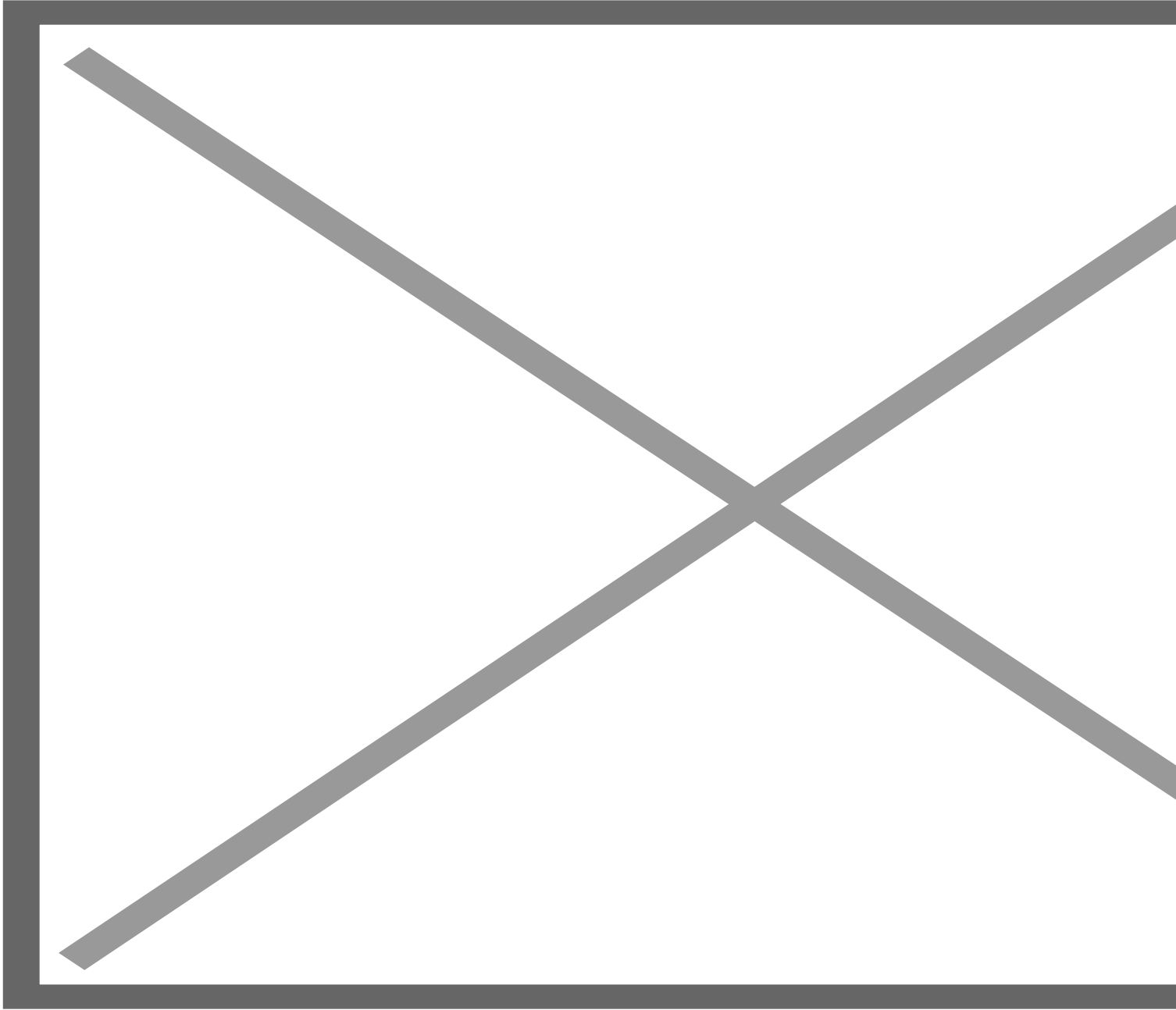


The poverty of gossip

It's not just that it's sadistic. It also lacks aesthetic or psychological imagination.

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

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In my last two columns, I endeavored to alienate as many readers as possible. (They say that this is a good thing to do when you've just published a book, as I have.) I wrote about various vices that I think mainline Christians are not quite censorious enough about. Some are things that people broadly agree to be bad but that for various reasons we don't want to nag each other about. Others are of the sort where the space between evil and good is often a hairsbreadth in width, hard to see, and apt to move around.

Gossip falls into this second category. What is it? When are we doing it? Is it just a hostile description of ordinary conversation?

