Nonsense

THE POWER OF NOT KNOWING

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The Resolving Mind

HOW SENSE MAKING WORKS

GÖRAN LUNDQVIST ARRIVED home from work and asked his wife a rhetorical question. "Today," he said to her, "we made a deal with Damien Hirst and another with John Irving. Guess which business I'm in?" In a past life, Lundqvist had been a professional athlete. He had competed in the Olympics as a diver twice, in 1960 and 1964. He was also an actor, appearing in four Ingmar Bergman films, including the Golden Globe–winning *Wild Strawberries*. But in the late 1990s, he was the president of a company.

At that time, the company was in the midst of one of the most productive advertising campaigns in the history of marketing. The campaign, which was launched in November 1980, was not only immensely effective, but also exceedingly long-running. In 1992, the company was inducted into the American Marketing Association's Marketing Hall of Fame, in a class with only two others, Coca-Cola and Nike. It achieved that honor, uniquely, without the help of television ads.

In its heyday, the company ran ads developed by Andy Warhol,

Kurt Vonnegut, the *New Yorker*'s cartoonists, Marc Jacobs, T. C. Boyle, Helmut Lang, Jean Paul Gaultier, and Versace. Ads featured Salman Rushdie, Chuck Close, David Bowie, and Gus Van Sant. The company hired painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, interior and fashion designers, and folk artists. In 2002, *Forbes* ranked them as the world's top "luxury brand," ahead of Gucci, Tiffany, and BMW.

The company's product was vodka. Its name was Absolut.

In 1979, Absolut sold five thousand cases of vodka in the United States. Ten years later, it was shipping 2.5 million cases and had passed its rival Stolichnaya, completing a move from last to first in US imported vodka sales. As sales of spirits were dropping overall, Absolut was seeing annual growth of over 30 percent. In 1979, it had a 1 percent share of imported vodka sales. By 1989, it had a 60 percent share. "Absolut is in a category of its own," one prominent industry consultant gushed.

Carried out primarily in a single medium—glossy print magazines—Absolut's campaign was so compelling that it grew addictive. People who didn't even drink liquor would cut out the ads from magazines: collect, sell, and trade them. The Absolut Collectors Society was founded in 1995. It had a monthly newsletter and, at its peak, 2,500 members. High school and college librarians had to start streaking the ads with black markers so that students wouldn't remove them.

Absolut's success is especially noteworthy considering the long odds it faced. For one, vodka is hard to market. It doesn't have much of a taste or smell. It's not like whiskies, wines, or lagers. Vodka-tasting courses and vodka connoisseurs are rare. People don't usually order vodka flights at bars. There are also restrictions on how you can advertise liquor. You can't pass out samples door-to-door like detergent. Perhaps most dauntingly, Absolut is from Sweden. This drew a blank for many Americans, who often confused the country with Switzerland. At most, Americans thought of Volvo, blond

women, or snow. They didn't think of vodka. Russians drink vodka. Stolichnaya had the right heritage. Even Smirnoff, one of the top-selling American vodkas, had a Slavic name. It was a lot to overcome.

The company decided that for starters, it needed a unique bottle. In advertising, there's an adage: if you can't sell the product, sell the package. Nothing distinctive about vodka? Create a distinctive bottle. Absolut would mimic the perfume industry and transform the bottle into a work of craftsmanship or a fashion accessory. High-end perfume bottles are sculptures. Made of frosted or colored glass, the most exotic seem to have emerged from the sea or space or some foreign civilization.

Absolut took its inspiration from old Swedish medicine bottles. While most liquor bottles had long necks and square shoulders, Absolut's would have round shoulders and a short neck. Instead of a paper label, as other liquor bottles had, its label would be printed directly onto the glass. As final touches, the designers added decorative text and a seal of the Swedish distiller Lars Olsson Smith.

