

## COMEDY AS A FORM OF CATHARTIC LIFE WRITING

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### **ABSTRACT**

There is something about humor that transcends almost any circumstance of the human condition. As Roger Scruton and Peter Jones write in their examination of laughter, “Man is the only animal that laughs” (Scruton and Jones 197)--and although the nature of how comedy is produced and consumed has rapidly evolved alongside developments in technology and globalization, the thread of human laughter has a constancy that is unbroken by changes in politics, show business, and the world at large. But what exactly *is* that thread of constancy that comedy seems to offer? Scruton and Jones go on to write, “The phenomenon which we seek to describe has intentionality . . . Laughter is its full expression, amusement its essence, and humour its intentional object . . . amusement contains, or is founded on, a thought of which animals are incapable” (Scruton and Jones 198). What I seek to unpack is what, exactly, that “thought” is, and why humor is such an alluring medium for conveying details about life. In this essay, I will argue that the power of comedy lies in its cathartic effects, which allow us to take ownership of losses by re-representing them in meaningful--if somewhat fictionalized--ways. Every comedian interacts somehow with loss, but in particular, Stephen Colbert, Conan O’Brien, and David Sedaris capitalize on losses and spin them to create stellar, yet different, comedic content that functions as a reflection of real life and as a cathartic tool for both themselves and for their audiences.

### **INTRODUCTION**

All comedic content stems from some sort of loss. In their essay, “Comedy and Tragedy as Two Sides of the Same Coin: Reversal and Incongruity as Sources of Insight,” Eva Dadlez and Daniel L  thi refer to incongruity as “one of the decisive links between tragedy and comedy” (Dadlez and L  thi 82), and state that, “In current humor research, incongruity theory may qualify as the leading approach” (Dadlez and L  thi 84). While I would agree that incongruity is indeed significant for both tragedy and comedy, I would also argue that the word “loss” better encapsulates how tragedy and comedy are, in fact, quite personal. In some cases, the loss may be very significant, such as with WWII journalist Ernie Pyle, who transformed the deplorable situation of infantrymen into a comical set of instructions for how readers at home can simulate the same experience in their backyards (Burns). Or, the situation could have *potential* for significant loss, like when comedians Jim and Jeannie Gaffigan make jokes about Jeannie’s brain surgery (Comedy Central Stand-Up). In still other cases, the loss may be utterly trivial, such as when comedian John Pinette expresses cartoonish frustration over having his time wasted by people who hold up long lines (ianswilson).

Through examples like these, we see that it is not necessarily the severity of the loss that matters in comedy, but rather the depth of the comedian’s response to that loss--after all, it is the response that generates the comedy. Conan O’Brien explains the complex nature of this relationship: “I’ve spent tens, hundreds, thousands of hours thinking about what’s funny, trying to be funny, and it’s still a struggle. It’s *always* a struggle . . . it has to achieve that weird, involuntary, physical response (laughter)” (Provenza). He also adds that in order for comedy to be authentically funny, it needs to be natural. “I think comedy needs to be natural . . . Doing comedy is like being a chef who sprinkles a pinch of salt, sprinkles some oregano, throws in a dash of this and a bit of that. He doesn’t measure everything or think about it and work out the chemical formula. For all of us it’s ultimately just what makes you laugh” (Provenza). Conan’s explanation reveals the personal nature of comedy; its creator must feel connected to

it, and that connection often arises because of a source of pain or anxiety, both of which indicate some type of loss. For example, looking back on the trauma of Jeannie Gaffigan's brain cancer, Jim Gaffigan says, "I felt like it was when we made some humor out of it (that) we took some of the power back" (Inside Edition).

