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MONTREAL

Punch line

Backstage at the Comedy Nest, an upscale comedy club in downtown Montreal, we're a world away from the Denver dive bar where we launched our adventure more than a year ago. But everything about this place feels strangely similar. There's the same sort of audience filling in around the stage, ready to cheer on those who make them laugh—and skewer those who don't. Around back in the cramped greenroom, there's the same sort of nervy pre-show energy. Comedians pace back and forth, saying little, while others slouch on a well-worn couch, sipping coffee and rehashing their routines. No one touches the meager basket of tortilla chips and plastic cup of salsa the club's manager has placed on a counter.

I can hardly sit still. I meander about the club, trying to gauge the vibe of the crowd, then wander backstage. Pete sits alone at the far end of the greenroom, illuminated by the harsh white bulbs of a row of makeup mirrors. He's staring off into space as he prepares to go up on stage—his second official attempt at stand-up. Once again, he's wearing a sweater vest.

As we'd planned, we'd finagled our way onto the lineup for the Montreal's Just For Laughs comedy festival, the largest comedy event in the world. So far, no one has given us interlopers much notice—but that might soon change. The month-long festival involves hundreds of comedy shows, seminars, live podcast tapings, and film screenings at venues big and small all across Montreal. Tonight, the last night of

the festival, the theme at the Comedy Nest is “As Seen on TV.” According to a sign on the wall, the comics who’ll be performing have all appeared on programs such as the *Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *Conan*. On the shuttle ride over from our hotel, a sitcom casting director tagging along to scope out the talent asked Pete what he’d been on. He had to think about it. “I was once on Channel 9 in Denver!” She wasn’t impressed.

Pete has spent much of the day by himself, going through his routine in our hotel room while I explored Montreal. Later, as we got ready for the night’s big event, he said to me, “If someone had told me two years ago that one of my biggest talks ever would be at the Comedy Nest at the Just For Laughs festival, I wouldn’t have believed them.” He’s taught hundreds of classes and presented in front of conference audiences numbering in the thousands. But something about the 80 or so people who can fit into the Comedy Nest feels so much more intimidating, so much more difficult.

“I’ve been thinking about the clown noses we wore in Peru,” Pete had told me, looking at the outfit he’d laid out for himself on his hotel bed. “When you put on the clown nose, you are the clown. When I put on this sweater vest, I’ll be a moderately funny professor.”

And now the professor’s here in the Comedy Nest greenroom, sweater vest on, minutes away from determining just how humorous he is. A Just For Laughs staffer armed with a clipboard approaches. “When do you want the red light?”

“Red light?” Pete looks bewildered.

The red light is the signal that your time on stage is almost up, explains Debra DiGiovanni, a bubbly comic who’s the night’s MC. A veteran of *Last Comic Standing* and one of Canada’s top female comedians, DiGiovanni takes one look at Pete and out come her maternal instincts. “Have you done any other shows?” she asks him.

“No.”

“Really, no other shows here in Montreal?”

Pete clarifies himself. “No other shows, *period*.”

The show soon gets under way. DiGiovanni takes the stage to warm up the audience before the first comic. A few minutes later, she’s back in the greenroom. “This is what you call a bad crowd,” she

says, chuckling. Later, after she’s introduced the next comedian, she revises her assessment: “They’re terrible.”

It’s Pete’s turn. “Need me to do any set-up?” asks DiGiovanni as she heads out to introduce him.

“Just make them like me,” pleads Pete.

As Pete starts to follow her, I offer one last piece of advice. “This time,” I say, “try not to unplug the microphone.”

**A couple of months** earlier, Pete and I had begun preparing his routine. If our time studying what makes things funny had taught us anything, it’s that good stand-up requires practice. We knew that if we’d spent the whole year honing a few choice jokes, we would have ended up with some good material. But we hadn’t done that, because that wasn’t the point. People already know that in comedy, hard work pays off. We wanted to prove there’s another way—a method that involves a little less sweat and a little more science.

We started by making a list of all our expeditions, and what we’d learned from each about how to make things funny:

#### Los Angeles: Who is funny?

- ➔ It’s not whether or not you’re funny, it’s what kind of funny you are. Be honest and authentic.
- ➔ It helps to be an outsider. Be skeptical, analytical, rebellious.
- ➔ Stand-up is experimentation. Write, test, repeat.

