

Guilt and Shame

Anything Good about Guilt and Shame?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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And here it's important to note that all of history is broken. It's important to note that everything we humans do is messy. It's important to note that we are makers of mistakes, a billion mistakes every day. Most of what we do is wrong, we have to admit this – most of what we do is utterly wrong. We make colossal blunders, then small corrections, then more mistakes, more small corrections. Sometimes we learn, usually we don't. But then every so often we create a little joy. (David Eggers)

Years ago, I was attending a conference of religious scholars from North America, Europe and Israel; it included senior theologians and a small number of graduate students. This was a high octane gathering; and I was fortunate to be there—I was one of the students. One evening we were gathered in a large circle, engaged in discussion. I must have asked an annoying question or made some provocative comment, because suddenly, one of the senior theologians turned to me, and in front of everyone there, asked me a very probing question and demanded an answer. I'll never forget that moment because I was literally struck dumb. It's not as though I didn't have the information to give an answer—heaven knows I had been studying this issue for years. But, do you remember manual typewriters and how, when you pressed down on a bunch of keys all at once they'd jam up? Well, I had a brain freeze—my mind was stuck.

Agonizing seconds ticked by with all eyes on me. A sickening warm wave of shame washed over me from the roots of my hair to my soles of my feet. It was excruciating. Dreadful. I desperately wanted to just disappear off the face of earth. Eventually, someone cleared his throat; I managed to mumble some lame, mangled answer, and the discussion continued. When the session ended, all eyes averted, I beat a hasty retreat and raced for the sheltering privacy of my room. What I experienced that day years ago was **shame**.

Second story: on Sundays in my late teen years, I frequently officiated in the blessing and distribution of communion during the worship service. As you may know, in the Mormon world, there is a strict prohibition against drinking alcohol. Well there *were these Sundays* when I was up there breaking and blessing the bread and blessing the water for the communion, while unbeknownst to everyone in the chapel, I was performing this sacred ritual with a wicked hangover from the night before. Though no one in that room knew about my unworthy state, *I*

knew it and that it was wrong—I had violated an important religious injunction *and* I was hiding that wrong doing and its effects from the people assembled in that church. At the very moment when my mind and intention should have been clear and pure and attentive, I was, instead, preyed upon by feelings of **guilt**. I was feeling guilty for having done something that violated a deeply held value of my community—a value linked with a prohibition that I had internalized from a very early age.

Now I've told these two stories, not to add to the catalogue of unsavoury things you know about me, but to describe two powerful emotions that make their presence felt in our lives starting when we were very young—emotions that plague and prod us in myriad ways throughout life. In the past, nearly twenty years now that I have pitched my tent in this religion, I have heard it said a number of times: “Unitarians don't do guilt;” and it's usually said with a laugh or sigh of relief as though it's a good thing. True, we don't live under Shari'a law, a Mormon “Word of Wisdom” health and purity code, or 613 laws to keep (or violate) as noted in the Talmud. Unitarians don't do guilt? Maybe that's a good thing. After all, who wants to end up in a world so drenched in guilt that it made one comedian say: “When we played softball, I'd steal second base, feel guilty and then go back to first”?

There are those voices that call guilt a “useless feeling,” “a destructive and ultimately pointless emotion.” I've read that guilt is “just another name for impotence and for defensiveness,” that it's “destructive of communication...the ultimate protection for changelessness...and ignorance.” “No good has ever come from feeling guilty,” wrote the social critic and analyst Paul Goodman, “neither intelligence...nor compassion. The guilty do not pay attention to [others],” he said, “but only to themselves...[and to] their own anxieties.” (quotes from Daniel Nayeri, Lynn Crilly, Audre Lorde, Paul Goodman)

If guilt means going back to first base after stealing to second; if it means punishing ourselves over and over for not having written or seen a loved one before they died; if it means those conflicted feelings you experience when you're thriving and a family member isn't; if it means that you wish for some evil to happen to a rival and it *does* and that your *thinking* it made it so; what about the uneasy feelings that arise when thinking about doing something prohibited but not acting on it; and if guilt means feeling bad about something we've *actually* done and then *not* taking steps to repent and repair the damage—that is, if we beat ourselves up in our own head as though that's all that has to happen for what, in fact, was an act of betrayal that harmed

someone else—if all *that's* the fruit of guilt, and the world's filled with orchards of it, then those who call it useless and destructive, a prescription for ignorance, and impotence, and an emotion that keeps us from genuine reparative change...well, they may be right. So perhaps it's a good thing that Unitarians don't do guilt.

Oh, but we have our own don't we? The list of prohibitions may not be as extensive, minute and damning as in some religions; we may have fewer commandments and codes of law and thus, perhaps, fewer occasions for making mistakes with guilt riding in the slipstream. But is it only other people who are messed up, deluded, cognitively awry, and weak-willed, other people failing expectations, causing harm in relationships? I think there's more to it than that. And I think we know it.

