

Too Soon?

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I was surprised to see my mom's Ford Contour smack in front of the entrance as soon as I walked outside, since she was usually late picking me up from school in order to avoid the rush of the other moms. She was usually not very stern, either, so I was startled to see such a serious look on her face. Was she mad at me? My nine-year-old brain quickly tried to think of something bad I had done. "What's the matter?" I asked innocently. My mother paused for a moment. "...they didn't tell you?" she questioned. They hadn't. Once we had been driving in silence for about five minutes, I could tell something was wrong. I eventually realized we were headed toward Midland Park, the next town over. "Maybe we're going to Friendly's!" I thought quietly to myself.

Then she pointed. Throughout these familiar New Jersey suburbs, on a clear day, you could easily see New York City from your car. We live just eleven miles from the city, so any slight incline could give us a perfect skyline view. But on this particular day—this particular bright-blue, cloudless, flawless day—in the place where the skyline should have been, there was only smoke. Smoke covering nothing. Days later, once that smoke was gone, that view was just a void. For some time afterward, that void became something beyond physical, and that emptiness spread throughout America and within its people—particularly among those living in plain view of New York City.

For weeks after 9/11, all I could think was, "When is all of this going to end?" But the guilty child within me did not want to ask. I know now that I was not the only one to have these thoughts, and I was certainly not the only one to desire that things go back to normal. It was difficult to even have an everyday conversation without mentioning what had happened, and it seemed as though nothing could be taken lightly: we were walking on eggshells with ourselves,

because we didn't have a concrete idea of how to handle the situation. The news was running constantly on the televisions in homes in the tri-state area—and I mean constantly. My mom, for example, is an absolute sitcom fiend, and for the first time in my life, she and I went weeks without our ritualistic reruns of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. In the midst of such horror, laughter actually seemed wildly inappropriate. We didn't necessarily want it to be that way, but news broadcasts were, in our minds, the only kind of television deemed appropriate at the time. Shows with laugh tracks? Not so much.

The days and weeks following 9/11 were such a tense, confusing, and undeniably sad time, but most of us just wanted to laugh again without guilty. In a way, Mayor Giuliani gave the city “permission” when he insisted, in various speeches and public appearances, that everyone carry on with their lives as they normally would (“Giuliani and 9/11”). New York tried its hardest to listen, and roughly two weeks later, some of the city's most beloved television shows began to air once more. As America prepared for entertainment to return to normal, many wondered how quickly this was “allowed” to happen. In other words: *could we be funny again?* Even the most professional of entertainers did not quite know how to answer this question, but they certainly tried. After September 11, 2001, three New York-based television programs, *Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *Saturday Night Live*, attempted to revive the spirit of their country by acknowledging the sensitivity of the subject at hand and still pursuing humor through escapism.

On September 17, 2001, just six days after the attack, David Letterman returned to the airwaves on CBS. Taking the intimidating role as the first major American comedy performer to reappear on television, *Late Show* ultimately set the bar for all the comedy shows—specifically, talk shows—that were to return. While Letterman eventually found humor directed through

others, he first maintained the tone of the sadness at hand in his introduction. Some of the regular components of the show were absent from its usual opening credits, which normally included music and a cheering crowd. Instead, with just some clapping from the audience in the very beginning, Letterman almost immediately began his monologue. After briefly mentioning that the show had not been on the air since September 11, he explained that “in the past week, others have said what I will be saying here tonight far more eloquently than I'm equipped to do. But if we are going to continue to do shows, I just need to hear myself talk for a couple of minutes” (liamstarwatcher). Letterman’s uncharacteristic “need” to speak about such a serious issue gave the audience a sense of just how he—someone who has been a staple of entertainment for decades—felt about returning to television, which basically meant returning to making people laugh. At this point, it became clear that average Americans were really not the only ones who felt uncomfortable with humor just yet, and that we all needed to work and talk through these issues before coming close to feeling back to normal. Indeed, other entertainers seemed to feel the same way: the format with which Letterman introduced the show that night was subsequently recreated several times over by other similar talk show hosts, such as Conan O’Brien (“Conan O’Brien”) and Jay Leno.

Besides the physical setup of this introduction, though, the seriousness with which the usually snarky Letterman addressed the situation is noteworthy. He explained that his decision to return was not based on any thought of his own, but he was rather he was inspired by the mayor. Within the first minute and a half of his monologue, Letterman said:

Watching all of this [news coverage], I wasn't sure that I should be doing a television show because for twenty years we've been in the city, making fun of everything, making fun of the city...so to come to this circumstance that is so

desperately sad—and I don't trust my judgment in matters like this—but I'll tell you the reason that I am doing a show and the reason I am back to work, and it's because of Mayor Giuliani. (liamstarwatcher)

He proceeded to describe how Giuliani implored the city to continue living as it should, and openly expressed his admiration for the mayor due to his courage and leadership. By indirectly placing faith in the hands of the mayor, Letterman conveyed a sense of contentment and reassurance through his apparent trust in Giuliani. Perhaps this mention of an authoritative figure made Letterman more comfortable in his atypically earnest and thoughtful return.