The advertising outfit TBWA (now TBWA Worldwide) was hired to promote Absolut. In his book *Adland*, Mark Tungate described the consumer feedback the ad company got when it tested the product. "We were given three pieces of advice," Claude Bonnange, the *B* in TBWA, explained. "First, change the name, because Absolut sounds arrogant. Second, change the bottle, because it looks like it's designed for urine samples. And third, change the logo, because the blue lettering is printed directly onto the glass, which means you can't see it on the shelf." But Michel Roux, head of Absolut's US distributor, liked the bottle's uniqueness. It would stay as it was.

Now TBWA just needed a memorable way to market the product. Traditionally, liquor ads were bottle-and-glass ads, which you can probably picture, or lifestyle ads, with photos of smiling models at fashionable parties. One of TBWA's first ideas was to poke fun at

Sweden's climate. A mock-up pictured a man ice bathing. THERE'S NOTHING THE SWEDES ENJOY MORE WHEN IT'S COLD, it read. An image of the Absolut bottle sat in one corner. TBWA's Geoff Hayes and Graham Turner knew it wasn't good enough, and it was Hayes who made the first breakthrough. He was lounging around one night in a Spartan apartment Turner described as consisting of "a bed and a mug." Sketching Absolut bottles, Hayes drew a halo over one of them. "Absolut," he wrote. "It's the perfect vodka." Turner simplified the catchphrase the next day to "Absolut Perfection."

The slogan set the template for hundreds of ads to come: a two-word headline, with Absolut as the first word. In the campaign's early years, the bottles in the ads were presented realistically and often embodied a person or a thing. In "Absolut Perfection," the bottle was an angel (or a haloed rascal). In "Absolut Elegance," the bottle was sporting a bow tie. "Absolut Profile" showed the bottle turned ninety degrees to one side.

One virtue of the ads was their touch of humor. Many of them flirted with self-parody. When Hayes created the "Absolut Perfection" ad, he knew that he was toying with comic-strip elements by presenting vodka as an angel as mischievous as Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes*. "Absolut Dream" was also cartoonish. It portrayed a thought bubble with the bottle's innermost fantasy: filling up a pair of martini glasses.

Richard Lewis, who was in charge of Absolut at TBWA and authored two books on its advertising story, emphasized that the ads also took a moment to digest. "Any piece of learning should take a second or two," Lewis told me. "We always believed that one of the cardinal aspects of the campaign was to treat the audience as smart. You create a little puzzle, or game, to bring them in, and then they feel better about themselves and better about us." Lewis knew that the ads challenged and "even befuddled" readers. The clues couldn't

be too obvious. The haloed bottle didn't read "Absolut Angel." "Absolut Elegance" didn't read "Absolut Black Tie." The ads hollowed out tiny spaces for readers to fill in with their imagination, like little brainteasers whose solutions were flavored with comedy. It's worth pausing to reflect on how outlandishly fruitful this simple approach became, and what Absolut's triumph tells us about the mind's attitude toward ambiguity.

IN 1949, TWO Harvard psychologists published a landmark experiment on reactions to incongruity that offers a complementary perspective to Absolut's case study. Jerome Bruner and Leo Postman believed that human perception, and more broadly how we make sense of the world, wasn't an altogether passive process. At that time, theorists had begun to conceptualize the mind as a computer, as if our brains simply respond by rote formula to different inputs, a view that stubbornly persists today across swaths of psychological science. Bruner and Postman instead thought that sense making was more active than reactive, and they engineered a way to test their suspicions: a peculiar set of playing cards where some of the black and red colors were reversed.

Bruner had first tried to get an American playing card company to produce the reverse-colored cards, taking care to use Harvard stationery to avoid looking like a card shark running a scam. But despite his best efforts and intentions, the company was reluctant to help out. "They were being a pain in the ass," he later recalled. Eventually he went to an art store accompanied by T. S. Eliot's sister-in-law, with whom he'd taken drawing lessons, to purchase the paints to create the trick cards.

Reverse-colored cards, observed for an instant, are ambiguous.

