

THE DOG ATE MY HOMEWORK AND OTHER EXCUSES: GUILT AND JUSTICE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Behind our house at 482 East Center Street in Wallingford, Connecticut spread a small meadow that was really part of Mrs. Lyman's back yard. I was about six or seven years old. Within the meadow sat a bottomless barrel that had been set into the ground to confine a spring of the purest water you can imagine. The spring water filled the barrel and bubbled across the rim through a patch of wild irises. Sitting contentedly within the barrel was a bull frog. One afternoon I reached into the barrel and liberated the frog and happily watched as it hopped off toward the brook at the base of the meadow. After dinner, just after sundown, about the time the crickets started their chorus, a highly agitated Mrs. Lyman knocked on our door. I denied all knowledge of her missing bull frog. Later, after tossing and turning in bed for what seemed like hours, I woke my parents and confessed. This was my first memory of something called guilt, an emotion which has plagued me from time to time ever since.

I have a friend in Oklahoma who has managed to put guilt, or at least the admission of it, to practical use. Whenever an officer of the law flagged him down for speeding, which was often, my friend Van would immediately exit his car with license and registration in hand (you could do that in those days) and say: "I'm sorry, officer, you're absolutely right in stopping me. I was speeding and you caught me red-handed." Those words so astounded the patrol person --- so unlike what she or he was accustomed to hearing -- that invariably Van drove off with a warning. He kept his warnings. The one he prized most was issued by the very same patrolman who pulled over the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVey, as he tried to flee the state on Oklahoma's Interstate 35.

My premise is that nowadays individual guilt is an option, something tucked away in dim memories of biblical and other religious parables, or in the chopped down cherry trees of our youth. That's why we're surprised when somebody admits a mistake right off the bat. On the other hand, collective guilt flourishes, a burden wrested from the shoulders of individuals to be redistributed among society at large. For example, the road was dry and there wasn't any traffic, implying that whoever posted the speed limit I exceeded was guilty of faulty judgement!

Today I'm going to talk about individual vs. collective guilt. If you subscribe to the idea that the concept of "guilt" faded away in the 1960's and was laid to rest in the 1990's, I guess you say I'm talking about individual vs. collective responsibility. I prefer "guilt" because it's hard to wallow in "responsibility." I'm going to give you my view of how guilt became somebody else's problem and whether or not this transfer from me to you is a good thing.

We're very clever at placing personal shortcomings on the shoulders of others. Take for example a situation that is difficult to understand or resolve. We used to call these situations "problems," and if the situation was something brought about by yourself it was simply "your problem." Now we no longer have problems. We have "issues." What exactly is an issue? Well it could be an

offspring, as in “he died without issue,” so under this meaning a “problem child” becomes an “issue issue” and therefore redundant. But most commonly the word “issue” implies some kind of dispute between two or more parties. By substituting “issue” for “problem” we conveniently transfer our own responsibility to some other entity, be it a person, institution or society at large. Nowadays any type of inconvenience is an “issue.” Such as: “the quarterback was benched because he has an “issue” with his throwing arm. Did he disagree with his arm?

Let me make it clear that when addressing guilt I’m not talking about those little acts of commission or non-acts of omission in our daily lives that cause us to go to great length to excuse. We’re all supposed to be rational beings, so I suppose it makes sense that we rationalize. Here’s three actual excuses for missing work:

1. I just found out I was switched at birth. Legally, I shouldn’t come to work knowing that my employee records may contain false information.
2. The dog ate my car keys. We’re going to hitchhike to the vet.
3. I’m stuck in the blood pressure machine at Wal-Mart.

Now, I’m going to talk about the big stuff; how we pass the buck when things really get tough.

Many religions and cultures have at one time or another invoked evil spirits or unsympathetic gods to explain why things go wrong. In the Christian tradition, the word “devil,” derived from the Greek *diabolos*, means the personification of supreme evil. The concept of the Christian devil was largely fixed by hermits in the Egyptian desert in the third and fourth centuries and legalized by the Council of Toledo in A.D. 447. Man generally makes his divinities, good or evil, in his own image, the result depending on the stage of his or her personal development and the age that he or she lives in. Which leads me to speculate who among us has horns, pointy ears, a barbed tail and likes to dress in formal wear?

