

Chapter 3
Asking Myself Why

On this morning I found myself scheduled for an appointment with someone who's daily occupation is a therapist. However, the interesting thing about this therapist is that he also moonlights as a comedian by night. He is considered to be one of the most reputable therapists in Hollywood as a result of having worked many years crafting jokes based on behavioral observation in the stand-up comedy industry. Some say that comedians actually make for great therapists since they observe and understand human behavior better than mostly anyone. So, I scheduled a visit and thought I would give it a try.

This therapist appointment came on recommendation from my book agent, since he has no confidence in my ability to write appealing drama stories. He thought maybe it would be fitting for me to try and test my prospects in the comedy writing business. I had no idea where this was leading, nonetheless, it was worth a try. Before I was about to go, I sat down at the kitchen table for a bite to eat. Upon finishing my meal, my girlfriend walked into the room. I don't remember the exact words that were spoken, however, the conversation went something like this.

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"Hi, what are you doing?"

"Oh, I was just finishing up a plate of graham crackers. They were hard to eat though."

"Why?"

"They became so drenched in my own tears that they were no longer crisp enough to eat anymore. It's ok though. I just poured some milk on them and pretended that it was cereal."

"Is your writing still not impressing anyone?"

"Impressing people requires talent, and that's something that I clearly don't have."

"You'll write something good soon."

"Yeah."

"Look, I know something that might cheer you up."

"Oh?"

"Remember the advice our couple's therapist gave us about learning how to have more fun while interacting with each other?"

"Not the funny question and answer game."

"Yup. Remember, she said that its very healthy for a couple to ask each other funny questions and try to answer them, because it helps to get to know more about each other's personality while having some fun in the process. Do you want to try it?"

"I don't know. What am I getting myself into here?"

"Stop being suspicious. It'll be fun. I wrote down some ideas a few days ago. Here, let me scroll down to some of them. Ok, are you ready?"

"Alright, go ahead. What's the first question?"

"Ok, first question. If you were to play a lead role in a movie that best describes you, what lead role would you play?"

"What role would best describe me?"

"Yes, if asked to play a lead character in a movie, what role would you want to play that best fits the person that you are?"

"Hm. Let me think here. A lead role in a movie that best describes me?"

"Well, don't take forever."

"I'm thinking. Hold on. Ok. Have you ever seen the movie Braveheart?"

"What?"

"What is so funny? Why is that funny to you? Please stop laughing."

"Oh my god. Tell me you do not think of yourself as a William Wallace."

"I do. I do in fact consider myself to be very similar to William Wallace."

"Oh my god. I have to get comfortable for this one. Why do you resemble William Wallace?"

"Well, we both have similar characteristics."

"Like what?"

"We both, uh, have a certain sense of ruggedness with a hint of intellect."

"A hint of intellect? What are we describing a salad dressing or something? What exactly is a hint of intellect?"

"It's, you know, it's a secondary or tertiary personality trait. Not a primary one."

"Why are you talking smart? Why can't you just say things in ways that a normal person says them?"

"It's just the way I talk, ok?"

"Settle down mister smarty pants, or shall I say, mister savage warrior with a hint of intellect."

"You're trying to be funny, at a time when I am not. You clearly are enjoying the thought of mocking me."

"I'm, you can perceive yourself however you want to perceive yourself. I am also entitled to be honest about what my perception of you is."

"And what is this perception that you think accurately describes me?"

"Look, I'm just saying. It's hard for me to imagine you riding on a horse and leading an army of mountain men into battle."

"You can't imagine that?"

"Well, for starters, if you tried to ride a horse into battle, you would probably fall off the horse and sprain an ankle or something. However, to your credit, you do have big feet, so you might be able to balance yourself and fall off without injury."

"Very funny."

"Ok, I'll give you a little bit of credit. I can see you as belonging to this rugged mountain man image of you, however, you are not a brutish Scotsman warrior of the middle-ages. You are more like a mountain man that is a geologist or something."