A red spade can look like a black spade or a red heart. A black heart could be a red heart or a black spade, and so on. Bruner and Postman guessed that the trick cards, glimpsed briefly, would trigger competing interpretations. For their experiment, they asked subjects to identify playing cards flashed before their eyes and describe what they saw. Mixed in with normal cards were those that shouldn't exist: red spades, red clubs, black hearts, and black diamonds. Each card was shown for a hundredth of a second and then for longer durations up to a full second, or until people correctly identified the card.

A remarkable 96 percent of participants, at first, described the trick cards as normal cards. People saw what they expected to see, denying any possible anomalies. One subject identified the black three of hearts as a red three of hearts sixteen times. Another described the same card as the three of spades twenty-four times. Yet another did the same thing forty-four times. Normal cards, the psychologists found, were identified after an average of twenty-eight milliseconds. People could name the number and suit of the normal cards almost instantaneously. Trick cards took four times longer, and even at a full second of exposure, subjects failed to identify the trick cards 10 percent of the time.

When some cards were flashed for longer durations, Bruner and Postman discovered, the subjects seemed torn between two different ideas of what the cards were. Here's how some people described the colors of red spades and red clubs:

Brown
Black and red mixed
Black with red edges
Black in red light
Purple
Black but redness somewhere

Rusty color
Rusty black
Black on reddish card
Olive drab
Grayish red
Looks reddish, then blackens
Blackish brown
Blurred reddish
Near black but not quite
Black in yellow light

Fifty percent of subjects were suspended in this cognitive limbo at some point. Even when they partially grasped that the trick cards were different, the subjects' perception still wasn't working like a camera. Reality was being skewed, dynamically constructed to align with drilled-in expectations. And when the subjects were stuck and yet still *had* to describe what they saw, many of them experienced the ambiguity of the trick cards as strikingly unpleasant. One subject, after seeing a red spade card, said this: "I can't make out the suit, whatever it is. It didn't even look like a card that time. I don't know what color it is now or whether it's a spade or heart. I'm not even sure now what a spade looks like! My God!"

Another subject was just as upset. "I'll be damned if I know now whether it's red or what!" Fifty-seven percent of participants shared this reaction.

Bruner and Postman unmasked the mind's natural tendency to paper over anomalies. They also revealed our distaste for ambiguity when we're under pressure—in this case, brought on by the experimenter's request to describe the cards. The stress of the experiment made the mental conflicts caused by the trick cards unpleasant. (Absolut ads aren't unpleasant, partly because readers aren't being ob-

served or evaluated.) More generally, Bruner and Postman vividly illustrated how mechanically our minds fill in gaps and dissolve discrepancies, and how preconceptions actively distort our experiences.

Our preconceptions are vital for making sense of things, planning, and taking action. Every day, automatically, we rely on small conjectures about the world to function. Think of them as the cause-and-effect associations—between objects, actions, events, people, and ideas—that guide our actions. For example, when driving a car, we expect that a red light means stop. We expect that when we turn on the kitchen faucet, beer won't pour out, but water will. We assume that working overtime will eventually lead to a raise. And we trust that spades will be black, not red. The stronger these assumed relationships are, the more automatically and actively our minds foist them upon whatever we encounter. That's why the subjects in Bruner and Postman's study saw red spades as black spades or red hearts. Playing cards' prototypes are ingrained so deeply that the subjects recognized them without truly looking.

Maybe the wildest example of expectations warping perception is the so-called McGurk effect, first reported in 1976. Imagine watching a silent video where a pair of lips utters the syllable "va." If you sync that video to an audio clip of the syllable "ba," what you see will dominate what you should hear. If you're looking at the lips, you'll actually hear "va." Close your eyes, and the correct "ba" sound will return. Our expectation that the syllables we hear and the way lips move will match is so strong that it changes the perception of sound. Check it out on YouTube—you'll be astonished.*

* Harry McGurk and John MacDonald first discovered the effect accidentally. They had been studying something else, and when MacDonald first watched the video, he thought that the technicians had misaligned the syllables and moving lips. The audio technicians hadn't noticed it, MacDonald told me, because as the audio was playing they had been looking down at their dubbing instrumentation. Search "BBC McGurk" on YouTube, and you'll find a nice demonstration of the effect.

