need to worry about anyone accidentally caring about me, that would just be tragic. But I have started to let myself, not in big grand showings. But I’ll text a friend, ask if they’re around to talk because I’m having a bad day. Sometimes opening up won’t go well, but it’s a lot better to be awkwardly rejected than constantly suffering inside but laughing outside.

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The Sources

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Reflection: *I learned a good bit about myself through this. Mostly in seeing how harmful my funny man tendencies have the potential to be. Emotionally isolating myself isn’t exactly going to do any good, although I have been talking to counselors and opening a bit more to friends. A project like this, one that I so personally connect to, is a great way to self examine.*