"A geologist?"

"Yes, a geologist. You walk the mountains researching nature or something nerdy."

"How dare you."

"What?"

"How dare you ruin my Braveheart fantasy and reduce me down to an outdoorsman with a science degree."

"Ok, yes, fine. I can give you some credit. I think that you are some kind of rugged geologist or something like that, I think?"

"You are clearly just being disingenuous now."

"What? Why would I be disingenuous?"

"To try and make me feel better. After all, you have crushed my dreams of being William Wallace."

"Did I take away your manhood?"

"You might as well have just neutered me."

"Ahh, your obviously upset that you can never be a rugged mountain man hero like William Wallace. Look, truth be told, you may not be an amazing Scottish warrior man in the real world, but in my world, you'll always be my little hero."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"I think I know just the right thing that would make you feel better. Do you want me to pick you up a Thor hat? Would that make you feel better?"

"No, besides, Thor hats were worn by Vikings, and a Viking can never live up to the greatness of a noble Scotsman that is everyone's hero."

"Yeah, but Vikings were able to wear the most awesome hats while bravely fighting their battles."

"That is so true. On second thought, a Thor hat would be very nice."

"Do you want me to pick up a Thor hat for you when I go out shopping tonight?"

"Yes, thank you. Ok, I have to make it for this appointment with this comedian therapist."

"Here, let me put these graham crackers away."

"Oh, thanks."

"I hope you come back for dinner in a more cheerful mood."

"I hope to come back feeling better too. See you tonight."

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Before walking into the office of someone who is both a therapist and a comedian, I had some reservation about where this was leading. Some say that humor is the best medicine when trying to cope with problems in one's life, however, I remained skeptical about this man's ability to help guide me through these difficult times. I almost decided to turn around and find something else to do that would ease my troubled mind, however, my curiosity got the best of me. The comedy business in Hollywood is always an interesting place that is vibrant with so many interesting people writing so many interesting things. So, I continued on.

Stand-up comedians can make for some of the most interesting writers in the business, and the creativity that they bring with them on the road proves this. When they are not writing bits in their apartments at the kitchen table, they are usually found wandering around seedy night clubs, sketchy underground taverns, and small-town bowling alleys. The life experiences and anecdotes of a comedian may prove to be the right combination of therapeutic advice for this struggling writer. I walked into this man's office with some hope for a few words of inspiration. I don't remember the exact words that were spoken, however, the conversation went something like this.

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"This is a nice office you have here."

"Yeah, thanks. I have to maintain a nice atmosphere. Some of my clients are really big Hollywood celebrities, so they want to show up to a place where they can feel comfortable and relax while they confess their deepest problems to me."

"Oh, yeah, ok. What celebrities are your clients?"

"I have a bunch of regulars that come to see me. Earlier I had Tom Selleck in here looking for some advice with some issues he's dealing with."

"Tom Selleck?"

"Yeah, he's a regular patient of mine. He's got a lot of issues."

"Like what?"

"Um. Well, recently he's had some problems with his mustache and existential anxiety."

"I don't follow. What does that mean?"

"Well, every time he has a role that requires him to shave his mustache, he goes through an emotional crisis from the loss of it."

"It grows back though."

"I know. It's just that his stache is everything to him. It's what made his career in Hollywood. It's the most famous stache in this town. He even hires a caretaker to provide daily conditioning treatments and trimmings for it. It's the most well-maintained mustache in showbusiness."

"That is a little odd."

"Yeah, most celebrities in this business are just that. A little odd. One of my regular patients who fits well into the oddball category is Carson Daly."

"Carson Daly?"

"Yeah, and I know what you're thinking. He appears normal with that calm and likable personality of his. The reality though? Inside of that man is a lost soul with so many issues that it would take a team of hundreds of therapists to unlock the mysteries of his delicate existence."

"Is it really that bad?"

