

Sackcloth and Ashes: On the Wages of Guilt

Jesse G. Jennings



Modern religion is divided on the subject of guilt—though not evenly divided, as there seem to be more who champion it than don't. In the ads for various methods and houses of worship, a frequent theme is, "There is something wrong with you. It's time you admitted this, and when you have done so, we can help save you." Less often seen is, "You are

absolutely wonderful just the way you are, and we can help celebrate you."

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," said Paul, which sentiment has resonated in enough hearts to stimulate almost 2,000 years of confessions, penances, and absolutions. If a person cannot find an adequate cause for guilt in his or her own daily life, goes the theology, damning enough is that the whole human species got off to a fabulously disobedient start, while believing oneself to be basically whole and good is viewed as an arrogant denial, both of the self's natural faults and of God's supernatural remedies.

The New Thought perspective, on the other hand, is that despite our occasional failings or even our relentless ones, God made us all from with Itself, and absolutely nothing can cause us to fall short of Its glory, since It is within as well as around us. Emma Hopkins taught, "If anybody tells you of there being a fall of man from his God estate, deny it," and that, "the doctrine of the fall of man came from believing in the reality of temptation, on the material side," and again, that "the only fall there is," is "the persistent habit of detecting ignorance and stupidity in people, and wailing about your own stupidity and ignorance." At the same time, we can believe we have fallen, or are falling, with such thoroughness and intensity as to manufacture the *sensation* of being outside of God, and then become convinced that what we are experiencing is the full extent of our reality—in other words, forget we made the whole thing up. So if the only thing ultimately to be healed is our sense of separation from our Source, has guilt any place in a spiritually healthy life? As with so much in our gloriously paradoxical worldview, the answer is a hearty yes and no.

Guilt may have a useful role when used on oneself in specific applications and *very small quantities*,

like, say, baking ammonia. The capacity for guilt means that we have a conscience, or inner moral compass, that tells us when we've strayed from our self-declared preferences of being, our personal *ethic*. *Integrity* is the state of remaining in contact with that ethic, and behaving thusly; it also suggests an integration and alignment of the self's various parts, such as our range of emotional currents as well as our thoughts. For guilt, there is *repentance*, which literally means to "think again." It would be nice if we thought again before the act from which follows our guilt, and the consequence of repentance is that we may evolve to the point where we do just that, thus entering into a place of *compassion*, which literally means to "feel with," or to walk metaphorically in another's moccasins.

But too much ingested guilt sickens, as would ammonia. This is where it can be differentiated from *shame*. Guilt is situational and acute. Shame is perpetual or chronic. Guilt says, "I made a mistake"—shame, that "I am a mistake." Guilt may inspire us to change our behavior, whereas shame moves us toward emotional paralysis, because nothing can avail us. So it may be guilt that moves us belatedly to acknowledge a friend's birthday, or even to give ourselves a complete behavioral makeover.

Guilt is the sensation that the path we are on won't take us where we want to go, and

changing paths makes the guilt go away—in fact, sometimes just becoming aware that there *are* other paths is enough to do it. But if no matter what we try in terms of outer behavior, the residual feeling of shame remains, we have deeper to look. Spiritual healing is not about outgrowing the capacity for guilt, but about transforming what has been called the "shame core," whose origin is basically environmental.

Some scripture study will be useful here. As noted, some religions teach perpetual guilt/shame as a corrective device, and some people accept those teachings as their soul's guide. Within the conservative branches of Christianity is found the theology of "original sin," stemming from Adam and Eve disobeying God's command to not eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, as described in the Book of Genesis. Marcus Borg, in his excellent book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, breaks down this event looking for what it indicates about "what went wrong" in humankind's relationship to its Creator. After pointing out that Genesis serves as a hugely significant piece

**Things said or done long years ago,
Or things I did not do or say
But thought that I might say or do,
Weigh me down, and not a day
But something is recalled,
My conscience or my vanity
appalled."**

—W. B. YEATS, "Vacillation"

of the Hebrew Bible, yet the concept of original sin is nowhere to be found within Judaism, Borg presents four options for interpretation of this “primal act.” The first is that it was purely rebellious. It didn’t matter what God tell them not to do, even if was to stand on their heads, they just simply shouldn’t have done it. The second interpretation builds on the first. Yes, it was disobedient, but was also an act of hubris, or spiritual pride, in that the serpent has told Adam and Eve that if they eat the fruit they will become “like God,” so they were trying to overshoot their destinies. The third interpretation is that Adam and Eve actually abdicated what powers they did have as sentient beings, by letting the snake tell them what to do; they gave away their power of rational choice, and to the wrong party. The fourth and last analysis of Borg’s is, to me, the most provocative, and in it I hear echoes of Mrs. Hopkins. It is that the act of disobedience, and the consequent “knowing of good and evil,” depicts the birth of individuated consciousness. In order to take up its role as

Because we’re all right to start, we’re free to improve ...for every intention, a state of consciousness that may be heavenly or hellish.

co-Creator with the Infinite, the capacity to judge had to evolve. The subsequent trials of our

two mythical forebears, then, are not punishments to be endured but results to be learned from.

