

Three Flavors of Guilt

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
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Guilt is a timely topic for me, and perhaps for some of you. August brought me a perfect storm of inconsistent obligations between Chatham and the Boston area. I had already had to bow out of a worship service at the end of July on short notice due to my auto accident, which was entirely my fault. This meant I had to find another car to drive. Then came the problem of multiple repairs to the rental unit I own in Lexington before a new tenant could move in. Then on the 18th, my 95 year-old Arlington father-in-law suffered a massive stroke, and I was the one charged with making medical decisions for him. And I still had a full preaching schedule here as well as summer concerts for which I was the organizer. I managed to pull it all off with lots of trips up and down Route 3, but every minute I spent satisfying one obligation I felt guilty for not spending more time satisfying the others. Do you ever have times like this?

This is a mild version of the dilemma called damned if you do and damned if you don't, and it even affects people who profess, as Universalists do, not to believe in damnation at all. Well, that's not entirely true. Universalists believe there is no hell in the hereafter, but we're all perfectly free to create hells for ourselves here on earth, and guilt is one way we do it.

For years I have been fascinated with the sense of guilt, which I both know from the inside and from dealing with parishioners and others in a ministerial capacity. Unitarian Universalism does not have a ritual of confession, and yet I have heard over the years many people in the privacy of my office unburden themselves of something that has been bugging them.

We had a UU 101 class last week, and we will continue that class next Sunday, but without taking the class, those of you who have heard me preach over the years probably picked up that the American varieties of both Unitarianism and Universalism arose in reaction to the religion that the Pilgrims and Puritans brought to these New England shores in the seventeenth century: Calvinism. And Calvinism is steeped in guilt. Those early Unitarians and Universalists tried to offer a happier alternative to Calvinist gloom, and in many ways, we try to do so today as well.

But as I have studied and reflected on the origins of our faith, it strikes me that Calvinism is only one of the religious traditions of America which emphasizes guilt. Two others that come to mind are the Jewish tradition and the Roman Catholic tradition. Yet I have never been able to articulate what the difference is between Calvinist guilt, Jewish guilt and Catholic guilt. So I set down the topic to preach on it, and here is what I think.

Before we get to that, a few other considerations need to be dealt with. First of all, it is clear that these are not the only three religions dealing with guilt. In a few weeks we'll be celebrating Martin Luther, and there certainly is Lutheran guilt. I was brought up an Episcopalian, and there is certainly guilt there; I'd not be surprised to see Mormons, Muslims, Sikhs, Methodists wrestling with guilt, and by the end of these reflections I want to deal with liberal guilt.

Second, we need to recognize that guilt is an almost universal human emotion; everyone

has it except for the truly dangerous. If Freud is right that the human personality consists in an id containing our animal instincts, a superego restraining these and an ego mediating between the other two, guilt is an essential tool of that superego. We come into the world as fountains of impulses and desires, and we civilize the infant barbarian by teaching him or her to curb those desires. Gradually a sense of a general moral code develops along with the individual responsibility to follow it, and a judgment as to whether the code is being followed in particular situations. When the judgment is turned on oneself, guilt is what tells us that we have failed to live up to the standards we expect of others.

So for many of us the ties between the guilt we feel and traditional religions may be quite tenuous; we may have been unchurched for generations. But I have the hunch that religion somehow persists in the shadows of our upbringing.

Third, we are all a bit skittish about discussing guilt, which is why guilt serves as such common fodder for comedians. Most of us readily laugh at something that makes us feel uncomfortable. So Jewish and Catholic guilt, in particular, have become staples of the standup comic, the novelist and the film maker and this creates stereotypes in the culture which I will try to avoid this morning. I won't be able to go into depth in the questions I explore, but I want to treat each of these great religious traditions with dignity even as I distinguish them.

Fourth, many of us feel guilty all the time. While some of us suffer unnecessarily, I take it as a given that there really are moral codes and people really do violate them and so there is what you might call real guilt out there. Some feelings of guilt may be quite justified objectively. Or put another way, a personal sense of guilt is an essential component of any system of morality I can imagine, and I can't imagine a society without some system of morality. I certainly wouldn't want to live in one.