"Let's just say that for even a trained therapist like myself, with decades of experience, it is difficult for me to even sit through such a rigorous mental evaluation of someone that is clearly incapable of being a normal person."

"He seems like a normal guy."

"Yeah, he struggles though. He has a rare form of obsessive-compulsive disorder that compels him to binge watch old reruns of 1960's television shows. He's probably the only person on earth that can memorize every word of every scene from Gilligan's Island."

"Sounds like some of these celebrities here in Hollywood can be a bit eccentric."

"Yeah, the celebrity clients that visit me for advice and counseling seem to get a little loonier by the day. Do you know who Nicholas Cage is?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so."

"Yeah, he's also a regular patient of mine. I've been working with him since the meatball incident."

"The meatball incident?"

"Yeah, last year he was dining with some friends at an Italian restaurant in Santa Monica when he accidentally started choking on a meatball. Someone at the table performed the Heimlich on him, and luckily managed to dislodge the meatball from his windpipe. During those moments he said that he had a near death experience of seeing himself walking toward a tunnel of light as god instructed him to be a better person."

"A better person?"

"Yeah, he recently converted to Buddhism, and has since devoted his entire life to charitable causes. I've never seen a person more dedicated to helping other people. Everyone in Hollywood regards him as some kind of guardian angel."

"I'm getting the impression that virtually everyone in Hollywood is in search for some therapeutic counseling."

"Yeah, Hollywood itself is like one giant therapist's office. Everybody's walking around this town trying to figure out what kind of condition they need to be treated for next."

"Well, I'm just here to get some advice about my writing career. What do you suggest I do?"

"Well, your book agent told me that you've been having some problems finding success as a story writer, and when I asked him why, he said that you found it necessary to write stories with characters that are critical of religion and liberal Democrats."

"Oh, uh yeah. I wrote a couple of stories. One story involved dialogue between characters that were rationalizing arguments that are considered to be critical of religious thought."

"Oh, yeah, that is definitely a good way to get on the bad side of virtually everyone in the world. Why would you think of doing such a thing?"

"I thought it would be interesting to write a story looking at those philosophical opinions."

"Nobody likes an author who expresses the disapproval of religion in their writing."

"Yes, I know. I've been told."

"What about your other story? Your book agent told me that you found it necessary to write a story where the characters were overtly critical of mainstream liberal Democrats, while arguing in favor of progressive activism. Is this true?"

"Uh yes, why, is that a problem?"

"Oh my god. Yes. Any arguments in favor of progressive ideology can be like kryptonite to some people and especially to those in Hollywood. Around here, they like their politics served nice and polite in the form of conservative liberalism."

"I had no idea."

"Most people in Hollywood would probably find your story on progressivism to be out of touch with the political bubble that they live in. To be forward about it, those in Hollywood are not very receptive to progressive politics since tinseltown is the epicenter of brunch liberalism. One could argue that the industry is progressive on cultural issues, however, other than cultural issues, Hollywood is furthest from being progressive. They just don't seem as though they want to fix a broken political system, and even if they did want to, they show too much support for corrupt corporate politicians to make it happen. Its certainly possible for Hollywood to support progressive policies that would upend the corporate elitism of traditional DNC politics, however, finding that widespread support would be an incredibly tough hill to climb. In a nutshell, Hollywood is an industry that is mostly comprised of very conservative liberals that are not shy about expressing their disapproval for progressive politics. As such, those in Hollywood would probably also not be shy about expressing their disapproval for any books that are arguing in favor of those beliefs."

"That's a very refreshing perspective. I thought that you were just a therapist and comedian."

"I spent a few years studying politics."

"Interesting."

"So anyhow. Let's talk about why you're here. You have failed as a book writer, and I am here to help. Do you know why your book agent recommended you see me?"

"No, why?"

"He told me that you may have an oddly imaginative potential to produce humor writing. However, the big reason he thought you might find some value in talking with me is because you might find some value in understanding how failure leads to improving what it is that you're trying to be good at. And the comedy industry is the perfect place to show how that happens."

