

Why is Eliot Spitzer on TV? Because disgrace doesn't stick like it used to.

By Laura Kipnis

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A question for Miss Manners: What's the appropriate waiting period after a massive public disgrace before the scandalizer in question appears on "Dancing With the Stars" or hints at a presidential run?

The process seems to have been fast-tracked lately. South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford is back from the Appalachian Trail and enjoying a 50 percent approval rating, while Sen. David Vitter (La.) of D.C. Madam fame seems poised for reelection. Even flagrant hypocrisy isn't a disqualifier for a second act. Family-values politicians exposed as adulterers (Newt Gingrich) or House leaders brought down by multiple ethics charges (Tom DeLay) don't fade gracefully from the limelight; here they are back in our living rooms, tangoing, pontificating, polishing their talk show quips. Who wasn't perversely enthralled to watch the Hammer samba away on "Dancing" last year (until felled by stress fractures in both feet)? Following DeLay's lead, teen mom turned abstinence queen Bristol Palin, who never had much of a first act, is nonetheless enjoying the fruits of a second.

When did we, as a moral community, become such doormats?

Scandals have always performed a necessary social function. The community brands and expels transgressors in humiliating, sometimes grisly ways, purifying itself in the process. Once there were public stockades and scarlet letters for this sort of thing; these days, the media shoulders most of the burden. Late-night talk show sadism and the savagery of the blogosphere are our tools of ignominy. The technology may have changed, but scandal's role remains the same: If communities are enclaves of shared norms, then shaming and shunning norm-violators is part of what makes a community.

But how can we shun them when they won't go away? An illuminating case in point: former New York governor Eliot Spitzer, a man with a world-class talent for flamboyant self-immolation. After a mortifying prostitution scandal, and following a swift, shrewd rehabilitation campaign featuring op-eds, TV appearances and a brief college teaching stint, he begins a second career as co-host of the new talk show "Parker Spitzer," starting Monday (alongside Washington Post columnist Kathleen Parker). CNN hopes the show will revive its sagging ratings, and maybe it will. Spitzer is a brilliant guy and a canny political observer -- though perhaps not so brilliant and canny in every respect.

Which brings us to one of the main problems with second acts: New selves don't just spring fully fledged from the wreckage of old lives. The old, bad selves stick around to have a cackle or two.

As we've been seeing lately. The central rite of scandal redemption these days is the public introspection session, and Spitzer has gamely played along in multiple media forums. He's been interrogated on NBC's "Today" by Matt Lauer, by Newsweek's Jonathan Darman, for Peter Elkind's biography "Rough Justice" and on film in Alex Gibney's documentary "Client 9," which opens next month. Despite all this practice, however, he has not proved to be a world-class practitioner of the art of self-examination.

With Lauer, he emphasized -- three times -- that there was no excuse for his behavior, repeating the phrase "egregious violation" twice, along with four variants on "pain to others." A cynic might suspect excess media coaching, but then it's not an easy thing to go on "Today" and discuss your inner "gremlins" -- which Spitzer said he was in the process of confronting, as though he were a cartoon action hero battling malevolent mogwai.

Things only get worse when he goes for high-culture references, as in his interviews with Gibney, in which he compares himself to Icarus.

Grasping to explain the events that made all this forced introspection necessary, he blames "hubris." It's an interesting self-accusation, considering that Spitzer's favored targets, as both prosecutor and governor, were those with excess hubris. His enemies -- crooks on Wall Street and crooks in Albany -- operated as though the world were their private slush fund and the rules need not apply. Of course, Spitzer, too, acted as though no rules applied. So where did he draw the distinction? Perhaps, in the end, he didn't.

This may be why his fiercely destructive talents weren't confined to external enemies; they also, eventually, turned inward. The evidence keeps mounting, courtesy of his public mea culpa sessions, that this was a deeply divided man, so divided as to be a danger to himself. He scattered enough clues for the feds to tie him to prostitution rings; surely he knew better. When pressed by Gibney for insights about how he'd failed to anticipate the downfall he was so obviously courting, he ducks the question: "Those are the mysteries of the human mind. I don't think I can answer those questions because I don't even know."

Then he casually drops a small bombshell into the conversation. While governor, he sensed that he was under surveillance. As indeed he was: The FBI was tracking his dates with prostitutes and the clunky financial ruses he'd devised to pay the tab. How could the intuition that he was being watched fail to trigger an internal alarm?

That self-obliviousness has lingered. Take the incongruous smiles that flash across Spitzer's face when the conversation turns to his travails or his reputation for out-of-control aggression. His temper tantrums were so frequent that his aides came up with the nickname "Irwin" for Spitzer's raging "evil twin," who screeched threats, collected enemies and made profanity-laden phone calls to his Wall Street targets.

When Gibney asks about these calls, Spitzer smiles strangely and denies any memory of them.

It's the very same smile that appears in news footage of an exceedingly aggressive confrontation between Spitzer and a sputtering Joe Bruno, the New York Senate Republican leader, during a public meeting at the Capitol in Albany in 2007, shortly after Spitzer became governor. "This is my room, and we'll play by my rules," Spitzer announces to Bruno, a big grin on his face, as if he hasn't just tried to cut a rival off at the knees in front of a room full of people. If the smile at Bruno was an unsuccessful attempt on Spitzer's part to mask his aggression -- while also a sign of just how much he was relishing it -- why is the same smile on his face when he discusses his fall from grace?

This, ultimately, is the most distressing thing about public downfalls like Spitzer's. Sex may be losing its ability to scandalize, but the capacity for self-destruction, for aggression directed inward, still has the power to shock. It's still scandalous how incoherent and clueless otherwise rational people can be. What makes these strange smiles of Spitzer's so disquieting is the realization that they're glimpses of Irwin -- Spitzer's raging inner prosecutor -- taking fiendish pleasure in having chopped down another case of hubris. We're brought face to face with that strange impulse that occasionally moves people to bulldoze their lives.

Irwin doesn't seem ready to retire anytime soon. Here was Spitzer on CNN recently criticizing longtime political foe Andrew Cuomo for his excess aggression, without noticing that he might have been talking about himself. About polls showing Cuomo's opponent gaining ground in the New York governor's race, Spitzer declared, grinning widely: "It'll be closer than people think."

We're all collections of internal warring factions, no doubt -- but for the protagonists of our scandals, the warfare is apparently far bloodier. At the moment, figuring out which of the fallen will manage to pull off second acts is a case-by-case enterprise: Bill Clinton has transformed himself into an eminence grise, but John Edwards doesn't seem due back from banishment anytime soon.

If we're more forgiving lately, it's because we're so divided as a moral community. Each new scandal winds up being a referendum on our shifting social norms, norms so in flux that even animal-torturers (Michael Vick) can win their way back into sports fans' hearts with nothing more than a brief, state-imposed exile and a better passing game.

We turn our scandalizers into dancing fools and talking heads, forcing them to perform their contritions as mass entertainment, because we don't know what else to do with them. The social landscape is shifting too fast to keep up: The old sexual morality is dead, the public-private divide is up for grabs, political civility is a joke, and economic panic is breeding cynicism about the social contract. How can there be any moral consensus on such shaky ground?