### COMIC CATHARSIS

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Comedy is able to be cathartic because the things that it is laughing *at* spring from the same well of human emotion that produces the laughter. Dadlez and Lüthi explain that comedy and tragedy are each "a mode of discourse or genre intended to elicit very specific emotions. Comedy, when successful, elicits amusement. Tragedy aspires to arouse pity and fear," and, "the two fulfill these distinct functions in surprisingly similar ways" (Dadlez and Lüthi 82). When thinking specifically about comedy as a form of life writing, this crossover between comedy and tragedy can be seen on two levels: first, the way in which a comedian's personal losses affect his or her overall career, and second, the way in which a comedian may look at any loss--whether or not it is personal--and then try to draw humor out of it. On *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, Jerry Seinfeld and Stephen Colbert, respectively, discuss this phenomenon: "'There's a lot of tragedy in comedy.' 'There's comedy *because* of tragedy.' 'But I mean, there's a lot of people who have tragic lives'" (The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. "Jerry Seinfeld"). Their phrasing makes it seem almost circular, as if comedy leads to tragedy, and tragedy leads to comedy, and there is no way of escaping that cycle except for the brief moments in between when one is laughing.

Indeed, part of Aristotle's theory of aesthetic catharsis is that two of the most cathartic emotions are pity and fear, and although they do not necessarily lead to laughter, they are aroused by errors, as laughter also can be (Pack 406). Of course, in the context of tragedy, these errors would be the likes of the rash decisions caused by Othello's jealousy or MacBeth's ambition. But comedic errors--whether they are intentional, such as in physical comedy, or whether they are seriously-intended third-party actions that are then mocked by the comedian--have the same potential as tragic errors to cause a cathartic reaction in the audience. In his essay, "What is Aesthetic Catharsis?" Alan Paskow further explains Aristotle's theory, saying, "The poet's function (and by implication that of the tragedian) is to describe 'not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary?'" (Paskow 60). Crucial to aesthetic catharsis, he says, is the relationship which develops between the protagonist and the spectator; humans delight in imitations of real human issues, and the spectator looks to the tragic hero as a moral figure--just as we look to real-life figures to help us solve moral issues (Paskow 61).

The spectator . . . vicariously lives through (the protagonist) and *in certain respects* appropriates in a manner that modifies his global outlook. The spectator's appropriation *is* the catharsis, and it results in the peculiar kind of pleasure of which Aristotle speaks . . . he is also able and even desirous of making this projection because who the character is and what he is inclined to do evoke the possibility of exploring, clarifying, and perhaps resolving an internal conflict of the spectator himself. (Paskow 63)

Aristotle's concept of the protagonist can be applied to the role of the comedian as someone who either adopts a character, or as someone whose exaggerated and perhaps insightful riffing on the issues of life causes relatability, and therefore laughter, and therefore catharsis. Paskow goes on to acknowledge that, "Classical comedy involves catharsis, an experience made possible by a prior (and complex) identification between spectator and a protagonist whose exaggerated (but not revoltingly destructive) foibles invite the viewer's assent" (67). Even in a day and age where comedy has evolved significantly since early performances of *The Comedy of Errors*, audiences still experience catharsis through a connection with the comedian. Dadlez and Lüthi write, "Philosophical and other investigations into humor have [underlined it] not simply (as) the enjoyment afforded by comedy but further emphasizing its role as an authentic counterpart of tragedy, capable of generating equally important insights and capable of canvassing equally significant issues" (Dadlez and Lüthi 81-82).

### **CONAN O'BRIEN**

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In terms of catharsis, comedians become the “protagonist” of whom Aristotle speaks. But how and why specific comedians become specific types of protagonists brings us to a deeper examination of the cathartic nature of comedy for those who are creating it. For example, Conan O'Brien describes his approach to comedy as, “Just that pure desire to make people laugh” (Provenza). This may seem simplistic on the surface, and in a way it is. But O'Brien elaborates on this approach, revealing that it is actually more complex than it may seem: “Whatever fuels someone's need to be funny, their need to express themselves, they need to follow that direction . . . We're all just looking for our fuel . . . Groups that historically have been thought of as very funny [have] *huge* amounts of fuel, like repression and cultural insecurity and all of that . . . All of us are grabbing on to our insecurities” (Provenza). The fact that he says, “someone's *need* to be funny” (italics mine), is very significant because it shows that comedy is not just a random choice, but a response to a need—a need to deal with specific losses. He also specifies some of his personal insecurities growing up in a large family: “What's my place here? How do I fit into this pecking order? . . . it goes all the way through to ‘Do I *belong* here on television?’ That's the constant. That's the stuff I mine a lot and get a lot of my humor from” (Provenza). Ironically, what O'Brien identifies as, “the constant,” is his insecurity. This shows that comedy is always relevant to us because as long as loss exists, so does the need for a cathartic response to it.

