

Guilt is a Heavy Burden

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

January 27, 2008

“Regrets, I’ve had a few...” Frank Sinatra’s song goes on to say “But then again, too few to mention.” Well, I don’t know about the “too few” part. [Here’s where I unroll my scroll of regrets that makes its way down the center isle.] Maybe he really meant “too many to mention.”

My sermon three weeks ago, “In Need of Comfort,” was about the unavoidable suffering we each experience in our lifetimes. This sermon is about suffering not from an outside source, but from within, our lifetimes of regrets and guilt. What if... If only... I’m sorry... If I could just take it back... Things might have been different... I made the wrong decision... What did I do? What have I done? Will I ever stop feeling guilty? This is a sermon about those things we do to ourselves that drag us down, hold us back, poison our psyches, fill us with dread and fear. Things we need to let go of!

Of course, guilt can be a good thing, especially when we have actually done something wrong. Our conscience helps us change our behavior so that we won’t make that same bad choice again. But guilt can become obsessive, and that’s when it takes over our lives. “We dwell too much with that which defeats us,” were the words of A. Powell Davies in my pastoral response this morning.

Besides Davies’ little prayer book called The Language of the Heart, I’m using two other great books this morning called Freedom from Fear by Forrest Church and The Forgiving Self by Robert Karen. You are welcome to borrow these, anytime, if what I am talking about today rings true for you. These are books that have helped me personally in the not-so-easy times of my life and I recommend them highly. However, if you borrow them and forget to return them, I hope you feel guilty.

Let me read you a story from The Forgiving Self that illustrates feelings we will all recognize, on both sides of blame and forgiveness. It’s actually part of an episode from the BBC show called East-Enders, by Richard Zajdlc, a sort of modern morality play.

A man is driving past a row of parked cars. A woman steps out from the cover of the cars without looking. He sees her form appear suddenly in front of him just before he hits her full force without having swerved or hit the brakes. She is dead on arrival at the hospital.

There’s an inquest. The woman’s family is there. The driver of the car, miserable over what he’s done, looks toward them pleadingly. The dead woman’s husband takes the stand. He seems crushed. “Everything was going right for us,” he testifies. He looks at the driver coldly.

The inquest absolves the driver of all guilt. But his guilt does not end. In fact, he is eaten up by guilt. Outside the courthouse afterwards, he tries to approach the widower, but the bereaved man brushes him off.

After some months the guilt-ridden driver, whose name is Corby, gathers the courage to go the dead woman's home. The husband, Nigel, is incredulous and bars his entry. Corby pleads to no avail. After sitting dejectedly on the stoop for a few moments, he looks up to see Nigel, still hostile, opening the door and allowing him in.

"I tried to write to you," Corby says. "After...you know. Tell you how sorry I was."

NIGEL, icily: "Thanks."

CORBY: "I was going to phone, do something but...I couldn't. I didn't know what to say. I still don't."

NIGEL: "Well, why don't you think about it on the way home?"

CORBY: "Mr. Bates, please, I'm sorry."

NIGEL: "Yeah, you said that."

CORBY: "It wasn't my fault."

NIGEL: "Fine. That it?"

CORBY: "You've got to believe me."

NIGEL: "Why?"

CORBY, desperately: "Because it's the truth! You heard the coroner. He said no blame could be attached to me."

NIGEL: "I know."

CORBY: "And the witnesses, the police – they all said the same thing."

NIGEL: "Well, there you are then."

CORBY: "It wasn't my fault!"

NIGEL: "Then why are you here?"

Corby's face is cracking: "I need YOU to tell me that you don't blame me for what happened." He stares at Nigel imploringly: "Please."

Nigel's wall is softening, but he's not ready to abandon his position. "I do blame you. I blame you for everything – you've ruined my life, Mr. Corby, d'you know that?"

This is what Corby feared. He nods pathetically. "Yes," he says. "And mine."

"Yours?"

"I can't sleep," Corby says. "I don't eat, see my friends. I can't even touch my wife – knowing I've got something you haven't. I keep seeing it again and again, over and over in my mind. She didn't look, but so what? I should've swerved. Or braked. Done something, but I didn't...I didn't." He's quiet. "I can't forgive myself – why should I expect you to even try?"

Corby stares at Nigel, his eyes brimming to tears. Nigel offers him some tea.

As they sit sipping their tea, Nigel says, "Look. What I said earlier – about blaming you – it's not true."

"Isn't it?" Corby says.

"I was angry," Nigel points to some packages: "These are some of my wife's, Debbie's things. I've been clearing them out – remembering. You, you just came at a bad time, that's all."

Corby is not satisfied. "'Everything was going right for us' – that's what you said in court. I've ruined your life..."

Nigel won't permit this any longer. "It was an accident. She didn't look. You've got to hold on to that. There was nothing you could do."

CORBYP: "You don't think that."

NIGEL: "I do."

"No."

"It wasn't your fault, Mr. Corby," Nigel says, kindly, emphatically. "I know that. I've always known it. Blaming you helped for a while. But I don't need to do that anymore. Nor should you."

