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DEDICATION

For Frank Miles

My brother by choice.

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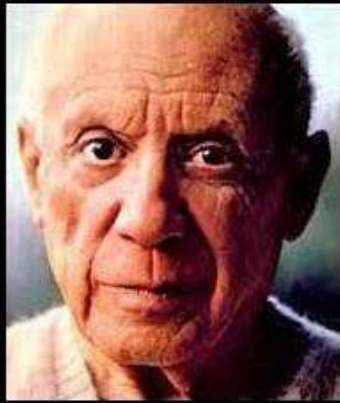
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INTRODUCTION

"I am always doing
that which I cannot do,
in order that I may
learn how to do it."

- Pablo Picasso



Can you really teach anyone to write jokes and humor?

Yes.

Uh, would you mind ... elaborating a little on that?

Sheesh, pretty pushy considering this book is free. Okay, fine.

Yes, I can teach anyone to write the funny. And the first step to learning how to write the funny is understanding how comedy, humor and jokes work. What are the cogs and gears, so to speak, and how do they all mesh?

A little background before I go on. I've been teaching stand-up comedy and joke writing professionally since 1982, or for history buffs, that's a little after Teddy Roosevelt left office. In the beginning I could write jokes and tell funny stories, but I didn't understand how I did that. If I was going to teach others how to do what I did, then I first had to understand how I did it. Right?

Most comedians work intuitively and that's great. Unless you want to instruct others. That's when you need technique. The only trouble was... there just wasn't any out there back then. Not any that made sense to me and that generated humor strong enough to put up on a professional stage.

So began my journey into discovering how information passes through the human mind to result in humor and laughter. What I call the machinery of humor. And eventually I

did learn a lot about how that machine operates. Now at last I really can teach you how to do what I did.

Does this eBook have two sections; one called Comic Structure and one called the Humor Generator?

Why yes it does. How odd you should ask such a specific question.

You're going to master two of the fundamental mechanisms required to create all comedy, humor, and jokes. In the first section I'll introduce those mechanisms and show you how they work. In the second section we'll actually use those two mechanisms in a step-by-step system for coming up with multiple joke ideas.

By the way, these tools, Comic Structure and the Humor Generator, were uncovered and refined through thirty-five plus years of teaching joke writing and stand-up comedy. They're in here because they really work and they've been shown to work over the long haul for many people in many places.

Why should I learn about stand-up comedy? I don't really want to be a comedian.

So don't be one. Seriously, you don't have to do that and no one here is saying you do.

As time went by, I'd get students in my classes who were public speakers, presenters, trainers, comedy writers, lawyers, and even doctors. Not a lot of politicians. Maybe they were already tired of being laughed at. Afterwards these people reported that the skills they'd learned in a stand-up comedy classes were helping them at work. Big time too. It became clear to me then that the techniques used by professional comedians could also be used for adding humor to almost any business situations and by absolutely anyone. Which is why we're here right now.

But you don't have to just trust me. Check out this article by Jenna Goudreau in Forbes Magazine: [Are funny People More Successful In Business?](#)

The article is about Steve Cody, the co-founder and managing partner of Peppercom. So one night he's suffering through an endless business dinner event in some hotel ballroom somewhere. He's getting ready to bail when the next speaker on the stage turns out to be an IT guy who also happened to do stand-up comedy. That guy's talk was both informative and funny. It was the memorable highlight of the entire evening.

Shortly after that, Cody signed himself up for a stand-up comedy class on the hunch that humor could be helpful in the office too, and not just on a hotel ballroom stage. He was right. He soon began experiencing the crossover benefits in his business relationships. He used humor to put his clients at ease. He got better at engaging his presentation audiences. Boardrooms stopped being bored rooms.

Cody wanted his employees to reap the benefits of his stand-up comedy training too. So he launched a 90-minute comedy class for his new recruits and staffers. Cody said, “It infuses them with confidence, bonds them with coworkers, teaches the nuances of reading an audience and environment, and livens up their presentations.”

