

Blue Sunday: Part III

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson, Parish Minister

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Unitarian Church of Vancouver

It's the third Sunday in January, and I'm telling you, it's hard not to have the Blue Sunday, Blue Monday blues. I've got the Haitian earthquake blues, the post Copenhagen-no-climate-change-agreement blues; the prorogued-Parliament-what-the-hell-is-going-on-with-Canadian-democracy? blues. I've got the Uganda witch-hunt-lynch-the-gays blues; the Wall-Street-clueless-greedy-bankers blues; the BC \$8.00 minimum wage, the \$610-a-month-social assistance cheque-sure-road-to-poverty-in-this-Province blues. I've got the what-am-I-going-to-say-in-this-sermon? blues. Oh yes, I do.

Now I know...a couple of weeks ago I was up here preaching that we must never forget the *Great Asymmetry* that is the deepest truth about the human family. That for every incident of evil (or disaster) there are and always have been 10,000 acts of decent, ordinary, saving, meaning bestowing kindness and solidarity expressed by women, men and children every day. *But that was then*; I was still basking in the glow of the holiday season and the gathering together in Vancouver of the whole Epperson family clan.

But tomorrow, Cliff Arnall of the University of Cardiff reminds us, is Blue Monday—by his calculations, the most depressing day of the year. The holiday season is over and credit card bills are coming due; New Year's resolutions have already been broken; tomorrow begins a new work week; the mid-point between winter and spring is still weeks away; and the Olympics loom like an iceberg on the horizon. Add up the cumulative damage—and what spews out is a sure fire formula for a very depressing day ahead. So dear congregation—again this year, you've been warned! — time to take evasive action, maneuver around Blue Monday or bowl your way

over tomorrow and the days to come with a good book or movie, with some good music, food and the company of friends and family and hold on tight.

Blue Monday gets me thinking about the blues—music that first took its classic shape around 1900 in the Mississippi Delta; music directly influenced by the field songs and prison shouts created and given voice by numberless workers and convicts—men who built the Mississippi River levees in the decades following the Civil War in the States. One shovel full, one wheelbarrow at a time, they raised a double wall of earth higher and longer than the Great Wall of China. Over time, those songs from field and prison made their way to kitchens and bedrooms, to porch stoops, barrooms and dance floors. With a handful of notes, stanzas of three lines in 4/4 time: they're songs of melancholy longing, pent up rage, hard loving, living, and resilience in spite of the card we're dealt. In the words of Robert Johnson, "I got stones in my passway, and my road seem dark at night. I got stones in my passway, and my road seem dark at night."

And speaking of blues lyrics, by my far-from-comprehensive reckoning, the words to traditional blues can be grouped into a small number of themes. The first, and most common, is the blues provoking *things that others have done to us*: taken our money, walked out, lying, cheating, mean mistreating. A second blues theme is the forlorn *things that those we love are doing to themselves*: "Watching you," Luther Allison sings, "watching you all the time (repeat)...watching you wreck yourself honey, all you do is sit round drink cheap cherry wine. You worrying me baby, and I sit here wondering what I can do..."

The third theme in blues lyrics *addresses an unnamed malaise*—something structurally wrong about the singer's way of being in the world, something flawed either about their interior

psychic landscape, or fundamentally awry in the world-at-large that they feel deeply and intuitively, but can hardly put a name to it. In the first instance, the singer laments:

Born under a bad sign
I been down since I begin to crawl
If it wasn't for bad luck,
I wouldn't have no luck at all.
(Booker T. Jones/William Bell)

And in Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" we hear this plaintive theme repeated:

I went down to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
I went down to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above 'have mercy now, save poor Bob if you please'....
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
'at I got the crossroad blues this mornin' Lord
babe, I'm sinking down.

From the interior self we go to exterior woe over a pervasive, atmospheric kind of flaw in things.

