At Ease, Disease—AIDS
Jokes as Sick Humor

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Disasters breed jokes.¹ One may well find the sick humor engendered by various forms of calamity to be in poor taste if not downright offensive, but the existence of such humor is too well documented to be gainsaid. First the jokes circulate orally and then later they may appear in anthology format. Skeptics have only to consult Rezwin (1962), Wilde (1979), and Hodes (1980) to gain access to dozens of examples of the genre. There are also numerous sick jokes contained in such paperback series as Truly Tasteless Jokes (Knott, 1982-1984), Gross Jokes (Alvin, 1983-1984), and Outrageously Offensive Jokes (Thickett, 1983-1984). Clearly, there is no dearth of data for those interested in demonstrating that comedy follows in the wake of tragedy.

Despite the plethora of books and articles devoted to the subject of humor, one finds little or no substantive discussion of sick humor. Although there is evidence that gruesome and grotesque humor goes back at least to classical antiquity (Flögel, 1862), the vast majority of the scholarly, scientific treatises insist upon analyzing theories of the comic in general (Grotjahn, 1957; Escarpit, 1960; Munro, 1963; Piddington, 1963; Fry, 1968; McGhee, 1979; Morreall, 1983; Lixfeld, 1984; Apte, 1985). Only a few even mention sick jokes as a legitimate topic of inquiry (Röhrich, 1977). Several essays do treat so-called gallows humor (Obrdlik, 1942; Moser-Rath, 1972-1973), but sick humor tends to be neglected generally (see Dundes, 1979).

We may or may not be amused by the classic “Aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?” but enough time may have elapsed since the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln for modern audiences to hear such sick humor without a grimace. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not such humor prevailed after Lincoln’s assassi-

nation. Folklorists were not about collecting such materials and, for that matter, publishing standards might not have permitted the publication of such texts even if they were collected.

We do know that after President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas in 1963, a spate of sick jokes was generated almost immediately. What were JFK’s last words upon leaving Washington, DC? “I need a trip to Dallas like a hole in the head.” What is LBJ’s favorite song? “I Love a Parade.” [LBJ became president after Kennedy was killed.] What did John-John [Kennedy’s young son] get for Christmas? A Jack-in-the-Box. A people of an entire nation, in grief, having seen the tragedy before their very eyes—either as it happened or in the hundreds of instant replays provided by seemingly masochistic television news services—had little recourse except to such brazenly sick humor.

The available evidence strongly suggests that sick joke cycles constitute a kind of collective mental hygiene defense mechanism that allows people to cope with the most dire of disasters, natural or otherwise. Exploring the resultant jokes serves little purpose. They would not come into existence if they did not answer some sort of deep psychological need. One witty individual might construct a joke, but it could not pass from one area of the country to another, from person to person, unless there were a human chain of communicators—using the telephone, for example—to disseminate such jokes.

Those unfamiliar with modern twentieth-century folklore and its often truly remarkable speed of transmission, thanks to various innovations in communications technology, never cease to be astonished by the rapidity with which a particular joke or series of jokes spreads. An individual may hear a “new” joke in his office in the early morning and then again several times that same day from colleagues around the country, thousands of miles away. What is so surprising is that the subject of the joke, a major disaster, may have occurred only the day before. Oral transmission remains one of the most quick and efficient means of disseminating information. A few individuals, bothered by the phenomenon of multiple existence—the fact that a piece of folklore will always exist in more than one time and place—actually have tried to track down the “origin” of a joke, but to no avail. A will ask B for his or her source C. C when consulted will indicate his or her source D and so the network may be dissected, but it turns out inevitably that there are so many different threads of transmission—a person may well tell a “new” joke to more than one friend—that it soon becomes a hopeless quest. No one knows just where or when a given joke begins. Jokes seem to appear
out of the blue, ex vacuo, but since the disaster in question happened just yesterday, it is also obvious that the creation (or revision of an older joke) must have taken place since the time of the disaster.

The space shuttle Challenger exploded on January 28, 1986, some 73 seconds after launch, killing seven astronauts. Millions watched the explosion in horror at home on their television sets while others saw it soon thereafter on replay. The seven crew members represented a cross-section of Americans including women and a black. One of the women, Christa McAuliffe, was a civilian, a schoolteacher from New Hampshire. This made it even easier for observers to identify with the crew. It was a horrible sight to behold and no one who saw the shuttle and its occupants vaporized could possibly remain unmoved. Yet within a day there were space shuttle or Challenger jokes. Journalists would write columns condemning the jokes (being careful not to retell any; see Simon, 1986; von Hoffman, 1986), but nothing could possibly stop the onslaught of such jokes.

What does NASA mean? Now Accepting Seven Applications or Need Another Seven Astronauts.