And fifth, there is a difference between guilt and shame. My supervisor in my pastoral care training put it this way: guilt is an unpleasant feeling you experience on account of a specific something you have done or failed to do. Guilt asks the question, "what have I done or left undone?" The dog died because I left her in a hot car. The remedy for guilt may be to make amends, to perform atonement, to get forgiveness. Shame, on the other hand, is an existential feeling that undermines the whole sense of worthiness. Shame asks the question, "What's wrong with me?" It pushes you towards the third rail of oblivion. The remedy for shame is not forgiveness but acceptance: "nothing's wrong with you, you're all right."

With those caveats, let us plunge into the question at hand: what is the difference between Jewish, Catholic and Calvinist guilt, knowing that we can only scratch the surface.

The sadness of my father-in-law's passing brought me closer to Jacqueline's family these past two weeks, and I mentioned this topic to them over dinner one night; her father was not Jewish but her late mother was. My brother-in-law Hal, also Jewish, said that he thinks his upbringing taught him to feel guilty when he had it better than someone else. You are standing talking to a friend and suddenly a bolt of lightning strikes him but not you and you feel guilty for surviving.

Judaism, of course, has an elaborate ritual apparatus for dealing with guilt: Yom Kippur. The New Year begins with Rosh Hashana, which this year is Sept. 22. After the books are closed for the year, everyone has ten days to settle moral accounts for the previous year. There are two types of accounts to settle: offenses against God and offenses against other humans. Yom

Kippur, ten days after Rosh Hashana, is the day to make atonement.

The Book of Leviticus describes the procedure for making ritual atonement in the days when the Tribe of Israel was wandering in the Sinai desert and the Tabernacle was set up as the focus of Jewish worship. Among other animals sacrificed, two goats were selected at Yom Kippur to carry the sins of the people. One was slaughtered, but the other, who was named Azazel, was released into the wilderness after the high priest had placed on its head all the sins of the people. This animal became known as the scapegoat.

My brother-in-law's description of feeling guilty when fortune visited him rather than someone else seems to me to have an element of this scapegoat, and its transference of advantage; you feel guilty because you place yourself in the position of the other. As Azazel has placed on its head the sins of the people, you experience vicariously the misfortunes of others.

The important thing about this is that it is guilt in community. In a perfect community, everyone's blessings and burdens would be equal, but in real life they are not allocated equally, so we have our conscience to goad us into doing something about that, to help the less fortunate.

This ethos is strong in the Jewish communities I am familiar with; my Jewish law partners back in Charleston explained to me that their synagogue, and I think most synagogues today, operated on a financial structure that just calculates the operating costs of the temple and divides it by the number of members. But this is a hardship on the members who do not have financial means, and so the wealthier members give extra to support the inclusion of everyone who wants to join.

Here's an idea that won't make it into the jokes: Jewish guilt is worrying about the less fortunate. To me such community-minded generosity much more typifies every Jewish community I have encountered than do the stereotypes. We have been force-fed humor on Jewish guilt such as "How many Jewish sons does it take to change a light bulb – only one, if he'd ever visit his mother, but that's OK, I'll just sit in the dark." Sure, there's some recognition in this stereotype, as there is in all the nervous jokes about marrying outside the faith and other edgy points of Jewish life, and my brother-in-law's comment is one data point and may not logically support a grand hypothesis, yet I think it is closer to the tradition as it has been expressed in the Torah.

The Torah, of course, is the heart of the Jewish Bible and important to the Christian Bible as well. It starts with the book of Genesis, and Genesis starts with not one but two creation stories. The first is the seven-day creation, in which God, at the end of each day's work, pronounced that the work was good. The second is the Garden of Eden story, and what I want to highlight here is that in the text one of the punishments imposed on Adam and Eve for their disobedience is that they will be mortal, they will eventually die.

Now this is a Jewish story, but Jewish theologians have not read great significance into it. That was left for Christian thinkers.

St. Paul was the first; he was trying to promote Jesus to the Jews, and claimed Jesus as the new Adam. Jesus himself had talked about life eternal for his followers and Paul said "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." Three centuries later, St. Augustine elaborated on Paul's idea and developed the doctrine of Original Sin. This doctrine held that the disobedience of Adam and Eve in eating the forbidden fruit has been passed down to all their descendants, that is, to the whole human race.