In the 16th century, Dr. Johan Weyer, a French physician, summed up the prevailing view of Satan:

He possesses great courage, incredible cunning, superhuman wisdom, the most acute penetration, consummate prudence, an incomparable skill in veiling the most pernicious artifices under specious disguise, and a malicious and infinite hatred toward the human race, implacable and incurable.

When things went wrong in the Middle Ages – pestilence, crop failures, natural catastrophes --- it was natural to pin the blame on the work of the devil or some kindred malevolent spirit. To some the powers of evil were very strong, and it was touch and go whether the Christian God or the Christian Devil would reign victorious. These attributions, however, did not end in the Middle Ages. The nationally syndicated “Cutting Edge” radio program referred to the 1992 presidential election as follows:

We have stated many times on this radio program that the occultic plan was to re-elect George Bush as President and to stage the appearance of Anti-Christ during his second term.

Thank God Bill Clinton came to our rescue.

From around 1450 to 1750, Europe and even the new world suffered through the shame of witch trials. Armed with the power to coerce confessions, inquisitors roamed the countryside hunting witches. Secular judges got into the act, forcing the accused to reveal their accomplices, thus insuring a continuing supply of victims. It was the ultimate pyramid franchise. Joe McCarthy used similar techniques, substituting loss of economic livelihood for torture, in order to extract names, any names, from the accused. Arthur Miller forcibly drew parallels in his play *The Crucible*. Ironically, McCarthy's methods were remarkably similar to those used by the very totalitarian regimes he claimed to oppose. Naming names under mental or physical abuse was critical to the type of purge orchestrated by the Stalinist regime. In a darkly humorous passage from *Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn reported that in order to gain respite from fierce interrogation an associate admitted to forming a subversive group that was entirely a product of his imagination. Soon word got around the gulag and other prisoners, frantic to please their interrogators, pleaded with the fabricator to let them join his fictitious group.

Witch hunting was a sordid episode in the ecclesiastical and secular history of the so-called civilized world and can be easily passed off as a product of ignorance and superstition. But the tendency to demonize an individual or group with whom we disagree for whatever reason is firmly with us in these presumably enlightened times. Whenever we use a person as an embodiment of some hateful concept --- as a scapegoat and example of some commonly condemned evil --- we are demonizing that person. We confuse hating a person with hating what they believe in. If you think I'm exaggerating, just spend an hour or two listening to talk radio or trolling the internet.

If during the 17th century fallen evangelists Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Bakker had made their tearful confessions that "the devil made me do it," they would have been whisked away to the executioner. The mere act of invoking the devil's name, regardless of the association, rendered a person suspect. Today we have the luxury of invoking agencies of evil to explain our actions without fear of personal recrimination, so I guess that's progress!

Before we in glass houses throw stones, let's examine some of the other "devil made me do it" excuses in our society. I've personally used that expression to justify forgetting to flip the toilet seat back down. But that's just being flippant.

Psychiatrists have catalogued more than 350 disorders that they tell us afflict half the population. Among these are caffeine-induced anxiety disorder and telephone scatologia. Now a boom is underway in Internet addiction disorder. It's easy enough to make fun of all this, but there's a serious problem. Nearly all of life's stresses and bad habits are being converted into some dread mental disorder. We increasingly look for psychiatric answers to social and personal problems. In other words, there are a lot of devils that make us do it.

John Leo, who used to write for U.S. News and World Report, observed that: “When jurors begin to behave like social workers rather than impartial arbiters of evidence, the boundary between right and wrong gets pretty fuzzy, to the peril of us all”

None other than Billy Graham, who decried cultural decline in sermons that reminded people of the consequences of sin, said this about Bill Clinton during an interview on “The Today Show:”

...we're living in a whole different world today, and the pressure on anybody today is difficult.

I know the frailty of human nature. ...he has such a tremendous personality that I think the ladies just go wild over him.

I guess this is just one more way of saying “the devil made me do it.”

