

The Art of Humor

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“Humor is a declaration of man’s superiority to all that befalls him”

ROMANY GARY

Humor, laughter, and comedy, different facets of the same feeling, have been defined in very different ways since the dawn of human history. According to the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, laughter is nothing more than a convulsion or contraction of the facial muscles.

However, such a physiological description, in my opinion, does not touch upon the essence of the concept: its exclusive humanity. As Oscar Wilde said in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “If the cave-man had known how to laugh, History would have been different.” And that is because, when laughter is present, negative feelings flee, and the soul displays its proclivity for balance and harmony. A traditional Spanish proverb says “humor is a whisper from the soul, imploring mind and body to relax and be at peace again.”

The dramatic subgenre of comedy is defined by characters who confront the difficulties of daily life, urged by their own defects, and guided toward happy endings, where human weakness is gently mocked (Figures 1 and 2).

So could we as doctors play the comic lead? Well, yes. Doctors too ...

Set off on the dizzying and stressful path toward science, technology, diagnostic riddles, cultural and ethnic diversity, tiredness, sleep, varicose veins, hunger, indigestion, bladder distension, flatulence... In other words: I am on call today.

Apparently, being on call as a first-year resident intern has its advantages: it is the one day your bed is made for you, you don’t eat out of a tin, you the ply the heroic trade you studied so hard for...

But this pales into insignificance beside the disadvantages: I have to squeeze myself into super-strength support tights that are only 30 cm long to start with, battle the blustering draughts that blow hot one minute and cold the next, run the hundred meter dash to the bathroom (50 there, and 50 back) beating the latest Olympic record...

However, there is always some kind patient who responds to the paracetamol administered to relieve their simple complaint with a: Thank you Doctor!

And then, it has all been worth the trouble.”

(*Diario de un residente*, [Diary of an intern] Elena González Guerra)

As with other dramatic genres, comedy is defined by the tragic nature of the protagonist, who is often an everyday kind of person. In most cases, their dramatic conflict tends to be with society as well as with themselves, meaning they struggle to overcome the obstacles barring their way to fulfillment.

“Good morning. I am the new first-year resident intern, Elena González Guerra.”

Once the human, geographical, and logistical introductions are over, I am given my first “mission impossible.”

“You can start straight away. Take this medical record.” (AARGH! Six and a half kilos of case history! OK Elena, stay calm. They must have noted your positive attitude, knowledge, enthusiasm, and “physical ability” for work. When I get home I’ll join a gym.)

My first patient is Martín Cano—I call him in. I can’t put two words together. Me—who outside these four walls will ask anyone for the time or directions! I feel I am trying to convince him of a “lie” (that I could be a doctor) and I am afraid he will catch me out. I babble my way through. When I get home I will sign up for relaxation and assertiveness training.

“Mohamed Albarracín. Oh sorry! Albrahim.”—The next one. There are no borders any more. Spain is increasingly international, and you, Elena, can only manage Spanish and some vague notions of English (the numbers, the days of the week...), do you think you will get anywhere with that? When I get home I will sign up for language lessons.

I go to the computer to request some studies and x-rays in the virtual world. But, what is the password? Which option do I want? Which key do I press? When I get home I will sign up for computer lessons.

After all, I don’t know what I was doing in those 6 years of university, it seems that medicine is all I’ve learned.

(*Diario de un residente*, [Diary of an intern] Elena González Guerra)

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Laughter, humor and comedy are, thus, life itself.



Figure 1. In the Doctor's surgery

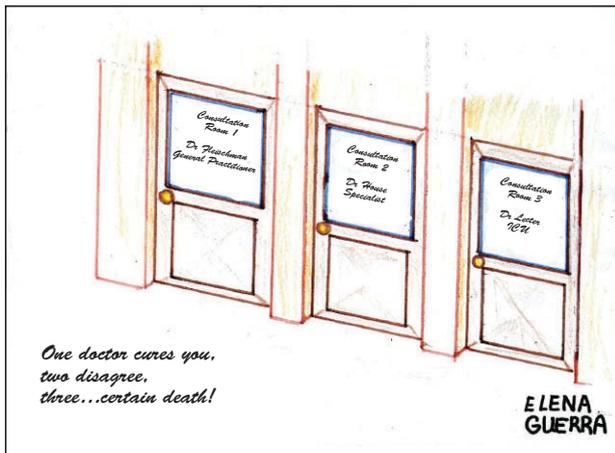


Figure 2. Out to lunch.

The Power of Laughter

Laughter is the physical expression of a pleasant emotion, consisting of the simultaneous contraction of 15 facial muscles, accompanied by spasmodic breathing and irrepressible truncated sounds. But I would like to define laughter in a more poetic fashion. For example, as a fascinating reflection. As a marvelous gift of mother nature, presented to us at birth regardless of sex or social class.

Laughter relieves accumulated tension and stress, discharges anxiety and repressed fears, and helps overcome daily frustrations and disappointments. But also, laughter is an excellent tool for improving our health. Since Darwin published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, many experiments have demonstrated that expressions and emotions work both ways. Today, supported by high levels of scientific evidence, we know that emotions can be both the result and cause of chemical changes in the brain. I think it is not unreasonable to state that laughter is comparable to satisfactory sexual activity. Isn't it true that laughter is similar to an orgasm? It is uncontrollable and pleasurable, releases endorphins, and produces a physical release followed by well-being and a sensation of exhaustion. Laughter is a sign of intelligence. The Latin poet Martial said so in his *Epigrams* back in the first century: "If you are wise, laugh!" Laughter is a sign of sociability. There is no greater companionship than that created by shared laughter. And what is more... it's contagious!

I don't need any more reasons to convince you that laughter is good. But, is there enough cause for laughter in the routine working day? Can health care professionals, continually dealing with the bitter side of life, with illness, and death, still manage to laugh?

The dermatologist, Elena González Guerra has shown us that they can. Her fondness of literature of any genre, united with her optimistic and versatile outlook, has already borne many such fruits; cheerful, friendly fruits that leave a good taste in the mouth. Her career in the difficult art of humor—especially hard for an elegant and intelligent form of humor like hers—has already, in spite of her youth, been prolific and she has several publications to her name. So, we will ask her to keep on making us laugh. Laughter is full of virtue.

And such was the understanding of romantic poet *par excellence*, Pablo Neruda, when he thus implored his beloved:

*"Take the bread from me, if you want.
Take the air from me.
But do not take from me your laughter."*

Are you convinced? Well, go on then, have a laugh!

A Guerra