We hear it in the "Portland Street Blues" where it goes:

Baby, well don't stop talkin' to me
Baby, well don't stop talkin' to me
Got the Portland Street blues, blues you can't touch or see.
What happened there, it's hard to say
But the guilt and shame still lingers...today
Every mother's son was changed
It was like catching the wrong train
Yah, the Portland Street blues, blues you can't touch or see.

You hear this theme of pervasive guilt and malaise even in the blues sung by Marianne Faithful and Beck Hansen. Faithful sings: "I feel guilt, I feel guilt/Though I've done no wrong I feel guilt./ I feel bad, so bad/Though I ain't done nothing wrong, I feel bad." And in Beck's song he feels "uptight when I walk in the city/...cold when I'm at home./Modern guilt, I'm stranded with nothing/Modern guilt/I'm under lock and key....Don't know what I've done, but I feel ashamed."

So if the first two themes in blues lyrics are about things that others have done to us and things that those we love are doing to themselves, the third is about an ingrained, unnamable flaw in oneself or in the world that gives rise to a sense of forlorn helplessness and feelings of guilt. The fourth and very common theme of the blues is the *harm or bad things we do to others*. That refrain is captured powerfully by the contemporary blues artist Robert Cray, in his song “Consequences,” where he sings:

Not a day goes by/That a man doesn't have to choose
'tween what he wants/What he's afraid to lose....
I was smoking and drinkin'/and thinkin' when you walked by
The next thing I knew/I was making up my alibi...
And all I've done since then
Is lie, lie, lie!
I took my chances/Had a real good time
But I'd give my soul/For a little peace of mind....
Homes will crumble and hearts will break
Baby, why gamble when there's so much to lose
'Cause there's consequences for what we do
Consequences for me and you.

Now we shouldn't be surprised that feelings of guilt—whether unnamable or explicitly concrete, crop up as a pervasive theme in the blues. In psychology, neuroscience, evolutionary biology and literature, time and again guilt is identified as a fundamental, innate, pancultural, and universal emotion. Guilt is a near constant concern of literary texts, including the lyrics of the blues; as is the quest for redemption, the alleviation of guilt and despair. From the *Bible* to the *Upanishads*, from *Antigone* to *Hamlet*, *The Scarlet Letter*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, to Camus' *The Fall*, and Robert Cray's “Consequences,” feelings of guilt haunt the pages of the literature we read, the plays we see, the songs we sing, the plaintive stories we spill out in an analyst's office.

Establishing the facts of *legal guilt* and apportioning responsibility and punishment lies at the very heart of our judiciary systems. Even if a person may be legally innocent of some deed,

still we are often moved to judge that person, we hold him *ethically guilty* if through free choice, we believe that he violated a moral law or a standard of culture and society of which he and we are members. On the other hand, an alcoholic, or drug addict may drink and shoot-up from compulsion rather than free agency, so that ethically speaking we may say there is no guilt; but that person may be wracked with it nonetheless from feelings of wreckage and estrangement from family and friends, of chronic existential waste, from the failure to achieve personal and social ideals.

Whole religions, like the myriad traditions in Christianity, have been founded on the belief that this is the essential problem of being human; estrangement and alienation from the divine and our fellow beings, and of their dire consequences for human flourishing. More recently, earth-centered and liberation theologies have attended to our environmental and political behavior; of how we, to the degree that we accept and participate in the values and habits of wasteful, unjust societies are complicit in them. Here the call is to respond, repair and remove unjust structures of the societies in which we are born, live and act.

If feeling and experiencing guilt—and what can be more blues provoking than shame, guilt, and remorse(?)—if that gnawing, haunting feeling is so pervasive; if legal systems, moral codes, religions, therapies, literature, movies, and music wrestle with it and its consequences, why is it that I don't see or hear many Unitarian ministers talking about it? Why is it that it seems so absent from our historical and contemporary discourse—ministers and lay folk alike? Why is it that as I was working my way up to writing about this Blue Sunday/Monday service, I realized that I felt like I had to kind of sneak my way up to this topic, and not just announce and dive into it from the outset?

