

GUILT: THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING UNACCEPTABLE

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS ~ *Andrew Pakula*

Come into this circle of community. Come into this sacred space.
Be not tentative. Bring your whole self!
Bring the joy that makes your heart sing.
Bring your kindness and your compassion.
Bring also your sorrow, your pain.
Bring your brokenness and your disappointments.
Spirit of love and mystery; help us to recognize the spark of the divine that resides
within each of us.
May we know the joy of wholeness.
May we know the joy of being together.

Come, let us be together now, in joy and worship.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* ~ *Kevin Henkes*

(Lilly, who is a mouse, gets mad at her teacher when he refuses to make let her disrupt the class. She makes a mean picture of him and puts it in his bookbag. Later, she regrets her meanness, and looks for ways to apologize.)

READING *For All the Gifts of Life* ~ *Barbara Rohde*

One summer morning – the morning of our forty-fifth wedding anniversary – we were awakened by the sound of two hummingbirds hovering among the feathery pink blossoms of the silk tree outside our bedroom window.

It was a small sound, more clicks than notes. It had none of the calling beauty of a cardinal's song, for example. And yet we experienced it as a gift, something life offered us for our particular delight.

Any event, when it nourishes our spirits, delights us, brings us energy or vision or direction or courage, is experienced as a gift. It is the genesis of all songs of praise.

Despite objective knowledge, we experience the sense of a gift as highly personal. I know, for example, that Channing did not write his sermon on spiritual freedom hoping that some day in the future someone like me would read it and see more clearly, but when a sentence from the sermon leaps off the page at me, I feel I have been directly addressed. Time has vanished and Channing is speaking his truth into my ear.

In our time it is difficult not to feel guilty about life's gifts, knowing that there are millions for whom a handful of rice would be the most important gift they could receive, knowing that millions are awakened by the sound of guns rather than by two hummingbirds in a silk tree.

A great temptation for the privileged is to ease our guilt by convincing ourselves that we have earned our gifts, by hard work or good deeds or the right creed. Or we go to the other extreme and adopt a kind of spiritual austerity program.

I believe such guilt is fruitless. Our task is to remember three things: gifts that are not received die; gifts that we try to hoard die; gifts that we cannot or do not hand to another die.

MESSAGE

Guilt: The Feeling of Being Unacceptable

~ Rev. Stoneberg

We are talking this morning about 'guilt' and this month about 'the holy.' While I won't dwell on making a connection between these two things, I do want to at least give a nod to their relationship. If you'll allow me, please consider the following to be something of a sidebar...hear it, then set it aside:

If I had to define sin, it would be as an act, or the experience, of separation from what some call God. That is to say, sin, or wrong-doing, implies a break in relationship, a disconnection from wholeness. Guilt then, is the feeling that ensues, as the result of missing a connection, of feeling that a holy relationship has been broken, or that a possibility for touching the holy has been missed. That guilt might also lead to a feeling of being unacceptable and unworthy...or, unholy.

Suffice it to say that I believe there is an association to be made between guilt and the holy. But, that said, I chose to speak about guilt today not because of its relation to the monthly theme, but rather because it seemed to me to be bubbling up in the life of this congregation. I have recently and repeatedly heard such things as: "I feel guilty because..." and "I won't be made to feel guilty" and "I don't want to do this simply because of guilty feelings." So, it seemed important to explore the reality of guilt in our lives and in our community... this religious community. What place does guilt have here, and in our lives?

A few years ago, there was an article in the UUWorld magazine showcasing the intentional efforts at outreach in a congregation in Providence RI (one that Peter Cook knows well.) They budgeted a considerable sum for this work, and among their projects were large bus stop ads. One of those ads pictured a multi-racial family, with the caption "If you are looking for a church where children learn values without guilt..." following simply by the website...www.AreYouUU.org.

Religion without guilt. Is that one of the reasons you're here?

A few months ago, Rev. Kendyl Gibbons began a sermon to her congregation in Kansas City¹ with this reflection:

"Many times people new to Unitarian Universalism will share a comment along the lines that they are so relieved to find a religious home where the basic message is not predicated on guilt. I think I understand what they mean; it's about being told that we are all sinners, deserving of god's wrath...

And it's true; that is not our message.

On the other hand, when I hear that observation, I'm always reminded of growing up Unitarian Universalist, and how jealous I was of my Roman Catholic neighbors across the street. They had two girls about my age, who both made their first communions during the time I knew them. Of course I longed for the white organdy dress and veil, but I was equally envious of the mysterious ritual of confession, by which they were

¹ allsoulskc.org/.../2014/12/What-To-Do-about-Guilt.pdf

able to be forgiven for everything they had ever done wrong.