#### New York: How do you make funny?

- ➔ Since most things aren’t funny, come up with a lot of ideas.
- ➔ If solo comedy creation gets you nowhere, try the team-based approach. Two minds are better than one.
- ➔ If you can’t be “ha-ha” funny, at least be “aha!” funny. Cleverness is sometimes good enough.

#### Tanzania: Why do we laugh?

- ➔ Don’t be afraid to chuckle at yourself. It signals everything is okay and lets others laugh, too.

- Good comedy is a conspiracy. Create an in-group with those you want to get the joke.
- Laughter has momentum. Get the guffaws going as quickly as you can.

#### Japan: When is comedy lost in translation?

- Complicated comedy is subjective, but bare-bones humor is universal. In other words, keep it simple.
- Context matters. No one is going to laugh if they don't know what you're talking about.
- Know your audience. Making something broadly appealing often kills the funny.

#### Scandinavia: Does humor have a dark side?

- It's easier to fail than to succeed—especially as comedy goes global. Tread carefully.
- Making things funny means nearly going over the line. Learn to be a comedic tightrope artist so you don't go too far.
- Who's the butt of the joke? Comedy can victimize, so be sure it's not the person who's supposed to laugh.

#### Palestine: Can you find humor where you least expect it?

- Humor is hardy stuff, so no topic is off limits. It's just a matter of finding the right way to make the violations benign.
- The best comedy turns the world upside down. Make fun of yourself before others get a chance to do so.
- Laughter is disarming. Make light of the stuff everyone's worried about and you'll negate its power—not to mention win over the crowd.

#### The Amazon: Is laughter the best medicine?

- Comedy signals an escape from the world. Create a safe, playful space where folks are free to laugh.
- Jokes can be a coping mechanism. Don't be afraid to kid around about the harsh realities of life—people need it.
- Humor is as important to the humorist as it is to the audience. If you don't enjoy your comedy, no one else will, either.

Some of these takeaways were easy to put into action. Considering our travels, Pete and I had a lot of comedy fodder from which to choose. And as a professor scrutinizing the world of comedy, Pete was very much an outsider looking in. Plus, thanks to all we'd been through together, it was clear we had no problem coming up with material as a team.

Other rules were harder for us to implement. With our hectic schedules, it was difficult to find the time to generate joke after joke, knowing the vast majority would be nixed. Nor was it easy coming up with material dealing with taboo topics and harsh realities—stuff that toed the line—while finding a way to make it honest and authentic coming from a university professor. We also knew that to set the tone and win over the crowd, Pete would have to be confident and congenial, plus score a laugh right away. And if we hoped to play to the audience and keep things simple, both of us would have to dial back our bad habits, such as Pete's tendency to want to explain everything, and my predilection to use abstruse words.

Finally, to make sure nobody got offended, it would be best to make Pete the butt of the joke. That, we knew from experience, would be easy.

Since our checklist suggested that the best material often comes from collaborating with other humorists, once we'd pulled together a rough routine we asked a few of our comedy contacts how we could punch up our material. Be spontaneous, suggested *Last Comic Standing* winner Alonzo Bodden. As Bodden put it, "One of the illusions we project is that we just thought of the joke." Meanwhile, Jordy Ellner, director of talent and digital at Comedy Central, took all his years working with comics and distilled what he'd learned into a single word: "Smile."

Los Angeles-based comic Shane Mauss offered his own advice. "The benign violation theory might explain the basic mechanics of how a joke is done, but delivery is the practiced sleight-of-hand that makes the joke surprise and wow," he pointed out. Take our punch lines, said Mauss—the "punch," the funniest part of the joke, should always be at the end of a zinger, so Pete won't step on potential laughs.

We decided to put the routine through a test run. A week before our trip to Montreal, Pete signed up for another Denver open mike, but this event wasn't on the cutthroat stage of the Squire Lounge. Instead it was a low-key affair on the back patio of a scruffy Polish restaurant, a place known for letting comics try out material.

Surrounded by potted plants and dangling strings of all-year Christmas lights, Pete ran through his routine as a small crowd looked on. And you know what? He got laughs. A lot of laughs—significantly more than a few folks that night who'd performed at this open mike before.

A buddy of Pete's named Terry came out for the performance, just as he'd attended Pete's first stand-up attempt at the Squire Lounge. After Pete's run-through on the patio, Terry came up to me. "At the Squire, I saw a professor trying to do stand-up," he said. "But this time? I saw a comedian up there, not a professor."

Pete and I were elated. We'd done it, we believed—we'd used science to build a better comedy act. From here on out, we figured, everything would be easy.

