

## Guilt, Grace and Race—Facing Guilt, Finding Healing

Guilt is a dirty word. I hear it every day in my diversity work, “This diversity stuff is just minorities trying to make whites feel guilty.” The variations on this theme include: 1) Women, gays, and people with disabilities are trying to guilt me, 2) Events that happened a hundred years ago are irrelevant, this is now—get over it, and 3) I didn’t own slaves, or put Indians on reservations, so I’m not a racist. Running from guilt tends to give us cultural amnesia. Since our history books are only beginning to tell everyone’s story, most of us have no idea how we arrived at this awkward state of human relations. An inclusive history protects us from making the same mistakes our forbears made.

The two most common views about guilt that I hear from religious people are: 1) guilt is bad, and 2) anything that makes me uncomfortable is guilt and should be avoided. Why do we find the word guilt so troublesome? Why can’t we handle the concept of culpability? My guess is that most of us don’t know what to do with or about guilt, so guilt has become an albatross, a huge dead bird hung around our necks like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*. As a nation, we have a difficult time saying we’re sorry. Although we avoid it ourselves, we want those who offend us to experience guilt and ask our forgiveness. Can there be too much guilt? Yes, we can become immobilized by guilt. We can also become completely absorbed in trying to find the guilty party, and assigning blame and ignoring our own mistakes. Guilt, repentance and forgiveness are major scriptural themes. As one scholar puts it, “The point is...the forgiveness of sins is held to be identical with healing...and the accent is—especially in Matthew—not on the healing as such, but on the power of forgiveness.” (Peake 1976)

I thought of a long-ago conversation with the Rev. William Sloan Coffin of Yale University. He said, “We want our truths served up, bloodless.” It is painful, but we need to know the whole shocking, disturbing and bizarre story of what really happened in Auchwitz, Selma, Wounded Knee, Japanese American internment camps and the Cambodian killing fields. The people who suffered there and their descendants need to hear from the rest of us that we will never let it happen again. We are now familiar with the news of hidden Nazi gold found in Swiss, American and European banks. Swiss Ambassador Thomas Borer, the diplomat who led negotiations over the Nazi gold scandal said, “We were systematically lied to about our past...If we are to lead our people into the 21st century, we will need to replace the mythology of neutrality by finally discovering the truth about who we really were.” (*USA TODAY*, Feb. 24, 1997)

We can’t right every wrong, but there are some issues that we can’t get around or beyond until we do. For example, even though you and I have no personal culpability for slavery, we cannot ignore the deleterious effects that slavery still has on the dreams of some and the unearned benefits that it has bestowed on others. Professor Eugene Genovese, a world-renowned slavery expert, estimated that it takes more than two hundred years for the effects of slavery to fade from a society. The point is not to guilt white people for their

ancestor's actions. Instead, we need to bravely assess the consequences of that "peculiar institution" and together move toward equity and healing. We can only get there by moving through our guilt to action. The wounds of racism will continue tearing our social fabric until our nation publicly apologizes for enslaving innocent Africans. We can't heal as a nation until we repent. If "Guilt is the teacher, love is the lesson," (Joan Borysenko, in *Quotations by Women*, Maggio, 1996)

I received anonymous racial hate mail from a Minnesota man, who I will call "Tom," for more than a decade. He is a millionaire donor to a Lutheran college where I was once on faculty. As his chief victim, a judge called what he did to me, "domestic terrorism." This emotional arsonist also writes to children and teens. One of Tom's victims, nine year-old Linda, told her story on a local radio station. She said, "I wrote him a letter and told him that he made my mom and dad sad, and his letter gave me a headache, please stop." When "Tom" was discovered by a postal inspector and exposed by the press, he was confronted with the destruction that he created in thousands of lives. He was, and remains to this day, publicly unrepentant. I have forgiven him his "trespass" and moved on from the fear and anger he generated in me. I know this because I go months without thinking about him. However, I want Tom to accept responsibility for the pain he continues to cause families and little kids. That may not happen, but justice demands that we not let a little child be attacked in this way and remain silent.

Does guilt have any socially redeeming features? I think so. Guilt can be a door to learning, not a hurdle to get over. Remorse can be a corrective. Our inability to learn from guilt and to manage its negative aspects comes from a faulty notion of forgiveness. We find it hard to forgive ourselves largely because we feel that we are not worthy of forgiveness and by extension, others are not worthy either. If the person we have wronged doesn't forgive us when we confess our offense, we can get stuck in a morass of guilt. The good news of the gospel is that we are forgiven,

"My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!" (Spafford circa 1875)

Confessing our fault to those we have wronged may bring some healing to them, but it is our own healing that begins at that moment. It allows us to claim a new identity and gives us the strength to change. As the psalmist David wrote, "Cleanse me from my sin! I know my transgression, my sin is ever before me...Create in me a clean heart, O God and put a new and right spirit within me."

Vivian Jenkins Nelsen  
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