Why do astronauts drink Pepsi? They couldn't get 7-Up.

Where do astronauts go on vacation? All over Florida.

Why didn't the astronauts take showers before they left? Because they thought they would wash up ashore.

Some of the jokes were racist.

Why did the shuttle crew have only one black member? Because NASA didn't know the Challenger was going to explode.

But most had to do with Christa McAuliffe.

What were her last words? What do you suppose this (little red) button's for? [This was a comment or criticism of a civilian's being on the mission with the added implication that somehow the accident may have been caused by her presence or lack of professionalism.]

What were her last words to her husband? You feed the kids; I'll feed the fish.

What was the last thing that went through Christa McAuliffe's head? Her ass.

How do they know that Christa had dandruff? They found her Head and Shoulders. [The trade name of a dandruff shampoo.]

How did they know that Christa had blue eyes? Because one "blew" left and one "blew" right.

Christa was a science teacher, now she's history.

Did you hear that Christa's Board of Education gave her a special award? In all her years of teaching, she only blew up in front of her students once.

Even the deity was invoked in one joke in the cycle.

What was God's (or in some versions the pilot's) response to the Challenger explosion? "I said Bud Light!"

This, like so many modern American jokes depends upon the listener's presumed familiarity with television advertising. In this case, the reference is to a series of Budweiser beer commercials in which a bar patron (mistakenly) asks the bartender for a "light beer" without properly specifying the brand and saying merely, "Give me a light." The response is invariably some form of semidangerous form of light, such as a falling light fixture, an incendiary flame, a blowtorch, or the like. The patron, realizing his error, rephrases his request: "Make that Bud Light," whereupon he is given the desired bottle of Budweiser Light beer. Most of the individuals who told these jokes were embarrassed to do so. Often there was a preambule of apology. Yet they did tell them. Several disc jockeys were supposedly taken off the air for having told one or more of these. How can one joke about such a tragedy? That was the most common question. Experience dictates that the most apt question is: How can one not joke about such a tragedy?

1986 saw another tragedy unfold—this time in the Soviet Union. The nuclear reactor at Chernobyl suffered a near or actual meltdown on April 27 and considerable radioactivity was released into the atmosphere. After initial Russian silence about the accident, reports of empirically observable increased radioactivity came from countries nearby, such as Sweden. Within one day of the disaster, jokes began to flow in the United States.

What has feathers and glows in the dark? Chicken Kiev. [Kiev is a large city not far from Chernobyl.]

What do you serve with Chicken Kiev? Black Russians [a drink].

Did you hear about Kiey candy? Melts in your pocket.

Did you hear the five-day weather forecast for Russia? 3 days. [This is an updated version of a joke that circulated in 1979 after the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in Pennsylvania. Did you hear the five-day weather forecast for Harrisburg? 3 days.]

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Here we have the age-old stigma against admitting one's homosexual proclivities.

The same theme is articulated in the following extreme example of sick humor:

Did you hear about the homosexual who finally decided to come “out of the closet”? He told his parents he had bad news and good news. “The bad news is I'm gay; the good news is I'm dying.”

The pro-heterosexual and anti-homosexual bias of mainstream society is implicit in such a joking question as this:

What's the difference between herpes and AIDS? One's a love story; the other's a fairy tale [Aman, 1983: 291; Knott, 1984: 85].


Most of the AIDS jokes are not all that clever.

Did you hear about the new disease gay musicians are coming down with? Band AIDS [see Aman, 1983: 291; Knott, 1983b: 79].


What do you call a gay man on roller skates [or a skateboard, or in a wheelchair]? Roll AIDS [see Aman, 1983: 290; Knott, 1983b: 78; Schmidt, 1984/1985: 70; Thickett, 1984: 117; Rolaid's is a standard antacid remedy for indigestion].

How do gays spell relief? NO AIDS [see Alvin, 1984: 74; Aman, 1983: 291; Knott, 1984: 85; the reference to spelling relief again refers to the advertising campaign for Rolaid's].

How do you know that your garden has AIDS? When your pansies start dying [see Aman, 1984/1985: 216].


Since AIDS appears to be transmitted largely through sexual contact, specifically anal intercourse, many of the jokes make reference to this.

Do you know what AIDS stand for? Anal Interourse Deterrence System, Anally Injected (or Inserted) Death Sentence, Assholes In Deep Shit, Adios, Infected Dick


Did you hear about the new strain of AIDS called Hearing AIDS? Know how you get it? Listen real close to an asshole [see Aman, 1984/1985: 214].


How did the minister get AIDS? He didn’t clean his organ between hymns [Aman, 1984/1985: 215].

Do you know why there is no cure for AIDS? Because scientists can’t teach laboratory rats to butt fuck [see Aman, 1983: 290].

