



# LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

Coronavirus diary month 11: reckoning with gallows humour. **By John Tregoning**

**S**ometimes, all that's left to do is to laugh. Stories from the First World War are riddled with gallows humour. In one apocryphal tale from the trenches, a bagpiper starts to pipe to raise morale. Fearing that the skirling sound of the pipes signals an imminent attack, the enemy shoot from their own trench, forcing everyone to take cover and the piper to stop playing. Eventually, the shooting subsides and the piper starts again, triggering the same set of events. Undeterred, the piper prepares to start for a third time, when someone shouts: "For Heaven's sake, play something they like!"

In times like ours, it feels as if perhaps the art of gallows humour should make a comeback. Life seems so relentlessly serious. Of course, it is serious: this pandemic is hopefully the major event of our lifetimes. But it doesn't mean that the pressure can't be relieved with a bit of dark humour. This approach has been applied effectively in every other rubbish situation humanity has found itself in.

The problem is that jokes don't really work in multi-party videoconferences. They need a reaction – something that is completely

lacking if everyone is on mute, with their cameras off and only half-engaged because they are juggling work with child minding, clipping their nails or checking WhatsApp. Jokes also rely on timing: if you have to unmute to drop a punchline, the moment has normally passed. And there is nothing worse than having to jokesplain your already-failed punchline.

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This is not to say that videoconferences can't be funny. An epically parochial parish-council dust-up made the global news. The members of Handforth Parish Council in Cheshire, UK, might not have achieved much in a meeting that started with an expletive and descended from there, but they tapped into the cultural zeitgeist.

At their best, virtual meetings have enabled people to come together from different

locations in a way otherwise impossible without the carbon footprint of a small nation. At their worst, however, they are exhausting, taking what seems like forever to deal with issues that could often have been resolved with a five-minute in-person conversation – prompting the sentiment, 'This could have been an e-mail.'

Technical mishaps have added to the stress of online meetings. My daughter's bin still bears a suspiciously boot-shaped mark from the morning my sound card failed mid-meeting. But they have at least provided some laughs: it's hard to forget the early adopter whose children so memorably gatecrashed his TV interview, or the lawyer stuck behind a Zoom filter who had to explain to the judge that he wasn't a cat.

## You've got to laugh

Having identified the problem (humour being in short supply), the usual path for an advice column would be to offer suggestions for how to fix it. But I don't have a solution. I tried making a joke in a sidebar at one meeting and it misfired wildly (it CC'd all instead of just the person I was aiming to talk to), so I wouldn't recommend that. Messaging from a phone on the side is effective, but does feel a bit 'naughty teenager', with the ever-present fear that one of the grown-ups will make you share what you have been doing with the rest of the class.

What has helped is chancing on other, funnier people online, amid the doom scrolling. If you haven't seen them, I would recommend, among others, the cartoonists Jason McDermott (on Twitter @redpenblackpen), Maria Boyle (@twisteddoodles) and Nik Papageorgiou (@upmicblog); the comic *Piled Higher and Deeper* (<http://phdcomics.com/>); neurobiologist Oded Rechavi, who has nailed the science meme (@OdedRechavi); and a family singing cover versions of popular songs in the new pandemic context (@MarshSongs). I'd love to hear others' suggestions of good science comedy.

Finding funny things scratches the itch, but jokes are better shared. This is probably where phone messaging and sharing came into its own, with memes circulating the world in a heart-click. There were several times in 2020 when I despaired that my research group was generating more memes than data.

It is through shared human contact that we will make it through the end days of the pandemic. Humour at its best is resilience: it's an important tool for coping with an adverse situation. It is certainly better to laugh when an experiment has gone belly up (again) than to smash up the lab and scream at the students. And it connects us – even though we still aren't able to stand gossiping around the distilled-water dispenser, we can at least laugh together.

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