Here's another illustration. In this example, we're consciously aware of the problem even as we unconsciously resolve it:

> Aoccdrnig to rseearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mtter in waht oerdr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porblem.

Amzanig, huh? What academic publications now call the "Cambridge University effect" actually began as a hoax. The scrambled words were circulated online in 2003, and there was never any study at Cambridge. But the hoaxer had made his or her point.

We should be thankful that the brain works in this way. It has to. We encounter so much information every day, we can't possibly absorb it all in fine-grained detail. We have to overgeneralize. The "fundamental problem of life," as the psychologist Jordan Peterson described it, "is the overwhelming complexity of being." To make our way, we have to be constantly stemming the deluge and, in his words, "eradicating vast swathes of information" irrelevant to our goals. Peterson praises this capacity of the mind as "the miracle of simplification." The only way we can manage the flood of perception is by creating and automatically deferring to working theories of what we're going to encounter—beliefs about the world, in the broadest sense.

"Belief," Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "is the engine that makes perception operate." Our expectations and assumptions—whether generous or hopeful, pitiless or woebegone—constantly bend and even warp the world we see. That's how we cope with what William James called life's "great blooming, buzzing confusion." We're endlessly reducing ambiguity to certainty, and in general, the system works well. Absolut's marketing triumph showed that the mind's

resolution urge is so powerful and innate that simply by baiting our habituated associations, by hinting at connections left out, advertisers could transform liquor ads into captivating little puzzles.

IN 1953, A writer named Leonard Stern was working on a script for the television show *The Honeymooners*. Stern was in his New York City apartment overlooking Central Park, sitting at his typerwriter, and he was at a loss. He was trying to figure out how to describe the nose of one particular character, Ralph Kramden's boss, and for half an hour, as he later remembered it, he found himself "wallowing in clichés."

Stern's best friend, Roger Price, dropped by the apartment. They were writing a comedic book together: *What Not to Name the Baby*. Stern assured Price that he'd be with him in just a minute and they'd get to work on it.

"No, we won't," Price retorted. "You're in your idiosyncratic-pursuit-of-a-word mode. I could be standing here for hours. Do you want help?"

"I need an adjective that—"

"Clumsy and naked."

Stern laughed. Ralph Kramden's boss now had either a clumsy nose or a naked nose. "Clumsy and naked," Stern recounted, "were appropriately inappropriate adjectives that had led us to an incorrect but intriguing, slightly bizarre juxtaposing of words." Price thought it was funny, too.

Instead of cataloging regrettable baby names, the pair spent the day writing stories with key words removed from them. At a party that night, they tested their new invention: they'd ask people for a part of speech to replace the removed words and then read back the completed story. Another five years would pass before the pair came

up with a suitable name for the game. It wasn't until 1958, at Sardi's restaurant in New York, that they overheard a conversation between an agent and an actor. The actor had decided to ad-lib an interview, which the agent told him was a mad idea.

It was the birth of Mad Libs. The children's game is absurdly simple. You may remember that the blanks ask for nouns, adjectives, adverbs, body parts, exclamations, silly words, or animals. Here's a Mad Libs snippet that will prove a useful reference as we go: "A good wine, served _____ (adverb), can make any meal a truly _____ (adjective) occasion. The red wines have a/an _____ (adjective) flavor that blends with boiled _____ (plural noun) or smoked _____ (noun)." You end up with sentences like: "A good wine, served happily, can make any meal a truly fast occasion. The red wines have a purple flavor that blends with boiled pants or smoked road."

How could this game possibly be successful? Why is it funny? These aren't glib questions. Mad Libs is such a cultural phenomenon that it now seems obvious that having readers fill in "appropriately inappropriate" words to construct little stories would make for a runaway hit product. But is it really so obvious?

