

On laughter

By Caitlin Endyke, Observer Intern

Whether you do it quietly, loudly, hysterically, to yourself, or for no reason at all, everybody laughs. The question is: Why do we do it?

Scientists – gelotologists – have been studying laughter and its causes for years. And the answer to why we laugh may not be as simple as one would think.

During one bout of laughter, the average person exercises 15 facial muscles, plus muscles from the abdominals, legs, back, and respiratory system, and several parts of the brain. Multiply that by 17, or the average number of times a person laughs per day, and you're getting quite a workout.

But what actually happens when you laugh? Scientists say that laughter results when a negatively charged impulse approaches the cerebral cortex in the brain. This makes muscles in the throat partially close up, which causes air intake to become irregular, and a fit of laughter

ensues. Laughter also uses several other areas of the brain. The left side of the cortex analyses the joke, the frontal lobe allows us to "get" the joke, and the motor sections cause the physical aspects of laughter. If any of these areas are damaged, a person can lose part of his ability to laugh. Therefore, the jerk you thought had no sense of humor might just have been the victim of a head injury.

Some scientists believe that laughing originated in primates as a sign of happiness, and that humans got the ability to laugh through evolution. There are three different theories as to what humans laugh at. The incongruity theory is when people laugh when something defies logic or their past experiences, the relief theory is when people laugh after tension or drama has lifted, and the superiority theory is when

people laugh to feel powerful over others. Sense of humor can also differ with age. Have you noticed that jokes that would have caught you in hysterics when you were little now seem stupid and ridiculous? This is because as people get older, their sense of humor also grows up. Children laugh at lots of things because everything seems new and unfamiliar.

Teenagers tend to laugh at things that adults would view as inappropriate. Adults laugh at things that stress them out.

"Those who tickle themselves may laugh when they please." This German proverb may not be scientifically accurate. Scientists believe

that laughing from being tickled is an automatic reflex, but no one can laugh from tickling themselves. This is because there has to be an element of tension and surprise when someone is tickled.

Besides being fun in social situations, laughter may truly be the best medicine. Studies show that laughing reduces stress,

increases blood platelets, lowers heart disease, clears the respiratory tract, and is a great aerobic workout. Laughing 100 times is roughly equal to spending 15 minutes on an exercise bike, so it might turn out that sitting at home watching a funny TV show is actually healthy for you.



Local comedian takes nightclubs by storm

By Eric Baxter, News Editor

Windham's Steve Guilmette always liked being the center of attention. From first grade through high school and later in sales jobs, he found he could not only gain attention but also keep it through a mix of humor and showmanship.

"I knew I could do this from day one. I decided to use my powers for good rather than evil," said Guilmette.

Good, for Guilmette, meant becoming a stand-up comic.

He took a class with local comedian Dave Rattigan at Northern Essex Community College. The final to the eight-week intensive comedy course was a five-minute stand-up routine at a local club.

It was there Guilmette got his first taste of professional comedy from the stage side.

"It was like trying to convert sheer terror into an entertaining format without letting on that you're scared stiff," said the father of two boys.

But that taste, the terror and the elation of making people laugh went directly to Guilmette's blood and he was hooked.

Guilmette said his humor is observational, almost Seinfeld-like, and his forte was taking the everyday and finding the odd twist, something people hadn't thought about before.

Like his most recent material focusing on the state's crematorium scandal and how the owner was charged with improperly storing a dead body and, funny enough, how Teresa Heinz Kerry was charged with same thing.

But whatever type of comedy a comedian worked in, Guilmette found that being a comedian was serious, hard work, but also something he loved.

A year-and-a-half after Rattigan's class, he had played at every venue that would take him, from small social clubs and fundraisers to Boston's Comedy Connection and Nick's Comedy Club.

"I followed the advice of the pros – stage time, stage time, stage time," said Guilmette. "That, and you work hard."

The funny business is just that – a business and like any business that would like to succeed there has to be an interest from the person working it.

"Like any other job, there has to be a passion for it. I have a passion for performing, for getting on stage and making people laugh," he said.

In that year, and now, at 47, as he continues with his new career there have been ups and downs. One of the ups was his second gig at the Comedy Connection.

"All comics are trying to get to the Connection, and it was a thrill the first time. But the time that really stands out is not the first time, but the second time. When you get invited back a second time it means you passed (as a comic) in their eyes. That's really cool, in comedy terms; it means you passed."

The lowest point in his short career was a show at the Franco-American Club in Beverly, Mass. The stage was next to the bar, and "a drunk guy who just got out of prison" heckled him through the whole show.



"Everyone there had been drinking all day, and they just didn't care – about the heckling or the drunk guy. It was a horrible experience, but as they say in comedy, it was good for the soul."

While the terror of being in front of an audience and being required to make them laugh remains intimidating, it's not something he's prepared to give up.

"The comedian brings normal, everyday events to the stage and allows people to see them through a comedian's eyes. This is how we see it, in a warped kind of way, and the people laugh."

"I love to make people laugh," he said.

For information on Guilmette, visit steveguilmette.com.



Lynn Denis

Dave Rattigan on stage.

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