Then we got to Montreal.

**Athletics have the Olympics. Film has Cannes. Music has South by Southwest. Comedy? It has the Just For Laughs.**

The night before we arrived at the festival, I had a disturbing dream. When we touched down in Montreal, even though it was July, snow was everywhere. Everyone was in parkas, sitting around roaring fires in frosted ski chalets. And here I was, freezing in my lightweight summer clothes.

"Oh, my God," I thought. "I've made a terrible mistake."

While there wasn't a snowflake at the festival, that didn't make it any less intimidating.

In the heart of Montreal, a large swath of downtown had been fenced off from cars and transformed into an open-air bacchanalia. Colossal stages showcased free dance concerts and magic shows all hours of the day and night. Quirky parades of huge pickle puppets snaked through the crowds. Giant balloon incarnations of Victor,

Just For Laughs' red-horned, green-snouted mascot, hovered over the revelry like Canadian castoffs from the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. And aromatic food trucks lined the streets, offering up various international delicacies—including, I was surprised to discover, *takoyaki*, the balls of deep-fried octopus that were so huge in Osaka.

The next day, we forced ourselves awake just in time for a catered festival luncheon. "We're turning into comedians," cracked Pete. "Out of bed at noon for free food." As we prepared to leave, we discovered a letter from hotel management by our door. Don't expect much in terms of housecleaning, warned the note: labor negotiations with the city's hospitality workers had just broken down. The city was packed with a thousand comedians with something to prove, and everywhere the hotel staff was on strike. Things would get messy.

So how did Pete and I gain access to this red-carpet hoopla? Did I use my crack reportorial skills to pull the right strings behind the scenes? Did Pete score VIP passes through sheer force of personality? Neither.

A few weeks after we first came up with our plan to storm the Just For Laughs festival, Pete received an e-mail. "I heard about your research," wrote the author. "We gotta become connected." It was signed Andy Nulman—president of Festivals and Television for Just For Laughs.

Nulman, a suave character who's always the best-dressed person in the room, was just the sort of guy we wanted to be connected with. In 1985, Nulman joined the nascent Just For Laughs festival, then a small-time francophone event. By the time he departed, fourteen years later, Just For Laughs was an international powerhouse. Then, after founding the tech company Airborne Mobile and selling it for millions, Nulman came back. Now, as part of Just For Laughs' thirtieth anniversary celebration, he wanted to innovate—and that included inviting as his guests two outsiders trying to deconstruct all of comedy. As he put it to Pete, "Our event is the playground for your research."

Access to that playground came with a price. Nulman wanted us to present our findings at the Just For Laughs Comedy Conference. To keep it interesting, we'd be facing off against Kenny Hotz. Hotz is

famous in Canada for his shock-and-awe brand of comedy. On one television series, he made a go at cannibalism and tried to convince a Jewish community to build a mosque. In another stunt, he ran afoul of the British Columbia Human Rights Commission by flying a banner over Toronto that read “Jesus Sucks.” But speaking to us over the phone before the festival, Hotz seemed like a reasonable guy. There was nothing to worry about, he told us; everything was going to go fine.

We believed him—right up until we got on stage with him at the conference. Pete hardly had time to go over his benign violation theory before Hotz pulled out the heavy artillery. On a video screen, he flicked on a comedy clip he’d put together linking the Pope and pedophilia. “Is that funny, and why?” probed Hotz over the mixture of groans and chortles in the packed conference hall. “Is that a benign enough violation?” Continuing on, he played a real-life video of horribly misguided New Age do-gooders crooning “You’re the Sweetest Thing” to a suffering denizen of an Indian leper colony. Hotz, for one, found this hilarious. So, he grilled Pete, how do you explain why, Professor?

“Yeah, um . . .” started Pete. The usually gregarious academic was at a loss for words.

But then Pete caught a break, courtesy of a video clip Hotz played of a neighborhood fireworks show gone horribly wrong. The seminar audience was mostly silent as the man filming the scene hollered in terror as his video camera captured fireworks exploding all around him. Then, halfway through, the cameraman exclaimed, “That was awesome!” In response, the crowd erupted in applause and laughter. Afterward, Pete seized his chance. “I don’t know if you noticed this, but one of the biggest laughs was when the gentleman recording this said, ‘That was awesome,’” he said. “I put this to the audience. Why did that moment in time get the biggest laughs?”

Immediately, people saw where he was going. “That’s when it became benign!” someone exclaimed.

