

## Transcript for Peter McGraw | The Humor Code (Episode 618)

Full show notes found here: <https://theartofcharm.com/618/>

PETER: We can learn to serve a tennis ball, to play piano, to become a better public speaker, and so all of those things suggest to me that if you wanted to try to be funnier, you could improve that skill.

JORDAN: Welcome to The Art of Charm, I'm Jordan Harbinger. Today we're talking with Doctor Peter McGraw. He's a professor of marketing and psychology at the University of Colorado in Boulder, but he studies humor, judgement, emotion, choice. He spent the last 10 years studying the answer to the question, "What makes things funny," and led him to find the Humor Research Lab, aka HuRL. I see what he did there. Today we're going to discover why humor is ubiquitous, amusement and laughter is present in all cultures, occurs all age groups, and is even experienced by non-human mammals. So you can tickle rats, and we'll go there. We'll also discuss why people should pursue more humor in their life, coping, relationship building, how to pursue humor more effectively, in other words how to be funnier, and explain how comedy can be a tool for good such as speaking truth to power, and for evil, like bullying. Enjoy this episode with Doctor Peter McGraw.

And if you're new to the show, we'd love to send you some top episodes and the AoC Toolbox. That's where we study the science of people and discuss concepts like reading body language, having charismatic nonverbal communication, the science of attraction, negotiation techniques, social engineering, networking and influence strategies, persuasion tactics, and everything else that we teach here at The Art of Charm. Check that out at [theartofcharm.com/toolbox](https://theartofcharm.com/toolbox) or in our iPhone or Android apps at [theartofcharm.com/iphone](https://theartofcharm.com/iphone) or [/android](https://theartofcharm.com/android). Also at [theartofcharm.com](https://theartofcharm.com) you can find the full show notes for this and all previous episodes of the show. Whether it's your first or 500th episode of AoC, we're always glad to have you here with us. Now, let's hear from Doctor Peter McGraw.

Tell me why you started studying humor because it's a little bit weird to say, "I'm going to figure out what's funny and I'm going to start with academic studies about things that are funny," because usually that's -- it seems almost like, "I need to figure out the least funniest way to find things that are funny and explain why they're funny."

PETER: Yeah, so there's certainly a certain amount of hubris that's associated with trying to answer the question, "What makes things funny?" And the reason I say this is because people way smarter than me have tried to do it, you know, since Greek philosophy and I think haven't done a terribly good job of it all. And so why should like, a kind of regular, everyday academic think that he can do this thing? The short answer to that is that I can run experiments. So in that way, that was my belief. I was like, "Okay, science explains a lot very difficult things, you know, you can create nuclear energy and you can explain black holes and you can figure out, at least we think, where the universe came from, and so I think we can figure out comedy, in that sense." How I came to study this, really is just happenstance. It wasn't like I woke up one day and thought, "This is super important and I'm the man to figure this out." It wasn't anything close to that. I actually what studying what makes things wrong, so I was studying a different question at the time. So I was doing work on moral judgement and decision making.

JORDAN: Not so hilarious. That does not sound funny at all.

PETER: Well interestingly, it was a talk that I was giving. So in 2008 I was giving a talk at Tulane University, so academics do this stuff all the time. They visit another university, they present a paper, and a bunch of curmudgeonly academics try to skewer them you know, in a talk. On occasion, there's someone who's like, super nice and really helpful and really excited and those people kind of make those talks worth it. This trip to Tulane, I'm giving the talk about moral violations, actually about religious marketing. So I was doing a project about how churches are using, kind of, marketing tools, business tools, to grow their

congregations. I used an example of religious marketing and my audience laughed. So they laughed at this thing that they thought was wrong. Some faculty member, professor in the back of the room raised her hand and said, "You know, you just told us that moral violations make people angry and yet we're laughing, we're expressing a positive emotion. Why?" And I was completely dumbfounded and unprepared for that question --

JORDAN: This is why I don't do talks, yeah.

PETER: -- and I just said, "I don't know." I mean I said, "I have no idea," and I -- at that point I had been studying emotions for over 10 years. I had never read a paper about humor, I -- of course I valued it in my personal life -- even in my professional life I told lots of jokes as an instructor -- and I couldn't begin to answer that question. So I came home and recruited a graduate student and said, "You know, we should figure out --" It wasn't "We should figure what makes things funny," it was, "We should figure out why people laugh at moral violations," and then that quickly turned into nine years of work now on this much broader question.

JORDAN: There's a lot of things that I've read in your book that were really surprising, such as "humor is ubiquitous," okay that's not so surprising.

PETER: Right.

JORDAN: And that "Amusement and laughter is present in all cultures," that's also not super surprising. But the fact that nonhuman mammals might experience humor, that was really weird. I'm trying to imagine my cat or dog thinking, "That's hilarious," you know, "He fell when he was coming down the stairs." What are animals experiencing in terms of humor. Let's just start with lower life forms.

PETER: Right, so you know I think that actually mammals, especially nonhuman primates -- so chimps, bonobos, monkeys, gorillas, etcetera, are often a good case study when trying to understand,

you know, the human condition, just because that's where we came from. And so if it's evident there, it's probably evident here. So first of all, I think emotions are present in mammals of all varieties. So your dog can be angry, right? Your dog can be scared, your dog can be happy in those kind of ways.

JORDAN: Mm-hmm.

PETER: And the precursors, for fear and anger and happiness in, whether it be dogs, or chimps, or I think even rats -- which we talk about in the book -- are similar to the precursors that humans experience these same emotions. And so then the question is, can animals actually find something funny? I actually don't think that animals find something funny in the way that we do, "Hey that's really hilarious."