Just take a look down our list of Unitarian principles, those values we covenant—that is, those principles we *promise* to affirm and promote. There are only seven of them. But they're doozies. Turn them over in your mind, like a coin, and read what's on the obverse side. The face that emerges is a world full humiliation, injustice, and inequity, of hard-heartedness and heart-break, of intolerance, dogmatism, and mendacity, a world of distraction, autocracy, conflict, tribalism, and willful plunder of the environment. And we're pledged to try to overcome and root *these* out of *us*, out of our relationships, our society and out of our one and only wondrous world? It's a set up for failure, heartache...and dare I say it? For guilt.

Now, in your mind's eye, turn the coin back to the list of positive values and goods that we embrace and vow to bring to fruition. We're good people—the kind that would come up with a list of principles like this: well-informed, kind, responsible and sensitive. And so we raise our children. Think about it: Is it any wonder that so many of us and *especially our young people*, experience a lot of anxiety, distress and guilt over the state of things in the world both public and intimate, the kind of bad news that haunts our thoughts, and fills our hearts with an aching sadness; with the specter of failure, of not measuring up...

And here, from out of nowhere, just as I finished writing those words, came the Leonard Cohen lyric in my head: “Ring the bells that still can ring/Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in.”

I can no more imagine a world without guilt than I can imagine a world without death. Though neither is a consummation devoutly to be wished, in spite of what Hamlet may have

said, they cannot be airbrushed out of our common fate. They can appall and incapacitate us, true enough—we are more than a little lower than the angels; we are neither deathless nor guiltless, but neither do we worship them like a cult. There may be a crack in everything, but that’s how the light gets in.

How can guilt ever be good? I would suggest that by acknowledging that *we do it*; Unitarians *do guilt* because, though it’s uncomfortable, we’ve got to hold something we’ve done or failed to do up against something we want ourselves to be, what we want our relationships and our world to be. We do guilt because we have principles and values. You want a world without them? A world without conscience? A world peopled only with guiltless demons and angels?

Do you remember the HPtFTU principle—the human propensity to f*** things up? It’s not just out there; it’s here. At times, when we reach those places in our lives where the sorrow of failure can hang on our hearts, it may seem that our propensity to mess things up is the whole truth about us. But it isn’t. It’s only *a* truth about us. And the way back to the rediscovery of the rest of what’s true begins with an admission that we are guilty of things done or not done that makes us feel like crap. “No one,” writes Francis Spufford, “is incapable of wrongdoing, and we have to be allowed our capacity [for mistakes] if we are to have our full stature. Taking the things that people do wrong seriously is part of taking *them* [and us] seriously. It’s part of letting...actions [really] be actions...of letting our lives tell a [true] life story, with consequences, and losses, and gains, rather than just being a flurry of events. It’s part of letting [each and all of us] be real enough to one another to be worth accepting and loving, rather than just attractive or glamorous or pretty or charismatic or cool.” There is a crack in everything, and us...something that living with our seven principles could or should remind us of everyday.

And when we find ourselves struggling with that raw realization—and that it applies to me, to us...messy, mysterious, multiple, self-subverting creatures that we are...what do we do with that knowledge? We can at least, for a start, turn to one another with kindness and compassion, knowing that each of us is locked in a mortal struggle all our own to find and express meaning, worth, and love as best we can. “That’s how the light gets in.” (see Spufford, *Unapologetic...*, pp. 35-53)

And that’s where shame is so catastrophically corrosive. Where guilt says: *I did* something bad, and I can take steps to admit and repair it; shame says, *I am* bad, never good enough; no matter what, I’ll never measure up. Where guilt, if seen as something we all

experience—that we’re all cracked pots—it *can* give rise to confession and repair, to speaking and being heard, to empathy and community; shame, on the other hand, singles out and isolates the other with humiliating contempt and censure. With excruciating pain, we see ourselves as worthless or flawed in the eyes of others who stop their ears and wish to abolish us from their sight; and we, in turn, desperately long only to disappear; or lash out in rage in order to annihilate those who hold us in contempt.

The landscape of shame can be as intimate and private as the distress felt by a young person recently graduated from university who can’t find a job and has to couch surf with friends or move back home. It’s as intimate and private as when a woman of normal size, a working mom struggling to make ends meet, is forced to compare herself against the barrage of images of lean, cool woman effortlessly doing and having it all with seeming nonchalance and glamour. The theatre of shame can be as small as a two person tragedy, where one spouse has their world unmoored, their self-worth unhinged, by the discovery of a partner’s hidden addiction or infidelity. And it can be as sweeping in scope, spanning centuries and continents, when whole peoples are adjudged inferior, enslaved, and by the sweat of their brow and unrequited toil, piled up untold luxury and wealth for those who held the lash and stirred the sugar and drank the tea cultivated in fields tended by those in bondage.

