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September 30, 2022 -

As told to Adam Schatz, 2553 words.

Tags: Comedy, Writing, Radio, Identity, Mental health, Mentorship, Day jobs.

On not being afraid to do something new

Comedian, writer, and radio host Tom Scharpling discusses finding the universal in the personal, learning from our day jobs, and how any advice he gives is for himself, too.

You've hosted the radio call-in show *The Best Show with Tom Scharpling* for 21 years. Last year you published a book, *It Never Ends: A Memoir with Nice Memories!*. In the spirit of doing one thing for so long, anything that's new must be revelatory. Even though it's still your voice, when it takes the shape of a book, people receive you in a different way. It must feel nice to be pushed into the deep end of a new pool.

Oh absolutely. That was the biggest thing for me, just the lifelong fetishizing of what it'd be like to one day write a book. Would I do it? Is this going to be a pipe dream that I'd never get to? To just be able to jump in and experience every aspect of what it means to put one of these things together and to see it through to the level of what I wanted it to be was uncharted territory. I was not ready. I've been writing my whole life, but not writing like this. I've been broadcasting for my whole life, but this was unlike anything I've ever done. So much of it was new to me.

Is there any one part of the book writing process that made you feel "This is different, this is something I couldn't plan for?"

I couldn't plan for what it was like to not hide behind characters or move between fictional storylines. I didn't know what the toll of being so literal with things was going to be, where suddenly I was talking about myself every day. That adds up. There's a real mental exhaustion I felt when I started mining my own stories, and turning them into humor was the next part of it. It was like, am I turning my life into some sort of punchline for everyone's amusement? But it's mine, I only have this. Am I selling myself out to make people laugh?

There's seemingly two categories of stories within the book. There are the stories that place the humor first. For the other category of story, the ones that highlight the darker parts of your childhood and the path that got you to where you are now, did you try to find the humor to act as connective tissue?

The goal with the book was just to always be funny in one way or another. I had two purposes going into it and I needed to find a way to weave them together. One was to be funny, because I wanted to write a funny book, but I also wanted to tell these stories and give context for who I am and how I got here. If I avoided some of the rougher aspects, I wouldn't have been telling the full story. I would have known in my head that I'm ducking, and not saying "I was in a hospital, I got electroconvulsive therapy." If I denied those things, there would be a false aspect on the most foundational level. The goal became for the funny stories find some deeper resonance in these and connect them to what they mean in a larger sense, and then conversely try and find some funny stuff in the hard parts. But the goal was always to be funny, that's all I ever wanted to do with the book.

There's a through-line between your earlier influences that lit that spark, where the jokes can be truly laugh-out-loud funny, but also really brutal. I think that lends to having humor as a defense mechanism, amidst a tragedy.

One of the worst and best parts of this whole experience was when I was trying to track down this psychiatrist who had administered my treatments, and he didn't remember me. In that moment I had two thoughts side by side, and one was *this is the worst thing*, and I was just destroyed by that. I shut down for days. I still knew in my mind *well that's the end of the book*.

Take a break, you've got to!

Seriously, that is a priority for me, the next bunch of stuff is just going to be funny. Any kind of self help thing just doesn't fit for me, I don't feel like I have the tools to do that properly. I'd do other people a *huge* disservice. And I'd do myself a disservice because that's not where my heart is. I'm figuring out that if there were two settings on this, the comedy and the tragedy, I've lived with both his whole time, and the comedy is there for a reason.

Your story and trajectory is so specific, but there must have been many people since the book's release who have reached out to you in response to one story or another. How does that feel?

It's a reaffirmation that everybody has something. That's what I really wanted to touch on. My thing is only my thing, no one is going to have the same story, but a lot of people are going to have their version of my story and see those commonalities and realize that stuff happens to everybody, sometimes you get a little more of it, sometimes you get a little less of it, and it's a matter of staying on your feet, getting through it, and coming out the other side. I wanted to communicate that whatever you've been carrying, it doesn't have to turn into shame, which is unfortunately what happened to me for so much of my life. Me talking about it has been the process of unburdening, and also letting other people know we don't have to carry these things as burdens of shame. You didn't do something wrong because something happened in your life. But some of us are stuck with these brains that will mutate that into shame and guilt.

That really connects to those through-lines you were saying you tried to find between all the stories in the book. There are these tentpoles in "It Never Ends," *shame* is a big one and *kindness* is another one and *drive* and *humor* as well, and it's really interesting to read and experience when those energies are running parallel and when they fully smash into each other head on.

Thank you, that was the goal, to keep all these plates spinning the whole time. The part that's so weird now is, if I was going to try and do this a second time I think I would be terrified of certain parts of writing this, because I was just so dumb with it, I just didn't know, I started writing this not knowing what it was going to be. I'm interested in trying something else where I don't know what the process will be.

I'm finally reading *Trouble Boys* (the Replacements biography by Bob Mehr), and that's absolutely the recurring theme from it, that Paul Westerberg is acting dumber than he is, and the thrill of that dumbing down identity. Then on stage he's acting meaner than he is, and sometimes you accidentally just become that way.

They became the screwups they pretended to be, and that's the tragedy of that band. But if I ultimately become stupid? I'd be very into that. To not be able to tell the difference between Kate Bush and Bush. That would be the greatest.

A lot of the people *The Best Show* celebrates actually live in that weird Venn diagram. Andrew Dice Clay is another example. There should be a reference list of people who began as send-ups of a character and just couldn't get out of the bear trap and became the thing.