JORDAN: Right, like how do you tell a rat a joke? You don't, right? There's no way.

PETER: They don't have the cognitions associated with that emotion. This is just a complete aside, like -- so you have a dog, you said?

JORDAN: I have two cats. And neither of them have hair, which is hilarious, to only humans.

PETER: Okay, so you have two cats, you know. I've always sort of thought -- you ever walk down the street and there's a dog pooping and the owner's standing right there? I swear that dog looks a little embarrassed.

JORDAN: I feel like you're right. I grew up with a dog and every time a dog does that they're kind of looking around like, "Who's watching," and they have this comical look on their face.

PETER: Yeah. Now I might be projecting, even I'm embarrassed on behalf of the dog or the dog plus the owner, I'm not sure.

JORDAN: Yeah, that's what I was thinking, right.

PETER:

Yeah, that maybe true but the question is like, we know the dogs can experience anger, we know that they can experience fear, can they experience embarrassment? I don't know. But I do think that they can experience amusement and the reason that I believe that is that amusement really has its roots in play. And mammals of all varieties play. They engage in rough and tumble play with each other, in the case of dogs, with their owners and with other humans.

And play has a particular set of precursors. So it's something that is threatening. There is some risk of physical harm. It's sort of rooted in fighting, you know? It's kind of a developmental aspect of -- for animals, in terms of developing the ability to fight comes up play, yet it's harmless, it's safe in this way. And so, in the same way that kids laugh when they're tickled, laugh when they play fight, they experience this positive emotion, it's arousing. Well I know that some animals certainly do that and the work in the book looked at work in which rats are basically having this kind of behavioral reaction, having positive emotions, and even expressing that positive emotion through something that's akin to laughter.

I don't know anyone who's looked at laughter in dogs. I don't think that dogs laugh per se but I do think that they're experiencing positive emotion that is pretty close to amusement when they play fight, when you kind of rough house with them.

JORDAN:

And I think we can kind of tell when dogs are super happy and they're hyperactive and they're doing that little squeal and they want you to throw something and they run back and they jump on you and then they jump down and they jump on you again. You can tell when they're riled up. Whether or not that's humor is something totally different. But what can humor do for people? I know that you've done a lot of research on this, like you said, for the past decade, but it seems like appreciating producing comedy can help people become a little happier, have better relationships. How does this work? What's going on here and how did you figure that out in the first place?

PETER: Well yeah, so I mean I'm standing on the shoulder of a lot of people when I make these claims. So there's a lot of work in -- work that emotion researchers have done, you know, mostly psychologists. But also, people who study humor run the gamut from philosophers to linguists, computer scientists, and so on. But firmly like, the behavioral sciences, are sort of most interested in these things.

I think we should make a distinction when we start thinking about the benefits of humor. So the first one is, as the recipient, as the audience member, there's a set of benefits of laughing more often, experiencing amusement more often. And then there's benefits as the producer. As the person who makes other people laugh, makes other people experience amusement. So in terms of the benefits, many of those are clear, right? So comedy is a great way to pass the time, right? It's a really enjoyable form of entertainment. You know, it sort of creates positive emotion, it creates arousal.

The work on positive emotions is super clear, that is, it helps broaden our perspective, so it helps us with things like problem solving. When we're in a negative mood, it's actually hard to be creative, when we're in a positive mood, it's easy to be creative. It also builds our emotional and psychological lights, that is that it helps us buffer against, pain, stress, adversity. It helps us essentially be healthier people, not just physically but also emotionally. And so having more positivity in our life -- it doesn't have to be amusement per se, it could be joy, it could be contentment, it could be other forms of positive emotion, but certainly amusement is a highly valued -- that helps us just get on in life much better.

It also helps us in terms of increasing your own positivity because positive people get more social support. So when you think about coping -- you know, people always talk about laughter being the best medicine, you know clearly it's not the best medicine. You know sometimes you need -- you just need a

shot of penicillin, no amount of laughing is going to help with that problem.

JORDAN: Right.

PETER: But having more positivity helps your immune system. It helps your perspective but also helps in terms of, we like to be around positive people. And so, people who laugh easily, people who can laugh in the face of tragedy, are people who ironically may not need our support as much but they end up getting it. So if you've ever had a buddy who's going through a breakup and he's just morose and he's just complaining all the time and he's just fixated on this thing, he can kind of wear you down. You know, like you eventually tire of listening to these things even though you care about him. Even though you want him to get over this and be happy. Your buddy who has a mix of like, grieving, you know, a lost relationship, but also can sort of make jokes about it, can be lighthearted about it, he's actually easier to support. And the research in psychology about social support is super clear. We live better lives when we're surrounded by people who are helping us, who are propping us up.

JORDAN: You mentioned that we can be more creative when we're in a good mood. That makes sense because it loosens up maybe some inhibitions or something like that. I want to know why that works but help me rationalize this with the bajillion counterexamples of depressed comedians, depressed actors, depressed artists, depressed poets, depressed writers. Everybody that we sort of, treasure in society, or at least a huge number of them, percentage-wise, are depressed, suicidal, morose in so many ways, what's going on there?