However, in a day-to-day manner, O'Brien's work does not focus on deep, serious losses; instead, he is an expert at using—and often catalyzing--silly losses through which he can create cathartic experiences by filling in the gaps with his humor. In his view, people are used to him trying things, so they don't worry about him because they know that even if it doesn't work he will just laugh it off (Charlie Rose). This idea of playground humor-- “The same instincts (that) I believe brought us all to comedy when we were seven years old, making people laugh on the playground” (Provenza)--while not necessarily addressing our deepest fears and pain, still provides an outlet for what Aristotle would refer to as purging or cleansing our emotional state (Paskow 59). For example, on his show, *CONAN*, O'Brien recently aired an episode in which he travels to Australia and tries different “Australian” things such as visiting a wildlife center, stocking up on sunscreen, learning the Australian dialect and slang, and playing “footy,” a popular Australian sport (“Conan In Australia”). In each of these scenarios, O'Brien adopts behaviors and language that lend themselves to errors, which creates opportunities for him to capitalize on these exaggerated, albeit trivial, losses for the sake of comedy.

In one segment, O'Brien joins a Sydney Swans footy practice in which he struggles to catch the ball, jumps around clumsily, and makes a big show of exhausting himself in an effort to push over a very fit member of the team (“Conan In Australia”). He also extends one of his show's long-running themes of ribbing his producer Jordan Schlansky by having one of the players kick a ball that features a picture of Schlansky's face (“Conan In Australia”). However, Conan also includes a few instances of success: despite his clumsiness he finally does catch the ball, for example, and he also manages to hold a mildly successful conversation which incorporates Australian slang. In the midst of his errors, Conan's small successes are also ways of using his role as protagonist as a cathartic medium: although his audience is laughing at him, they are also rooting for him because a personal connection has been established and they are invested in the premise of each piece of comedy.

### **STEPHEN COLBERT**

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Late-night host Stephen Colbert approaches comedy a bit differently than Conan, yet his work is also evidence of how audiences connect with a protagonist who re-represents losses in a way that provides a sense of ownership. On his prior show, *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert played a character of the same name, whom he describes as a “well-intentioned, poorly-informed, high status idiot” (OWN. “Will the Real”), and whom, he now explains, is a hyperbolic performance of his own identity. “By embracing it very strongly, what I have been doing my whole career is questioning my identity by playing it--by performing my identity,” Colbert explains. “The ‘Stephen Colbert’ character was [a] heightened white guy really embracing the white-guyness. But it was not just an act; it was also a confession, which is ‘This

is who I really am,' and then questioning, 'What does that mean?'" (Peele). Stephen Colbert the character was therefore a cathartic outlet for Colbert to explore his own identity, as well as a cathartic outlet through which his audience could laugh at the absurdity of all that this aggressive figure "catch[es] in the headlights of [his] justice" (colbertbiter. "Stephen schmoozes about Anderson"). The losses that Colbert explored through the character were twofold: for the character himself, the losses involved anything outside the realm of his fellow players, "The Colbert Nation" (feattie. "Stephen Colbert Interview at Harvard")--in other words, anyone who disagreed with him. In terms of satire, the losses involved real tensions within American politics and society. But interestingly, although Stephen Colbert the character is indeed very one-sided, an Ohio State University study found that both liberal and conservative college students thought that Colbert was funny, and were able to connect with the character by viewing him through their preferred lens; the liberal students took him as a liberal pretending to be a conservative, and the conservative students took him at face value (LaMarre, et al.). Both groups, therefore, experienced catharsis through connecting with the same character--even though they viewed him differently, they each gained a sense of satisfaction from their perception of Colbert's work.