"Comedians, just like yourself, become familiar with what truth is. Trust me. Comedians feel the truth every time they get on stage. Truth will tell them whether or not they have what it takes to make other people laugh. Comedians, also like yourself, know pain. All comedians experience trying and failing at the work they do. Look, you have tried writing fiction stories, and have bombed doing so. For comedians, that's just par for the course. Comedians bomb all the time. The life of a comedian is just a story about someone who has just learned to fail, and all in the public presence for everyone to witness. You see? You, Ian Connor can perfectly relate to this."

"Are you calling me a failure?"

"Not necessarily. It's all about having the correct optics. You are not a failure because you are always failing. You are actually a success because you keep trying with indifference to failure itself. Like a comedian failing hard in front of crowds, or you failing hard in public with your writing, these are just examples of people slowly learning what it takes to succeed at what they are trying to be good at."

"You, like comedians, at least have in your possession, the ability to continue bombing, regardless of the self criticism that tells you to not try this again. Almost all people avoid what they have been failing at. Except for comedians. They fail, then they try the same thing and fail again. Some say, they continue to fail because they just don't learn, when in reality they are learning all too well, that failure can be a good thing, if you really want to be good at something."

"Does this resonate with you?"

"Sure."

"Keep what I just said in mind as you progress with your work. Other than that, are there any questions you have that I might be able to answer?"

"Sure, what makes someone want to become a comedian?"

"In most cases it's the approval of others that compels comedians to be successful. It is commonly seen as just a way for them to see themselves as good people, as a result of never being loved by others while growing up. Virtually every person that works in the stand up comedy industry shares the same experience. The motivation to work in the world of comedy has everything to do with the experience of growing up without the approval of others. For example, my parents never gave me approval for anything."

"When I learned my ABC's, my parents just sneered and said, yeah anyone can do that. When I learned to take my first steps and walk, they said, finally, what took you so long, now go walk to the fridge and get me a soda. When I had a lead role in my first stage play for my kindergarten class, my parents fell asleep during the entire show, then left without me. I had to take a cab home."

"That's so empty and sad."

"Yes, it is. And the only thing that is able to fill in the space of that emptiness is laughter. Comedians enjoy when others show their likeness and approval for us, as it is being expressed with the emotional reaction of laughing."

"Wow, the life of a comedian can appear good, until you realize that they are struggling with all sorts of issues."

"Yes, comedians, and especially stand up comedians are saddened by a mental struggle, where they find themselves being consumed by their own inadequacies, and they spend their entire lives struggling with these inadequacies, while speaking into a microphone and trying to make people laugh. They are the odd ones of our society, that have found out how to make a living by behaving in silly and immature ways on stage in front of other people."

"They are the jester peasants reflecting the humor of the commons. Some respect them as being valuable members of our society, while others regard them as the symptoms of society's ills. Either way, they try to make people laugh, and when they succeed at doing that, we respond by giving them a round of applause before they leave to go stuff themselves with pizza and chicken wings."

"Also, working in the comedy business is not always about just failing until you make it. It's also a struggle of being able to handle the criticism and disapproval of others. And many comedians are terrible at handling criticism. They are practitioners of failing, yet when people dump their criticism on them, sometimes they tend to sink into moments of despair, that results in scrambling their own sense of confidence."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know. Some of the most well known comedians are among those that have shown to not handle criticism or the fear of rejection very well. It is a sad state of affairs when the minds of comedians are tormented by criticism and the emotional demands of trying to be talented. We all saw what happened to Dave Chappelle when fame came knocking on his door. The fear of criticism and rejection was so overwhelming that he was too afraid to turn the knob and let the craziness in. To this day he's still very sensitive to rejection. Have you heard the latest rumor about Dave?"

"No, what rumor is that?"