It wasn't at the time. Stern and Price's publisher didn't think it would work as a book, and suggested they take the idea to a game manufacturer. So they took it to a game manufacturer, and were told that it wouldn't really work as a game, but that a book publisher might be interested. In the end, Stern and Price had to publish it themselves. To help promote their new product, Stern asked Steve Allen, whose top-rated Sunday night television show he wrote for, to try using the idea in his introductions. Allen employed the winning format to bring out Bob Hope, allowing the audience to fill in the missing words in the bio line: "And here's the scintillating Bob Hope, whose theme song is 'Thanks for the Communist.' "

Mad Libs became a bestseller, with over 150 million copies sold.

To put that in perspective, one of the top-selling novels of all time, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, has sold over 200 million copies. *The Lord of the Rings* has sold over 150 million. Taken together, then, the Mad Libs series ranks among a select group of the top-selling titles in the history of book publishing. That's a bit strange, don't you think? What treasure, precisely, had Stern and Price stumbled upon? Why does the human mind enjoy filling in words and laughing at their appropriate inappropriateness?

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IN 1970, THE Swedish psychologist Göran Nerhardt was developing a thesis about the nature of humor. His hypothesis, expressed in stiff academic vernacular, was that "the inclination to laugh is a function of the divergence of a perceived state of affairs from the expected state"—in other words, the kinds of weird juxtapositions in Mad Libs stories. We expect wine might have a fruity flavor and so "purple flavor" is funny.

To test his sweeping theory, Nerhardt devised an experiment. His subjects were not informed of the true purpose of the study. They were merely told to close their eyes and hold out their hands as an experimenter passed them a series of weights, one by one, and asked them to judge whether the weight was light or heavy. Depending on the reply, experimenters also asked if the weight was very light, quite light, or between light and heavy, or alternatively, very heavy, quite heavy, or between heavy and light. The weights varied from 20 to 2,700 grams.

Nerhardt's experimenters first habituated people to a limited range of weights. Then, once subjects had formed a rough idea of what to expect, they were handed an oddly out-of-place weight. So, for example, a subject might get a series of weights of 740, 890, 1,070,

1,570, and 2,700 grams, and then they'd be handed a 70-gram weight. When people picked up the odd weight, Nerhardt found, something unusual happened. They laughed. Not only that, but the greater the difference between the weights they'd been holding and the suddenly odd weight, the more people giggled. Michael Godkewitsch, another humor psychologist, reported a similar effect. His subjects found adjective-noun word pairs funnier the odder they were, so that "hot poet" was funnier than "wise egg," which was funnier than "happy child."

Nerhardt and Godkewitsch seemed to be onto the very thing that made Mad Libs enjoyable. But Nerhardt might have been aware that he didn't have the full story. After all, humor can't be that simple, can it? In testing his odd-weights experiment outside of the laboratory, in fact, Nerhardt experienced an interesting failure. He attempted a version of the study in Stockholm subway stations, telling people that he was conducting a consumer survey and having them pick up suitcases of various weights. When they picked up a much lighter or much heavier suitcase than expected . . . nothing happened. Nobody thought it was funny. No one laughed. Psychologist Rod Martin, who published a history of the psychology of humor, thinks that the critical difference was that commuters at a train station had different expectations for the experiment.

"At the train station," Martin explained, "passengers were either getting off or about to get on a train. Maybe they were going to work. They were in a serious mode of thinking. But subjects in a lab setting know it's a psychology experiment. They're more likely to think, 'Why would an experimenter give me a weight that is so obviously different and ask what it weighs? Something strange is going on.'" People were ready to partake in a serious scientific experiment, and it turned out to be a silly game. That's what was funny. Subjects were laughing at the *idea* of the experiment. In Nerhardt's lab, the

odd weight was unexpected *and* it allowed people to make bizarre sense of the situation. At the train station, there was no puzzle that people could solve. An oddly weighted suitcase was unexpected, but not in any meaningful way.