Nonetheless, in between ending *The Colbert Report* and beginning his role as host of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, Colbert told GQ that, "Shedding the suit of the high-status dummy he played for nine years has liberated him to do the comedy he really wants to do" (Lovell). And even though Colbert describes his current performance as the host of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* as, "One and a half times me" (TimesTalks), meaning that his persona is still a bit exaggerated, he also said, "I'm grateful to have a purpose now. To know what I want to do every day, which is to keep my eye on what's happened for the last 24 hours and talk about it . . . Perhaps [the audience] sense[s] how grateful I am to be onstage with them. I need this job. I get the same sort of release that I think the audience is looking for" (Peele). Here again, we see how powerful comedy is for everyone involved; although he is not in character on this show, Colbert has found a different, yet equally effective pathway for confronting daily social and political losses and tension. He actually described himself as, "'A very uncomfortable person,'" and explained, "'There's something about my work that speaks to a deep discomfort with being in society'" (Lovell). His work may not make these losses go away, but it does allow both him and his audience to feel like they have more ownership over them: "It's like the demon that must be named, and then it can go" (*The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. "Patton Oswalt: Grieving").

At this point we must return for a moment to Aristotle and his theory of aesthetic catharsis. Aristotle argues that, "'Tragedy is an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action'" (Paskow 62). Paskow helps us unpack this argument, writing, "The play is constructed so as to depict primarily what agents *do* and how that doing is part of a larger network of significance . . . Character therefore helps us to make sense of the agent's action" (Paskow 63). This aspect of aesthetic catharsis is particularly salient when discussing *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, because if we view the show as being analogous to the play of which Aristotle speaks, then the character is also analogous to Colbert's role as host: he presents and jokes about the actions of that day's major players, in essence making sense of them for the audience. In fact, he has said that he does not view comedy and acting as being separate, and he argues that, "All shows are essentially emotional events," which makes perfect sense in the context of comedy as a cathartic way of representing life (TimesTalks). Charles Dickens once wrote, "It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes [in] regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon" (Dickens 128). Although they are not exactly murderous melodramas, Colbert's acerbic monologues--the staple opening of the show--do just that: they present the "tragic scenes" of the day's news, followed by jokes that attempt to turn those uncertainties into something that no longer seems so disconcerting. Laughter, a "destabilizing force" (Dadlez and Lüthi 82), therefore ironically becomes a sort of emotional stabilizer. As Paskow states, after a play--or in this case a show--"The spectator has new, important, and more correct cognitive informings of certain orientating feelings" as a result of experiencing catharsis (Paskow 64); or, as Colbert simply states, "You're here as a release valve for people's emotions. And that's a very valuable thing" (Whipp).

One of the most interesting dynamics of comedy is that not everyone who creates it perceives him- or herself to be a comedian. Writer David Sedaris, whose books notoriously produce giggles over his bizarre similes and memorable anecdotes, told Judd Apatow, “I would never call myself a comedian” (Apatow 506), and, “I don’t know much about comedy” (Apatow 507), despite the fact that he can fill Carnegie Hall with people who want to hear his work. Perhaps this has more to do with how one defines comedy than it does with one’s ability to make others laugh. Sedaris does not view himself as a comedian in the classical sense—he references stand-up, saying he could never prepare even ten minute’s worth of material (Apatow 507)—but as Apatow asserts,

His act consists of walking out onstage, standing at a podium...and reading for ninety minutes. He absolutely kills. I’ve never seen anybody do this before. David doesn’t consider himself a stand-up comedian, because he stands at a podium and reads off of a piece of paper. I didn’t want to say this to him during our interview, but he *is* a stand-up comedian. (Apatow 506)

While Sedaris may dispute the exact definition of his comedic role, he also expresses near amazement at the fact that people want to listen to him read in the first place (O’Brien, Conan. “David Sedaris.”). But he also emphasizes that, “Nothing is better than hearing them laugh” (Apatow 508). These two ideas work together in a strange way. First, they demonstrate that one does not have to strictly be a comedian in order to produce funny material that benefits both the performer and the spectator. Second, they demonstrate that laughter is not just a cathartic avenue, but *evidence* of a performer’s success, which actually initiates a deeper level of catharsis when the performer is reassured that he has achieved his desired result. As Colbert once said in response to the question, “How soon, once [the show] starts, are you totally in it?”: “First laugh, ‘cause that’s the drug, right there. Then I could do it all night” (CBS Sunday Morning).