So yeah, you don’t want to be a stand-up comedian. We knew that going in. But the skills of communicating with humor can give you a real advantage in business and life. And wasn’t that your reason for downloading this eBook?

Have you seen any good Ted Talks lately by Andrew Stanton, and didn’t you already kinda do this joke?

Yes and yes.

I was watching a Ted Talk recently, The Clues to a Great Story by Andrew Stanton (writer Toy Story, Finding Nemo). Stanton opened with a story that closed with a huge laugh. As the laugh subsided he said, “Storytelling is joke telling. It’s knowing your punch line, your ending, knowing that everything you’re saying, from the first sentence to the last, is leading to a singular goal, and ideally confirming some truth that deepens our understandings of who we are as human beings.”

The structure of humor is the distilled structure of all powerful and pointed communication. It’s all basically the same deal. Really it is.

Who would benefit from learning this Comic Structure?

Anyone who works with other people, sometimes gets in front of them, and wants to be more humorous. See if you are anywhere in the following list:

- Sales People
- Managers
- CEOs, CFOs, and E I E I Os
- Business Speakers
- Business Writers
- Business Trainers
- Business Presenters
- Public Speakers
- Motivational Speakers
- Toastmasters

- Copywriters
- Clergy
- Creative Writers
- All Writers
- Teachers
- Doctors
- Lawyers
- Police
- Everyone at the DMV
- Comedians
- Actors
- You

I've been told that humor can be dangerous in business.

In the hands of the uneducated and inexperienced, jokes can be too controversial, or inappropriate, or outright offensive. Like the one about the Priest, the Leprechaun, and the Holy Lubricant. (Damn, I wish I could tell you that one, but it wouldn't be inappropriate here.)

This is where the power of knowledge really comes into play. Once you know and can apply Comic Structure, you'll make fewer missteps with your use of humor.

Are you going to teach me about how to deliver or perform humor, and am I getting paid to lob you these set-up questions?

Yes and no respectively.

Just understanding comic structure, and what's going on beneath the words and actions, will tell you a great deal about how to perform humor at work or anywhere.

How?

Well, for one thing you'll know why it's funny. Knowing the desired outcome informs your word choices, which is a part of the performance. Take for example this deceptively simple story:

“A Zen monk was on one side of a rushing river and wanted to cross it. He saw a second Zen monk on the other side of the river, so he yelled, ‘How do I get on the other side of the river?’ The second monk yelled back, ‘You’re already on the other side of the river.’”

This story can be easily messed up by not understanding Comic Structure. For instance,

“A Zen monk was standing on a river bank. He saw another monk on the other side, so he yelled, ‘How do I get to your side of the river?’ The monk yelled back, ‘You’re already on the other side of the river.’”

The Comic Structure is wrong because the beginning doesn't support the Punch. Just a few changed words and the funny story turns into nonsense.

What are some other ways this new knowledge could help?

Knowing Comic Structure keeps you safer in the business world because you'll be using humor exactly when and where you want to. And nowhere else. If you don't know Comic Structure, you can accidentally make inappropriate jokes in, let's say, a presentation, and not know why everyone is laughing.

For instance, I was watching a well-rehearsed talk at a business workshop. A young lady was giving her talk and said, “I was at home eating. This guy... [pause].” Terrible place for a pause because the audience heard, “I was at home eating this guy.” The crowd laughed really hard and for a long time. At her. Not with her.

She was puzzled because she didn't recognize the joke. And that's because she didn't have a deep and habitual understanding of Comic Structure. If she did, she could have easily identified and changed the language. Or just not paused.

I'm afraid that if I try to inject too much humor into my work it will just backfire.

Yeah, it probably would. So don't do that. (See, that was easy.)

Look, professional stand-up comedians must work in at least five laughs per minute. But in business, as a speaker, trainer, or presenter, if you get one laugh every three to five minutes, you'll stand out as entertaining and humorous. Getting one appropriate laugh every five minutes is a doable goal by anyone who gets up in front of people. And you don't need to tell a joke in every single conversation either. Also, when you do crack a funny one, leave it at that. Just one. You don't need to tell more than one joke in the same topic or situation.