And it is because of sex that this is justified. Augustine had a real hangup on sex; inconveniently, sex is completely bound up with the human race. So Augustine decided that despite Jesus's promise of eternal life, most humans would go to hell and suffer eternal torment, and only a few would go to heaven. Everyone carried a load of existential guilt, just from being born of the sexual union of their parents.

Now notice that this guilt is divorced from any particular action; in that regard it is like shame that I discussed earlier. It is a general state of being.

And it is internal. In Jewish law, guilt depends on your actions. In Catholic tradition, following St. Augustine, you can be convicted by your thoughts. You not only are guilty for stealing your friend's bicycle or fondling that woman, you are guilty for just thinking about doing it.

And while Jewish law sets up the Yom Kippur ritual to atone publicly for the sins of the community, Catholic tradition sets up the confessional, where your private thoughts can be divulged to a priest, who will then ritually pronounce a punishment and forgiveness.

After Augustine, it became the position of the Roman church that all paths to salvation lay through the procedures and the sacraments of the Church. But on Halloween day in 1517, Martin Luther took his hammer and nailed 95 arguments to the door of a church in Germany, thus starting the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant claim, broadly, was that the path to salvation was not through the church but through the Bible, and the function of the church was to help people understand the Bible.

However, John Calvin did not lighten up the load of Christian guilt; rather he increased it. One of the five pillars of Calvinism was the total depravity of humans - Augustine's Original Sin squared. The only people who would make it to heaven were the elect, and they were selected for salvation – predestined was the word – before they were even born. The precarious condition of all humans was described this way in Jonathan Edwards' great sermon "Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God" from 1741, a Calvinist classic many of us read in school:

"They are already under a sentence of condemnation to hell. They do not only justly deserve to be cast down thither, but the sentence of the law of God, that eternal and immutable rule of righteousness that God has fixed between him and mankind, is gone out against them, and stands against them; so that they are bound over already to hell."

This sermon was part of the first Great Awakening, where Calvinist ideas spread far and wide in America. As the Industrial Revolution took hold, a variation on Calvin's teachings came to the fore: you couldn't change who was going to be saved, but one way you might find out if you were in the elect was whether you made money. Financial success might be an indication of God's favor.

Well, this was quite a Catch-22. If you were well-to do, you'd prosper in this life and then look forward to further rewards when you died. But if you were struggling to feed yourself in this life, you had eternal torment to look forward to.

Thus was born the American notion that it is a sin to be poor. And Protestant guilt, Calvinist guilt, strives for perfection, strives to work ever harder to prove oneself worthy of eternal salvation.

The sociologist Max Weber wrote his classic study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of*

Capitalism about this conjunction, and he credits it with putting America at the forefront of industrial progress.

All right, we have Jewish guilt based on deeds and notions of fairness in a community, Catholic guilt based on thoughts, and Calvinist guilt based on trying to prove one's worthiness for salvation.

Unitarians rejected the depravity of humans and Universalists went one step further and held that God loved humans too much to damn even the most evil sinner. Our spiritual forebears rejected the Garden of Eden story, and indeed our current understanding of evolution shows that we did not fall from a state of primitive grace, but have evolved and are evolving ways of living in relationship with one another.

But there is no cause for smugness; we may not adhere to any of these faith traditions now but they affect our feelings in subconscious ways. In the middle of the night when I'm wrestling with a problem, my Presbyterian forebears will convene a court around my bedstead and pronounce me guilty and sentence me to cold sweats until dawn.

These three flavors do not exhaust guilt; they may be the least influential. Right now we are experiencing a development of liberal guilt. This week a colleague posted a picture on social media of a three-masted square-rigged ship with the caption: "trigger warning." The point was that old sailing ships may remind some viewers of slave traders or colonizers. Some other colleagues responded that the particular ship she depicted was the wrong era for either use, and others piled on that this objection missed the point.

I agree with both points of view; it is important to be historically accurate, but being aware of how other people may view any image or interpret any words is also important if we are to come together to build the beloved community.