The rest of the seminar went well, and conference organizers seemed excited and appreciative for our involvement. (“What are you thanking them for?” cracked Hotz. “I did everything!”) It’s not

the first time in our adventures that the benign violation theory has come through in a clutch. If anything, Pete’s journey with me beyond the ivory tower have made him ever more confident in the theory.

Take the “violation” half of the theory, says Pete, the idea that humor is born from situations that are wrong, threatening, or disruptive. We witnessed this concept all over the world, from the Japanese *manzai* duos, where the dim-witted *boké* always started the joke by doing something incorrectly, to the clown mission in the Amazon, which was all about turning the world upside down and breaking social norms. And let’s not forget the comedy we found in Palestine: if that isn’t proof that humor arises amid threats and violations, we don’t know what is. Find something wrong, and you’re likely to find somebody joking about it.

Of course, our findings weren’t all doom and gloom. For Pete, it was clear from our travels that the “benign” half of his theory was just as essential as the violation, that humor can only take root when situations are seen as playful, safe, or otherwise okay. In New York, we’d learned from Todd Hanson of *The Onion* that even something as terrible as the 9/11 terrorist attacks can be joked about, just as long as the butt of the joke deserves it. In Los Angeles, we’d found that comedians do best in environments where audiences feel secure—such as dark rooms or in crowds planted with professional laughers, folks skilled in letting others know that everything is okay and therefore funny.

We found additional evidence for the “benign” half of the theory in comedy’s potential downside, in how it signals that the stuff being joked about is harmless and doesn’t have to be taken seriously. It’s how people get away with derogatory humor by claiming, “It’s just a joke,” and it’s likely why the funny sex-ed PSAs we created for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy might have been catchy but didn’t get the job done.

Finally, our journey proved to Pete that both conditions of the benign violation theory have to be perceived simultaneously—that timing does matter. It’s why most things in the world aren’t funny, and it’s why even so-called funny things are boring to some people

and offensive to others. It's hard to find the balance between what's a violation and what's benign, especially when everybody has a different idea of what's okay and what's not, what's a horrible tragedy and what's a ho-hum mishap. That's why it helps to be diligent and observant like the stand-up comics we met in LA, not to mention creative and open-minded like the cartoonists we got to know in New York. All of those qualities are essential to landing your jokes in the comedic sweet spot.

"I can't say the theory is perfect," says Pete. There are funny things that don't easily fit the formula. But then again, he says, the benign violation theory certainly holds up better than its alternatives, theories like superiority, relief, or incongruity. "It's definitely better than what was out there before," he says. And even Victor Raskin, the theory's number-one critic, seems to have come around somewhat. "I hadn't realized that Peter was a psychologist," he writes in an e-mail to me once he's learned more about Pete's work. "His use of the term 'theory' is casual: it does not mean more than a certain feature that may be loosely associated with humor. Moreover, he measures the distance from a person or event and correlates it with humor appreciation. That's all there is to it." For someone like Raskin, that's downright effusive.

I've been impressed with the benign violation theory, too. But once again, I want to see the theory in action before final judgment. That's why we're here at the Just For Laughs festival, and that's why we asked Andy Nulman to provide a complete unknown and coveted spot at one of the festival's big, final-night events.

It's time, in other words, for the ultimate test.

"We have a little something different here," says Debra DiGiovanni to the Comedy Nest audience. "He's actually a professor at the University of Colorado, and he's studying what makes things funny. Please welcome up to the stage Peter McGraw!"

I could say that what happens next is a triumph, a coup, a stunning success. That every joke kills, that he turns that terrible audience around. That by the time his eight minutes are up, he's left in his dust

his precursors, all those ringers from *Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. That the festival is soon buzzing about the unknown upstart who got on stage for the second time in his life and proved beyond a doubt that science has nailed comedy once and for all.

But I'd be lying.

Here's what happened:

"From studying comedy, I've learned that you have to get a laugh right away," begins Pete, flashing a confident smile. "Which is why I wore this sweater vest." The self-deprecating dig works, earning hearty guffaws from the audience.

"So does anyone know the famous quote by E. B. White about deconstructing humor?" he continues. "E. B. White wrote 'Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.'"

Pausing for laughs, he carries on. "You know who says that? Comedians. Comedians say, 'If you figure out what makes things funny, that's like telling people the trick behind the magic. And then people won't like magic acts anymore.' But that's a silly argument. NOBODY likes magic."

