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Comedy is preparation for death

On Norm Macdonald's two passings

Kent Anhari 2 days ago · 12 min read ★

The funniest scene in sitcom history is in the first episode of the fourth season of *Louie*. You'll forgive me if I transcribe it here at length. Louis C.K.'s autofictional protagonist walks into Dr. Bigelow's office hoping to treat his new back pain. "My professional diagnosis," the doctor says, "is your back hurts."

"Well, what can I do about it?" asks Louie.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"The problem is you're using it wrong. The back isn't done evolving yet. You see, the spine is a row of vertebrae. It was designed to be horizontal. Then people came along and used it vertical. Wasn't meant for that. So the disks get all… floppy. Swollen. Pop out left, pop out right. It'll take another… I'd say, 20,000 years to get straightened out. 'Til then, it's going to keep hurting."

Louie balks. "So that's it?"

"It's an engineering design problem. It's a misallocation. We were given a clothesline and we're using it as a flagpole."

"So what should I do?"

"Use your back as it was intended: walk around on your hands and feet. Or accept the fact that your back is going to hurt sometimes. Be very grateful for the moments that it doesn't. Every second spent without back pain is a lucky second. String enough of those lucky seconds together, you have a lucky minute."

The plodding, ruminant tempo of the scene is hard to transcribe, but it's very nearly the substance of the joke. Even provided its semblance of a punchline, the whole exchange is a two-and-a-half-minute long anticlimax. That our strange upright posture is, in some sense, an image of the world in miniature has been the premise — whether acknowledged explicitly or smuggled in furtively — of our millennia-long project of meaning-making. Cycles of myth contrive elaborate cosmologies strung along vertical *axes mundi,* philosophers ascend (as they conceive of the exercise) from particulars to universals, good men are "upstanding" and bad men are "crooked." The whole beautiful, tortured ordeal of human history is justified, again and again, by the notion

a man, a *qutb*, like the Vitruvian of da Vinci, but here comes Dr. Bigelow, on the bleeding edge of evolutionary biology, to unveil the whole farce. The protracted anticlimax has been ongoing for seven million years. You're not merely an accident, but a catastrophe.

I've been sitting on some half-finished reflections on David Lowery's *The Green Knight* for several weeks now, but things move slowly with a newborn in the house. It seemed fitting to make a first pass at some of its themes by way of a brief farewell to Norm Macdonald, whom I will miss dearly. Celebrity eulogies get tedious, of course. Entirely too many people are clamoring to say too much. It's difficult to say something that's been left unsaid, and difficult to say anything at all without affecting unearned familiarity with the deceased. At the risk of oversaturating the conversation, I'd like to probe a bit into the unstable relationship between comedy and philosophy. There have been a few lovely and thoughtful pieces of writing published on the way in which Norm, equipped as he was with a well-honed but well-hidden philosophical sensibility, played the Socratic gadfly. I've enjoyed all of them, but it bears considering that the alliance between comedy and philosophy has only ever been tenuous.

Philosophy, at least in its classical register, is a pilgrimage to the *omphalos*: a journey from the lower to the higher and from the periphery to the heart of things. It shares this aspiration with most kinds of religious practice. Comedy, for its part, moves in reverse. Comedy allows exceptions to overtake generalities and makes a mockery of the comprehensive. It ushers us away from intelligibility and coherence and towards absurdity. The space that the comic opens for us is a dangerous place to live. By exposing our shared social world for the largely arbitrary game that it is, comedy endangers our sense of responsibility to one another and to ourselves. "Funny" is emphatically not a moral criterion, and the insistence that jokes about some subjects might be not merely objectionable, but *not funny* on that account, should strike us as a deceptive *non sequitur*. The funniest subject matter can be the coarsest, basest, and most mean-spirited. Don't mistake me: this isn't a way of claiming that nothing should be off-limits to comedy, but only that humor itself really is dangerous, and that the philosophers and churchmen have been right to warn us against its hazards. Laughter

By calling comedy "dangerous," on the other hand, I'm at risk of indulging a stupid cliché. There's a late 20th-century sensibility, commonplace among Americans, that regards this as a term of approbation. Americans are chronically incapable of imagining ourselves as anything but the beleaguered resistance to something. Our enemies, whoever they happen to be, are somehow always enjoying a thousand-year reign, while our bravery and clearsightedness and unimpeachable moral integrity are always threatening to bring the whole rotten system to its knees. Our comedians and satirists, we assure ourselves, are "dangerous" in just this sense. We flatter them into the narcotic fantasy that they're anything but singularly complicit in our collective torpor. It's exactly this pretense (one which comedy shares with philosophy, I hasten to add) that makes the comic project most *properly* dangerous. Humor is itself a potent intoxicant, and propaganda is at its most intoxicating when it pretends to unfettered truth-telling.