Surprise, to be sure, is critical to the humor in Mad Libs. But for the bizarre word combinations to be truly funny, the surprises have to mean something. Certainly, "purple flavor" and "served happily" and "fast occasion" are slightly odd. But they do make sense by some strange logic. Kids might say grape juice has a purple flavor. A drunk serves wine happily. Drunkenness can speed an evening along. You can imagine a universe not so far from our own where an eccentric sommelier reported catching a whiff of "boiled pants" or "smoked road" in a Barbaresco.

Many jokes follow similar rules. Think, for example, about the elements that constitute this joke:

> There are only three kinds of people in the world: those who can count, and those who can't.

First, we expect to hear about three types of people. (If we know it's a joke, we guess that the punch line will involve the third type.) Second, we're a little surprised when there's no description for the third kind of person. Finally, we discover an alternative rule that makes sense of the surprise: the joke teller can't count. Try to consider each element as you read through these English phrases that tourists found abroad:

> *On a Swiss menu*: Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.
> *In a hotel lobby in Bucharest*: The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.
> *In a cocktail lounge in Norway*: Ladies are requested not to have children in the bar.

> *In an airline ticket office in Copenhagen*: We take your bags and send them in all directions.
> *In a French hotel elevator*: Please leave your values at the front desk.
> *In an Athens hotel*: Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9 and 11 a.m. daily.
> *In a Swiss mountain inn*: Special today—no ice cream.
> *In a tailor shop in Rhodes*: Order your summers suit. Because is big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation.
> *From a hotel air conditioner instruction booklet in Japan*: Cooles and Heates: If you want just condition of warm in your room, please control yourself.

We imagine what the texts should say. Our wines won't disappoint you, you won't be able to take the elevator because it's broken, please don't bring your children to the bar, and so on. Second, there's an odd juxtaposition between what's expected and what is. Third, we *are* able to make appropriately inappropriate sense of them. We picture the cartooned worlds they animate: despairing wine drinkers, cranky hotel guests, and women impolitely giving birth in cocktail lounges. The humor here hinges on ambiguous meanings. "Nothing to hope for" could mean either "not wanting" or "hopeless." "Unbearable" could be "untransportable" or "intolerable." "Have children" could mean either "give birth" or "bring children." We get the joke when we grasp how the alternative meanings are actually somehow sensible.

Here's another example where the humor clearly depends on uncovering an ambiguity (a pun) that we first overlook:

1) Call me a cab.
   You're a cab.

There's an expectation. You'd expect someone to reply "no problem" or "right away." The actual reply doesn't fit, and then we go back

and get the joke by noticing that the first line is ambiguous. It could mean "please refer to me as a taxi." Now take a look at two altered versions of the same joke:

2) Call a cab for me.
   You're a cab.
3) Call me a cab.
   Yes, ma'am.

Number two removes the ambiguity from the first line. So it's still weird, but like Nerhardt's train-station experiment, it's not funny. There's no way to make sense of it. In number three, the double meaning in "Call me a cab" is back, but it doesn't register because the ambiguity is never exposed. Humor experts at McGill University tested the preceding example and similar variations on kids in grades one, three, five, and seven. The youngest kids, the researchers found, were equally satisfied with versions one and two of the joke. Children in grades three and up, by contrast, enjoyed the first version the most. Older kids preferred to discover the hidden meaning.

Laughter, psychologists Howard Pollio and Rodney Mers once wrote, "is a partial exclamation of achievement rather than an expression of surprise over incongruity." For puns and jokes, laughter is a testament to the voracious power of our sense-making minds, as all three of the processes involved—expectation, surprise, and the discovery of a rule that resolves the puzzle—happen almost instantaneously. Not all humor, of course, derives its alchemistic power this way, and the solution doesn't always lie in a hidden pun. Stand-up, parody and caricature, everyday humor, and slapstick often play by different rules. But chuckling also springs from our exploration of hidden meanings and our delighting in clever, unexpected connections that we normally disregard.