So how would you sum up this opening section?

Laughter is universal because Comic Structure is universal. How the human brain processes and responds to humor is exactly the same for everyone. My book *Step by Step to Stand-Up Comedy* has been translated from the original English version into Chinese, Indonesian, and Spanish. This was only possible because the Comic Structure I teach applies to every language and every culture.

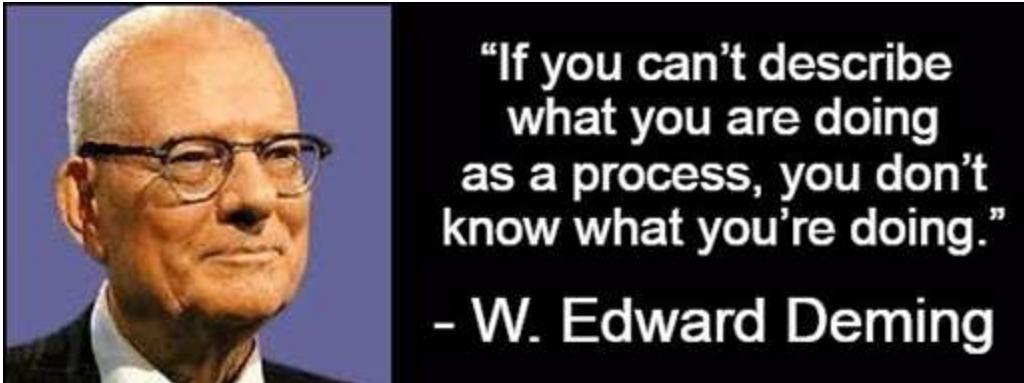
So let's move on now to those two fundamental elements of Comic Structure I mentioned to you earlier. Right after we close with a riddle style joke.

"How can you miss every deadline you ever set, deliver nothing you promised to your customers, have all of your bosses know it, and still keep your job?"

"Get reelected."

And now we move on to the section on Comic Structure.

GREG DEAN'S COMIC STRUCTURE



What's a joke?

Good question. Most people would define a joke as something someone says or does that makes others laugh. That statement, though true, doesn't really tell us what a joke is. It just describes the desired effect. What about jokes which get a huge laugh in one situation and a roar of silence in another? If a joke doesn't get a laugh, does it suddenly stop being a joke?

Interestingly enough, people usually recognize a joke whether it makes them laugh or not. Why? Because there's some consistent, intrinsic structure that everyone identifies as humor. Until now, no one has presented this structure in an understandable manner. That's about to change. Explaining Comic Structure to you is exactly what this section is all about.

ONE-LINER JOKE STRUCTURE

First let's examine the one-liner joke. Since this is the simplest type of joke it's easier to understand the elements and how they fit together. Later, I'll go deeper into the variations of how jokes work in storytelling.

SETUP AND PUNCH

Let's begin with what most people already know about one-liner jokes. Traditionally, they contain two parts: Setup and Punch.

Why don't you use the term punch line?

For one-liner jokes that term works well, but as we get into the non one-liner variations, it quickly becomes apparent that some joke Punches are not always lines. To avoid confusion, we'll use the term punch.

Let's examine this one-liner joke:

*"I'm on the Drinking Man's Diet. It really works. I've already lost three **days**"*

The Setup and Punch are usually defined in this way:

The Setup is the first part of the joke that sets up the laugh.