I think of gossip as what happens when ego or the will to power shapes ordinary conversation in cruel ways. One moment we're having a healthy conversation with Friend 1 about Friend 3, whom we both love, and suddenly we find ourselves joining together to tear apart a straw version of Friend 3, whom we both also hate a little bit, as we often do those we've loved long enough. Often I realize that I've been guilty of gossip only after the fact. Starting from a sense of legitimate concern about this or that person, I launch into careless speculation about their motives, creating a version of them that is flawed in ways that prop up my ego. Or I reveal something about this person that I know to be true but that the person wouldn't want known and my interlocutor doesn't need to know, because I want to feel important and interesting.

This is a horrible thing to do. It is one of the worst things that people regularly do to each other. And it has a way of sneaking up on you.

Some forms of gossip are so apparently moral—they look so much like attempts at honesty or expressions of concern—that various commentators have attempted to rehabilitate gossip's reputation. Stanley Hauerwas once described gossip as a form of everyday moral casuistry, which it might be, if you removed the element of lip-smacking sadism that makes something gossip in the first place. More recently, feminist writers have argued that gossip—at least in the form of rumors about dangerous, powerful men—can help keep women safe. Since we often discount people's testimony simply because they sit on the wrong side of some power differential, whisper networks may be their only means to pass on necessary warnings against sex pests and other behind-closed-doors villains.

The substantive point here is obviously correct. The question is, again, whether this behavior is what an honest and fair-minded person means by the word *gossip*, as opposed to an abuser's opportunistic extension of the definition. If you're seriously concerned for someone's safety and you tell them, "I'm not sure this is true, but I've heard some disquieting things about this person," that's not what most people mean by gossip. It's more like telling an oblivious jogger that tornadoes have been spotted in the area. It's a public service. What would make it gossip would be to pass on an unconfirmed anecdote because doing so makes you feel important, or because you don't like the villain of the anecdote for other reasons.

Feminists have also correctly pointed to the word's questionable etymology. It derives from an Old English word for godparent, so one can argue that its denotation is gender neutral. But our modern use of it pretty clearly goes back to stereotypes about garrulous and malicious old women. As with the word *hysterical*, which originates with sexist medical theories about emotional dysregulation originating in the womb, it's a flawed word that describes a precise range of behaviors for which we don't have an equally good word. A late-night flurry of social media posts from Donald Trump shows us a man succumbing to, precisely, hysteria; a man who uses others' secrets to curry favor at work is a gossip. There are no better words, so all we can do is apply them to men as often as they fit. Unhappily, they do so all the time.

The sadism inherent in gossip horrifies me, but what really sends me over the edge is the poverty of aesthetic and psychological imagination it often reveals. I love Henry James and George Eliot, in part because both

novelists often define their characters against the reader's desire to type them. They tell you who a too-hasty observer would assume their characters are, what stereotype they are just one or two crucial degrees of complexity away from becoming. This is one reason why James, infamously, takes so long to say anything. But it feels to me like a deep truth about how people are: We are defined in part by the people we *almost* are, the clichés we try to stop ourselves from living out. They pull on us like gravity, and we fight them, and we become the person revealed in that fighting. While lesser novelists—and almost all novelists are lesser than James and Eliot—vivify old character types, these writers both challenge the types and acknowledge their very real presence in human social life.

Gossip tends to work like a bad novelist. It smooths everything out. It turns complex actions into simple, legible ones and cuts ambiguities down to a single dimension. When a person's behavior raises questions, gossip's answer to those questions is always the crudest and basest one available. Gossip, like a prosecuting attorney, always flattens: mixed motives become single ones, half-willed deeds become carefully worked-out plans. This crudeness is gossip's aesthetic hallmark. It turns Henry James situations into reality TV scenarios.

During my first year of graduate school, someone told my boss they thought I was getting drunk before teaching my 8 a.m. classes. This would have required more devotion both to alcohol and to getting up early than I possess. The rumor was so inexplicable that it was hard to defend myself against it: I couldn't offer a correct reading of a string of misunderstood details, and thus I had no evidence to present in my defense, just a flat denial. Someone had acted either from simple malice or from a complete misunderstanding of what, say, ADHD behaviors look like, and the stakes for me couldn't have been higher: It was a question of whether I would get to do work I was good at and enjoyed or return to dire poverty. I try to assume that my anonymous denouncer had some creditable reason for doing this, but I can't imagine what it was. I just know that the epistle of James is right: The tongue is a weapon. And God knows Americans aren't careful with those.