One of the fascinating things about humor is the way it acknowledges how our minds fill in gaps, resolve discrepancies, and reduce the hypercomplexity of everyday life. It exposes our lightning-fast assumptions by toying with them.

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IN 1998, BILL Cosby was hosting a television show on CBS. The idea for *Kids Say the Darndest Things* was that Cosby would conduct on-stage interviews with small children. To coax the funniest moments out of his tiny interviewees, Cosby had developed a number of shrewd strategies. One was to ask the kids about concepts that would stump them. Here's a chat, for example, that he had with five-year-old Kemett Hayes:

Cosby: I have a cut [he shows the boy his finger]. See it? What do you do for that?
Kemett [without hesitation]: You've got to put a little Neosporin on it. And then put a bandage over it. Then it'll go away.
Cosby: Where does it go?
Kemett: It go, um, it go . . . down here [he points to his finger] . . . in your blood.
Cosby: And where does it go?
Kemett: Then it'll go in another country.

The audience laughed. Cosby let the crowd enjoy the idea. Then he made good use of it. ("What country do you think mine is going to go to?" "Uh, China." Kemett, aware of the joke now, smiles.) Think about how similar the comedy here is to the humor in Mad Libs. Kemett fills in an answer almost automatically, it doesn't fit, and then

the crowd laughs, without malice, at his mistake and the alternative world it animates. What truly made the show was the fascinating logic that kids—and all of us, by extension—employ to explain the world. And to be fair, Kemett's first explanation for where a cut goes when it heals, "in your blood," is actually pretty good. Compare his logic with that of another five-year-old:

> Interviewer: What makes the wind?
> Julia: The trees.
> Interviewer: How do you know?
> Julia: I saw them waving their arms.
> Interviewer: How does that make the wind?
> Julia [waving her hand in front of his face]: Like this. Only they are bigger. And there are lots of trees.

The interviewer here is Jean Piaget, the renowned Swiss philosopher and psychologist. His investigative techniques included interviews with small children, and many of the interviews were amusingly similar to Cosby's. As Seymour Papert of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology once put it, Piaget "was the first to take children's thinking seriously."

Piaget found that when children try to understand a mysterious phenomenon, they often just extend a concept they already have about how the world works. Where can things go when they go away? They can go to another country. How is wind made? It's made in the same way I create a breeze with my hand. Piaget called this kind of reasoning *assimilation*. Children assume that things that move must be alive, for example. In their model of the world, which is built up from observing animals, there is an assumed link between movement and life. If it seems to move by itself, it's alive. They assimilate other moving things into this conception. The sun, moon, and wind move, and so, like animals, must be alive. The sun and moon even follow us when we're out walking, just like a pet dog. It's the same kind of analogical thinking that has trees waving their arms and cuts migrating to parts unknown. As one child phrased it, the wind feels "Because it blows" and water feels "Because it flows." A six-year-old, asked what it means to be alive, replied very clearly: "To be able to move all alone." Piaget showed that all of us have mental models of the world—he called them *schème*—and that we apply them to new situations or things we don't understand. That's often appropriate. *This* hotel-room faucet probably works like *that* faucet at home.

But sophisticated thinking requires more flexibility, and when children were challenged by an inconsistency, they also sometimes adjusted the way they saw the world. Piaget called this reaction *accommodation*. Kids accommodate their thinking when they allow new information to change their minds, a process that often begins with isolating a contradiction, as when one child retorted, after being told that dead leaves were certainly not alive, "but they move with the wind!" Leaves move, things that move spontaneously are alive, and now the boy has learned that fluttering leaves are dead. He's facing a direct challenge to his assumption that movement equals life. He can engage in denial, or he can decide that not all things that move "on their own" are alive, as one of Piaget's ten-year-olds did when he admitted, at last, that the moon wasn't really following him around or running after him, as he once imagined.* Alternatively, the child may remain stuck between assimilation and accommodation, believing that the sun follows him yet remaining slightly aware that this