What place does guilt have in dismantling white supremacy? Is it useful? Part of me says no, our Universalist heritage is of a God who wants to "happify" people and not to dwell on the shortcomings of the past. But it is not responsible to ignore the way the past stretches into the present, and anyone who thinks we have somehow resolved racism or white supremacy has not been paying attention. We are the hands and hearts and voices of the good, and we do not serve human progress by putting on rose-colored glasses and ignoring the sufferings of the present.

Finally, let me come back around to the reading I did earlier, an aspect of guilt not from religion but from neuroscience. It appears that the brain circuits for guilt and for shame and worrying are right next to the reward center of the brain, the same place that makes the addict reach for his next fix. This is why sometimes it feels good to wallow in guilt or shame. It is exciting or at least comforting.

The neuroscientist Alex Korb on whose work this article reports, says that when we have beat ourselves up with guilt, the way out of the cycle is gratitude. Just the search for reasons to feel grateful stimulates the production of serotonin:

It's not finding gratitude that matters most; it's remembering to look in the first place. Remembering to be grateful is a form of emotional intelligence. One study found that it actually affected neuron density in both the ventromedial and lateral prefrontal cortex. These density changes suggest that as emotional intelligence increases, the neurons in these areas become more efficient. With higher

emotional intelligence, it simply takes less effort to be grateful.”

So in a word, if you’re beating yourself up with guilt, whether its flavor be Jewish or Catholic or Protestant or liberal or none of the above, look for gratitude. Guilt is necessary, but gratitude is divine.

Amen

Reading for Three Flavors of Guilt

From “New neuroscience reveals 4 rituals that will make you happy”

By Eric Barker

May 19, 2017

<https://www.theladders.com/p/21219/neuroscience-4-rituals-happy>

Sometimes it doesn’t feel like your brain wants you to be happy. You may feel guilty or shameful. Why?

Believe it or not, guilt and shame activate the brain’s reward center.

Via *The Upward Spiral* [by UCLA neuroscientist Alex Korb]

Despite their differences, pride, shame, and guilt all activate similar neural circuits, including the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, amygdala, insula, and the nucleus accumbens. Interestingly, pride is the most powerful of these emotions at triggering activity in these regions — except in the nucleus accumbens, where guilt and shame win out. This explains why it can be so appealing to heap guilt and shame on ourselves — they’re activating the brain’s reward center.

And you worry a lot too. Why? In the short term, worrying makes your brain feel a little better — at least you’re doing something about your problems.

Via *The Upward Spiral*:

In fact, worrying can help calm the limbic system by increasing activity in the medial prefrontal cortex and decreasing activity in the amygdala. That might seem counterintuitive, but it just goes to show that if you’re feeling anxiety, doing something about it — even worrying — is better than doing nothing.

But guilt, shame and worry are horrible long-term solutions. So what do neuroscientists say you should do? Ask yourself this question:

What am I grateful for?

Yeah, gratitude is awesome... but does it really affect your brain at the biological level? Yup.

You know what the antidepressant Wellbutrin does? Boosts the neurotransmitter dopamine. So does gratitude.

Via *The Upward Spiral*:

The benefits of gratitude start with the dopamine system, because feeling grateful activates the brain stem region that produces dopamine. Additionally, gratitude toward others increases activity in social dopamine circuits, which makes social interactions more enjoyable... Know what Prozac does? Boosts the neurotransmitter serotonin. So does gratitude.

Via *The Upward Spiral*:

One powerful effect of gratitude is that it can boost serotonin. Trying to think of things you are grateful for forces you to focus on the positive aspects of your life. This simple act increases serotonin production in the anterior cingulate cortex.

I know, sometimes life lands a really mean punch in the gut and it feels like there's nothing to be grateful for. Guess what?

Doesn't matter. You don't have to find anything. It's the searching that counts.

Via *The Upward Spiral*:

It's not finding gratitude that matters most; it's remembering to look in the first place. Remembering to be grateful is a form of emotional intelligence. One study found that it actually affected neuron density in both the ventromedial and lateral prefrontal cortex. These density changes suggest that as emotional intelligence increases, the neurons in these areas become more efficient. With higher emotional intelligence, it simply takes less effort to be grateful.