The punch line gets just a few meager chuckles. But we prepared for this. "Ah," Pete remarks thoughtfully, turning to a flip chart he's positioned on a metal tripod beside him. He flips over the first page, revealing an algorithm:

$$\begin{aligned}
 f(\text{LAUGH}) &= a_0 + A/\pi r^2 * \\
 &\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \left( a_n \cos \frac{n\pi x}{L} + b_n \sin \frac{n\pi x}{L} \right) * \\
 e^x &* 1 + \frac{x}{1!} + \frac{x^2}{2!} + \frac{x^3}{3!} + \dots, \\
 -\infty &< x < \frac{\infty}{\tan \alpha} + \sin \beta * \\
 2 \cos \frac{1}{2}(\alpha + \beta) &\cos \frac{1}{2}(\alpha - \beta)
 \end{aligned}$$

He adds a square root symbol to the capital "A" on the first line. "We'll be good from this point on," he cracks, to the bemused laughter of the crowd. Then he continues.

"I do like hanging out with comedians. They are lot of fun. And they have a lot of advantages over professors. For instance, comedians can drink on the job. Scratch that. They HAVE to drink on the job. And they fall into one of three categories: they're either on their way to being alcoholics, they're alcoholics, or they're recovering alcoholics. So when someone comes up to me and says, 'You know, Pete, I am thinking about getting into stand-up,' I have to ask them, 'How are you at alcoholism?'"

He pauses for laughter, but it's largely silent.

"But I haven't just been looking at comedians. I've actually been traveling the world, looking at humor in all of its forms. I recently was in Osaka, Japan. And if you don't know this, Osaka is the humor capital of Japan. The funniest people in Japan live in Osaka. You can walk up to someone on the street in Osaka and go BANG!"—Pete mimes pointing a gun at an audience member—"and they will spontaneously act like they've been shot."

He waits a beat. "What's fascinating about that is that no one has used this technique to rob the banks of Osaka." The laughs are back.

Pete wraps up with a discussion of our *Mad Men* experiment in New York. "I got an ad team from one of the big ad agencies drunk and asked them to create funny content." He turns to the flip chart. "I am going to show you the outcome of this study, in order from least-drunk to most-drunk Venn diagrams. This is after round one of drinks." He flips the page.



There's mild laughter. "After two or three drinks, they started to get a little more bold." Next page:



By now, a couple folks seem to be wheezing. So Pete pulls out all the stops. "And by the time that they were wasted . . ."



"Awwww." He's taken it too far. The laughter turns to groans. In this crowd, nothing about this diagram is benign.

"So, if jokes are like frogs, and this set is any type of example, there's a lot of sick frogs out there," Pete says in conclusion. "And I think cutting up a few frogs might actually benefit the world a little bit. So you can say, 'I've dissected this frog, and I know its problem.'" He holds aloft an imaginary amphibian, like Hamlet clasping the skull of poor jester Yorick. "It thinks that wearing a sweater vest is funny."

The crowd claps and laughs as Pete steps off the stage. "I didn't kill," he tells me. "But I didn't bomb, either." He's right: he got far more laughs than he scored at the Squire, and who knows, maybe more than if he'd developed his routine the traditional way.

"It's not surprising, knowing what we know," says Pete, standing in the back of the club with the other comics who've already gone on. A place like this is never going to be a perfect comedy lab, he says,

gesturing around the darkened club. It's too wild, too messy, there are just too many variables outside of anyone's control. But that's okay, he says, celebrating with a whiskey and looking ever more like an old, road-tested comic. "After all," he says, "it's not like we were trying to cure cancer."

I'm still pondering Pete's stand-up routine in Montreal when my buddy Ron says something that surprises me. "You know," he tells me one night over beers a few weeks later, "I think you've gotten funnier."

"Really?" I'm taken aback. I've spent so much time scrutinizing other people's funny bones I haven't spent much time considering my own. But now that I think about it, maybe Ron's right. Maybe I am funnier. I'm more willing to crack jokes with my friends and family, even with relative strangers—and more often than not, these jokes work. I'm more playful, more quick to laugh, and, in truth, happier than I've ever been. I goof around with my son, Gabriel, try harder than ever to make my wife, Emily, giggle, and am excited to teach my clown tricks to the new baby girl we will soon be welcoming into our family. And while I've never been one for the spotlight, these days when I do speak in front of an audience, I'm more confident, even a bit cocky. It's as if I'm turning into a comedian.