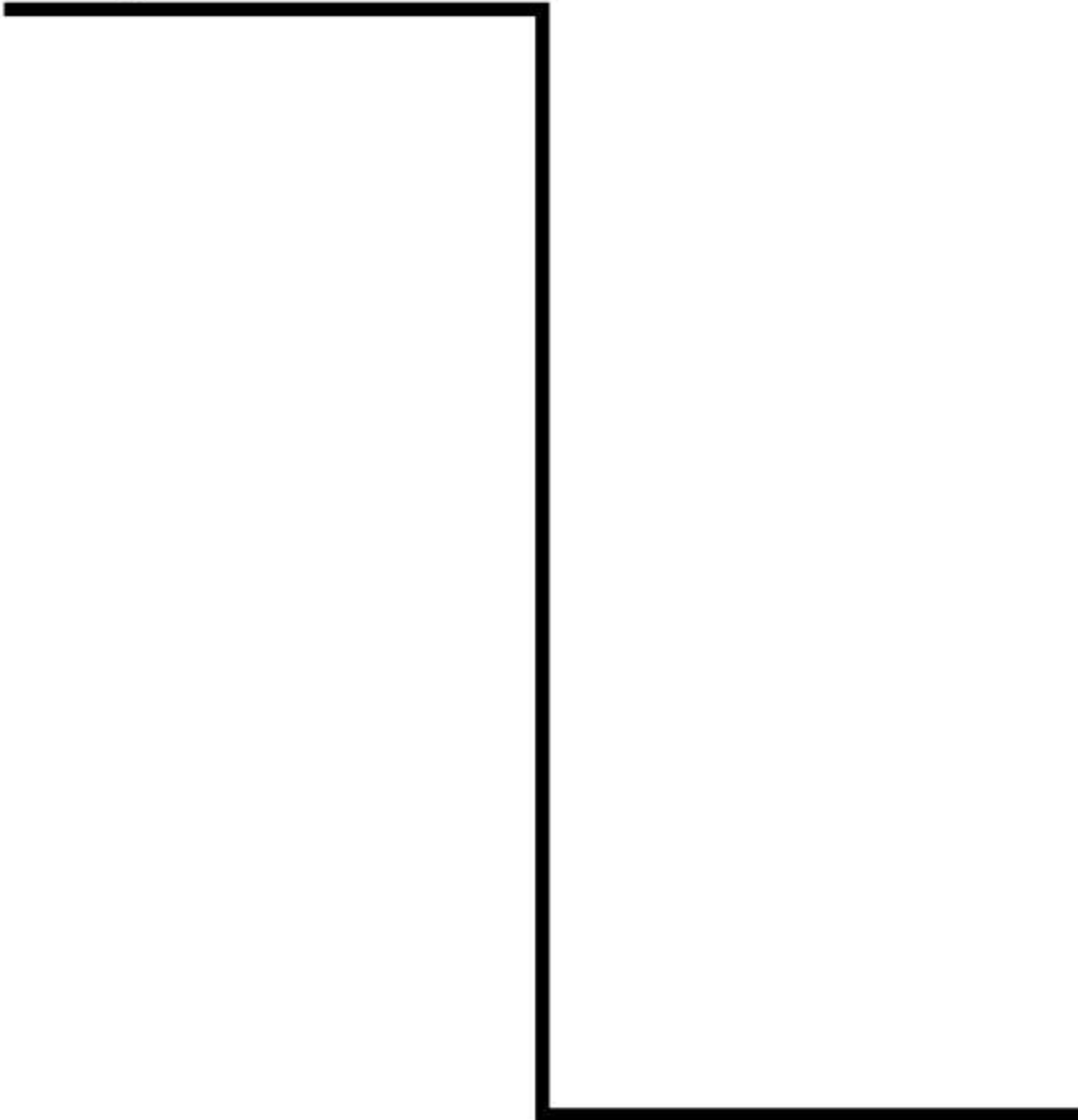
The Punch is the second part that makes you laugh.

And that's great except for one small problem: it doesn't really explain anything. Let's see if we can do better.

To help explain the joke structure, I've designed a visual device, Greg Dean's Comic Structure Diagram. When we put the above joke on Diagram 1 (next page) we can clearly identify the Setup and Punch:

Greg Dean's Comic Structure - Diagram 1

Setup: *"I'm on the Drinking Man's Diet. It really works. I've already lost three..."*



Punch: *"days."*

You'll notice that in this diagram I've added the words "expectation" and "surprise." This is a key to understanding the mental processes of humor. Let me unpack that now.