Even at that age, I knew that my church offered its adherents no such out; until all the injustices in all the world were corrected, and all suffering relieved, we had work to do; as long as one orphaned kitten remained homeless, it was because we were not trying hard enough. That's a daunting message of responsibility for a child, and even though I understand it now in a more nuanced way, I still think it is fair to say that our faith trades in its own peculiar brand of guilt. We may not use the vocabulary of 'sin', but we can still whip up a mean case of overwhelming moral accountability and inadequacy."

Which is it? Are we a religion without guilt, or a faith that trades in its own peculiar brand of guilt? The best answer to this is the good ol' Unitarian one... We are both and. BOTH a religion without guilt, AND a religion that can, however unintentionally, whip up a mean case of guilt and inadequacy.

Religion did not invent guilt, but religion, even ours, has sometimes fostered it in pathological ways. Religion has used guilt, along with the threat of hell or God's judgment, as a form of coercion to encourage moral behaviour and even financial support. I wonder though, if our modern dis-ease with religious guilt is better characterized as an unexamined reaction to felt guilt, a reaction that also would have us throw out the potentially healing qualities of honest, appropriate guilt. Let me explain.

Universalism, as expressed in North America, arose as a reaction to the Calvinist theology of original sin and human depravity. Universalism proclaims that we are inherently blessed, and that God's love is so boundless that no one would be sent to a place of eternal torment.

Unitarianism, with beginnings in the oneness of God, came to promote the worth and dignity of humanity, along with the assertion that we are capable of improving ourselves and developing moral character. As one source says of Unitarianism, "What you do, not what you shy away from, makes us who we are and has the possibility to save, or at least change, the world."²

So neither of the traditions in our history claimed that we are perfect, or inherently good. Rather, our theology is rooted in an assurance that we are loved, and that we are worthy of that love, assurances that are, more accurately, antidotes for shame, but not for guilt.

See, there's a crucial distinction to be made between shame and guilt. Shame is the experience of being unworthy, unlovable, unacceptable...way down at the core of our being. Guilt, on the other hand, is best described as an appropriate, and honest, response to wrongdoing.

So let's look more closely at guilt...or what we often describe as guilt. Most often guilt is painted as a negative thing...like the drawing on the front of the order of service...it's that feeling of being on the receiving end of the 'big pointing finger'...the finger that says "You are wrong. You are bad. You are worthless." This kind of guilt is seen to be imposed by some external and looming judge who is condemning us without a fair trial. This kind of guilt is paralyzing...it holds us down and eats us up inside...it interrupts our ability to connect with others and even makes it impossible to enjoy life. When we feel this kind of guilty, we try to make others feel it too. This, I believe, is the kind of guilt that our ancestors were responding

² http://northfieldunitarian.org/newsletter/sermon3_6_2011.doc

to as they envisioned and brought into being our Unitarian Universalist faith. It is this kind of guilt that longs for the good news of our human worth and dignity, and wants to insist that we are cradled in universal love.

This harmful, disease-like guilt might better be named as humiliation, or belittlement, or the result of bullying, because it leads to shame, or a feeling of worthlessness. This 'false' guilt makes us want to hide, to become defensive, or to believe that we best keep who we are a secret. But, to call all of this 'guilt' is not really appropriate or even accurate.

Our UU faith says that we have inherent worth, but does not claim that we are perfect, or inherently good. We acknowledge that we make mistakes and that we can learn from them. Guilt, true guilt, is actually a very useful and healthy response. It is this honest kind of guilt that calls us to face our wrong doings and to make changes.

This true kind of guilt is like ethical rumble strips...alerting us to the fact that we have strayed off the path of right relations or right speech or right thoughts or right action, and that we need to make some correction. We would do well to be grateful for these kinds of guilty feelings, for they are the voice of our conscience calling us to the best of who we can be.

But I fear we are often unable to welcome or respond to this kind of good guilt...this guilt that comes in the interest of positive transformation and healing.

Why is that? Is it a failure of sufficient vocabulary? Is our inability to be articulate in identifying our feelings? Or is it simply the long human history, particularly in western thought, of feeling bad about who we are?

In an article "The Anatomy of White Guilt"³ found on the website of the UUA, an article that specifically addresses white privilege and the ensuing guilt of privilege, the author contends that when we experience, or observe, wrongdoing...whether our own or that of others...and in this case, particularly the wrongdoing of racism and oppression...whites might respond with pain, horror, remorse, sadness, tears, outrage, betrayal, despair, confusion, uncertainty, overwhelm...but we tend to name it all...all of this complexity...as guilt. Those of us who are white, who are privileged, often just feel guilty.