* To be fair to the seven-year-old, the illusion that the sun and the moon follow us is real and is based on the comparatively rapid movement of other landscape features. As Piaget noted, the illusion is more convincing with the moon. Remember the book *Goodnight Moon*?

can't be true. This child, Piaget writes, "tries to avoid the contradiction so far as he can," reasoning that maybe "the sun does not move but its rays follow us, or the sun remains in the same place but turns so it can always watch us." He's motivated to resolve uncertainty.

Our propensity for avoiding or shutting down what could otherwise be a process of endless deliberation was probably a product of natural selection. It's what allows us to stop thinking and move on with our daily lives. There comes a point when we just have to decide. Our need to simplify means that we all have an innate ability to form impressions based on limited information. We *must* have the capacity to see people in stereotypes and envision objects and ideas prototypically. Our urge for resolution is vital both for managing complexity and, as Piaget understood, for learning. Clarifying ambiguity helps us to act and to build knowledge. Our appetite for consistency is a means to an end.

Mad Libs flourished partly because children enjoy the shocking and silly. But this doesn't entirely explain the pleasure of Mad Libs. We're also laughing at the discovery of colorful new meanings, just as Leonard Stern chuckled when he realized that a clumsy nose was meaningful in a way he'd never considered. Absolut ads succeeded, too, not only by portraying the bottle in strange ways, but also because they achieved some new kind of logic, expanding the ways we normally think of things. *Kids Say the Darndest Things* was based on exposing the naive assumptions and imagined worlds that children (really, all of us) project onto the mysterious world.

"I use the analogy of a Swiss Army knife," Rod Martin, the humor psychologist, said. "Our brain is the knife. It has all these tools for processing information and making sense of the world, and what we do in humor is play with them. We turn them upside down, and use them in ways they're not normally used." We're amused by fiddling with our own brains' remarkably proactive, ambiguity-eliminating

tendencies. Puzzles and humor illustrate our relationship with the particular ways our minds cope with the incoherent. Evolution has endowed us with a powerful magnet by which to haul the messy world toward clarity. Sometimes, we seek out little brainteasers to exercise this mental machinery. Sometimes, admirably, we laugh at its follies.

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IN THE 1980S, Absolut's competitor, Stolichnaya, had some image problems. In 1983, the Soviets accidentally shot down a Korean Air Lines flight that had ventured into Soviet airspace. Over 250 people on the flight—including a US congressman—were killed, and in 1984 the USSR boycotted the Olympic games in Los Angeles, citing "anti-Soviet hysteria." Absolut took advantage of its rival's misfortunes, and during the latter half of the 1980s, the Swedish company expanded its famous ad campaign, having made a vital conceptual leap by removing the realistic bottle from some of the ads.

Instead of the actual bottle always taking center stage, ads in the late 1980s and 1990s conveyed the iconic bottle's shape either plainly or slightly disguised. In an "Absolut Boston" ad, the "bottle" was formed by dozens of Absolut boxes floating in a nighttime harbor. In "Absolut Philadelphia," Benjamin Franklin's old-fashioned spectacles were subtly redesigned as two bottles touching at the bridge of his nose. Most of the ads retained the dash of humor, verging on parody, that had always endeared them to fans. Some were visual puns that baited expected connections, and still others created *I Spy*–type puzzles, where the reader hunts for the bottle shape.

Even early on in the campaign, the Absolut bottle had become so iconic that readers recognized it automatically, mentally filling it in at a glance like Bruner and Postman's subjects staring confidently at

red spades and calling them black. In the "Absolut Rarity" ad, that assumed familiarity resulted in a comic outcome. In the ad, the blue letters on the bottle read "Asbolut Vodka." The rarity was the typo. But readers didn't notice it. The misspelling didn't register, and the ad had to be pulled.