PETER: Yeah I think it's an interesting puzzle. So certainly you're pointing out people who are really good at producing comedy, you know, so standups, they do it for a living. The more laughs they get, the better they get paid, in this kind of way. And yet, it seems to be the case that they struggle with alcoholism and there's prominent cases of suicide in comedy in this way. So

there's a group of people who write about this and look at it and there's not a lot of research and there's not a lot of good research done on this topic. So there's a lot of anecdotal evidence and then there's a bit of research that's just correlational, where you have a group of people who aren't comedians and you can compare their depression levels or their psychopathy levels with folks who are comedians and, low and behold, the comedians are higher. Or you look at mortality rates, comedians non-comedians, and low and behold, comedians are higher.

So the problem with those studies are those groups aren't often well-matched. So for instance, creative people in general, other types of entertainers, musicians, actors, and so on, often have similar levels of depression, have similar levels of mortality rates as comedians. So it seems to be that there's sort of an entrainment effect, that is, the people who end up being entertainers, in some ways, have rougher lives than people who aren't entertainers. Now the people who want to explain why comedians are funny is they often put forth the case that you need a certain amount of tragedy in life and you need to be able to transform that tragedy into comedy and so the act of creating comedy is actually a coping mechanism, so it's an outgrowth of this brokenness that these folks have.

So, there's one problem -- well there's at least one problem with that. One is, well why would it be the case that brokenness turns into musical ability in one case, acting ability in another case, and comedic ability in yet another case? So that becomes a hard story, you know, if you start to compare these groups in a fair way. I have a particular belief, which is actually derived from the answer to the question of what makes things funny? I actually think that comedians, yes they have depression problems, yes they have alcohol problems. You know, they suffer from bad lifestyles, but so do the people in the audience, that is, that plenty of people have had divorce in their family and have been abused and have drug families, and abuse alcohol, and have suicidal thoughts and so on. It's just that they



don't get up on stage with a microphone and talk about those things.

And so we have this very skewed perspective. A, we have these high profile cases of, you know, comedians overdosing, Belushi, drug problems, Richard Pryor, Suicide, Robin Williams, and it stands in contrast to this sort of, happy-go-lucky funny side of them. So that's really memorable. Then we also just have comedians who talk about their problems in the way that normal people don't. It helps to understand why they talk about those problems, and the reason they talk about those problems is because they actually make good fodder for comedy, that comedy is about things that are wrong in the world, they're not about things that are right in the world, and so the comedians that have healthy lives, they talk about other things that are wrong in the world. You know, and so, what's happening is, if you're a funny person, you're just looking to point out what's wrong with the world. A great place to start is what's wrong with yourself and so I what I think happens is, the belief that comedians are kind of screwed up might come from the fact that comedians highlight their screwed up-ness and the rest of us don't, because we don't have a mic and because we're not getting paid to make people laugh in that way.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: Okay, this makes sense, right? So it's sort of like a sample -- selection bias and so you have that, of course, going here, and then you have the idea that people relate to the humor of comedians because a lot of times -- I'm a generally pretty happy person, especially these days, so when I hear one of those comedians that's like, "Here's how everything sucks," I often don't really relate to that and I don't think it's funny and I'll tell my friends, "Oh, man this -- don't bother watching that one, it's terrible," and then they'll watch it anyway and they'll go, "What are you talking about? That was so funny. It was amazing." Some of that is just a difference in a sense of humor but if I've got a similar sense of humor to a lot of my friends and they love that, I start to think, "Okay, what are they relating to that I'm not

relating to? What's going on there?" Often enough, it ends up being, they relate to some -- "Oh, yeah well, I mean, the depression thing really hit home for me," or the hating your boss stuff, and I'm thinking, "Oh, I don't have any of that." And so it has to be something that, yeah when you grow up with a rough life and you can relate to these people, and they're throwing all this stuff out there that you have shame attached to, and they're making a career out of it and everyone's just saying, "Oh, this guy's so awesome," it makes you look at yourself differently.

PETER: Yeah I think there's an issue of relatability. I mean, I think it's very hard to find someone who hasn't had adversity in their lives and so in that way, that's sort of a commonality. So, in the book we talk about this idea that comedians believe that, sort of, good comedy is a conspiracy, that is, it's like, "It's us versus them. There's those bad people out there, those dumb people out there. But us, all of us in the room, we all get it," in that kind of way. And I think that you're right, like you're drawn to particular styles of comedy and particular comedians based upon your values, your beliefs, the mood that you're in -- what is it you want to kind of experience, and that issue of relatability very clearly fits into that.

JORDAN: Yeah I think the relatability is kind of a no brainer and it's not just a difference in the sense of humor. Humor also, as you've explained, has to do -- or is correlated anyway with risk in many ways. Good natured humor can sometimes backfire, as we've seen in many instances. Why is humor risky and why is that risk also, in many ways, correlated with the reward of the comedy actually getting a reaction, being funny in the first place?

PETER: So this brings us to the benefits of comedy production. So, obviously we're going to live a good life if we laugh easily. That's pretty clear, that's pretty nice. Why do we live a good life if we're good at creating comedy, that is we're good at making other people laugh? So one is, is that laughter and amusement are valued and so we gravitate towards those people. So, there's

researchers who do this rat laughter work. It's really fascinating, if you go onto YouTube, you can find these clips of --for instance type in like rat laughter or rat tickling.

So they kind of jostle and tickle and flop these rats over and rub their bellies and so on, which has this element of being both threatening and safe, and they make these little chirping sounds, these rats. And then what's fascinating is when the scientist moves his hand to the other side of the cage, the rats chase after the hand. That is, they seek out this experience. Well that's the same thing that we do when we try to sit next to someone at dinner because they're funny, or you want to go out with someone again because they made you laugh. And so, people enjoy this delightful experience and then they seek it out and they certainly seek it out in their social lives. So, funny people are well-liked, they're kind of more memorable, they're more attention getting. They're often good at sort of smoothing social interactions, which might have some conflict. Again a very beneficial thing, in terms of negotiating the world. But with those great rewards also comes some risk.