I've been around long enough to notice that there are some things we'd just prefer to not talk about. I've seen good Unitarians recoil at words like "God," sacrifice, evil, sin, and judgment. Guilt can be one of those of ideas. It's not as though I don't get it; that we can personally have good reasons for reacting negatively or evading these terms. Some of us have escaped from gloom and doom, guilt-ridden religions where, because of our ideas, our dissent, our sexuality, we were consigned to outer darkness by rigid orthodoxies and conventions.

But much can be lost if we don't walk into the valley of the shadows. Unitarianism in England today, for example, is a mere shadow of its 19th century self, because its relentlessly cheerful, optimistic, progress-saturated theology had little or nothing meaningful to say about the tragedy of the First World War. And with some shock, I recently read how Coretta and Martin Luther King Jr. attended Unitarian churches in Boston during graduate student days in the 50s. And that they gave, Coretta said, "a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at [the] time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian." The reason? In Martin Luther King's words: "The more I observed the tragedies of human history, and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin, [and] I came to feel that" liberal theology "had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned to false optimism." That statement pierces my heart, troubles my mind, and I wonder what our religious movement would be like if he had chosen differently. (see Rosemary Bray McNatt, "Why Martin Luther King Jr. Wasn't a Unitarian Universalist," *UUWorld*,

Nov/Dec. 2002)

I've been thinking about guilt and wanting to share some thoughts and feelings with you because of a couple of things I read and heard recently. In the first, the philosopher Marcia Cavell wrote: "If only you could feel the right *kind* of guilt." The *right kind* of guilt? What was she talking about, I wondered. And in the second instance, I was told: "This is not about *you*, or

how bad *you* are. What I'm trying to do is think about and solve a problem, and I need your help."

Now I don't know how many of you therapists and counselors out there are nodding your heads or marveling at how obtuse I am, but let me proceed. June Tangney has written that:

"in guilt, the object of concern is some *specific* action (or failure to act) which violates internal standards. So guilt involves the perception that one has done something 'bad.' There is a sense of tension and remorse or regret over the 'bad thing' that was done. But although the person experiencing guilt may feel...that she or he is a 'bad person', her or his core identity remain essentially intact." (quoted in Dallas Savoie, "A phenomenological Investigation of the Role of Guilt in OCD, PhD thesis, University of Saskatoon, 1994. Hereafter cited as Savoie)

This definition describes very clearly the feelings the blues musician Robert Cray was singing about in his song "Consequences." A specific act—stepping out with another woman—provoked remorse, the recognition that he had violated both an internal standard and that his actions had caused a loved one deep pain. As well, he may feel that he is a 'bad person', but the fact remains that he knows who he is—that he has a soul he'd "give...for a little peace of mind," and that there are standards that endure to which he is still accountable.

This is what I think Cavell was talking about when she wrote: "If only you could feel the right kind of guilt." And the right kind of guilt, according to people working in evolutionary biology, is of the utmost evolutionary significance for human development, for its innate role in the human constitution. For example, according to Carroll Izard, through the experience of guilt, "we have come to realize some control over our aggressive and sexual impulses...It is involved in the development of a sense of responsibility to others...[and thus has given rise] to standards of ethical and moral behaviour," which signal "to us that we have hurt others and that we need to repair these injuries...Without the experience of guilt, there would be little appreciation of behavior that is injurious to others." (cited in Savoie)

This makes me think of the comment made by Michael Lewis, a professor of pediatrics and psychiatry, when he said: "I wouldn't want to live in a society where people aren't truly shamed, where they don't feel guilt about some of the things they do." (from: "What is Guilt?" a roundtable discussion,

The Philoctetes Institute, February 22, 2007. Hereafter: Guilt)

If there's a *right kind of guilt*, the kind that has helped to create standards of ethical and moral behaviour, a sense of responsibility to others, and the felt need to repair—the kind of guilt that contributes to creating societies in which we would *want to live*; what about the *wrong kind of guilt*? Remember the second comment I heard recently and quoted above: “This is not about *you*, or how bad *you* are. What I'm trying to do is think about and solve a problem, and I need your help.” This is a crucial distinction in the discourse of guilt.

