

# America Is Losing Its Sense of Humor

I often remark to my acquaintances that Americans no longer tell jokes.

Growing up, as a child, I was in possession of a healthy arsenal of jokes that I gleaned from my parents, relatives, and friends, and that I would eagerly relay to others when the opportunity arose.

Decades later, I can't remember a single one of those jokes, nor the last time I heard a joke told to me.

Part of the reason for this movement away from joke-telling is perhaps due to what philosopher Jacques Ellul [identified](#) as our culture's shift from word-based to picture-based thinking. In the not-too-distant past, people placed value on humor linked to artfully-constructed narratives and clever turns of phrase. Today, many people in the West do not have the attention spans to track a multi-layered joke, and instead get their laughs from viewing memes, gifs, and absurdities on YouTube.

I think the other reason why people shy away from telling jokes, however, is simply that our culture is rapidly losing its sense of humor. And the main cause of this loss may be the rise of a fanaticism associated with the ideology of political correctness.

Neil Postman identified this link between fanaticism and the decline of humor in his 1995 book [The End of Education](#):

*"To be able to hold comfortably in one's mind the validity and usefulness of two contradictory truths is the source of tolerance, openness, and, most important, a sense of humor, which is the greatest enemy of fanaticism."*

The rise of a fanatical political correctness and increasingly “intolerant tolerance” has been well-documented. Intellectual Takeout’s page, along with others, has frequently criticized the dogmatism of the PC ideology, and the tendency of today’s younger generations to become “triggered” by words that they have deemed offensive to supposedly protected classes or, more often than not, to themselves.

According to [a popular 2015 article in The Atlantic](#), it is precisely for this reason that many comedians are opting out of doing their acts on college campuses. College students, they maintain, simply cannot take a joke. It turns out that comedians, like many of us, are finding that attempted humor among these sorts is not a cross worth dying on.

It’s also apparently not very profitable anymore. As [a 2014 Quartz article](#) showed, comedy has become the least profitable genre for Hollywood studios, and they’re scaling back their comedy output as a result.

When those who subscribe to the ideology of political correctness do make an attempt at humor, I find that it is usually not funny at all, but caustic and mean-spirited. This observation has also been made by Amos Oz—dubbed Israel’s “most famous living author”—in his book [How to Cure a Fanatic](#):

*“I have never once in my life seen a fanatic with a sense of humor, nor have I ever seen a person with a sense of humor become a fanatic, unless he or she has lost that sense of humor. Fanatics are often sarcastic. Some of them have a very pointed sense of sarcasm, but no humor.”*

The decline of humor in America is unfortunate both for ourselves and our society. The ability to laugh at ourselves is a normal part of humility, and to laugh at others serves as a recognition of our mutual brokenness. As philosopher Roger Scruton [has noted](#), humor served a particularly important role

in sustaining the “melting pot” of America:

*“A society that does not laugh is one without an important safety valve, and a society in which people interpret crude humor not as the first step toward friendly relations, but as a mortal offense, is one in which ordinary life has become fraught with danger. Human beings who live in communities of strangers are greatly in need of laughter, if their differences are not to lead to civil war. This was one of the functions of the ethnic joke. When Poles, Irish, Jews, and Italians competed for territory in the New World to which they had escaped, they provisioned themselves with a store of ethnic jokes with which to laugh off their manifest differences.”*

It’s counterintuitive to many today, but as Scruton’s words imply, an America whose citizens can no longer laugh at themselves will very likely become a more divided America.