And so the risk is, you try to be funny and you fail. And one of the things about humor that's difficult is it's easier to fail than it is to succeed. One reason is that there's two ways to fail. You can bore your audience or you can offend your audience. There's a recent paper that just came out in the Journal Personality of Social Psychology that shows that, basically funny bosses are seen as like, more confident, there's seen as better leaders, but if they fail to be funny, they're seen as incompetent. And if they succeed, they're seen as both confident and competent. And so, in that way, trying is good, but trying and succeeding is really -- ended up being more important.

JORDAN:

To clarify this, when somebody tries to be funny and isn't, they're seen as incompetent. When someone tries and actually succeeds, they're seen as more competent even though, their job performance can be exactly the same. It's just whether or not the jokes land.

PETER: That's right. Trying to be funny, people say, "That person's confident. They've got self-esteem." Because they recognize that there's some risk there. You've got to do it well for it to be seen as actually competent, as good at being a leader in that kind of way.

JORDAN: What about -- we see sometimes that humor is actually -- it's funnier when it's about something that's so wrong that we feel awkward and we start laughing. The laughter that processes, say, awkward emotion or uncomfortable emotion is different than the laughter we experience when something is actually funny for a different reason. Is that accurate?

PETER: I think so. One of the challenges with me doing this kind of thing is, I'm sort of left to hypothesize a lot because the study of humor, although it's been around for a long time, it's been very niche. It hasn't been very mainstream, and so there's a lot of work to still be done.

But certainly this notion of kind of nervous laughter, is a little bit of a puzzle. So why is it that people laugh and they kind of cover their mouths in this, so they kind of cringe when they're laughing? I think that there's some sort of meta element to that, that is, the mechanics of their laughter is -- what underlies their laughter is still the same. What actually makes things funny is, you know, it'll be a nice reveal. But I think what happens is, they realize that they ought not to be laughing at this particular thing. They see the tension in it and hence the kind of behavioral displays, you know, of laughing and not wanting other people to know that you're laughing, but yet you're having a hard time holding it back. That tension, I think, is very real.

And I think you're right, it happens when it comes to certain taboo topics, the timing of certain jokes, you know, the fact that a joke might be too soon that it doesn't feel appropriate to be laughing about it in that way. But these are just my guesses. There hasn't been a good paper written about nervous laughter.

JORDAN: It's almost a default reaction. When I was a kid I used to cover my mouth when I laughed because I was self-conscious and I didn't want to draw attention to myself and I felt like I was doing that when I was laughing. I know a lot of people cover their mouth for self-conscious reasons. Maybe they're ashamed of their teeth.

PETER: I think that's something that's like, really wonderful about someone who laughs very freely, or someone who has kind of an awkward laugh, and doesn't try to disguise it. Like people, I think sort of like that.

JORDAN: It's endearing, right? Someone whose laugh is -- when we see a contagious laugh, it's not the person who's just laughing really hard, it's the person who's laughing and it's going like, "heh, heh," and then they snort, and then other people are laughing at that because we think, "Wow if I had that laugh, I would not do it. I would be covered in a blanket right now," and there's this person in the front row just going bananas and everyone's laughing at that, but in a very endearing way that kind of says, "Props to this lady in the front row who doesn't give a crap about what anyone thinks," right?

PETER: I think it's wonderful. I love it and actually, you know -- so certainly laughter is contagious. When one person starts laughing, it makes it more likely that others around them laugh. But what you're describing is, you're not just laughing because they are, but you're laughing also about their type of laughter.

JORDAN: Right.

PETER: And that you recognize, again, you know -- humor is about things that are wrong and so in that moment -- it almost seems wrong to laugh with that kind of laugh, at least if you were doing it yourself, it might be difficult to do.

JORDAN: Even within the laughing because something is wrong, that also has nuances. Because we all know that guy who's so awkward that we're laughing just to kind of get them to stop doing what they're doing. Or, I had a college roommate like this

a long time ago, great guy but super unfunny and would just keep going and everyone's going, "Heh, yeah, don't say that, it's a little racist." You know and we're like, "Heh." And he's just like, "Oh, everyone's laughing," and it's like, "Oh, you're just not picking up the cue here that this is that awkward laughter to process your awkward behavior. We're not entertained by this." And some people pick up on that and other people do not. But that's a different kind of laughter because it's almost forced in a way that just processes the tension and has almost nothing to do with humor in some way.

PETER: Yeah, it's not joyous. It's not delightful laughter. I mean -- so laughter is an imperfect predictor of whether we find something funny. So in our studies, we always ask, "Was this funny?" you know, "Were you amused? Did you laugh?" and then obviously some continuum for each of those types of questions. We also ask, "Were you offended? Were you angry? Were you scared?" We also ask -- often ask negative emotions to see when someone isn't amused. Is it because they were upset or because they were bored.

But one of the things about using laughter as the sole measure of amusement is that we have some control over it. That is, we can hide it. So we can hear something funny and we can actually hide it. Someone who's racist, hears a racist joke, thinks it's amusing, but knows that no one else -- they don't want anyone else to know that they think it's funny. They may be able to stifle or hide their laughter. And then as you point out, we can fake it. And humans aren't great at faking their laughter but they can still do it and often do it enough to fool someone. You know, often done out of politeness. Your boss makes a bad joke, you might laugh just to keep it from getting awkward.