Donald Carveth of York University in Toronto wants to define guilt as “the capacity for concern; concern that drives toward reparation.” (all references to Carveth are from “Guilt.”) He contends that our discourse, our understanding of guilt, is so confused that we have applied the same term to two very different kinds of feelings and behaviours; that we have confused “shame” with “guilt.” In the first instance, when we've done, or perceived that we've done, something bad to another person, we react with feelings of shame, and conclude that we're a bad person. And as a result, all-too-often in this situation, we resort to self-punishment, self-torment, and resort to pills, the bottle, and other self-destructive acts. In this scenario, not only can't we bear to face who we are—thinking that if we're not perfect, then we're worthless and bad—if we're stuck in this kind of black and white picture of ourselves and have concluded the worst about us, then we're going to be of little or no use to the person or group that we may have injured.

That good person was right in telling me: “this is not about you, or how bad you are. What I'm trying to do is solve a problem, and I need your help.”

The way out of this, Carveth argues, is through a “greater capacity to feel guilt” as concern for others that leads to “creative, constructive, reparative activity.” And here, I believe Carveth has something particularly important to say to us on this Sunday before Blue Monday. “What would induce someone to feel [the right kind of] guilt”—that capacity for concern that

leads to reparation—feelings and acts that rise ultimately from love—“is the enormous relief” he observes in people when they take the right kind of guilt on and then act. “Instead of being plagued with painful states of shame,” he says, if we could learn to “look at the actual harm that [we’ve] done, or are doing, or wish to do—and then take responsibility for it, change, stop doing it, apologize, repair” our “life gets better.” We’ll no longer be “plagued by terrible disintegrative states of fragmentation and shame anymore.” We’ll be more able to respond to that person in our lives who says: “What I’m trying to do is solve a problem, and I need your help.”

At times I think that our oft-times too sunny theology can be something of a set up, that Martin Luther King was right, and that we need to listen more closely and sympathetically to those two themes running through so many lyrics in blues music: the ones that sing plaintively of guilts both pervasive and nearly unnamable but deeply felt, and those that speak of specific wrongs that we do to others. “I feel guilt, I feel guilt,” Marianne Faithful sings, “Though I’ve done no wrong I feel guilt./ I feel bad, so bad/Though I ain’t done nothing wrong, I feel bad.” There is a kind of atmospheric, radioactive background permeated by guilt that our well-tuned, sensitive psyches pick up and of which we are dimly aware. How could it be otherwise on a continent whose wealth was amassed by the displacement and slavery of others?

And the heart piercing “I’d give my soul/For a little peace of mind” guilt that arises from the specific harm we do to others? Best we stop thinking of ourselves as a “little lower than the angels,” “how marvelously wrought...how infinite in capacity, how like the gods!” That recipe for narcissism ill-equips us for the daily task of being what we are: neither near angels, nor demons—but women and men in need of that “capacity for concern,” that healthy quotient of guilt whose slings and arrows need not incapacitate us with misfortune, but that will lead us out of ourselves and guide us toward the creative, constructive, loving activity of repair, of mending frayed relations and the tattered fabric of a world that needs us.

Chalice Lighting:

We kindle this flame knowing that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. May our light and passion be a blessing to this community and to those beyond these doors who seek and need warmth and illumination.

Meditation:

The times weigh heavily upon us; with heavy hearts and troubled minds we look around and at the prospects ahead: uncertainty, injustice, war, the degrading of our environment, intense competition, the celebration of excess... self-doubt, aging, loneliness, unearned guilt, honest failure.

Words of thanksgiving come reluctantly, if at all.

Yet we continue, we hope, we don't give up on others or ourselves.

Listen to the quiet. Feel the blood and breath of life surging, entering, ebbing, flowing.

Can we accept life in its fullness? Can we recall its occasions of beauty, love and service? Remember your capacity for joy and wonder; then weigh the sorrow and the joy together, and whisper in your heart: I can serve, love, live, hope and give thanks for this day and the days ahead.

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