Comedy is clearly a flexible medium, but it is still layered with constraints that come in many different forms: time, a script, a network’s rules, how far a guest is willing to go, the performer’s own emotional state, and ultimately, whether or not the audience thinks the material is funny. As O’Brien puts it, “The crowd will tell you from joke to joke exactly how you’re doing and what they think about it . . . A sense of humor is very democratic . . . It’s an absolute—they laughed or they didn’t” (Provenza). Boundaries and constraints are inseparable from comedy, and if there were no constraints, there would really be no comedy because there would be nothing for comedians to jump off of or to kick against. O’Brien talks about “pushing [boundaries] and doing weirder and weirder and stranger things” (Provenza), and Colbert talks about how he actually loves constraints (Blyth), resistance (Peele), and not knowing what will happen as an improviser (colbertbiter. “Stephen schmoozes about subatomic”).

It is an interesting tension—a constraint being a help, and a constraint being a hindrance. Colbert, for one, is great at using constraints as comedic material, such as reading on air a letter from the network telling him that he cannot do something (TimesTalks). Early in his career, he even turned his very real financial constraints into an audition tape for *The Dana Carvey Show*, in which he uses his infant daughter as a character and then cries about how he doesn’t have the money to provide for her (Greenbaum). In terms of his current work, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* is scripted apart from the interviews; but, he still has the freedom and skill as an improviser to “filigree” off of jokes that go well, or to even abandon the script entirely when it does not fit a situation, such as with election night in 2016 (Face the Nation). These are all examples of obvious constraints—but sometimes, things that seem liberating can also include a degree of constraint. For example, when Colbert reflects on taking over *The Late Show*, he expresses: “I never in my entire life had done something as myself (as opposed to in character)” (Weinberg), and, “I don’t know why I thought going from one show to the other and trying to change forms wouldn’t be difficult and painful” (Whipp). But overall, Colbert tends to emphasize “‘transform[ing] the poison of anxiety’ into adrenaline” (Weinberg), and he said, “I work all the time, mainly out of fear that the day will come when I can’t think of anything funny” (Finn).

In this sense, the obstacle of anxiety is sometimes a catalyst for Colbert—but, constraints can also live up to their reputation of being a hindrance, especially when the comedian is his or her own hindrance. In a conversation with Howard Stern, Conan says, “I used to think I needed to be incredibly

unhappy to be funny . . . (But) I realized I'm wasting time, I'm being so negative sometimes in rehearsal . . . that it's actually a drag on us being able to do good work" (Stern). Colbert, too, stated, "I needed to be medicated when I was younger to deal with my anxiety that I had thrown my life away by attempting to do something that so few people actually get away with, or succeed at . . . I was in such a weird panic that I would never create anything new again" (Hiatt). In an anecdote from his book, *Sick in the Head*, Judd Apatow recounts a time when he received a "dream letter" from Steven Spielberg, but in his insecurity he thought, "How many of these do I need to feel good about myself?" (Apatow 295). Here again, we see how the passion for comedy and the desires to succeed and to be liked can transform into pressure that prevents those very endpoints. But, as noted, these comedians have been able to turn their pain into productivity, so constraints do have the potential to be useful when they fuel a desire and a commitment. "Creating something is what helped me from just spinning apart like an unweighted flywheel," Colbert says (Hiatt). "If I don't have the show to do every night, I go a little, uh, you know--nutty in the squirrel cage" (The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. "Flipped Interviews"). It seems that in order for a constraint to be a help, the comedian must view it the same way that he views any other loss: as something that he must push through and examine from a different angle in order to use it to his advantage.