Interestingly enough, when Letterman did crack a few jokes within his monologue, they were directed at something, *anything*, other than September 11th. He made fun of himself, his hair, and a band member's lack thereof. Most importantly, the fact that he quipped toward the end of the monologue, "Thank God Regis is here, so we have something to make fun of..." (liamstarwatcher) was the most clear, brilliant illustration of Letterman truly yearning to make people laugh once again, as if to say: here is something to make you smile, let us focus on it for at least a moment. Apparently, his approach of focusing on matters other than September 11th itself worked. *Time Magazine* listed this episode as the Number 1 Best TV Moment of 2001, declaring, "[Letterman] gradually came back from comedy's self-imposed mourning period to show that topical, cutting satire wasn't just appropriate; it was downright American" ("TIME"). The American public viewed Letterman's return as more than tasteful—his return was needed. After September 17th, other programs began to feel it appropriate to air once again.

However, the return still was not necessarily an easy one. Even unconventional talk-show hosts found it challenging to come back to the small screen in such a seemingly short period of time. Notoriously cynical Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* in particular was extremely passionate

about the people of New York City, so he too kept with the similar theme of opening up the show with an uncharacteristic solemn yet hopeful monologue. Upon his return to Comedy Central on Thursday, September 20th, 2001, Stewart began his show with no music or introduction. He began right into a monologue, and soon stated:

I'm sorry to do this to you. It's another entertainment show beginning with an overwrought speech of a shaken host, and television is nothing if not redundant...it's something that unfortunately we do for ourselves so we can drain whatever abscess is in our hearts, and move on to the business of making you laugh. ("September 11")

By making his intentions clear from the very beginning, Stewart established a distinct entertainer-audience relationship. There was a point from the start in which the simple relationship was broken down and understood: the audience—members both in the studio and at home—wants to laugh, and the entertainer wants to make them laugh. Moreover, since Stewart asserted his pure emotions from the very beginning, the audience reacted in a similar way by remaining silent throughout the majority of the monologue, which ultimately led to him speaking through tears. Stewart explained, in a broken voice, that he considers his duty to make jokes a privilege, and open satire in this country a luxury.

To break the tension, he turned to self-mockery, explaining, "They said to get back to work, and there were no jobs available for a man in the fetal position under his desk crying, which I gladly would have taken" ("September 11"). Even in such serious context, the audience certainly appreciated the joke. The show continued with old clips from past episodes, none of which related to terrorism or the attacks in the slightest. These clips, with the sole purpose to make the viewer smile, were certainly a breath of fresh air for watchers. Stewart, like Letterman,

was apprehensive to return, but ultimately turned to other sources for humor to fulfill his responsibility as an entertainer, even if he felt that he returned to the circuit a little late.

Interestingly enough, one of the last major television programs to return was one of the oldest and most watched. This was not really the show's fault, though, as the season was not set to air until September 29th, 2001. The return of *Saturday Night Live* to NBC that year was potentially the trickiest; this was a show that was not only set up for several performers and major celebrities, but *SNL* is a sketch show based on topical humor. Therefore, in order to establish the show's return as appropriate, episode one of Season 27 began a bit differently than most other episodes, with a Tribute to 9/11 in the very beginning of the program. Mayor Giuliani, amongst two dozen New York City firemen, addressed the nation with a speech of America's strength and willpower to make decisions based on freedom, not fear ("SNL"). His speech was followed by a performance by Paul Simon singing "The Boxer," ending with the famous line, "But the fighter still remains" ("The Boxer").

After such a somber and touching introduction, the direction of the episode became unclear for a moment when the camera panned back to Giuliani and the firefighters. Lorne Michaels, producer of the show, joined them, and thanked the mayor for being there, to which Giuliani responded, "Thank you, Lorne. Having our city's institutions up and running sends a message that New York City is open for business. *Saturday Night Live* is one of our great New York City institutions, and that's why it's important for you to do your show tonight" ("SNL"). This straightforward invitation compelled both actors and viewers of SNL to continue the usual funny and heart-lifting routine. The biggest sigh of relief came, though, when a tense Lorne Michaels anxiously asked, "Can we be funny again?" After a few nervous chuckles from the audience, the mayor quipped, "Why start now?" ("SNL") That moment, just two and a half

weeks after September 11th, marked the point in which many felt it was officially time to entertain. The same tone and gusto took a while to return completely, of course, but New York was now much less tentative about finding simple relief in laughter.

For those few weeks of limbo after 9/11, a void lingered inside of all of us that genuinely yearned for happiness, but the majority was too timid to take action. This is what made a lot of people wonder if it was “too soon” to enjoy themselves. How could we be sure of when the grief was allowed to end and the moving on begin? For me, it was being able to watch *King of Queens* reruns with my mom again. But it really wasn't just watching—it was being able to find sincere comfort in the activity. It was the actions of others, however distant, making me laugh. Entertainers gave me the feeling that, in the midst of all this, we *could* find enjoyment. David Letterman's saying was perfect for the situation: “For the love of God, folks, don't try this at home!” After all, he's the expert. And we needed to hear that it was okay.

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