But even if the philosophers and churchmen warned us rightly (and, again, they have), there's something at least a *little* bit funny about the warning itself. Comedy plays on incongruence and always threatens to erupt unbidden into precisely those spaces that are arranged to exclude it. A prohibition on laughter is already compromised. Self-seriousness is the perfect set-up for a joke, and there's nothing funnier than watching an actor try to keep a straight face. Humor is simply one of many hazardous eventualities that can be navigated more or less responsibly, but never wholly forefended.

Laughter is dangerous, but so is most everything. There is, to speak generally, simply no route of safe passage through the world. Americans raised in the '60s, '70s, and '80s have imagined that nothing except prohibition could be truly, properly dangerous, and subsequent cohorts have generally imagined that we could be made safe by the right set of proscriptive guardrails. Both attitudes should strike us as mere wishful thinking. A man can be undone by comedy, poetry, or philosophy. A man can be undone by fasting, obedience, or love. Prayer, if we are to trust experts in the matter, is the most dangerous project we could possibly undertake. Some of these simply befall us in the course of living, while others are incumbent upon us if we want to live well. In any case, it is *precisely* the expectation that the world can be domesticated, precisely the attempt to forestall the ordeal rather than brave its hazards, that is most deadly of all. Most human activity is petty sorcery, undertaken in the desperate hope that some

rightly calculated the moral arc of history, rather than reckoning the breadth and depth of our ignorance? How often do we imagine that wisdom is a prophylactic we can take in advance to avoid learning from the ordeal? How much art is assuring self-mythology or mere distraction? Indeed, how much piety? How many Christians of late have imagined that the God who feeds His children to lions would, at our command, promise us safety from illness?

Our only recourse is to apply each craft — poetry, philosophy, and even comedy — like a scalpel to the tasks for which each is best suited and with sufficient care that we bloody ourselves as little as possible. To try another metaphor, it is our responsibility to put away the deliriant *pharmakon* and take from each of these enterprises some good "ferment" or "enzyme," as Valentin Tomberg suggests, "whose troubling presence disquiets thinking, stimulates it, and calls it to immerse itself to ever new depths." We can busy ourselves with warding off the *agon*, or we can build up within ourselves a lively store of good leaven such that we're ready to metabolize those of our experiences that are roughest and most terrible. When the *agon* arrives, we might receive it as an initiation into yet more profound mysteries. It seems to me that comedy, despite its real perils, is the best and most reliable storehouse of a certain kind of enzyme.

Apocalypse, as a literary genre, claims to unveil things hidden, but does so in cryptic figures which themselves demand to be deciphered. Norm Macdonald was an apocalypse. Something in the fabric of reality seemed to warp, wend, and break in his presence. He was profoundly disorienting, and was constantly metamorphosing, without warning, from a posture of concealing and dissembling — "I'm not revealing anything; I'm saying I'm deeply closeted!" — to candor and sincerity. The latter was no less disarming than the former. No matter the context, he sent pretense and artificiality scuttling. His practice of hiding his brilliance, cultivation, and deep moral sensitivity in order to play the dumbest guy in the room was, as so many have noted, no doubt most responsible for this effect. It reality, he doesn't seem to have done anything thoughtlessly.

The only jokes that have ever made me laugh harder than that scene from *Louie* have been Norm's interminable shaggy dog stories. Really, the "Moth Joke," which you've no

catastrophe. He excelled at that. It remains interesting to me that Norm, nobody's idea of a nihilist (and, in fact, a Christian of hard-won but unmistakably sincere faith), thought it responsible to tell some of the jokes about living and dying that he did. In interviews and other personal exchanges, he seemed simply overcome by the world's bewildering splendor, and delighted in his inability to exhaust its surprises. His humor, on the other hand, could be pitch black. Norm was preparing for death for longer than hardly anyone knew. He was, as we now understand, preparing for his own very real, impending death for nearly a decade, but I don't doubt that his deliberate preparation began long before his diagnosis. He prepared himself well because he was a comedian.

The movements to which both philosophy and comedy impel us —ingathering toward the *omphalos* on one hand and dissipation into absurdity on the other — are paralleled in dying. Not uniquely, Plato's *Phaedo* pictures death as patterned on philosophy: a revelation, a pilgrimage from the world of Becoming to the world of Being, the Great Initiation. Regardless of whether or not this is picture is truthful (as Norm believed it to be, and as I do), it's futile to deny that death (like *Louie*'s Dr. Bigelow) abruptly naturalizes something we take for more-than-natural. Death is also Hopkins' "winding sheets, tombs and worms and tumbling to decay." Our former coherence comes unraveled and creeping things repay us for our years of tyranny. A familiar continuity is interrupted by the unconquerably alien. Any supposed preparation for death that satisfies itself with consolation is just more petty sorcery, but a joke can be a good enzyme: a working confrontation with the otherwise unthinkable fact of our unmaking.