Why is AIDS a miracle? It’s the only thing in the world that will change a fruit into a vegetable [Aman, 1983: 291; Knott, 1984: 86; Thickett, 1984: 115].

When the popular actor Rock Hudson admitted that he had AIDS (and thereby confirmed longtime rumors that he was a homosexual), a whole new series of AIDS jokes was initiated. Some refer to singer-actor Jim Nabors, who was alleged to have been one of Rock Hudson’s lovers.

What’s the difference between Staten Island and Rock Hudson? The first is a ferry terminal, the second a terminal fairy [Aman, 1984/1985: 216].

Did you hear that the Statue of Liberty has AIDS? They don’t know how she got it. It could have been either from the mouth of the Hudson or the Staten Island ferry.

What is it going to say on Rock Hudson’s tomb? Born in the East, reared in the West.

Did you hear how AIDS got transferred to L.A.? In the rear end of an old Hudson. [The reference is to an older make of automobile.]

Why did Rock Hudson’s car insurance go up? Too many rear-enders [see Aman, 1984/1985: 216].

When Rock Hudson checked into the clinic in France, the doctor said, “I’m going to need the names of your last 100 male lovers.” “Rock Hudson said, “What do you think? I’ve got eyes in the back of my head!”

Did you hear that doctors found another growth in President Reagan’s colon? Exploratory surgery showed it to be Rock Hudson’s wristwatch.

Did you hear that Rock Hudson doesn’t have many friends anymore—but he has Nabors up the ass.

Do you know why Jim Nabors didn’t need any more life insurance? He had a piece of the rock [see Aman, 1984/1985: 216]. [This refers to the Prudential Life Insurance Company’s advertisement and logo proclaiming that the company is as solid as a rock, specifically the Rock of Gibraltar. Prospective buyers of Prudential policies are urged to get a piece of the rock.]

Did you hear that Jim Nabors died? They found him bobbing [face down] on the Hudson.

Did you hear about the new sequel to the movie Rambo starring Rock Hudson and Sylvester Stallone? It’s called Ram But [see Aman, 1984/1985: 216].

What are the next two movies that Rock Hudson will star in? “Rambut” and “Romancing the Bone.” [This refers to the movies Rambo and Romancing the Stone.]

Did you know that Sylvester Stallone has AIDS? He was in Rocky II.

Sometimes the jokes take another format. The following example purports to be a baseball quiz.

Do you know who holds the record for the most career home runs? Hank Aaron. The most hits? Pete Rose. The most stolen bases? Ricky Henderson. The most balls in the face? Rock Hudson.

Occasionally, the AIDS joke cycle merges with another current cycle, for example, the Jewish American Princess jokes (see Dundes, 1985).

What is the new Jewish American Princess disease? MAIDS—if they don’t have one, they die.

But for the most part, the AIDS jokes are separate and distinct. One reason for the popularity of these jokes is that many are not just concerned with the disease AIDS but are also antihomosexual. In that sense, there are two topics, both taboo, that are involved: homosexuality and a deadly disease. Many Americans are uncomfortable talking openly about either of these topics. Hence it makes sense for there to be a joke cycle that facilitates the ventilation of private fears about contracting AIDS (and about possible connections with homosexuality). By joking about AIDS, one can distance oneself from the disease and from homosexuality.

AIDS jokes are new because the disease was heretofore not recognized. It had to be named before jokes involving its name could possibly be generated. The immediacy of the disease (as opposed to disasters in other countries or in outer space) and its continuing near-epidemic proportions have no doubt been critical factors in the perpetuation of AIDS jokes. To the extent that the anxiety level of the general public remains high concerning the dangers of contracting the disease, it is
likely that this joke cycle will continue to flourish. Only when some kind of temporary or permanent cure is finally discovered will AIDS jokes fade from the scene.

Jokes themselves are neither good nor evil. They are simply reflections of the fears of a people or of individuals at a given instant in time. It is therefore futile to protest against the existence of sick humor. As long as natural and human-made disasters occur, jokes about these disasters are probably inevitable.

“At ease, disease, there’s fungus among us” is a folk rhyme that was current in military folklore of the 1950s that expressed concern among naval male personnel about the possibility of getting athlete’s foot as a result of showering and dressing in a locker-room environment. How innocuous athlete’s foot is compared to the usually fatal AIDS! Yet the principle remains constant. Folklore, including jokelore, will always rise to the occasion to articulate anxieties, whether well-founded or not, about the state of one’s health.

NOTE

1. All the jokes reported in this article, unless otherwise acknowledged, were collected in the Bay Area in the mid 1980s. One should keep in mind that San Francisco’s population includes a large homosexual component. A relatively high proportion of the nation’s AIDS cases were reported from this area and that may in part account for the currency of AIDS jokes in the Bay Area.

REFERENCES