JORDAN: What about the connection between laughter and memory? Jason and I were recording commercials yesterday, which we do every week. I'm never going to remember 99 -- more than 99 percent of my commercial recording sessions. I'm going to have no recollection of that. We blow through them, we're talking. It's

not painful or anything, it's just not -- It's routine. However yesterday I lost it during a Home Depot ad, I won't say why but we were just dying. I mean I haven't laughed that hard in weeks and weeks. And me and Jason were thinking, "We're going to remember this for a long time." I mean we were sharing the audio with our network, which doesn't care, and they were replying, "Oh, my gosh, I'm so glad I listened to this, Home Depot's going to love this one." You know, it was so silly, why are we going to remember this? I mean Jason even mentioned, and I have similar experiences. I've been to 100 parties. I've been to a million parties, right? But I remember the two where we were in someone's living room, laughing our asses off at the cat that did something dumb, but I don't remember where we watched, you know the space shuttle launch, or like, you know, the one where I met soon to be best friend. I don't remember those times at all, which are much more meaningful than the time the cat rolled off the bookshelf and fell and everyone laughed. What's going on there?

PETER:

Right, yeah. So you are right. The research pares this out. So creating comedy, creating amusement moments are more memorable. So there's a bunch of research on advertising, for instance. So people better remember humorous ads than they do non humorous ads. I think there's a variety of reasons for that. So one is, there's a general principle within memory, which is we actually have better memory for positive things than negative things and that's actually striking because usually negative things have a bigger effect on us than positive things. So some of it might just be kind of a memory glitch that we have where in general we're better at remembering positive things. We're also better at remembering unusual things and so these amusing moments are often notable, novel, different than kind of regular, everyday life, different than the typical taping that you're doing in this kind of way. And then the last thing is that it might be the case that the actual act, the thing that actually is funny, is especially novel. That is, that there's some conflict between, I don't want to say right and wrong, I have to say what's wrong and what's okay in the world is what forms a foundation of humor. And again, those things are novel, they

create positive emotion, and they don't happen that often, and they certainly don't happen enough, I think, for the average person. And then the last thing I would say, I'd add onto this thing is, if you're really cracking up rolling on the floor laughing, those are really arousing situations, and we tend to remember the really arousing situations much better than normal mundane kind of palate emotional situations.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: I think that there's a lot of situations that I remember that are so wrong that I actually feel guilty about laughing in that situation. A long time ago, I mean one of our first boot camps at Art of Charm -- we run these live programs in L.A. where we teach people nonverbal communication, body language and stuff like that and we have this older guy come through -- he's our oldest client at the time, he was 63 or something like that. And he came through and he was telling us about a time -- how he wasn't well-liked when he was younger and how he even went to Vietnam and he even said well, being well-liked or not well-liked is strange for me because -- and he told us all these horrible things about his childhood and growing up.

And then he said, "But it's also -- as much as it's made my life terrible in many ways, it's also saved my life so I'm not sure what to think about not being well-liked." And he told us this story about when he was in Vietnam, he was in a tank crew, and everyone hated him so much they used to call him names and I can't even remember the names but I remember them being pretty horrible. And they were driving down a path one day, and they wouldn't let him sit in the tank, which is obviously super dangerous.

PETER: I already know where this is going.

JORDAN: Yeah they wouldn't let him sit in the tank, yeah, and it's -- I'm cringing already. And then he was walking on the path but the Jeeps that were behind and in front of the tank kept on nudging him and he thought, "I'm going to get hit by the tank and die,"



and that was almost the idea, they just didn't like this guy at all. So he's walking through deep mud and he starts to fall back behind the convoy and the convoy hits a mine and everyone dies except for him and he ends up laying in the mud, as like the Viet Cong CoD overruns this convoy and he gets away. And so, he's got this complicated relationship with everyone not liking him because it served him so well in the past --

PETER: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- to be alone all the time but now it's making him unhappy which is one of the reasons he came to Art of Charm. So I remember that story being so unusual and so funny in the wrongest way that I had to go to the restroom after he told it because I just needed to like laugh and get that out of my system and then feel all the tragedy that was attached to it.

PETER: Yeah. So, congratulations, you're a normal human being.

JORDAN: Ah, thank God. All right.

PETER: One of the benefits of what I do is I get to experience more comedy than I would otherwise, and one of the kind of the kind of unfortunate things that I often do is like, I end up analyzing it a little too much which can kind of ruin the magic of it all.

JORDAN: Oh, you're that guy. "This is funny because this." "Shut up, Peter."

PETER: Exactly. I mean, I try not to share it unless someone asks, for that very reason. There's this phenomenon in comedy clubs. If you ever stand in the back of a comedy club, that's where all the comedians who have just performed or are waiting to perform are standing. And the audience might be roaring with laughter and the comedian in the back of the room will just very coolly go, "Oh, that's very funny," because they're sort of not emotionally affected but they kind of cognitively get it, they can see how they're making magic. Yeah, I actually don't think

there's anything wrong with you having laughed at it because it fits the model so perfectly.

So to step back for a second, when I first stumbled on the question, "What makes things funny," I did the same thing that any of my undergraduate students do when I give them a research project, I just started Googling answers to this thing. And then if you read in academic papers or you can find stuff online, there's basically three theories out there that are very common. So, there's superiority theory, we laugh at the follies of others. You know, humor is a game in which there are winners and losers. There's release, or relief theory, which Freud is a big proponent of, that comedy is this sort of way to let these kind of sexual and aggressive taboo kind of tendencies out in kind of a safe way. And then the 800 pound gorilla of humor theory is incongruity theory. We laugh as sort of a mismatch between what we expect and what we get in the world.