I think it's safe to say that most Unitarian Universalists reject the notion of a manipulative evil spirit of supernatural origins. In the mid-16th century, Faustus Socinus, whose father was a religious liberal in northern Italy, got in trouble for writing a book titled *Christ the Saviour* wherein he denied the Trinity and personality of the devil. Having assailed the staples of Catholic and Christian thought, he had to flee from both Italy and Switzerland, eventually ending up in Poland where he established dozens of what we would call Unitarian churches. The orthodox factions eventually tracked him down. He was arrested and tried, and his books burned in the public square of Cracow. Refusing to recant in public, he was turned over to a mob to be thrown into the river. He was rescued by two Jesuits, proving that good people can rise above systems and organizations of which they are members.

Nowadays there are forces out there that seem to be clouding the distinction between guilt and evil. One of these forces is called “postmodernism, which I'm not smart enough to define so I'll let someone else do it. Writing in the *Inquirer*, a British Unitarian publication, Gordon Denington commented that:

(Postmodernism)...may be seen as a particularly virulent strain of relativism.... It effectively denies the possibility of communicating meaning, other than the basic sort that can be achieved by pointing at things.

He goes on to say:

Postmodernism offers parched lips a cup of hot sand to sip. Our aim should be to celebrate and encourage all that's good in the human spirit as an end in itself, as a means to discourage and constrain all that's bad about the human spirit. No pseudo-interfaces with postmodernism are required --- all that's wanted is a consensus on that constitutes good and what constitutes bad in life on this earth, as it is experienced by humankind.

So I suppose this means in one sense or another we become victims, meaning that we aren't always responsible for our own actions. In his essay on “Crime and Punishment” contained in “The Prophet,” published in 1923, Kahlil Gibran put what I think is a modern spin on treatment of crime in our society when we wrote:

*The murdered is not unaccountable for his own murder,
 And the robbed is not blameless in being robbed.
 The righteous is not innocent of the deeds of the wicked,
 And the white-handed is not clean in the doings of the felon.
 Yea, the guilty is oftentimes the victim of the injured,
 And still more often the condemned is the burden bearer of the guiltless and unblamed.
 You cannot separate the just from the unjust and the good from the wicked;
 For they stand together before the face of the sun even as the black thread and the
 white are woven together.
 And when the black thread breaks, the weaver shall look into the whole cloth, and he
 shall examine the loom also.*

Gibran's observations seem to anticipate a couple of late 20th century endeavors known as "Truth and Reconciliation Commissions" and the restorative justice movement, both endeavoring to create dialog and perhaps a degree of understanding between victims and oppressors. But these movements follow clear-cut legal determinations of guilt, so by no means sugar coat transgressions.

I am not that enthusiastic about feeling guilty, but I do think the scales of justice are tipping away from individual accountability toward something more collective and nebulous. I find myself agreeing with the following observation by Hannah Arendt:

Where all are guilty, no one is; confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits, and the very magnitude of the crime the best excuse for doing nothing.

Of course, as a society, we must work to eliminate conditions that foster crime. But at the same time we cannot lose sight of the values that make it possible for us to function as a society in the first place. Some contend that our devils have sprung out of the "me" generation. William Doherty, in his book entitled *Searching: Why Psychotherapy Must Promote Moral Responsibility* concluded that "therapy which focuses only on what feels good to me is bankrupt. Happiness is founded on some measure of being good and useful to others." Andrew Schmookler observed that "...Coming out of an era where we encountered many narrow-minded views about what was right and acceptable and what was not, many of us rejected the whole notion of such standards. Just feeling good too often displaced any concept of what it might mean to be good."

But let's face it. We're all fallible. Here's a closing poem by Peshah Gertler entitled "The Healing Time:

*Finally on my way to yes
 I bump into
 all the places
 where I said no to my life
 all the untended wounds
 the red and purple scars*

*those hieroglyphs of pain
carved into my skin, my bones
those coded messages
that send me down
the wrong street
again and again
where I find them
the old wounds
the old misdirections
and I lift them
one by one
close to my heart
and I say holy
holy.*

May we all exorcise our demons.

Amen