

# Send in the clowns

For a few weeks during the Christmas season, items that I had ordered online were either ransacked or stolen. I'd come home to find my packages shredded and some, if not all, of their contents removed. The first time was frustrating, the next few times maddening.

A police officer tried to console me by telling me that this was also happening to many of my neighbors, but I didn't find that comforting. My friend's attempt was better: She sent me a video of a burglar who gets surprised by a "glitter bomb" of confetti as he tries to commit a similar crime (no one was harmed and to the best of my knowledge the video was staged). While I would not have done this myself, watching it was cathartic. They don't call it comic relief for nothing.

I've been thinking a lot about the important role comedians play in a culture, especially in dark and discouraging times. The comedian's role has historically been one that offers a necessary reprieve, whether in the form of the clown, court jester or stand-up comic.

But they also serve society by speaking aloud hard truths in a manner in which they can be received. The Shakespearean fools are anything but foolish, and the audience relies on them to convey the deeper meaning of a scene.

Today's comedians play no less an important role. Here I am not referring to late night talk show hosts who tend to fan flames of anger and resentment. I mean those comedians who take the time to observe cultural phenomena at length and then skillfully share what they discover.

A good comedian helps an audience to recognize common absurdities, inconsistencies and hypocrisies in any given cultural moment. Their real genius is helping audiences to recognize the ones in which they also take part.

In some ways, watching a good stand-up routine is like doing a guided examination of conscience. When done well, these routines help us pause and take an honest look at cultural tides. We laugh in part because we're uncomfortable, but also out of relief. The truth does set you free.

Take for example the emerging comic Ryan Hamilton, who with wit and charm, is able to address the serious issue of the breakdown of natural communities and courtship through bits on geolocation dating apps:

“We have all of these devices constantly broadcasting our location, so here’s what dating has become in the modern world: who’s right here, right now. Who are you interested in? Everyone in a hundred-yard radius, basically. I’m not interested in a long-distance relationship.”

Or Sebastian Maniscalco, who tackles our cultural obsession with taking photos of ourselves: “Taking a photo of yourself? They call it a ‘selfie.’ I call it a ‘lonely.’ Do you know how alone you have to be, that you can’t find anybody to take a photo of you?”

And against the backdrop of the sexual abuse crisis, distrust in episcopal leadership and polarization among the church’s members, at least one Catholic comedian has emerged to help break the tension. Jeremy McLellan, who hones his comedic chops on Twitter, has taken to producing satirical videos in which he poses as a journalist reporting on Catholic news, but which ultimately challenge Catholics to offer a better, more consistent witness.

I’d venture to say that comedians are some of the only cultural commentators with the discipline to thoroughly examine a phenomenon at length before weighing in on it. Many who should have that responsibility, including everyone from public intellectuals to priests — seem unable to exercise restraint against the lure of public, reactive online commentary.

Comedians have become some of our wisest and most contemplative figures. They have the capacity for thoughtful, sustained reflection that is desperately needed today.

In times like these, I say, send in more clowns.

