

Healthy and Unhealthy Guilt

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It seems that guilt has a bad name among Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals. We find the use of guilt as a means of manipulation repugnant. Whether it's parents, or so-called friends, or religious leaders – guilt can be an effective, if unpleasant and negative, means of influencing our behavior.

We would prefer to be guided by more positive motivations, like caring and compassion and fairness. And besides, we lay enough guilt-trips on ourselves. We don't need a whole bunch of travel agents adding to the itinerary.

That being said, I think we need to recognize that guilt, as a natural product of our own conscience, does have a useful, constructive role to play. In fact, we need some kinds of guilt to help keep us from repeating mistakes. But excessive and prolonged feelings of guilt can become counter-productive and a huge waste of emotional energy.

I find it helpful to consider an analogy with pain. Pain is another unpleasant experience, which nevertheless serves a useful purpose. Pain tells us there's something wrong, which needs attention. When you get too close to a heat source, pain alerts you to the need to move away before your tissues are damaged. When physical ailments cause you pain, that is a signal to seek medical care and treatment. In general, pain provides information that something is not right, and the motivation to do something about it.

On the other hand, once pain has done its informative and motivational job, it doesn't always just go away. And when it lingers, it is no longer so useful or beneficial. Frankly, it's simply - well - a pain! And, like guilt, pain can be wielded as a weapon by others to manipulate us or hurt us. We certainly want to prevent and avoid unnecessary pain - or guilt - even as we recognize its positive role.

So what is guilt, and where does it come from? As I've suggested, guilt is an emotional warning sign, whose purpose is to let us know when we've done something wrong. It's a negative feeling of internal conflict that tends to nag at us, especially if we don't do anything about it. It may make us want to hide our faces, as in the illustration on the Order of Service (bag over the head). What we probably really want to hide is the inner rottenness of our guilty selves. Facing our guilt is like looking into a mirror and gazing into our own guilty eyes. We'd much rather just try to remain invisible.

Some evolutionary psychologists theorize that guilt and shame helped maintain beneficial relationships, such as reciprocal altruism. If you feel guilty when you harm another, you are more likely not to harm others or become too selfish. You reduce the chances of retaliation by members of your tribe, and thereby increase your survival prospects, and those of the tribe or group. If someone causes harm to another, and then feels guilt and demonstrates regret and sorrow, the person harmed is likely to forgive. Thus, guilt makes it possible to forgive, and helps hold the social group together.

Marriage and Family Therapist Arlene Harder describes several varieties of guilt. Most basic is what she calls "essential guilt," which arises from disobeying commonly recognized codes of behavior. Things like murder, stealing, rape, and greed are prohibited by virtually all religions and civilized societies. Guilt over these behaviors plays the evolutionary role of enhancing survival, as I mentioned earlier.

A second kind of guilt is “deserved guilt,” which arises when we inadvertently or purposely overlook our obligations to others. She includes in this category things like cheating on your income taxes or forgetting to feed your dog. Modifying your behavior to prevent future bouts of such guilt help maintain smooth-running, well-oiled relationships.

A third kind of guilt is “self-generated guilt,” which is the product of perfectionism. That is, you set impossibly high standards for yourself, and then when you can’t live up to them, you feel guilty for failing. Of course sometimes you may fall short of even reasonable expectations, and some degree of guilt may be warranted. Dealing appropriately with this type of guilt requires an honest assessment of whether you have, in fact “done your best.”

A fourth kind of guilt is “borrowed guilt,” which arises when the manipulative guilt-trips you have received from others conflict with your own conscience. This can be a lose-lose proposition, unless you can separate yourself from others’ expectations.

And finally, a fifth kind of guilt is “hindsight guilt,” which comes from such impossible beliefs as the idea that we SHOULD have known how to prevent something that we had no way of knowing how to prevent. Or from the assumption that we SHOULD have known how to handle a situation that we previously had no opportunity to learn how to handle any differently. This is also closely related to perfectionism: the idea that we should be equipped to handle anything we face with skill, grace, and a good outcome.

