

Editorial: Schadenfreude's danger to accountability

September 8, 2022

In [my editorial last week](#), I used a particular word some may not have recognized—schadenfreude. Others thought it dismissive. Why did I use it?

The first time I heard the word—pronounced SHAW-duhn-froy-duh—was during season two of *Boston Legal*. The second episode is titled “[Schadenfreude](#).” James Spader’s character, Alan Shore, defines the word as “to take spiteful, malicious delight in the misfortune of others.”

The entire show, and not just the one episode, had a propensity for seediness. So does schadenfreude. But schadenfreude isn’t always that sordid. America’s Funniest Videos made a fortune on our propensity to laugh at others’ mishaps.

Less distasteful definitions leave out the spite and malice and simply state we enjoy seeing harm come to others. Well, it’s less distasteful by degrees, anyway.

Why, then, did I write: “In our schadenfreude culture that revels in a celebrity’s humiliation—especially when that celebrity is a minister—churches and ministers won’t be able to ignore [Matt Chandler’s] tale completely. It’s already viral.”

Because that’s precisely what I meant, and it wasn’t a compliment. It was closer to a statement of fact.

Pushing back against the term

So much of our humor is predicated on schadenfreude. Some of our most despicable pleasures are, as well. Thus, to cast the viral attention given to [Chandler's leave of absence from The Village Church](#) as schadenfreude seems inappropriately dismissive.

Indeed, [a letter writer indicated as much](#): “Matt Chandler’s mess *has* gone viral. But please pause before chalking it up to schadenfreude.

“Many have suffered abuse at the hands of the church. After decades of, at best, being harmed and then ignored, communities of victims and advocates are organizing, and people are hearing them. Attributing the attention around Chandler to society’s insatiable appetite for celebrity downfall diminishes the voices of those making progress.”

Point taken.

Yes, many abused by religious leaders and organizations have stood up to these individuals and groups over the last several years, and they have received even more abuse for doing so. Their courage, tenacity and advocacy for themselves and others should not be diminished; it should be encouraged and supported.

At the level of intent, schadenfreude is not an accurate description for what many survivors and advocates seek in holding authority to account.

At a macro, societal level, however, schadenfreude is in play. For this reason, we need to consider its relationship to accountability.

The nature of schadenfreude

Schadenfreude is useful for accountability. However, it tends to be useful in

the same way fear and guilt are useful. Fear and guilt can get the job done, but when employed in debased, cynical and manipulative ways—as they often are—they inflict harm. They are effective motivators, but they are not the best motivators.

Likewise, schadenfreude can be a lever to move the recalcitrant to admit responsibility or wrongdoing, but it exacts a toll in the process, and not just on the person or organization being held accountable.

Biologically speaking, [schadenfreude involves brain chemistry](#), which we know influences our choices and behaviors. We also are learning how much brain chemistry shapes the very structure of our brains.

When we encounter someone else's embarrassment—however slight or significant—we receive a little dopamine hit. Dopamine is the chemical that makes us feel good and return to what makes us feel good.

The more often we return for that good feeling, the more practiced, ingrained and automatic the process becomes, without our realizing it, because the brain becomes wired for it.

Psychologically speaking, [schadenfreude involves at least three emotions](#): envy, rivalry and justice. We know envy and rivalry are problematic and contrary to the spirit of Christ. Justice, however, is what makes schadenfreude's relationship to accountability tricky.

When people do wrong, we want them to receive their just desserts. When they are outed and held into the light of public scrutiny, we feel a sense of satisfaction they are getting what they deserve. This sense of justice is a component of schadenfreude.

The problem with schadenfreude

Our desire for justice is one of the ways we are created in the image of God—the author of justice. It is twisted, however, in the melding of justice with envy and rivalry. Likewise, it is shaped into an idol when we allow ourselves to chase dopamine more than Christ.

Our God-given desire for justice often meets resistance from those in authority. The sexual abuse scandal in the Southern Baptist Convention—especially its mishandling by key members of the SBC executive staff—is a prime example. Many of those being held to account resisted it, only seeming to bend when public scrutiny went viral.

When religious leaders do not accept accountability early on, they become complicit in a feature of our culture they condemn—schadenfreude. When their downplaying, covering up and stonewalling accountability for wrongdoing does not weaken until they are publicly humiliated, they perpetuate additional harm and train others to follow instinctive emotions more than Jesus.

Furthermore, that some religious authorities and organizations have not responded contritely to accountability, only to bend under the weight of broad public attention, works to ingrain schadenfreude into our accountability structures. It is to tell the world, “We won’t accept accountability until you are rejoicing at our humiliation and downfall.”

Such spiritual toxicity *is* sordid. It is spiritual malpractice.

The current situation at The Village Church may not fall into this category. That’s yet to be known publicly. Even so, it sheds light on something all of us must address.

I used the word schadenfreude, because it’s part of who we are and is

something we must overcome. We can make a good start by taking seriously those mistreated and abused under the guise of religion.

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