My collaborator Caleb Warren and I found all of those theories lacking for a variety of reasons. One of the main critiques is, some work well for some forms of comedy and don't work well for other forms of comedy. So what ends up happening is you need three theories to explain humor, that doesn't exist in any other type of emotion theory. Like, you don't have three theories of fear for three different types of stimuli that cause fear in the world. And so, you're always seeking parsimony. You always think of the simplest explanation. And there's a linguist named Tom Veatch who had written this little cited paper at the time, that we read and we're like, "Whoa this is really good." As someone who's studied emotions, I was like, "The bones of the theory are in this," and so what Caleb and I did was add a bunch of psychology to it, start testing it, and where we're at now, in terms of answering the question of what makes things funny, is that there needs to be something wrong, something unsettling, something kind of threatening about the situation. That comedy really has its roots in negativity. But of course the things that are wrong, the things that are unsettling, the things that are threatening, they don't usually make us laugh, they

make us cry, they make us angry, they confuse us, they make us sad, they create negative emotions -- that there needs to be something else there, some other appraisal of the situation and that is -- that thing that's wrong is seen as okay and that thing that is threatening then is seen as safe. The thing that is unsettling, actually makes sense in the world -- that this violation seems, in some way, benign. And we call this 'benign violation theory.'

So tickling fits this. Tickling is an attack, a violation that's done by someone you trust and is not done in a way that's too painful. And so you have this emotional reaction and you laugh to communicate to others that this violation is benign. It explains why the two ways that a humor attempt can fail. So it can be too benign and thus boring, it can be too much of a violation and thus upsetting. You're finding the sweet spot between those two worlds. You can sort of imagine a Venn-diagram of a world of benign things and world of violations and you're trying to get that space in the middle.

So, maybe I could ask you -- so to take a benign violation approach -- the things that we find amusing are wrong yet okay -- what do you think about your friends who survived this attack because he was unliked?

JORDAN:

Oh, it's just so unusual that somebody would be mistreated their whole life and then not only is this weird, perverse, and I'm putting justice in air-quotes here because nobody deserves to die for being kind of -- you know, for being a jerk to somebody. But it's sort of this weird perverse justice in a way that they're like, "We're going to make this guy have a miserable, miserable day. He's going to be exhausted, he's going to be hot in the sun, we're going to be in the tanks. Screw you Marty," and then they're dead because of their actions and he's alive because of this pattern of him just having and being, in some way, in his description, inherently dislikable, which really isn't true. He was a little strange but he was an abused kid in a bad way so obviously that's the result. And you know, when you're in the army and you're supposed to bro out with a bunch

of guys and you're quiet and seemingly a little awkward and everyone is 20 years old or 19 in Vietnam, they're going to be -- it's just the way it is. Things I did when I was younger were crazy too.

So that story, all that weird juxtaposition just somehow mixed together to be humorous in the moment.

PETER: Yeah so I think you're pretty dang close. As I was listening to you tell the story, it's sort of like, "What's wrong with that scenario?" Well it's wrong to be treated this way, right? It's wrong to be ostracized. It's not the way the world should be. It's like -- awkward people should not be further damaged for their awkwardness. Yet -- but, the fact that he was treated so wrongly, saved his life. So it transforms this violation into something that is okay. And maybe it is the case that there's an added layer of the bad guys get their due but I don't think you need that explanation to explain this. It's just like, something bad happened to him that actually turned out to be way better than it ever was bad.

JORDAN: Right.

PETER: If they had made him fall behind and then he got killed because he fell behind, nothing funny about that. Violation on top of violation.

JORDAN: No, that would be awful. That would be like, wow that ended up even worse.

PETER: That'd be even worse.

JORDAN: Even worse.

PETER: That's right. When something is funny, you can often -- it's hard to back these things out -- but you often simultaneously see what's wrong and what's okay about that situation and you could easily see how that situation could break one way or the other, so that it's not funny.

JORDAN: Right, okay, that all makes sense to me. I always wondered why that was so funny to me. And I like the other idea that you brought up about how something that's threatening can be made okay. In fact, we interviewed this guy Serge Popovich who used to run a resistance group in Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic, you know this guy?

PETER: Yes. Yeah.

JORDAN: So one of the things that they were doing -- and I'm sure you came across this in your research -- was they were making Slobo look ridiculous. Like, they would tool the police by painting a bunch of, I think it was Ping-Pong balls or something with 'resist' or something like that, or, you know they would draw Slobo on it and they would dump these things out in the street and all these cops, you know, overweight, abusive police are chasing them down in the streets. And then they would take a barrel and they would put a wig on and dress it up like Slobo and they would spray paint 'Slobo' on it and put it in the middle of this big popular walking street and they'd put a little hammer next to it so people could come up and whack Slobo. Well the police had to come and arrest a rusted out oil drum.

So they're using humor to make it okay to tool the dictator and the police at the same time. And at the same time, the police are probably even looking at themselves and going, "How the hell? This job sucks." You know, "Working for this guy just sucks. Look at how much the idiots we are. We're the butt of this joke." Instead of being really scary it becomes, "Look at this yutz," and that's a totally different path to go down. There's a lot less resistance looking at somebody and laughing than there is thinking, "If I get caught by this guy, I'm going to get tortured," right?