One important precursor to Dr. Bigelow bears mentioning, I think. Diogenes the Cynic, more comic than philosopher by our standards, trafficking only in syllogisms he can break (and for that reason more Norm's type than anyone in history), lets a featherless biped loose in the Academy of Plato and declares it a man. It's a good joke, not least because of its wild indeterminacy. Are we laughing because Plato's supposed definition fails even to approach the depths of the human mystery, or because the definition mostly holds and Diogenes really has unveiled something comic about our pretense to transcendence? Something crucial about our identity is suspended precariously in that question, poised between the absurd, the mortal, the merely natural, and *something else*. That "something" only presents itself in the confrontation with oblivion, remaining otherwise hidden from view. The consciousness of death and the choice it

Pilate: Here he is, an absurd tragedy, decked in mockery, going to an ignominious death, the man, the consummation of the long work of Genesis 1:26, robed for his coronation, the King of Glory.

Other animals, as far as I can tell, die neither well nor poorly. The consciousness and foreknowledge of our death opens two possibilities to us: of shoring ourselves up against the inevitable, victimizing whomever we need to victimize in the process, or of transcending the exigencies of mere nature and bare life and doing something else instead. I very much doubt that the Scholls, Skobtsovas, and Bonhoeffers of history went to their deaths with a full and unquestioning confidence in their eternal reward. An ordeal without teeth hardly demands anyone's courage. It seems to me that in order to give one's life freely and heroically, one really must confront the death of the body and possibility of terrible oblivion and choose it anyway. The choice, at the level of strict moral calculus, is only ever between courageous surrender to the unknown and white-knuckling a world that's passing away: warding off the thought of death whenever it presents itself, filling our larders and grainhouses and armories, or finding some Abel or Remus or Nazarene whose death can make us feel secure. If the choice is obvious when framed thusly by philosophers and churchmen, it hardly makes a difference to most of us. Death is terrible enough to make vainly clamoring after immortality seem like the sensible decision. The real choice demands preparation, and while the traditional *memento mori* seems sufficient for some sober minority, the slow-of-heart among us might require the dizzying violence of a morbid joke.

If you'll permit me one more lengthy quote, I'd like to leave you with this passage from the first pages of Norm's 2016 "memoir":

> *Over at the table I hit a couple of buttons on my computer and discover what my agent found so funny. Some joker has changed my Wikipedia page, all right, and he's left me for dead. "Norm Macdonald (October 17, 1963– May 12, 2013) was a comedian and actor who was known from…" I read on and on till the final sentence. The death sentence. "Mr. Macdonald was found dead in an Edmonton hotel room from an overdose of morphine."*
>
> *Well, that's a sight to see, all right, with all the authority of the Internet behind it! I'm standing stock-still in the very same Edmonton hotel room where I'd died the night before. And then I start to laugh and I laugh to beat all get-out, just like my agent did, just because I'm alive and I can. Then a thought comes to me in a sudden, a thought that stops all my*

> *isn't that far off. After all, the only thing this joker really did was change tenses, turned "does" to "did" and "is" to "was." He got the date of my passing wrong, for sure, but nothing else. To misquote Twain, it turns out the rumor of my death is only slightly exaggerated.*

Norm, it seems to me, made a practice of standing on the precipice of death for as long as he could. He laughed about it until he couldn't any longer, and then he pulled back to rally and try again. This was his way of preparing. If some of the candid moments late in his life are any indication, it seems that he met death with courage, curiosity, and good humor, as well-prepared as most of us could hope to be.

Early in the *Phaedo*, when Socrates first introduces the notion that philosophy is preparation for death — "that it would be strange indeed" if philosophers, who spend their lives preparing for death "then resent it when what they have wanted and practiced for a long time comes upon them" — his interlocutor Simmias takes it for a joke. "By Zeus, Socrates, you made me laugh, though I was in no laughing mood just now. I think that the majority, on hearing this, will think that it describes the philosophers very well, and our people in Thebes would thoroughly agree that philosophers are nearly dead and that the majority of men is well aware that they deserve to be."

It's hard not to hear Norm's voice somewhere in there, with the tenor of a Weekend Update spot from '95. "A prominent philosopher claimed this week that he's eager to put his life-long preparation for death to the test. He'll be glad to know that everyone else is as eager as he is." Perhaps it strikes me so because he could be, as he so often was, both the comic and the butt of the joke.

Norm Macdonald Philosophy Christianity Death Comedy