So, given all these kinds of guilt, waiting at every turn to trip us up, how do we deal with them? In particular, how do we get rid of unnecessary, unhelpful guilt? And this includes deserved guilt that has passed the statute of limitations and can no longer do you any good.

First, you should recognize, as I’ve suggested already, that some guilt feelings are good for you. They force you to confront and evaluate the consequences of your actions. And they can motivate you to align your behavior more closely with your espoused values.

Second, when you do experience feelings of guilt, examine them. Try to figure out where they’re coming from, and whether the message they’re sending you is valid. If the message aligns with your conscience – your own sense of right and wrong – fine. Otherwise, wrap it up neatly, and return to sender.

In those cases where the guilt seems warranted, you can help clear your conscience by acknowledging to others that you’ve made a mistake. “I made a mistake” and “I’m sorry” are two of the most difficult sentences for many of us to speak. But when you have the courage to use them, they can be extremely healing both for the person saying the words and the one hearing them.

Finally, forgive yourself. Releasing guilt is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself. You cannot force someone you’ve harmed to forgive you. But you always have the power of forgiving yourself. Of learning your lesson, doing what you can to make amends, and moving on.

Before we finish up with a little exercise in self-forgiveness, let me tell you a story about transforming unhealthy guilt to more healthy purposes.

A man came back to work in a place from which he had been fired several months previously. His work was superior. A fellow worker remembered how inconsistent he had been in the past and asked, “What happened to make such a difference in you?” The man told this story:

When I was in college I was part of a fraternity initiation committee. We placed the new members in the middle of a long stretch of a country road. I was to drive my car at as great a speed as possible straight at them.

The challenge was for them to stand firm until a signal was given to jump out of the way. It was a dark night. I had reached 100 miles an hour and saw their looks of terror in the headlights.

The signal was given and everyone jumped clear – except one boy. I left college after that. The look on that boy’s face as I ran over him at a hundred miles an hour stayed in my mind all the time. I became hopelessly inconsistent, moody, and finally became a problem drinker. My wife had to work to bring in the only income we had.

I was drinking at home one morning when someone rang the doorbell. I opened to find myself facing a woman who seemed strangely familiar. She sat down in our living room and told me she was the mother of the boy I had killed years before. She said that she had hated me and spent agonizing nights rehearsing ways to get revenge. I then listened as she told me of the love and forgiveness that had come when she found religion.

She said, “I have come to let you know that I forgive you and I want you to forgive me.” I looked at her that morning and I saw deep in her eyes the permission to be the kind of man I might have been had I never killed that boy. That forgiveness changed my whole life.

That, of course, was a rather extreme case. But I suspect that most of us carry with us some burden of guilt. Guilt for a bad act committed, or for a good act left undone. Guilt that is serving no purpose other than to keep us from being the whole person we could be.

Those of you familiar with twelve-step recovery programs will recall the ninth step that calls for making amends to those you have harmed. That is certainly one way to address and move past some of those guilt-inducing behaviors of our past, whether we receive forgiveness or not. But another important step in that process of letting go of our unhealthy, non-productive guilt is to forgive ourselves. It’s not easy to do, but if we can let go of those feelings with which we punish ourselves, we will be freer to be who we want to be.

I’d like to ask you, now, to just take a few moments to bring to mind something you’ve been feeling guilty about. It may be large, or it may be something very small. It may be recent, or as in my case, it may date back some forty years. Just whatever comes to mind. . .

And now, with those burdens of guilt fresh in our minds, I’d like to invite you to join me in a litany of atonement, compiled by the Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, as a way of beginning the process of letting go and moving on. After each phrase I read, we will say together, “We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.”

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference:
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible:
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause:
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others:
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone:
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit:
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity:
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled
the illusion of separateness:
We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.

We begin again in love. That is the key. If we can use the awareness of our previous shortcomings, not as a weapon to beat ourselves with, but as motivation to make a fresh start, then our feelings of guilt have served their purpose, and it's time to set them aside and get on with our lives.

So may it be.