PETER: Yeah, I love that story. One of the things I like about that story is it's a very modern -- it's a modern story about using comedy, you know, to punch up, to speak truth to power. My favorite story of their pranks -- they used to do all these pranks. So, they

had these boxes, you know, they were coming out of their offices or whatever it is, they have these boxes that they were carrying that are laid out in the street but there's nothing in them. And so, like, the cops go to pick these boxes up and they think the boxes are heavy and they kind of like, fly through the air, you know in this, Keystone Cops kind of way. I think one of the things that's fun about that story, when you have dictators -- this was the case in Nazi Germany -- they'll often ban jokes. There's sort of this implicit knowledge that jokes can be threatening. I think they're threatening for two ways. One is, again, good comedy can be a conspiracy, that is, it can bond us together. And I think in the case of Milosevic, they actually made protesting cool in a way. You've got to be the cool one. And comedy is often very cool. And then the other one is, when you're laughing at something that's scary, it's hard for it to be scary. If somebody's supposed to be intimidating, and you're laughing at it, then it loses its spite, so to speak. That's happened in the United States, here and there with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In [The Humor Code](#), we interviewed one of the head writers of The Onion and one of their famous publications came maybe 10 or 11 days after 9/11 in this sort of, very clear, too soon territory. But what they brilliantly did, was they made jokes about the terrorists and hilarious kinds of headlines like, "Hijackers awaken: Surprised to find selves in hell," you know, things like that.

JORDAN: Right, I saw that in The Onion, yeah. Right, because The Onion is going, "Crap, we can't write anything this week in comedy. This is so tragic," and then they went, "Wait a minute, what if we tool these knuckleheads who think they're going to get 72 virgins and they're shocked to wake up in hell with other evil bastards?"

PETER: Right. And if you're laughing at terrorists, well terrorism thrives on fear -- more on fear than on lost lives or anything like that. And so, can it be a tool in which you can use, to again, to address the things in life that are tragic, that are scary, that seem wrong to us?

JORDAN: So how come we start to use humor in the right way? How can humor even be taught? Let's start there.

PETER: I believe it can. I think a lot of people don't believe that, they believe that either you're born funny or you're not. So there's a psychologist names Carol Dweck, who's spearheaded a lot of research that contrasts what she calls a growth mindset with a fixed mindset.

JORDAN: Right, she's been on the show before, as well.

PETER: Oh, wonderful. So people who believe you're born funny or not have a fixed mindset but people who have a growth mindset, like me, believe that you can become funnier. The evidence for that is pretty meager. The evidence for that are professionals. So clearly, professional comedians, professional improvisers, standups, etcetera, comedy writers, start off pretty funny, but they hone their craft getting funnier over time, through practice, through feedback, through training, you know, through learning the tricks of the trade and so on. And the fact is that, the world's funniest comedians are not 18 years old, they're not phenoms. They're 30-somethings, they're 40-somethings, who have been dedicated to a craft in that way. So I think that is certainly good evidence that you can become more humorous, that you can get better at this kind of thing. The other thing is that there's just lots and lots of very difficult skills that we can acquire through practice and feedback. We can learn to serve a tennis ball, to play piano, to become a better public speaker, we can learn to be more socially adept. And so all of those things suggest to me that if you took an approach in which you wanted to try to be funnier, you could improve that skill.

JORDAN: So how would we start to maybe, do that? Is there anything that you can suggest, where we can start to go down that road, in the way of practicals for the audience to take away from this?

PETER: Yeah. So, I'm a big fan of improv for two reasons. One is, when I watch an improv show, I don't fall into the I'm dissecting why

this is funny or not because it's arising spontaneously out of the moment.

JORDAN: Sure.

PETER: It's not something that a comedian has written down the day before, year before, in that kind of way. The second one is, is that improv is really quite doable for regular everyday people to do. There's a small set of rules that you can learn and that you can practice. And I actually think that improvisational skills benefit us in non-comedic situations also. You know, in everyday life, in a business setting, around the dinner table. Approaching the world with improvisational thinking can be more useful. So I would say one place to look is also to take an improv class, in order to sort of be more systematic about this kind of thing.

JORDAN: Yeah, we actually do a lot of improv work in boot camp because it is great to get people thinking on their feet. And it's not just to be funnier, it's also to be quicker on your feet, more relatable to other people, being able to pick up on threads in conversation and relate to them that way. So we kind of take improv ideas and resilience in conversations and things like that and tie them into what we teach at art of charm. So, every boot camp that we run, every week, has a improv-esque tie-in.

PETER: That's great. So I just did the 101 UCB course in February. So this idea of yes and, is designed to create positivity, is designed to create cooperation. This notion of being a servant that is, gifting other people, is super valuable. You know, that you're putting other people in front of you. And then, the comedic element of UCB is looking for the unusual thing. How do you create a scene is to find the unusual thing and to justify it. Well the unusual thing is a violation, is something that's wrong, the justification is what makes it benign, is what makes it okay. And so, in regular everyday life, add some improvisational training. If you want to become funnier, what I often say is, A, you have to try, that is, you have to actually make more of an effort to do it. B, you have to seek feedback, that is, you can't just try to be funny,



you have to see is this successful or not? Does it work, does it not work? Comedians do this all the time. Every time they tell a joke, they're making a mental note of how that joke went. The jokes that continually fail get thrown aside, the jokes that continually do well, get built up. And then I think it helps to have a little bit of theory. So as I was saying, is that often times it's pay attention to where that unusual thing is. I wrote a paper with a couple colleagues on humorous complaining. So if you think about it, what is a complaint? It's an expression of dissatisfaction. Anything that you complain about, can actually serve as good material for something that is humorous in that way. Because you already have the problem, now is there a way to sort of make it okay in that sense. But, I don't have a great script for this, you know, because everybody's sense of humor is different. Some people are good -- oh, I'll give you another one. Here's another one. Pay attention to how you are funny. So it's much better to build on a strength than it is to try to remedy a weakness. So, if you're good at writing funny texts or funny emails, you know in that way, well then maybe try to do that some more. If you're good at being, kind of spontaneously funny in conversation, look to do that more. So, look to build on something that you're already kind of good at.

