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“The more one suffers, the more, I believe, has one a sense for the comic.” -Søren Kierkegaard

In June of 1980, comedy star Richard Pryor covered himself in rum and lit himself on fire after days of cocaine freebasing in what he would later admit was a suicide attempt. During a four-month span in 2012, stand-up comic Tig Notaro fought a life-threatening bacterial infection, lost her mother in a freak accident, went through a breakup, and was diagnosed with bilateral breast cancer. On April 21, 2016, comedian Patton Oswalt discovered that his wife, Michelle McNamara, had died in her sleep from a combination of prescribed medications and an undiagnosed heart condition.

It's hard to imagine how one could find humor in any of these events. Yet these comedians each managed to integrate their experiences into stand-up performances that blur the line between comedy and tragedy. Whether it's *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip*, Notaro's *LIVE*, or *Patton Oswalt: Annihilation*, shared pain becomes the driving force behind laughter. But was this humor from sadness an occupational necessity for these comics or does it suggest a more general approach to coping with tragedy? If so, what benefits does it provide and how can one find laughter in misery?

In approaching these questions, it helps to note that although audiences often engage with comics as stage performers, stand-up comedians are primarily writers. And as has been discussed on this website in an enlightening piece on trauma literature by Kristina Fleuty, simply writing about tragic events and accompanying emotions can be therapeutic. Citing research by psychologist James Pennebaker, Fleuty notes that using “language to construct a coherent story, combined with the expression of negative emotions” can produce “cognitive changes” in the writer.¹ In the process of writing a comedy act, the opportunity to creatively engage with tragedy alone can provide a benefit.

But beyond the therapeutic quality of writing, does laughter in sadness provide additional support? Studies conducted by George Bonanno, professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University's Teachers College, suggest this is so. In his book *The Other Side of Sadness*, he discusses findings that widows and widowers who express joy more often in the period just after their spouse's death tend to have better mental health outcomes in the two years following the loss. Bonanno concludes that “people who showed genuine smiling or laughter when they talked about

their loss coped better over time.”² He suggests this tendency to find humor in dark moments facilitates healthier outcomes by providing a reprieve from constant gloom.

But Bonanno hints at another benefit of experiencing happiness after tragedy: it puts those around the sufferer at ease. Though we are largely wired to sympathize with and want to help people who are struggling, it’s taxing to be around someone with a perpetually sad affect. If it becomes too strenuous, friends and family may pull away to spare their own feelings. Thus, grief can become an isolating phenomenon, worsening the mourner’s situation. But if one can experience occasional joy, friends are comforted and will distance themselves less, allowing the sufferer to maintain support networks.



Richard Pryor, *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip*, 1982.

This social function of humor is illustrated in the closing moments of *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip*. After thanking his audience for their outpour of love while recovering from his burns, Pryor chides them for their “nasty” jokes and ends his show by performing one. Striking a match, he waves it slowly and asks, “What’s that? Richard Pryor running down the street!”³ By including a joke made by others at his expense, Pryor relates to his audience in a way that not only eases tension, but essentially absolves them of insensitive rudeness and strengthens his tie to this support system.

Another important aspect of coping with tragedy according to Bonanno’s research is that it usually isn’t a continuous depression, but an oscillation of many emotions, including joy. When discussing these topics with psychiatrist Dr. Anand Desai, he elaborated on this idea for me, describing multiple “visions of reality” one can have, particularly after a loss. Patients can experience tragic visions, angry visions, ironic visions, comedic visions and more, all about the same event. The difficulty for patients, Dr. Desai explains, usually arises when they fixate on one vision of reality. Healthy coping requires a flexibility of outlook.



Tig Notaro, *Tig Notaro: Boyish Girl Interrupted*, 2015.

On her album *LIVE*, days after receiving a breast cancer diagnosis, Notaro uses this fluctuation of feeling to great effect. Unlike the other performances discussed here, she leads with tragedy rather than building to it with standard jokes. “Good evening, hello. I have cancer. How are you? Hi. How are you? Is everybody having a good time? I have cancer.”⁴ She proceeds to find humor by flowing from absurdity to anger to joy to irony to sadness and so on as she shares a gauntlet of painful experiences. It’s Bonanno’s oscillation of emotions condensed into a twenty-minute act.

Interestingly, the interaction between comedy and tragedy isn’t necessarily one way. Just as laughter can help cope with difficulties, sadness can facilitate creating humor from these same situations. In discussing research on the function of different emotions, Bonanno explains that “sadness helps us focus and promotes deeper and more effective reflection.”⁵ This focus can be a powerful tool for a comedian, whose jokes often rely on making unique, insightful observations. Examining through a lens of sorrow, comics can notice things they might not have before.



Patton Oswalt, *Patton Oswalt: Annihilation*, 2017.

At one point in *Patton Oswalt: Annihilation*, this comes in the form of revisiting his thoughts on favorite comic book superheroes. In the grief of losing his wife, Oswalt realizes that Batman wouldn’t swear vengeance for his parents and hit the gym. Instead, he’d more likely become “Gotham City’s most annoying slam poet.”⁶ This humorous observation stems directly from an original outlook provided by an honest evaluation of his heartbreak.

Of course, no one chooses suffering as their primary route to laughter. But there seems to be some solace in finding humor in our tragedies when they do strike. Still, it requires allowing ourselves the kindness to live a full range of jumbled emotions, including happiness, on our recovery from pain. The closing words of Oswalt's performance seem fitting for this idea. Quoting his late wife's outlook on life's randomness and doing good, he shares what also sounds like a mantra for the messy grieving process: "It's chaos. Be kind."⁶

References

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