Maybe with me this ends with some giant laugh track machine alone as I watch the world crumble around me.

I've come to realize that the brain I've got, it sometimes doesn't do me favors, but ultimately I'll take it. I'd rather have this overly driven brain that won't let me quit and makes me feel like a dog that won't let go of a bone.

It's how we learn. When you're a kid, there's a such a weird boilerplate of things you're warned about. *Strangers, drugs, bullies maybe. No parental figure properly puts into words that you're going to make stupid decisions and have to live with them, and that's not specific to just you. That's what being a kid is. It's those training wheels of trying to be the adult you want to be. It's like, I'm a person who goes to concerts, I'm sixteen.* The way you think you look when you're sixteen versus when you see a sixteen year-old when you're older.

They should be at home in a crib. What are you doing out and about pretending to be an adult?

Exactly. I do think in lieu of an officer coming to your school and warning you about the pitfalls of putting yourself out there, your book can now be the place where people will get those lessons.

Any time I give any advice, I know I'm giving it to myself at the same time. You're right, though, parents warn you not to drink and drive, but they don't warn you about the tiny, stupid things. There's no guidance about that. "Hey, maybe if you go to a concert, just play it cool and act like you've been there before. Just see what other people are doing, read the room and act accordingly..." I never got any advice like that.

I think parents want to maintain the illusion that they've never screwed up for as long as possible. Which is pretty unhealthy probably...

Well yeah, it's a total lie.

It's a big lie!

It's an enormous lie, where by omission they aren't talking about the way they've screwed up over time, but it is funny, those are the things you're completely on your own with.

You write about the time you spent working at the sheet music store, World Of Music, in Summit New Jersey. I loved reading about Jim, the owner.

He was, and still is, an uncle to me in terms of advice and worldview and even though he was just a maniac in certain ways, I love him to death. He taught me so much stuff.

There's the story in the book about Jim losing his temper on a customer who perused for an hour and purchased two guitar picks, but are there any other stories of him that helped shape the way you saw the world?

I was just with him every day for years, because we worked at this store side by side. We just would laugh and laugh and try to get through the days. I believed in that store so much and got so much satisfaction from working there and seeing it succeed, it was just a special learning experience. I took all of those skills and brought them into writing and broadcasting. I learned more about professionalism and dedication from him and from my mother than anywhere else.

I find it interesting that even in the first places you decided to work, you still end up in the underdog of business. Working at a sheet music store rather than working at a record store..you don't need to be paid hourly to learn how to listen to records.

No, I got every lesson I could get from going into record stores, I didn't need to work at one.

That trajectory of going from a sheet music store when sheet music was very much out of fashion, into an unpaid position at a community radio station (WFMU), which is sort of like the sheet music store of radio stations; it wouldn't be an enjoyable story if you didn't land where you are now. If there is anyone taking advice from your experiences, it's not about looking at every individual hardship and saying, let me look at this specific moment and ask "did this teach me anything? Is it just bad luck?" But rather ask if you can get past it and end up in a place where you can be happy and be surrounded by people you love and choose to be around. That's the triumph and maybe it justifies why we have to go through anything.

I couldn't say it any better. Why didn't you write my book?

I'd like to spend a final moment talking about your Paul Simon music video pitch. The joy of a book like yours is that you fill it with as many stories as you can and different people will gravitate towards different parts and tell you which made them laugh the most, and your failed Paul Simon video pitch just made me laugh so hard. Because I can really see it. It stays with me.

Oh, I can watch that video with my eyes closed. I can't even tell you what song it is, I think I just set it to "You Can Call Me Al" because I figured that version of Paul Simon deserves to get hit by a barrel, no offense to *Graceland* fans.

Would you mind walking me through it one more time?

Sure, it was going to be an OK Go style video, like for their song "This Too Shall Pass" with the giant Rube Goldberg machine. It's really just one of the most impressive feats that's ever been accomplished, that video. The video would start like that, then an oil drum goes rogue and bounces the wrong way and hits Paul Simon hard in the leg, and he hits the ground. It would all be in one shot, no cut-aways, he's in agony, and there's just this moment, this would have been the funniest part, too, this moment while he's in pain before people are sure whether he needs help or not...that just speaks volumes about me, that I find that the funniest moment. That when you're trying to figure out how bad a situation is. So he's lying on the ground in pain, some people come around to help him, it's not good. An ambulance pulls onto set and the camera follows him into the ambulance on the stretcher, and it would just go until the song ran out. That was my big pitch for a Paul Simon music video and shocker of shockers it did not get off the runway.

I mean, I think if anyone reading this wants to start the petition..there's one last chance.

I'm ready. I would go and do it today. I would quit my job, I'd quit everything to go make that video. If they were like "Let's shoot this video in the hottest of COVID hot zones, we're gonna shoot it in Tampa," I'd say "Let's do it."

Adam Schatz recommends (via Tom Scharpling)

Things that I've discovered through listening to Tom over the years

ABBA

Trouble Boys, the big and wonderful book about the Replacements by Bob Mehr

Comedian Mary Houlihan and her very funny monthly zine that I currently pay \$10/month for on Patreon

This video of when Lou Reed and Pavarotti performed "Perfect Day" together

Shout about what you love without remorse

Name

Tom Scharpling

Vocation

comedian, television writer, producer, music video director, radio host

Fact

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