

Schadenfreude: The sin of the modern world

Last year was a rough time for humanity. Every time I read the news, I wondered is there a contest on who can outdo the next with a more vile and evil act?

I was often lost for words and had troubling making sense of the atrocities and injustices. Many intellectuals offered nuanced explanations, but I feel like one piece of the puzzle was missing: schadenfreude.

We don't like to talk about schadenfreude. The concept is so antithetical to human nature that it is even disturbing to conceptualize it. We don't even have a word for it in English (not counting epicaricacy), and thus, we have to borrow a German word. We are too embarrassed to talk about it, and even more ashamed to plead guilty of it.

Despite the lack of discourse surrounding the concept, schadenfreude is driving much of the racism, terrorism, warfare, and inequality in the world today. It is THE SIN of the modern world, though unconfessed by most. In short, schadenfreude is to take pleasure in other's misfortunes, to delight in their suffering.

Everyone is guilty. It might be a small instance. You know that friend that has a perfect life - great house, great job, great family. When you see a Facebook posts about a minor hiccup in their life, you might let out a small smirk, relieved that they, too, have problems. I am Patriots fan, and I know most people in Maryland, including my wife, smile every time Tom Brady gets sacked. Most of this is harmless, but the problem is far more deep and profound, with every section of society having a different motivation.

The downtrodden. There are many, too many, people that live in poverty, that are isolated from society, or have been bullied. For a few individuals, instead of working to resolve their problems, they want other people to suffer with them. They want to create as much suffering as possible, often in their last act on earth. They bomb. They shoot. At schools. At marketplaces. Inflicting pain on the most innocent of

people, oddly in an attempt to find some level of fulfillment. This is a very small percentage of people, but what disturbs me is the much larger group that approves of their actions.

Who are the people who “liked” Ismaaiyl Brinsley’s instagram post: “I’m Putting Wings On Pigs Today” before he executed two police officers? Who are the people that rejoice after a terrorist attack? Who are the people that idealize school shooters? They are people who believe they’re being systematically held down (perhaps, true) but are happy when one of “their people” seek revenge in a violent way against those oppressing them.

The middle. Historians blame the middle class (especially the petite bourgeoisie) for backing many of the racist movements in modern history. The Nazis, for instance, drew support from this group. Why? The middle requires someone below them, and it is the fear of the lower class surpassing them, which makes them susceptible to radical movement. In other words, there is a subtle effort to keep those below them, below them, and to keep the poor and uneducated, poor and uneducated. There is also an attempt to dehumanize the lower class as subhuman. I wonder, if these people smile when a “thug” is killed? Perhaps, the shooting was justified, but can’t we agree that is was a tragedy? Yet, some people enjoy another’s death. When a drone attack takes out a terrorist, but kills several innocent bystanders in the Middle East. They are many “respectable” people who secretly delight and think they deserved to die as well. Oddly, many people feel better when lower class individuals are mired in their misery.

The elite. Perhaps, the group with the most damning motive for schadenfreude is found in the upper echelon. The lower class seeks revenge, and the middle class props themselves up by schadenfreude. The elite, however, benefit from other’s suffering.

You have bankers bundling risky mortgages and then betting against them, making a profit when people foreclose. I have a special disdain for the political elites who make a career out of increasing “awareness” to a cause. They draw attention to human suffering, but do little to solve it. In fact, they remain in power and in the national limelight by perpetuating the problem; solving it would end their career. Moreover, many of these elites are seen as allies. Your banker. Your Representative.

Your CEO. Do they really want to help you, or have we been fooled, as they benefit from prolonging the suffering of the masses?

Edmund Burke's famous quote is often cited by cultural critics: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Oh, how I wish. Those would be better times, if "good" men did nothing. Now, we have the majority of people, I believe, rejoicing in evil acts, delighting in the suffering of others. We have gone so far off course. What can be done?

Schadenfreude is rooted in two principles. First, many people are consumed by their suffering. We think we have it so bad. Our financial situation is the worst. Our medical issues are the most painful. Everyone needs to visit the sick and help the poor. Take a mission trip to the developing world. If these are impractical, pick up a book about someone who has been persecuted or had a difficult life. You'll begin to realize, that, yes, you have challenges, but they are manageable. And, yes, you have sufferings, but you also have many blessings.

Second, most people think other people don't suffer. Sure, the sick and poor people suffer. Undoubtedly, we are moved when family members and friends are in pain. Yet, we need to realize that even wealthy, Hollywood actors who have unlimited money and fame suffer. They maybe are in more pain than you and I. Trust me, every person has their crosses, and we don't need to add to them. In sum, we need to realize that everyone suffers, and that we don't need anyone else's suffering to increase to make us feel better.

As Christians, we have a unique relationship to suffering. Jesus suffered and died to save us. He, who did not have to suffer, died so that we might enjoy eternal life. We, thus, see suffering as something redemptive and positive. I see suicide bombers as the antithesis to the crucifixion. In Jesus' last act, he took on the suffering of others, and the bombers, in their last act, seek to increase the suffering of others. We can limit schadenfreude by being less consumed by our lot, and focusing more on others. As Christians, we are called to more. To imitate Christ, we need to do more than not delighting in other people's suffering. We need to also seek out those who are in pain, and lighten their load, by carrying part it. I promise you that will give you true joy, and it will be far more profound and fulfilling than the delight found in schadenfreude.