By Shane Ryan, 2012 Fall Conference Faculty, Humor Writing

I don't know about you, but I've always been impressed by essays that begin with a quote from a famous person. If that famous person is dead, even better; dead people have an aura that I've always envied. Speaking of which, I apologize for being alive as you read this post. You deserve better. (If I've died since writing, neglect the last two sentences and please avenge my death.)

The point is, I love dead people quotes. So when I was tasked with writing an introduction to my humor writing workshop, I thought I'd lead with something from a guy like Benjamin Franklin . He must have had a few thoughts on comedy, right? Who's funnier than ole Ben Franklin? Remember that time he flew a kite in a lightning storm with a metal key attached? That was classic physical humor; Charlie Chaplin owed him a great debt.

I tried to remember a good Franklin quote, but I was hungry at the time, so my brain just came up with images of roasted chicken sprinkled with salt. I considered turning to Google for help with the quote, but instead I begged my girlfriend to roast a chicken and sprinkle it with salt. It wasn't easy, but she finally agreed after I started crying. Man, did I feast. I ate the hell out of that chicken. When I was done, I made a miniature chicken from the bones and hung it over my bed so I could remember the meal forever. I named it "Bones," after a similar creature I made out of a turkey carcass last Thanksgiving. It was such a great experience that I even asked the NCWN people if I could get out of the humor writing seminar and lead one about how to devour a roasted chicken instead. Unfortunately, that topic had already been taken by current U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey .

So here I am, back at the keyboard, with nothing to show for myself. But I resolved to start with a quote, so before we go any further, I'm going to make one up from a fake historical figure:

"True humour, my dear, is the fool's bosom friend, the vicar's frigid companion, the tyrant's sworn enemy,
and the psychopath's ruinous lover."
—Lord Addison "Barnacles" Balfour, in a letter to his wife, Lady Barnacles, 1594

Barnacles Balfour died only three months later in a Viking raid , a cruel and ironic end when you consider that the Vikings had died out 500 years earlier. And no, I'm sorry, I don't know what the word "vicar" means either.

You may have noticed that the first 400 words of this essay have been utterly useless. Forgive me, but I was being pointless to make a point—humor is an evanescent, ephemeral ghost of a concept, prone to misinterpretation and disagreement and ultimate irrelevance. Some of you made it through those three paragraphs and thought, "That was the stupidest thing I've ever read." Some of you may have smiled, or even laughed. But rest assured that I, personally, sat here laughing like an insane person while chicken grease ran down my mouth in ecstatic, loathsome rivers. In the end, we're all correct.

Let me be serious for a moment: This world was designed to be difficult. Why? I don't know, but I believe in God precisely so I can have somebody to resent for the way things work. Even for a guy like me, who has had a relatively easy twenty-nine years, life has had its rough patches. Yet somewhere else in the world, people are having a really hard time, so I can't even enjoy my little challenges by indulging in self-pity. Which, again, is very annoying.

Saturday Night Live , legendary just forty years ago, seem stale and even conservative today.

Shakespeare
, whose tragedies hold up as achingly gorgeous treatises on human frailty, is a writer whose pun-based humor you would want to emulate only if you hoped to get beat up on a city street. Times and attitudes change, and it takes a keen understanding of the zeitgeist to capture what's funny today.

Humor is diverse; racially, culturally, stylistically. I am not personally a fan of Larry the Cable Guy and his ubiquitous catch phrase, "Git 'er Done," but he makes loads of money from people who would mock me for driving a Toyota Prius. His stand-up routine couldn't be more different from a show like *Arrested Development*
—a wonderful mix of character-driven absurdity, physical comedy, and narrative subversion which became a sort of mainstream cult classic that was canceled after three seasons. And what common threads could be said to exist between the melancholy mid-life-crisis laments of Louis C.K.
and the detached wordplay of the late
Mitch Hedberg
? What binds the biting, racial satire of
Dave Chappelle's
sketches and the selfish egotism of
Larry David
? Each is vastly different, but the world is big, and each has its audience.

And yet, I swear, there is a connection. Difficult as it may be to identify, these comedic fountains rise from a common source. And if there's a point to my ramblings, it's that while humor is diverse and ever evolving, there are guiding principles that can help us when we try to be funny. When you learn the rules, it gets a little—not a lot, but a little—easier. The main requirement is that you pay attention to the life that goes on around you. Seriously, that's it. Just open your eyes, and everything else will follow.

To use an actual quote from a real person, I draw your attention to Tolstoy : "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I'm going to spin that one on its head for a moment, and declare that there are a million ways to be funny, but only one way to fail. If

you can't live through the triumph, tragedy, and even boredom of our world without feeling that persistent thread of humor seeping through the cracks in the façade, undermining and saving us at the same time, then God help you.

And fair warning: God may not help you, because God is funny.

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Shane Ryan will lead a Humor Writing workshop at the 2012 North Carolina Writers' Network Fall Conference . Shane is a writer for Grantland.com , *Paste Magazine* , and Carolina Public Press . He has written about sports, music, film, politics, and comedy for a variety of publications, including McSweeneys.net . No matter where he writes, he expends a lot of effort trying to be funny, and has embarrassed himself publicly so many times that he is now considered an expert. His biggest fans include his mother, who thinks he's especially hilarious when asking for money. Shane grew up in Saranac Lake, New York, graduated from Duke University in 2005, lived in Brooklyn for five years, and attended the UNC School of Journalism in 2010. He lives in Carrboro with his wife, and is two months away from turning thirty, which is not funny at all.

Registration for the 2012 Fall Conference is now open .