### CATHARSIS FOR THE COMEDIAN

Now that we have touched on constraints, and specifically on personal constraints, it is important to reemphasize that at least half of the cathartic effects of comedy apply to the performer, not to the audience. I would actually argue that comedy cannot be a cathartic experience for the audience if it is not first a cathartic experience for the comedian. So far, we have focused mostly on comedians talking about shared, public losses, or even just intentional, silly losses. However, at this point we would be remiss not to dive a little deeper into how personal losses affect each comedian's outlook and work. In Sedaris's writing, for example, a heavy theme is his lifelong desire to obtain his father's approval, which he never feels he does. In, *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls*, Sedaris writes about the pain and anger he felt as a kid when all summer after his swim meets, his father would incessantly praise another swimmer Sedaris's age, but never Sedaris himself. He remembers thinking, "Dad wants Greg Sakas (the other swimmer) to be his son instead of me" (Sedaris 33). After recounting the moment when he wins a swim meet and his father dismisses it, Sedaris says, "My dad was like the Marine Corps, only instead of tearing you to pieces and then putting you back together, he just did the first part and called it a day" (Sedaris 38). Even as an adult, Sedaris expressed that his father is often a source of perpetual criticism in his life (Apatow 509-510); he writes, "It's not my father's approval that troubles me but my childlike hope that maybe this time it will last" (Sedaris 40). But despite the dispiriting nature of these quotations, *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls* is actually an incredibly humorous collection of essays, again highlighting how losses, when spun in a new light, can be the very springboard by which one achieves success. As Sedaris told to Apatow, "My entire career is based on taking whatever advice my father has ever given me and doing exactly the opposite. It has all gone in opposition to him. If he had been supportive and encouraging . . . then I would be nothing" (Apatow 510-511). In fact, Apatow himself writes something very similar in the dedication of his own book: "For Mom and Dad. Your support--and the mental health issues you gave me--made all of this possible" (Apatow 524). Perhaps not everyone experiences success in this manner, but Sedaris is a great example of how losses in one's own life can be turned into comedic material.

Sometimes, personal losses may actually intersect with external constraints such as network limitations. In 2010, O'Brien suddenly lost his spot as host of *The Tonight Show* due to issues with NBC; he acknowledges that after this occurrence, he "went through some stuff, and got very depressed at times" (asj584. "Conan O'Brien"), but soon decided to assemble his team and, for the first time, put together a comedy tour. "When we started putting this tour together, it got--I started to feel better almost immediately," he notes (asj584. "Conan O'Brien"). Now, almost ten years later, O'Brien is the host of *CONAN* on TBS; losing *The Tonight Show* was a stepping stone to arriving at where he is now. Fittingly, much of that initial tour's content was self-deprecating humor about the very incident that led O'Brien to create it. At one point he says, "This is a huge milestone for me. This is the first time anybody has ever paid to see me. Can you believe that? Yeah. Oh, they've paid to make me go away!" (asj584. "Conan

O'Brien"). He uses a very personal, very painful loss, as fuel for a project that not only keeps him on the comedy scene, but helps him to heal.

On O'Brien's podcast, "Conan O'Brien Needs A Friend," O'Brien and Colbert had an intimate conversation about comedy in which they share, among other things, how their own losses have affected them and their work. They both agree that comedy "saved" them: "Comedy saved me from being an incredibly uptight, unhappy person," Colbert says (O'Brien, Conan. "Stephen Colbert."). O'Brien explains that he grew up very anxious, and did not realize that comedy was something that was valued until he reached college. Now, he calls comedy "transformative," saying that its power lies in its ability to make people happy without losing anything--he even states that if he had a disease in his body and went on stage in front of a great crowd, he believes that the experience would heal the disease (O'Brien, Conan. "Stephen Colbert."). What he says about not losing anything is interesting, though, because I would argue that to make people laugh, he is actually drawing from things that he has *already* lost. And indeed, their conversation also covers extremely traumatic losses. When Colbert was ten years old, his father and two of his older brothers died in a plane crash. As the youngest of eleven children, he was left at home with his mother until going off to college at age eighteen, which was when the magnitude of the loss finally sunk in (OWN. "The Tragic Plane Crash"). This grief manifested itself in different ways; Colbert says that while studying to be an actor, he "wanted to *be* Hamlet . . . [and] was depressed *at* [people]" (O'Brien, Conan. "Stephen Colbert."). Although he expresses that it is virtually impossible to quantify what impact this loss has had on him (colbertbiter. "Stephen schmoozes about family."), he points to comedy as the avenue that helped him cope, and also characterizes loss as something that fits well with comedy. "[A loss like this] certainly gives you one step back from society, or what is considered normality . . . none of it made sense anymore. I think that really helps if you're doing comedy, or maybe even specifically doing satire, [because] what seems normal no longer has status" (CBS Sunday Morning). After his brothers died, Colbert says he moved into their room, and started listening to records of comedians like Bill Cosby before going to bed.

