

Jada Pinkett Smith Shouldn't Have to Take a Joke. Neither Should You.

This is not a defense of Will Smith, who does not need me to defend him.

Instead, this is a defense of thin skin. It is a defense of boundaries and being human and enforcing one's limits. It is a repudiation of the incessant valorizing of taking a joke, having a sense of humor. It is a rejection of the expectation that we laugh off everything people want to say and do to us.

I think a lot about how we are constantly asked to make our skin ever thicker. Toughen yourself, we're told, whoever we are, whatever we've been through or are going through. Stop being so brittle and sensitive. Lighten up.

I'm not talking about constructive criticism or accountability but, rather, the intense scrutiny and unnecessary commentary people have to deal with when they challenge others' expectations one way or another.

Who is served by all this thick skin? Those who want to behave with impunity. If the targets of derision only had thicker skin, their aggressors could say or do as they please. If we all had the thickest of skins, no one would have to take responsibility for cruelties, big or small. It's an alluring idea to some, I suppose.

Thick skin comes up often in the context of comedy. Done well, comedy can offer witty, biting observations about human frailties. It can force us to look in the mirror and get honest with ourselves, to laugh and move forward. Done less well, it leaves its targets feeling raw, exposed and wounded—not mortally, but wounded.

It should go without saying that comedians are free to say what they please. Long live creative license and free speech. But it should be obvious that the targets of jokes and insults have every right to react and re-

spond. There is a strange idea that there is nobility in tolerating or, better yet, enjoying humor that attacks who you are, what you do or how you look—that with free speech comes the obligation to turn the other cheek, rise above, laugh it all off. We often see this when comedians want to joke about race, sexual assault, gender violence or other issues that people experiencing them don't find terribly funny. If you can't laugh along, you are humorless. You're thin-skinned. You're a problem.

I've stopped aspiring to be thicker-skinned, and I no longer expect or admire it in others. Because sometimes, people can't take a joke. In some situations, yes, we're humorless. If our skin gets too thick, we won't feel anything at all, which is the most unreasonable of expectations. And we won't know we've been wronged or wounded until it's too late.

During the 2022 Oscars telecast, the comedian Chris Rock made a joke about Jada Pinkett Smith's closely shorn hair. "Jada, I love you," he said. "*G.I. Jane* 2, can't wait to see it." The audience, including Ms. Pinkett Smith's husband, Will Smith, laughed, but she rolled her eyes, and her face fell. Her thick skin cracked.

You probably know what happened moments later: Mr. Smith walked onto the Oscar stage, slapped Mr. Rock, returned to his seat and shouted that Mr. Rock should keep her name out of his mouth, including an obscenity for good measure. The laughs became titters, became stunned silence. It wasn't clear if this was a bit or real life, and then all was crystal clear: What we were experiencing was someone not taking the joke. We were seeing skin that had thinned to nothing.

Ms. Pinkett Smith has alopecia, a condition resulting in hair loss that disproportionately affects Black women. It was in poor taste for Mr. Rock to poke fun at her hair. He has reportedly said he did not know about her alopecia, but he probably at least knew that the joke would sting, since he produced the documentary *Good Hair*, about Black women and their often fraught relationships with their hair.

Ms. Pinkett Smith has spoken openly about her struggles with hair loss—which is difficult for anyone but especially hard in the sexist and image-conscious world of American celebrity, where women, especially, endure an endless litany of comments about their appearance, their sartorial choices, their relationships and anything else people can find to pick apart. Famous women such as Whitney Houston, Britney Spears,

Amanda Bynes, Janet Jackson, Monica Lewinsky and Meghan Markle have been pushed to the edge by such scrutiny and the unreasonable expectation that they thicken their skin to derision, disrespect, insults and jokes. Even if later, long after these public shamings, their treatment is re-examined and condemned, the measly acts of public contrition are too little, too late. The damage is done.

Violence is always wrong and solves very little. Mr. Smith could have made so many better choices that did not involve putting his hands on another person in front of the entire world. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences opened an inquiry into the incident Monday afternoon, and Mr. Smith apologized to Mr. Rock and the world on Monday evening via Instagram.

Still, Mr. Smith most likely saw his wife's pain, and it's possible he was himself experiencing a moment of fragility, of thin skin. In his memoir, *Will*, the actor writes about the guilt he felt because, as a child, he could not protect his mother from his father's abuse. Mr. Rock's gibe was not in any way the same thing as domestic violence, but I can see how Mr. Smith might not have been able to take that joke, at his wife's expense, given the layers of context and public and private histories leading into that evening.

I am trying to hold space for all of those layers—Ms. Pinkett Smith's exhaustion with being a target of humor, Mr. Smith's series of bad decisions and Mr. Rock's trying to maintain his composure in the immediate aftermath of being a target of violence. Unfortunately, the incident has become something of a Rorschach test onto which people project their backgrounds, opinions and affinities. And what gets lost in the discourse is that, however disappointing the incident was, it was also a rare moment when a Black woman was publicly defended.

We also witnessed an example, last week, of a woman forced to wear incredibly thick skin as she was left largely undefended. During Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court, that distinguished jurist endured all manner of insult, racism and misogyny from Republican senators asking ludicrous questions that were really opportunities for grandstanding. Judge Jackson was applauded in many circles for her calm and composure.

For many Black women, it was a painful spectacle because we know

what it is like to experience that kind of scrutiny, interrogation and disrespect in personal and professional settings. We know what it's like to withstand scrutiny without intervention. We understood that the only way forward for Judge Jackson was to remain composed, stoic, impervious. We also noted that other than Senator Cory Booker, Democrats failed to protect their president's nominee. The Senate Judiciary Committee apparently valued decorum over Judge Jackson's dignity.

Thick skin was also on display at the 2022 Critics Choice Awards, when the director Jane Campion made the bizarre claim that the tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams "do not play against the guys, like I have to." Whatever led to that strange, unnecessary and incorrect claim (Ms. Campion clearly had not planned her remarks, and she was caught up in the adrenaline of the moment), it forced the sisters to be thick-skinned, to take the joke made at their expense. As cameras panned over to them, the Williams sisters smiled quizzically and maintained their composure. In the aftermath—Ms. Campion apologized the next day—they were gracious beyond measure. Their thick skin held up, as it has in the face of myriad unspeakable insults and as it will many times to come. It shouldn't be this way.

Yes, these are all public figures. An imperviousness to criticism and ridicule is a necessity for celebrities or anyone in the public eye. But no matter how thick your skin is or with how much wealth, fame and power you are cosseted, being the butt of a joke isn't fun. Sometimes, it is intolerable. When you are constantly a target—of jokes, insults, incivility and worse—as most Black women are, the skin we've spent a lifetime thickening can come apart. We're only human, and so, too, are the people who love us.

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