Corby looks at him tearfully and with immense gratitude. (p. 41-43)

In real life these processes of anger, blame and forgiveness don't quite happen as quickly as they can in a TV show, but the story nonetheless illustrates what is important. This is a story of restorative mercy – mercy toward another and also toward oneself. There are times, though, when there is no one who can forgive us but ourselves. Those are the regrets that take the longest to get over.

What about national guilt? The way the European settlers treated the native inhabitants already living in the Americas. Slavery? Racism? Are we doing enough to bring about what ever restorative justice is possible at this point in history to whomever we might owe it? Is it ever too late? I don't think so.

What about the shameful acts of torture and predatory war initiated by our country in our names? There is plenty to feel guilty about these days, isn't there. And for these things it is not enough to forgive yourself, saying "Well I'm not the one who shipped slaves over from Africa, and I didn't vote for George Bush." It must be a larger act of protest and outrage. Then, when we realize our relative personal inability to effect change, or we don't write that letter to our representative or make that call to make our opinion known, we add a few more layers of guilt to the veneer threatening to stifle any and all sense of civic viability.

What are other things we do to ourselves that make our lives miserable, or at minimum, less than they could be? There is the familiar "if only I had decided to study something practical rather than pre-renaissance literature." Or the "what is wrong with me that I can't make up my mind?"

“I hate the way I look.” I once had a ninth grade math teacher who heard me lamenting, daily, something about my hair or how tall I was at that time, and told me one day “Don’t wish your life away, Alison.” It was one of those ah ha moments for me in my life and I try to remember this advice whenever I am feeling sorry for myself for some silly reason.

Another thing we constantly do to ourselves is project negatively into the future. “I’ll never get that job.” “Oh, we could never talk about that in this congregation – there’s too much bad history around that subject.” “I’ll be lost without you.” We have the unfortunate ability to imagine a bad or sad or hopeless future. “Forethought of grief” is what Wendell Berry calls it. This is a great expression to remember the next time you start thinking about how awful it will be when..... Forethought of grief.

Once I read a book that talked about the different kinds of personalities we all have. One exercise was to imagine that you had just gotten on an elevator that began its ascent and then suddenly stopped dead. What would your first reaction be? Mine, at the time, from among the multiple choice possibilities was “Oh no, what did I do?” I immediately assumed I must have done something wrong, as some of us are prone to do. This is one kind of forethought of grief – it must be my fault, or at least partly my fault.

Robert Karen writes that when we are caught up in the negativity of regret and guilt “we deny ourselves the space to be. There is no right to explore, to struggle, to make mistakes, to not know. There is no forgiving voice that says, You were being you, and that was all you could be at the time. There is only bitterness and grudge. Obsessive regret is how we submit and get defeated. Often, it is little more than revenge against the self.” (p. 117-118)

That idea of unconsciously working to punish yourself, for crimes real or imagined, caught my attention and brought to mind another example about myself. (I have more than a little experience with the subjects of guilt and regret it seems.) A very wise person once suggested to me, in a time when my burden of guilt felt particularly heavy, that I must be keeping a baseball bat near my bed and inside the front door with which to beat myself up all through the day and sometimes through the night, too. For what did I need to punish myself so badly he wondered, and did I really deserve what I was doing to myself and my life? Seeing the situation in that light was enough to begin to lay to rest that imaginary bat and its not so imaginary effect on my life.

This was another one of those wake up calls in my life, even more important than what the 9th grade math teacher had said about not wishing my life away. I did not have to pay, with the rest of my life, for something that was not my fault. To forgive oneself, especially for self-inflicted conjured up crimes, is a very large birthday present, and I say birthday present because it does seem that life can start anew when the heavy burden of guilt is allowed to dissolve in newborn understanding.

We all, each one of us, have our own stories of regret and guilt, those real or self-inflicted wounds to our spirit. How hard we have worked to create lives of beauty and generosity and kindness and joy out of our less than beautiful stories. I know this is true because I have heard your stories, and I know mine as well. The stories of all people everywhere ring with the same

suffering and the same self-condemnation and the same moments of self-revelatory wisdom and the courage to change. I so appreciate and admire each of you and the lives you have made for yourselves amidst all of our challenges.

Forrest Church writes that freedom from our fears comes from three kinds of courage. “The courage to act – because performing is a gutsy thing to do; the courage to love – because open hearts break easily; and the courage to be – because, all by itself, life can be frightening.” (Freedom from Fear, p. xxvii) His simple wisdom that makes all this possible is to “Do what you can. Want what you have. And be who you are.” (p. xxvii)

Do what you can. Want what you have. Be who you are.
Have the courage to act when it becomes necessary to act.
Have the courage to love despite the risk of being hurt.
And have the courage to be – simply be – the best of who you are.

We do not have to remain at the mercy of our fears, our regrets, and most of all, our heavy burdens of self-imposed guilt.

“We dwell too much with that which defeats us.”