

# Coping, Healing, and Mending: The Transformative Power of Humor

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I've always been really good at making inappropriately timed jokes, like the one time when I was in fourth grade and my entire family witnessed my grandma fall down a flight of stairs. She was totally fine—just a few scratches and bruises. But as everyone was helping her stand up, without thinking, I blurted, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Grammy *move* that fast!” Immediately, my parents gave me that awful look of disappointment, but my grandma rose to her feet, dusted herself off, and laughed. Of course it was embarrassing, and, yes, for a split second I had feared for her life, but once it was all over, there was nothing we could do but make light of the situation and share a few chuckles.

You know what I’m talking about: those moments when you want to laugh but society says no.

Well, I want to challenge that. I believe humor heals us. There’s a time and place for every emotion, but humor has the power to transform us by helping us cope with our insecurities, mending our heartbreak in interpersonal relationships, and unifying our relationship with a diverse society, bringing us closer to our desired future.

So what do I mean by “coping with our insecurities”? It means laughing at the most embarrassing parts of ourselves. Many psychologists call this “self-enhancing humor,” defined as “a style of humor related to having a good-natured attitude toward life, having the ability to laugh at yourself in a constructive, non-detrimental manner.”<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we’re weird, clumsy, and uncomfortably awkward, like the other day when the employee at the airport checked my passport and told me to “have a good flight,” and I said, “Thanks. You, too!” Growing up as a non-traditional-identifying female, preferring to defy stereotypical definitions of what it means to *be* female, I had a hard time becoming comfortable in my own skin. The most defining parts of my identity quickly turned into my biggest insecurities. I spent the majority of my time in high school battling with my mental health, frequenting the counseling office, and fighting against myself. It wasn’t until I recognized these insecurities, became comfortable with them, and learned to laugh at myself that I began to accept myself for who I was. For example, I used to get called a man in high school—even *before* I cut my hair! And it used to eat at me. I would get so humiliated that I would spend my days desperately trying to fade into the background. Now that I accept

these insecurities, have become comfortable with them, and transform them into confidence, I laugh at what used to bring me down. Now, when I meet someone new and I can tell that they're trying to decide if I'm a girl or a guy, I can find humor in the face they make when they ask for my name as an attempt to find an answer, and I say, "Taylor." Their face says: "Well, that doesn't help." I walk away and laugh because the majority of the time everyone has good intentions—they're just curious. And I love it. Blurring the lines of gender is a strength of mine now, not a weakness. Researchers from the University of Hong Kong discovered that self-enhancing humor is strongly related to positive mental health.<sup>2</sup> Look at me—saving money by becoming my own therapist!

Humor helped me to cope, and it has also helped to heal my interpersonal relationships by mending heartbreak. One moment I will never forget happened in eleventh grade. I was sixteen, just finishing up the best summer ever. I had spent the majority of those days with two of my best friends, Autumn and Brendan. Those two were inseparable, and I got to be the lucky third wheel, or the comedic, underdeveloped best friend. The weekend before school began again, Brendan was killed in a drunk driving accident. To this day, I struggle to describe the feeling of attending my best friend's funeral when I had hoped to be sitting around the campfire with him instead. At his viewing, Autumn was asked to stand in front with Brendan's family. When I got there, she wrapped her arms around me and cried. But when she pulled back, she smiled and said, "Do you want me to come up with you to see him?" I nodded my head yes, unable to speak. She grabbed my hand, squeezing so tight that I could feel all her pain and sorrow through our intertwined fingers. When we got to the casket to visit Brendan one last time, Autumn pointed to him and giggled, saying, "Taylor, look how much gel they put in his hair! God, he would hate the way it looks." I could still feel the tightness of her grasp, but I felt her body ease as she laughed and rested her head on my shoulder. I began to feel my own tension ease, too. As explained by Stanford psychologist Max McClure, "humor exerts its psychological effect by forcing a change of perspective."<sup>3</sup> I smiled and laughed along with Autumn. Life is harshly and unapologetically filled with sorrow, but humor can help heal our suffering. In that moment, I didn't have an answer for how I would continue moving forward in a world without Brendan, but I knew we would be okay. If we can remember to laugh with one another and change our perspectives, even in the most heart-wrenching situations, then we can heal by using humor to mend our heartbreak together.

So far, we have looked at how humor heals our relationships with ourselves and others. Now, let's focus on how humor unifies our society in times of division. The 2016 presidential election left the United States greatly divided due to political disagreement. However, humor is the common ground on which all of us, no matter our affiliations, can be brought back together. This might possibly be the one time that social media helped us with this. After the results on election day, political memes were shared constantly, representing a variety of political viewpoints, shedding light on the absurdity of it all.

Examples of this included photos of Trump captioned: “That darn Hillary rigged the debate with facts!” Others included photos of Clinton captioned: “Hillary 2016 – Only because she’s not Trump!” And even photos of the candidates combined were captioned: “If Donald & Hillary were on a boat together in the middle of the ocean, who would survive? America!” Now, clearly, these can be created and shared by absolutely anyone on the internet, heavily influenced by their own bias, but, regardless, there was something for every politically engaged person to laugh at. Humor allows us to lower our guard, to be vulnerable with others, and it reminds us of the humanity within us all. Famous actor and comedian Robin Williams explains, “Comedy is acting out optimism.”<sup>4</sup> These political memes didn’t change the outcome of the election. They just helped us cope with the results, find common ground with others, and briefly laugh at the political election. Humor allows us to unify the diversity within our society by laughing when all else fails, giving us the space to connect with those with whom we fundamentally disagree. This helps us all to heal in times of division.

Just like my Grandma’s bruises, slowly fading after the “Great Fall,” humor heals us. Its power helps us cope, it helps us mend, and it helps us unify. Humor brings us closer to our desired future. Even today, at our annual Bailey Oratorical contest, Juniata’s oldest and most prestigious academic tradition, I’ve publicly managed to make a joke about my grandma falling, acknowledge and laugh at my deepest insecurities, and even toss in some political humor as well. We need to embrace the laughter and begin our own healing process. I call on all of you to find and enjoy the humor in life— to transform your awkward, challenging, and uncomfortable moments by laughing. We owe it to ourselves to start now. And always remember, as my grandmother once said, “Ouch!”

## NOTES

1. Celia Micklefield, “Funny. What Makes Things Humorous?” *Celia Micklefield*, March 14, 2017, <http://celiamicklefield.com/funny-is-what-funny-does/>.
2. Xiao Dong Yue, Xia Hao, and Giovanna Loretta Goldman, “Humor Styles, Dispositional Optimism, and Mental Health among Undergraduates in Hong Kong and China,” *Journal of Psychology in Chinese Society*, 11 (2010): 61-68.
3. Max McClure, “Stanford Psychologists Find That Jokes Help Us Cope with Horrifying Images,” *Stanford News Service*, August 1, 2011, <https://news.stanford.edu/pr/2011/pr-humor-coping-horror-080111.html>.
4. Robin Williams, “Quotes,” *IMDb*, 2020, <https://m.imdb.com/name/nm0000245/quotes>.