Similarly, in all of our individual lives, we experience a complexity of reactions.... Judgment, inadequacy, rejection, dismissal, disrespect, a lack of inclusion or feelings of belonging, etc, etc, etc...and we tend to call all of this guilt. In most cases, this is not healthy guilt resulting from something we did or didn't do that we wish we had or hadn't, but rather it is the taking on of something foisted upon us from some outside source. Something, or someone else has 'made' us to feel guilty and unacceptable.

There's a silver lining here as well. Just as grief is so often an indication that we have loved, guilt is often an indication that some relationship matters to us. Be it that with our parents, our friends, our community, our religion...when some relationship matters to us, it then it matters if we are perceived to be following the rules, or meeting the expectations. We want approval. An actor friend of mine, Carl, has talked about this as one's private audience...the people and ideals that sit in the audience for the performance that is our life. We imagine that private audience as observing and reacting...and we hear their applause, or their boos of

³ <http://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/curricula/whiteness/students/index.shtml>

consternation...we feel their affirmation or disapproval. And when their reaction is, or feels, negative, we assume the guilty posture...even when we do not believe that we have done anything wrong. We feel sorry that we have disappointed them, but this does not necessarily imply that we have done wrong.

So, how do we correct this? How do we go on in the face of our perceived shortcomings and failures? How do we battle, or eliminate the kind of guilt that is so harmful?

Actually, I believe this faith has an answer in two of our principles...the first, inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the third, acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. If we truly accept one another, in spite of our failings, and in the spirit of recognizing one another's inherent worth, we are working to eradicate the shame that too often paralyzes us. If we truly encourage one another, including ourselves, in our spiritual growth (that is, in the growth of the size of our hearts,) we may learn to respond more appropriately...in healthy, whole, ways...when we are guilty of doing something we regret...and will be able to say we're sorry, and to make amends. That is spiritual growth.

I suggest that when we feel guilty, we first reflect on whether guilt is what we are really feeling. Knowing that it is a healthy response to wrongdoing, if guilt is appropriate, we can ask what we are going to do to correct what we have done. And, if guilt is not called for, best to spend some time in discernment...to see what is it we're really feeling. If it is remorse for disappointing someone, we might express that to them, even if we don't intend to change our behaviour. If it is shame, then what we need is more love...more acceptance...so that we might come to believe that we are worthy, we are enough. And, this is a group project. It's gonna take all of us, all of who we are, all of what this faith is...to learn to practice acceptance and to live in self-love.

One more thing. Our third principle has a small, but critical, tag that I left out earlier. "We affirm acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth IN OUR CONGREGATIONS." Let us not forget that acceptance, and guilt, and forgiveness, and culpability apply not just to us as individuals, but to us as a congregation, a community, a faith. This community, the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough, has inherent worth, but we also make mistakes, as a community. We forget to live our values. We aren't as inclusive as we'd like to be. We too often have blinders on to difference, and to how our actions affect others. We are guilty of these things, AND we can make amends, we can be transformed, we can respond to our better vision of who we want to be...that is, if we are willing to name and face appropriately our guilt.

At its best, and with all of our combined efforts, let this be a place for reflection, and for discernment, individually and together, about how to live worthy and meaningful lives. Let this be a place where shame is actively eradicated. Let this be a place for owning our mistakes and for making amends. Let this be a place for relationships that matter, for engagement and learning and for growing love in the world.

In the words of Rev. Thom Belote, "May our inherent goodness find ways to outweigh the guilt we might be carrying, and may we transform our guilt to bring us closer to one

another."⁴

Amen.

READING

You Are Enough

~ Nancy Ore

CLOSING WORDS

~ Maryell Cleary (*adapted*)

Knowing that we do not always live up to our best expectations of ourselves, let us seek the good within, which some call the inner light, and some "a spark of the divine."

Knowing that we live in a society which falls far short of the ideal, let us resolve to do one thing this week to aid those suffering from want and injustice.

Knowing that the earth is our home and that we have too often abused and poisoned it, let us consider how we might be part of making it more healthful for all living things.

Knowing that each of us has some sorrow or anxiety hidden within, let us consider how we may reach out to one another with our smiles, our handclasps, and our encouraging words.

Go forth from this time, knowing that you are enough, more than enough, and that I love you.

Amen.

⁴ <http://revthom.blogspot.ca/2009/03/sermon-religion-without-guilt-delivered.html>