Strange how we need the evil German, the godless Communist, and other vile groups in order to know what wickedness looks like, and how blameless we are in comparison; strange the silence over slavery, genocide, racism and plundering the land that helped create wealth and power in North America. That’s what shame on a grand scale and closer to home looks like: start talking about racism, or class, or privilege on our own streets and in our own back yard, and the curtains of silence, of shame descend.

Intimate and epic, private and public—shame is an epidemic in our culture and the malign cousin to guilt. After having studied the power of vulnerability and shame for over ten years, 1000s of stories and 100s of interviews, Brene Brown, a research professor of social work, has shown a striking correlation between shame and addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide and eating disorders among other baleful, distressing experiences and expressions of shame. “Shame,” she says, “is the gremlin who says: you’re not good enough...who do you think you are?...Your father was a drunk. Your spouse left you. You’re not thin enough. You’re an immigrant. Look at your kids, you’re a miserable parent”.... and on

and on the tape of shame keeps playing in our heads with the outcome that we are the “most indebted, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in history.”

Everyone knows the warm wash of shame, Brown says, but it’s organized by gender. It ensnares women in a web of unobtainable, competing, conflicting expectations: you’re supposed to do it all, do it perfectly and never let them see you sweat. Whereas for men, it’s to never let *anyone* see you weak. “You show me a woman,” she says, “who can sit down with a man in real vulnerability, without blame and expecting perfection; and I’ll show you a woman who has done incredible work.” “You show me a man,” she continued, “who can sit down with a woman who’s just had it, who can’t do it all...and his response isn’t: “but I unloaded the dishwasher!”—but, instead, who sits down in real vulnerability, without blame and expecting perfection, and *really listens*, and I’ll show you a man who’s done a lot of work.”

Is there anything good about shame? Anything like how taking guilt seriously as *a truth* about us may begin a way back to rediscovery of the rest of what’s true and worthy about us? It’s more difficult to see and achieve, I think, especially because guilt’s pain can be inclusive: we all make mistakes—welcome to the guild of the guilty. Whereas, shame’s lash diminishes, derides, dismisses, and excludes the other. Is there a way out of our epidemic of shame?—

Sometimes, it takes violent riots like those that erupted on Friday June 27, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in New York City which launched the gay liberation movement, or a horrible Civil War in the States to end the scourge of slavery, or a decades-long struggle of nonviolent resistance to wrest away the “Jewel of the Crown” from the hand of empire and secure independence for India and Pakistan, or for a lone lawyer to finally say, what so many felt sixty years ago, when Joseph Welch, on live television said to Senator Joseph McCarthy: “Have you no decency sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?” and thus signaled the beginning of the end of McCarthy’s reign of terror, or for a lowly street vendor in Tunisia to immolate himself in protest against systemic humiliation and thus ignite the Arab Spring.

Sometimes it takes violent resistance, self-sacrifice, and shaming the shamers to overcome shame.

It doesn’t always have to be that dramatic, heroic or violent. For mere mortals like us, ensnared in interpersonal webs of shame, to find our way back to ourselves and each other, to achieve some measure of self-worth and respect, we need to understand how shame affects us,

how it affects our self-image, our parenting, our work, our relationships, how it affects the way we look at and live with each other.

Shame flourishes where there is secrecy, silence and judgment. To get out from under it takes empathy, a willingness to be vulnerable to each other, an exercise in sympathetic imagination; and then a commitment to listen, really listen to one another so that when we know that we've been heard and seen for who we are, and that who we are is enough—though there is a crack in everything, including each of us, all of us—then we'll know that we are worthy of connection, and that's how the light gets in.

I want to end with this: for too long, as a nation, we dwelt in secrecy and silence on a shameful part of our history that blighted the lives and hopes of a whole people and of generations. Justice Minister Irwin Cotler called the decision to house First Nations, Inuit and Metis children in church-run residential schools “the single most harmful, disgraceful and racist act in our history.” It's taken two decades of struggle and extraordinary courage for those impacted by this scourge to come forward and tell their stories in hopes of bringing about healing and reconciliation in this land. It's taken that and a firm commitment to ensure, in the words of Shirley Williams, a residential school survivor, “that this will never happen to any of the other nations in the world.” To that end, she says: “We want to take back our education and teach our history, our language and our culture. We have begun to tell our story—our history—and we want to tell it in our own words to the world.”

This weekend in Edmonton, as a step toward healing and reconciliation, “An Expression of Truth and Reconciliation,” written by the Unitarian ministers of Canada and by the Board of Trustees of the Canadian Unitarian Council, has been delivered to the Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A copy of that statement is printed in our orders of service. I urge all of us to read it, take it home and read it again, and then work with me to make these more than just words on a page. This statement commits us to act. May we do so that the paralysis of our shame will begin to come to an end.