"Apparently, a few weeks ago, some Netflix executives asked him to get on a plane and show up at their main offices. When he arrived, a group of them were standing there holding his latest stand-up special contract. They expressed their disapproval of him, tore up the contract, then asked him to leave."

"Wow."

"Yeah. He was last seen shopping for a space suit."

"What?"

"Yeah, apparently, he called up Elon Musk to see if he could bump him up to the top of the list for a flight to Mars on one of their Heavy Falcon Nine rockets."

"Interesting."

"Yeah, you know what he said when asked when he intended on returning?"

"What?"

"He said that he only booked a one-way flight."

"Sounds like he doesn't take rejection very well."

"Yeah, the pressures of fame and the fear of rejection can have real emotional impacts on people in this business."

"Have you ever heard what happened to Jerry Seinfeld?"

"No, what?"

"In his early days of trying stand up, he went on a comedy club tour that found him traveling around the state of Florida. He was bombing so bad that crowds started to rebel against him by throwing nachos and peanuts on stage and demanding refunds. He was so emotionally affected by it that he took a month-long culinary arts class in baking, legally changed his name several times, then fled the country."

"Wow, then what?"

"Several months later he was found as Emilio Sarkozy, spending his afternoons baking loaves of bread at a religious monastery in the south of France. After being extradited from the embassy in Paris, he returned to New York City, and after a short stint on the comedy club circuit, he came up with the idea of creating a television show based on his life as a stand up comedian."

"Sounds like he just needed a Sabbatical to reset and find his voice for comedy."

"Perhaps. Clearly, comedians can be very sensitive to the approval and rejection of others. Sure, they like to present themselves as having a strong exterior that pretends to not care about criticism, however on the inside they are as delicate as eggshells. Just one remark of disapproval is enough to crack that exterior and send them into a messy tailspin of emotional confusion. Criticizing a comedian is like saying, not only are we not approving of you, but we also hope that you stop trying to do something that you are clearly not good at doing. It's a spiral that even the best comedians cannot avoid."

"That is so interesting."

"Yeah, this business can really cause a person to get a little loopy. Take Jim Carrey for example. He rehearses his movie roles in a mirror to the soft sound of applause being played in the background. This applauding, even though fake, calms his nerves by convincing him that people like him."

"Wow, that's kind of weird."

"Yeah, he's an interesting character. I hear that when he's not sleeping in his custom-built hyperbaric chamber, he is wandering around looking for ways to make people laugh, so that he can feel love and acceptance. It's rumored in Hollywood that he is only the empty shell of a man with no understanding of basic human emotions."

"Wow. One would never know by the cheerful nature of their personalities. It sounds like comedians are really just sad people on the inside."

"Like they always say. Comedians smile on the outside, because it's the only way to hide the miserable sadness of what is going on with them on the inside. Essentially, comedians live out their lives between a struggle of wanting approval and needing the talent it takes for that approval to be given to them."

"I've never heard it put that way. I'm really glad I had this talk with you. It really helps with trying to figure out this Hollywood writer thing. Maybe I want to stay away from the comedy stuff just for my own sanity. Maybe the low-key story writer thing is good for now."

"Whatever you feel suits you. Just remember what we talked about when it comes to failure. Some of the best and brightest are among those that have failed the hardest. So, keep writing about whatever it is that you think you're good at, and if you fail, don't be afraid to accept it as just a bump in the road that is leading you to whatever destination success may take the form of. Success means different things to different people, and perhaps for you, success is just found in the form of approval from an audience that appreciates the unique expression of your thoughts and feelings. Much in the same way a comedian feels when an audience gives their approval after they've expressed the humor of their thoughts and feelings. Try not to be afraid of failure. Failure should never be seen as an end. It's just a beginning of learning how to become better at what it is you are trying to be good at."

"Thanks for looking out, and thanks for the words of encouragement."

"That's what I'm here for. Come visit me sometime and let me know how it goes."

"Yes sir."