

THE GEO-SAMPLER

Okay, stop me if you've heard this one before; it's time for another edition of the *GeoSampler*. You have? Well, what if we told you this one is dedicated to the serious topic of humor? No joke. But if you think this is just going to be a lot of "So a horse walks into a bar," and "What's the deal with so-and-so," think again. You're going to learn something today. We'll be diving into the history of hilarity, the biology behind buffoonery, and the chemistry connected with cackling. And we'll aim to crack a smile or two in the process. So, putting all kidding aside, we won't be putting any kidding aside.

FUNNY YOU SHOULD ASK

Some people take having a sense of humor for granted. But many of us fail to realize that we take humor itself for granted. We don't take the time to fully understand what humor is and why it exists in the first place. For instance, do you know where the mere term "humor" comes from? It actually originates from the humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks, which stated that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as "humors," control our health and emotion. In fact, the Latin term "humor" means "body fluid." (I know, icky.)

The history of hilarity

And where did humor, as we know it, originate? Every culture recognizes it in some form or fashion, and the idea itself is believed to have evolutionary benefits, which we'll get into later. But for now, we'll begin with a little history lesson. For starters, long before the stand-up icons of today, the first comic can be traced back to Susarion, the Archaic Greek comic poet, when, in 580 BC, he transplanted the Megarian comedy in the *Attic deme of Icaria* as a tribute to the god, Dionysus. Hilarious, right? Well, I suppose you had to be there.

Yep, leave it to the Greeks to start the whole concept of Western humor. Actually, it was Plato, who credited his teacher, Socrates, as having the idea that the essence of the ridiculous is an ignorance in the weak, who, as a result, are unable to retaliate when ridiculed. Thank you, Captain Comedown. Later, Aristophanes, a comic playwright and satirical author, would write 40 comedies based on satyr plays, which were considered gratuitously obscene. It wasn't until Aristotle came along and soft-

ened the approach to humor a bit when, in his *Poetics*, he theorized that an ugliness that does not disgust is fundamental to what folks find funny. Jeeze, what a prude.

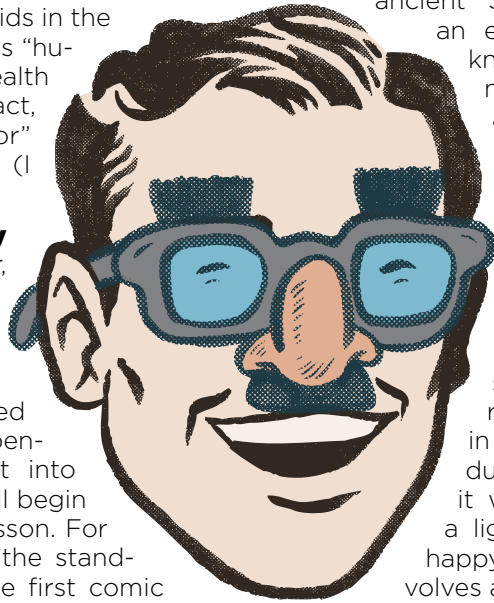
And if you were to follow humor through the ages, you'd find yourself laughing at very different things based on where and when you experience it. For example, in ancient Sanskrit, it was merely an extension of drama and known as mirth, one of the nine emotional responses an actor could perform. In Arabia it was identified as a poetic theme and view, simply as the "art of reprehension" with no reference to troubling beginnings and happy endings like the Greeks. Although, I'm sure it had the Persians rolling in the aisles. And in Shakespearean plays during the Elizabethan era, it was narrowly defined as a light-hearted story with a happy ending that usually involves a marriage at some point.

Skip ahead a few hundred years, and you've got very different types of humor to tickle that funny bone of yours - genres like black, blue, improv, character, observational, alternative, physical, prop, surreal, deadpan, topical, insult, sketch, and spoof. Oh, and newsletter.