Is it due to Pete's benign violation theory? Maybe in part. I have started to notice all the potential violations lying around that are waiting for me to make benign. And knowing what I now know about humor's balance of pleasure and pain, I've gotten more thoughtful and precise about what I joke about—and with whom.

But that can't be the full explanation for why I'm funnier. After all, as our time in Montreal demonstrated, we haven't managed to find a secret shortcut to becoming the world's greatest comedians. And that's okay. In fact, it's probably perfect. Yes, we've come a bit closer to cracking the code behind humor, a bit closer to comedy's underlying DNA. But we're far from finding the algorithm that will mass-produce great jokes like Big Macs. Humor is and will continue to be strange and complex and illusory and just a bit dangerous. It's always going to be part art and part science. That's what makes it so much

fun. And if you want to become a world-class humorist, a good formula or two might set you in the right direction—but it won't get you all the way. To do that, you have to explore new ideas and challenge your assumptions. You have to venture out of your comfort zone.

That's exactly what we've been doing. We subjected our laughs to Hollywood's top humor headhunter, and acted out our Don Draper fantasies at one of Manhattan's ritziest watering holes. We tracked a mythical laughter disease across the African savanna and compared the size of our manhoods with Japanese game-show stars. We trudged through the frozen Swedish wilderness in search of an illegal fairy castle, embroiled ourselves in a Palestinian controversy of international proportions, and became way too touchy-feely with an Amazonian clown brigade. We now count among our friends stand-up comics and cartooning pariahs, joke connoisseurs and expat improv performers, rat ticklers and revolutionaries, and one sweaty Patch Adams. A couple of times we nearly got arrested. Traveling by airliner, rental car, bullet train, African dinghy, Israeli techno-cab, and clown-filled cargo plane, we each covered enough miles to circumnavigate the globe—repeatedly.

I'm not the same guy I was all those months ago, cowering in the corner at the Squire Lounge. For one, I have a lot more witty yarns in my comic repertoire. And now that I've hit five of the seven continents (Australia and Antarctica, we still hold you in our hearts), it's far easier for me to put my daily foibles and faux pas in perspective, to find a way to laugh them off. Let's not forget that I've tangled with Israeli soldiers and Scandinavian commandos, strapped on a clown nose in one of the poorest places on earth, and temporarily paralyzed my pinkie for the good of science. After all that, putting myself out there by telling a joke or two doesn't seem so daunting. All in all, I've found there's a lot more to life—not to mention a lot more to laugh at.

Credit has to go to the professor whose off-the-wall research started it all. Pete's no longer just another story subject for me. He's a colleague, a close friend, a partner in crime. He's pushed me out from behind my reporter's notebook and forced me out of my shell. The process hasn't always been easy, but it's been more than a little



worthwhile. In return, he tells me, I've helped him think less like an academic and more like a journalist, an explorer, a vagabond. He's back in touch with his adventurous side, the part that got lost in the shuffle when he was busy engineering his life to be productive and comfortable. Now his hypotheses are a little messier; his variables aren't so constrained. He's learned it's okay for his experiments to not always go as planned.

Like the best *manzai* duos, we make a good team.

"I understand humor better now," Pete tells me; it makes sense to him in a much broader way. "Most people could stand to laugh more," he says. "Life gets serious. Our world is full of mortgages and careers and retirement funds and horrible headlines on the nightly news. And when you live in a world that's really serious," he says, "it's hard to be playful about things."

So how can we hope to change that? I ask. "One way to do so is to be really systematic about it," Pete replies—the way he usually goes about things. Watch fewer dramas and more sitcoms. Join a laughter yoga club. Increase your visits to your local comedy club.

But there's a better way to do it, he says: "Surround yourself with the people and things that make you laugh. Seek out interesting places and interesting people. Focus on the friends who make you laugh, not the ones who bring you down. Choose as a partner someone with whom you share a sense of humor, someone who helps you see the lighter side of life."

"And maybe it's clichéd," he continues, "but remind yourself that everything is going to be okay." That thing that seems so scary in the moment, so catastrophic and worrisome, is only scary because you're paying so much attention to it. It's okay to complain, but add a bit of wit to your grumbling. Figure out a way to make that violation benign.

Above all else, he concludes, "Remind yourself that life's meant to be enjoyed, to be delighted in, to be laughed at." In short, that our world is one big joke. Sure, the set-ups aren't always perfect, but keep an eye out. Sooner or later, you'll find a punch line waiting to happen.