WHAT JOKES DO

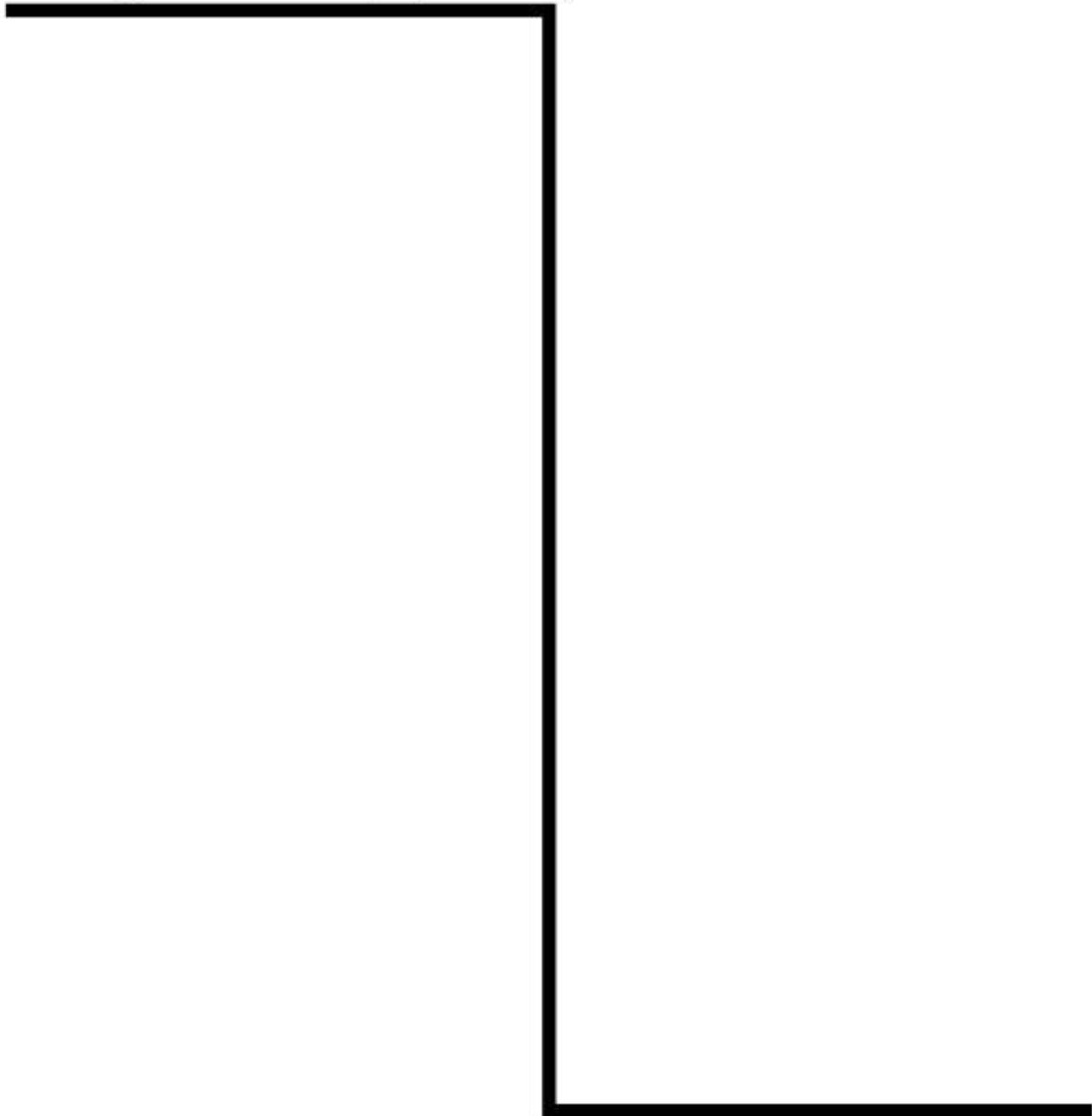
Expectation and Surprise

The Setup and the Punch are directly related to expectation and surprise. Let's keep looking at the same joke to understand the relationship between the Setup and expectation and the Punch and surprise.