So, why humor

Why does humor exist? Why do we need it? Well, besides helping us get through the yearly Thanksgiving dinner with the in-laws, there is a theory that it serves an evolutionary purpose. It states that humor occurs when the brain recognizes a pattern that surprises it, and it rewards that recognition with experience know audibly as laughter. It goes on to say

(continued on reverse)



Why do they put Braille dots on the keypad of the drive-up ATM?



How many roads must a man travel down before he admits he is lost?

Honk if you love peace and quiet.

Horn broken ... watch for finger.

Do vegetarians eat animal crackers?

Atheism is a non-prophet organization.

As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in public schools.

I feel like I'm diagonally parked in a parallel universe.

Make it idiot proof and someone will make a better idiot.

Quantum mechanics: The dreams stuff is made of.

She's always late. Her ancestors arrived on the Juneflower.

Taxation with representation isn't so hot, either!

The buck doesn't even slow down here.

You are only young once, but you can stay immature indefinitely.

I am not speeding I am qualifying.



(from page one)

that recognizing those inconsistent patterns instantly and unconsciously helped to strengthen the brain's ability to detect mistaken reasoning. So the next time someone asks you why you're watching the Three Stooges holiday marathon instead of sitting at the dinner table with everyone else, you've got a legitimate answer. Survival.

Laughter is the best medicine

But there's more to the need for levity in our lives than just living long enough to become a species with opposable thumbs and an understanding of irony. The physical act of laughter itself brings a lot to the table. For instance, scientists know that two parts of the brain's limbic system - the amygdala and the hippocampus (a pretty funny sounding name itself) - are involved in laughter. This is the system that's also involved with emotions and helps us with functions necessary for survival.

In 2005, researchers at the University of Maryland found

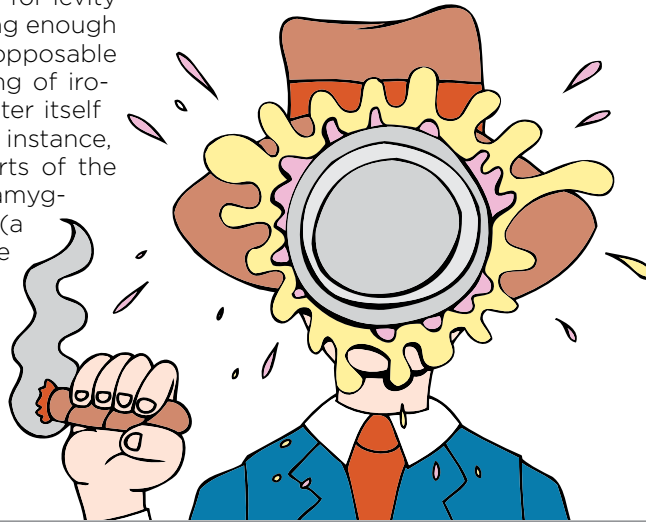
a link between laughter and healthy functioning blood vessels. Turns out, laughing causes the dilation of the inner lining of blood vessels, the endothelium, and increases blood flow. The theory goes that beta-endorphin-like compounds are released by the hypothalamus and activate receptors on the endothelial surface to release nitric oxide, thereby resulting in dilation of the vessels. I know, it's really hard to say all

that without laughing, but let's try to be adults here.

Laughing has also been directly linked to reductions in stress hormones such as cortisol and epinephrine. Laughter also allows the brain to release endorphins, which can relieve physical pain. It also boosts the number of antibody-producing cells and enhances the effectiveness of T-cells, leading to a stronger immune system. In your face, vitamin C!

And while we know that common causes of laughter include experiencing joy and humor, there are other situations that are theorized to result in laughing, as well. One general theory is called relief theory, which Sigmund Freud summarized as a release of tension and "psychic energy." Philosopher John Morreall theorized that laughing may be a shared expression of relief at the passing of danger. With dry wit like that, I'll bet both were voted "Class Clown."

Thank you. I'll be here all week. Try the lobster bisque, and remember to tip your wait staff. Good night!



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