

# The New York Times

## Opinion

### Talk Show

Dick Cavett



June 27, 2008, 7:43 pm

## Smiling Through

Who decided that it's variety that's the spice of life?

I submit that, rather, it is *contrast* that is life's piquant condiment.

Last week, I attended two events in my home state of Nebraska that supplied both variety and contrast on successive days. A bit like the Mafioso some years ago who got married one day and began a 10-year jail sentence the next (a cynic might consider them both "sentences").

On the one hand, I addressed a group of noble citizens whose job is aiding and counseling poor devils suffering from depression. "Cavett Returns Home to Discuss 'The Worst Agony Devised For Man'" read the next day's headline in the Lincoln paper. Despite the subject matter, I got quite a lot of laughs. My credentials? Having been there myself.

The year before I had talked to a similar group of care-givers in Omaha in front of an audience that included what you'd think would be an entertainer's nightmare: a hundred or more people in the throes of the disease. I expected no laughs.

I had just gotten started telling the grim faces that I knew what they were going through when a large man — in pajamas, as I recall — stood up and slowly made his way toward me.

"Paranoid schizophrenic," someone stage-whispered to me. There was general tension in the room as the man continued to approach. When he stopped two feet in front of me, and stared at me, I heard myself say, "Come here often?" Loud general laughter broke the tension. He returned peacefully to his seat — probably without having heard me or the laughter.

Miraculously, I kept them laughing for perhaps an hour. Clearly the fact that I knew about their plight from my own experience had a lot — or maybe everything — to do with it.

I was able to say to them, *I know that everyone here knows that feeling when people say to you, "Hey, shape up! Stop thinking only about your troubles. What's to be depressed about? Go swimming or play tennis and you'll feel a lot better. Pull up your socks!" And how you, hearing this, would like nothing more than to remove one of those socks and choke them to death with it.* (Laughter mixed with some minor cheering.)

The reward from this was unique in my experience. Afterwards, those in charge seemed amazed and delighted. One said, "See Clara over there? She hasn't moved a muscle in her face for six months and you had her laughing out loud."

(Such inane advice of the "socks up" variety, by the way, can only be excused by the fact that if you've never had it you can never begin to imagine the depth of the ailment's black despair. Another tip: Do not ask the victim what he has "to be depressed about." The malady doesn't care if you're broke and alone or successful and surrounded by a loving family. It does its democratic dirty work to your brain chemistry regardless of your "position.")

My time with them in Omaha a year ago was not recorded but I would rather have a tape of that day with that audience than just about anything I've done. Of the things I said to them I can recall only this story:

Personal item: Once I said to a doctor during a "session" that I wished he could get inside my head for just a minute because there's no way of imagining what this feels like. "Oh, I know," he said, "I got pretty sad when my father died."

Defying standard protocol on the couch, I arose on one elbow, turned to him — he was seated behind me — and said, "Do you think grief is even close to this?" To his credit he replied, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

(The anger you feel at such a moment pumps a shot of adrenaline that can make you feel symptom-free . . . all too briefly.)

The fact that these afflicted people in Omaha knew me to be a "celebrity" had a good deal to do with the unexpected success of the whole thing. Some had even seen me talk about the nasty illness on television in the early '80s, or in *People* magazine. While not wishing to become the poster boy for depression, I still found the rewards undeniably pleasant, gratifying and touching.

As in: *Dear Mr. Cavett, You don't know it but you saved my dad's/ wife's/daughter's life. Followed by various forms of, My dad's seeing that Dick Cavett could have it made him feel he wasn't a freak, and he finally went for treatment. We are so grateful.*

Apparently one thing I said on "Larry King" back then hit home hard. It was that when you're downed by this affliction, if there were a curative magic wand on the table eight feet away, it would be too much trouble to go over and pick it up.

There's also the conviction that it may have worked for others but it wouldn't work for you. Your brain is busted and nothing's going to help.

The most extreme problem that depression presents is suicide. It's the reason you don't dare delay treatment. Don't mess with it. Run for help — whether it's talk therapy, drug therapy or the miraculous results of ECT (electroconvulsive therapy, erroneously labeled “shock therapy”). The shock involved is closer to insulin shock than electric shock. It's a toss-up whether more people have been scared off it by “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest” than have been scared off medication by Tom Cruise's idiotic braying on the subject on “The Today Show.” (Matt Lauer should have hit him with a wet turbot.)

I guarantee that one result of [this week's Supreme Court decision on guns](#) will be the deaths of people who have a gun at home for the first time while in depression. In the depths of the malady, getting a stamp on a letter is a day's work. Going out to somehow arrange for a gun would be way beyond your capability while stricken. But having one near at hand is another matter. There were times when I longed for my ancient .22 single-shot squirrel-hunting rifle. Luckily it had been given away years earlier.

Suicide rarely happens when you are all the way down in the uttermost depths. Again, it's too much trouble. Perhaps the saddest irony of depression is that suicide happens when the patient gets a little better and can again function sufficiently. “She seemed to be improving,” is the sad cry of the mourners.

Two prime victims of the disease are your libido and your ability to read. Five times through a paragraph and unable to say what it's about. But, oddly, you can read a book or article about depression with full comprehension. The two best books I know of are William [Styron's monumental account](#) of his own case, “Darkness Visible,” and Kay Redfield Jamison's [“An Unquiet Mind.”](#)

Damned if I had meant to rattle on so long on this subject, depriving you of my contrasting event, the Johnny Carson Comedy Festival in his hometown of Norfolk, Neb. (I'll get to that.)

And pardon me for teasing you last time about a promised tale of espionage and murder. The case is more complex than I imagined and will take some time.

And is anyone still wondering about the error by the test-makers on that exam that American students performed so dismally on?