Using the same joke in Diagram 2:

Greg Dean's Comic Structure - Diagram 2

Setup: *"I'm on the Drinking Man's Diet. It really works. I've already lost three..."* (expectation)



Punch: *"days."* (surprise)

Notice how the Setup creates a *false expectation* and the Punch comes as a surprise. The trick is you cannot be surprised unless you're expecting something else first.

This understanding of expectation and surprise actually goes back to Socrates. This was an important breakthrough in humor theory because it established that jokes have two parts.

And here they are:

The Setup, which creates an expectation.

The Punch, which reveals a surprise.

So now that you understand this, you should be able to write a joke?

Yeah, but I can't. So what's the deal?

The deal is simply this: it isn't enough to know what a joke does. You need to know how a joke does what it does. And I'm going to explain that right now, just because you're reading this eBook.

HOW JOKES WORK

Assumptions Create Expectations

It should be clear that what Setups do is cause us to have an expectation. To understand how jokes work, we must understand how the mind builds an expectation.

Here's how. After hearing a Setup, we imagine a scene in our minds. Since this scene is only in our minds, it isn't real. We've constructed it by making a series of assumptions based on our past experience so that the Setup makes sense to us. Then we accept what we believe the scene means, and then fully expect that belief to be true.

With jokes, making assumptions about the meaning of the Setup is what creates our expectations. Since the expectation is built from a collection of assumptions, it can function as a false expectation to misdirect the audience. This is what allows jokes to work.

What's an assumption?

I'm sorry, I assumed you knew.

An assumption can be any thought based on remembering, taking something for granted, presupposing, conjecturing, presuming, forecasting, projecting onto, theorizing about, speculating upon, or accepting that something is as it's always been. If that doesn't help, try this definition:

Assumptions are everything you know or imagine, but aren't directly perceiving right now.

That's deep.

But it's true. Anything you currently cannot see, hear, feel, taste, or smell exists only as an assumption in your mind. The chances are that it does exist, but since you have no direct evidence that it does, you're making an assumption.

We do this because sane human beings, as a rule, have a profound need for things to make sense. If something doesn't make sense, we'll fill in the information so it will. And we do that by making assumptions based on our past experience.

Take this eBook for example. You know it's a book because of your past experience with other eBooks. Now, since your perspective or point of view limits the information your senses can experience directly, while you're reading one page, you can't see the other pages. This is a fancy way of saying, it's impossible to experience everything all the time.

But, because you have a mental model of what this and other eBooks are like, you assume the text will not end until the eBook is completed. You assume the writing will continue to be in English. You assume you'll continue to read from left to right. You're making assumptions about everything about this eBook you aren't directly perceiving, right now.

Doing this is not a bad thing. In fact, it's absolutely necessary. Imagine a world without assumptions. You'd have to carefully test each step you took to make sure the floor would hold your weight. You'd have to peek behind everything to find out whether the backs were actually there. You'd have to look in a mirror to make sure you're still human. You'd have to call the IRS every year to determine if they still wanted your money. Get the idea?

HOW SETUPS CREATE EXPECTATION

Target Assumption

The first joke mechanism I'd like to explain is the Target Assumption. Of the many assumptions you imagined based on this Setup,

"I'm on the Drinking Man's Diet. It really works, I've already lost three..."

at least one will be the Target Assumption.

Here's the Target Assumption on Diagram 3:

Greg Dean's Comic Structure - Diagram 3

Setup: *"I'm on the Drinking Man's Diet. It really works. I've already lost three..."*

Target Assumption: He lost weight.

Reinterpretation:

Punch: *"days."*

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