Colbert: Those people, in some alchemical way, took it (the pain) away. And in the work that you've (Conan) done, every time I've watched you, in some small way, you have retroactively taken away what of it lives with me to this day.

O'Brien: We do that for each other. You're doing that, too. There's nothing you can say about me that you're not doing just as much. (O'Brien, Conan. "Stephen Colbert.")

This conversation is a very powerful example of how being able to laugh about things not only helps individuals heal, but helps individuals connect through a shared cathartic medium that says something about a life experience to which they can relate.

There is a strange dynamic that exists between laughter and tears. Sometimes, we laugh so hard that we cry; other times, we laugh to keep ourselves from crying, or we laugh because we are crying; or, we may even laugh and cry at the same time. Even the physical nature of these two actions is similar: the way in which the face stretches in a particular way, the inhibited breathing, the tightness in the chest and abdomen. For example, when comedians including Colbert and Steve Carell reflect on the cancellation of *The Dana Carvey Show*, the pain of that memory is evident, yet all they can really do is laugh about it--sometimes to the point that they almost cry (Greenbaum). To circle back to Dadlez and Löthi's work, comedy and tragedy accomplish their goals in very similar ways; and to extend Aristotle's argument, laughter and tears both produce a cathartic sense of relief. Dadlez and Löthi claim that, "Amusement is more likely when the reversal or incongruity is believed benign. That is, amusement is a response to a clash or dissonance that is regarded as more or less harmless . . . Humor and comedy are associated more specifically with those incongruities that are typically thought less fit to be the intentional objects of fear or distress" (Dadlez and Löthi 84). Sometimes this is definitely the case--I refer here to earlier examples from "Conan in Australia"--but overall, I actually disagree with this assertion. *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, and even a slightly more serious show like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, demonstrate very clearly that some of the funniest material comes from "incongruities" or losses that *are* real sources of fear and anxiety. John Oliver's entire show is about unpacking prevalent issues, and therefore virtually *all* of

his jokes are about those issues. Similarly, although much of Stephen Colbert's work shows that he is a master of silliness, his show "reflects what's happening" (TimesTalks), and he daily addresses public anxiety over Russia-U.S. relations, the Trump administration, the next election cycle, and a host of other things, all while the audience erupts into laughter. Indeed, after interviewing Colbert, Joel Lovell reflects in his article for GQ, "The thing I've been thinking about the most since my time with Colbert is loss . . . Our lives are compendiums of loss and change and what we make of it" (Lovell).

## CONCLUSION

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Over the course of this paper, comedy may almost seem like a burden, despite the fact that its intention is to relieve burdens. Even Del Close, one of the most revered teachers of improvisation, said as he lay dying, "'Thank God. I'm tired of being the funniest person in the room'" (Johnson). But while the expectation to be funny, like any expectation, may at times become a source of pressure, we return to it for a reason: as Sedaris says, "Writing is the only moment where I feel a connection to something that feels like it might be larger" (Apatow 516). Comedy is a medium for re-representing something about ourselves and about the world in a way that is significant to us, and that therefore becomes significant to the audience as well. Colbert wonders, "I don't know how to do a nightly comedy show that's also about love" (SuperSoul)--but maybe the love comes from the connection that laughter can provide. The Bible tells us that there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh" (Ecclesiastes 3:4); and perhaps, as we search for "the peace which surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7), comedy becomes one place we look.

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