The enthrallment with communal and personal shame is often accompanied by the fascination with a perfect world waiting for us after this one. If Earth is just a proving-ground for Paradise, we needn’t exert ourselves overly much in bettering the here and now, which may help explain why it’s taken us centuries to begin to speak up and act for others’ rights. Our modern culture still advocates shame about many things, such as the presence or absence of money, power, youthfulness, and most of all about ethnicity, gender, and sex. People who don’t like themselves very much tend to teach their children to not like themselves very much. The ideal that everyone is capable of realizing his or her self-worth is sometimes ridiculed, though history shows that oppressing others is not done by those who genuinely and deeply approve of themselves.

Yeats’s poem, quoted above, is describing shame—not a day goes by, he says, that something he did or might have done weighs on him. But Yeats was also a student of esotericism, who elsewhere wrote, “The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write,” and the full text of his poem is about a mystical experience in which, among other things, he recognizes that it’s an overwrought sense of responsibility that has clouded his ability to see

things as they really are. Toad of Toad Hall is a fictional character of enormous conceit who exploits, impersonates, swindles and steals, though eventually he comes to his senses, repents, and is a changed Toad. We all enjoy stories of brave people (or animals) doing heroic things, yet we’re even more moved when a thoroughly obnoxious being sees the error of his or her ways and experiences a transformation. The moral teachings of the ages, from Aesop and Confucius forward, tell us: *anyone can change*. This is because it isn’t the fundamental essence of the person that is defective—they have only experienced a wound.

When I was about ten I neglected to walk a neighbor’s dog, as I was being paid to do, resulting in a firing, a series of lectures on responsibility and honor, and a voice in my head that for the next thirty years or so would bring up, “But you didn’t walk the dog,” whenever any opportunity to create or achieve presented itself. The owner had long since forgiven me, my family had forgiven me, I’ll bet even the dog had for

given me, but on some level I hadn’t forgiven me. The remedy was as evasive as it was simple. The adult me saw that it was a youthful mistake and not a

“Henceforth I will be a very different Toad. My friends, you shall never have occasion to blush for me again. But, O dear, O dear, this is a hard world!”
 –KENNETH GRAHAME,
The Wind in the Willows

life sentence to irresponsibility, while the 10-year-old me had never worked it out. It was *he* who had to be convinced that he was whole and sound at his essence, so I had to get in touch with him on behalf of the responsible, adult world in general, and help him to see this.

Yet another twist on our paradoxical human/divine existence is that because we’re all right to start with, we’re free to improve. Being formed from the only Power there is, into Its hospitable universe, there is nothing so outrageous we could do that could possibly remove us from Its presence and Its unconditional love. At the same time, there are a number of things we can do to limit our own experience of Its hospitality and love—we have “sought out many inventions.” For every action, there is a reaction, and for every intention, a state of consciousness that may be heavenly or hellish.

What can be done about shame, or perpetual guilt? One direction is just to cave in to it, taking some consolation in the idea that everybody else must be just as damaged. Eric Hoffer wrote in *The True Believer* that mass movements, religious or political, farm for converts among those who are “seeking escape from an ineffectual self.” Then Hoffer brightened, “Nothing so

bolsters our self-confidence and reconciles us with ourselves as the continuous ability to create; to see things grow and develop under our hand, day in, day out.” At some point, often through anger at the soul-pain of unrelenting shame, the self reaches out (or, more precisely, *in*) for meaning and purpose. The illusion of negative self-worth falls apart, and light floods the dark recesses of the psyche.

Ernest Holmes offers this: “If you have a vague, subtle unconscious fear, be quiet and ask yourself, ‘Who am I?’ ‘What am I?’ ‘Who is speaking?’ ‘What is my life?’ In this manner think right back to Principle, until your thought becomes perfectly clear again.” To be free of situational guilt, we should stop doing whatever it is that causes us to feel guilty—either that, or stop associating guilt with the activity—and no one else has the right, much less the power, to tell us which of the two it should be. Life continually points us back to our own internal ethic, or set of intentions for our lives, as embraced in Holmes’s fourth question: “What is my life?” To be free of chronic *shame*, a spiritual makeover is warranted, one that begins with the realization that many of us have had the story of Creation and our place therein precisely backward: this is a Paradise waiting to be explored, we were ushered not out of the garden but into it, and the Power that fashioned us “little lower than the angels” has not wavered for a second in Its care for us or Its presence with and within us.



Copyright © 2005 by Jesse G. Jennings.

All rights reserved.

This article first appeared, in a slightly different form, in the October 2005 issue of “Science of Mind” magazine.