JORDAN: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Because of course, as we also know, trying too hard to be funny has the opposite effect. It is inherently dislikable.

PETER: Yeah and I think -- you know, that's another improv component, is the idea of authenticity about being real, being honest. So comedians can get away with not being honest because they're performing theater, they're actors on a stage.

JORDAN: Right.

PETER: They make it seem like they're just thinking of this in the moment, but most of our lives -- a lot of the comedy that happens in our lives, is truly spontaneous. It's not a planned joke that we have in our back pocket. If we are going to tell

planned jokes, it helps to have a little bit of theater, where you make it seem like it's the first time you've ever told that joke.

JORDAN: Right, you have to act like you're suddenly inspired or, "Hey this thing happened to me on the way here," and it's the same story they've been telling on every stage for a year and a half but that now they're nailing it, right? Nailing the delivery.

PETER: Indeed.

JORDAN: So Peter, thank you so much. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you want to make sure you deliver to the AoC audience here?

PETER: I do have one thing that I want to say. And so, I like what you guys are doing because you're trying to help people live better social lives.

JORDAN: Mm-hmm.

PETER: So one of the things that happens -- I think attention that happens when people want to be funny, they want to be liked. So, this idea of like, "I want to be well-liked and so I want to be funny in order to be well-liked," and so -- but what happens, I think, often times, especially when people start dating -- so I get lots of questions about dating and humor in this way. I have, I think, some counterintuitive advice for people, which is, you shouldn't have a set of jokes that you tell so that you make your date laugh, so your date likes you. I mean that's nice if that happens naturally. What I often say is, tell the jokes that you think are funny." If your date doesn't laugh, it means that your date is probably not a good match for you. If your date laughs, it means that your date is probably a good match and your date will like you more for it. And so in this way, comedy can reveal connections as well as create connections. But sometimes, it's okay for someone to not laugh at something that you think is funny and what it says is, "Maybe we'll just be friends."

JORDAN: Interesting. Right, so and we know from trial and error and from looking at a lot of dates, so observing a lot of this behavior, when somebody's interested in you, they will laugh even at things that are not funny. And so, that sort of solves the mystery as to why she's laughing at this dumb jock's joke that's totally not funny. It's because she's already interested. So one of the ways to tell in which somebody's interested in you, is if you're talking with a group of people, you can look at who's laughing at things that you say, even if those things aren't funny. And often enough -- not every time of course --but often enough, that person is somehow physically attracted to you.

PETER: Yeah and also, you know, they -- it's hard to know that if it's not funny to them because all that matters is what the audience perceives in that sense. It's just a suggestion in terms of thinking about comedy, to simultaneously help bond people but then also decide who you should be bonding with.

JORDAN: Thank you so much, much appreciated. Really appreciate your time and your insight. Great big thank you to Doctor Peter McGraw. The book title is [The Humor Code](#). We'll have that linked up in the show notes as well. If you enjoyed this one, don't forgot to thank Peter on Twitter. We'll have that linked in the show notes as we always do. Tweet me your number one takeaway from Doctor McGraw here. I'm @theartofcharm on Twitter and remember you can tap the album art if you're in a podcast player on your phone, show notes should pop right up. It doesn't do that on Spotify but I can't do much about that, can I? Boot camps, our live program details, [theartofcharm.com/bootcamp](http://theartofcharm.com/bootcamp). The boot camps are super rewarding. People come real far, like I mentioned during the show. We do a lot of humor, improv, conversation, rapport, and we're sold out a few months in advance. So if you're thinking about it a little bit, get in touch with us ASAP so you can get some info from us and plan ahead. Our live program details are at [theartofcharm.com/bootcamp](http://theartofcharm.com/bootcamp).

Networking and connection skills and inspiring those around you to develop a personal and professional relationship with you. It's also free. A lot of people don't seem to know that, they

think it's going to cost money. It doesn't. It's a fun way to start the ball rolling and get some forward momentum. We'll also email you our fundamentals Toolbox, that I mentioned earlier on the show. That includes some great practical stuff, ready to apply, right out of the box, on reading body language, having charismatic nonverbal communication, the science of attraction, negotiation techniques, networking and influence strategies, persuasion tactics, and everything else that we teach here at The Art of Charm. It will make you a better connector, a better networker, and a better thinker. That's [theartofcharm.com/challenge](http://theartofcharm.com/challenge) or text the word 'charmed,' C-H-A-R-M-E-D, to 33444.

For full show notes for this and all previous episodes head on over to [theartofcharm.com/podcast](http://theartofcharm.com/podcast). This episode of AoC was produced by Jason DeFillippo. Jason Sanderson is our Audio engineer and editor and the show notes on the website are by Robert Fogarty. Theme music by Little People, transcriptions by [TranscriptionOutsourcing.net](http://TranscriptionOutsourcing.net). I'm your host Jordan Harbinger. Go ahead, tell your friends, because the greatest compliment you can give us is a referral to someone else, either in person or shared on the Web. Word of mouth is everything so share the show with your friends and enemies. Stay charming and leave everything and everyone better than you found them.



