

Inherent Goodness & Inherent Guilt

by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered April 6, 2014

It's funny how seemingly innocuous or even friendly actions might have something entirely different underneath them. Take handshakes, for example. A friendly greeting, right? Actually, it may have originated as a way to check out whether the other person was concealing a weapon and to prove to them that you weren't either. Then, after shaking hands, you might each have a drink and toast, a friendly gesture of celebration. Maybe not though. Some think that one came from concerns about poisoning so that you'd each spill a little of your drink into the other cup when you toasted, so if you had poisoned them, you got a dose of the poison too. Guilty until proven innocent and trustworthy.

Guilt has a long history and touches into our own theological history as Unitarian Universalists too. At its core, Universalist theology came as a reaction to the Calvinist theology of original sin and the inherent depravity of humankind. In classic Calvinist thought, original sin stated that humans are inherently flawed and sinful and therefore need salvation to fix that original state. Universalists felt the opposite, that we are inherently blessed and NOT born inherently sinful in need of cleansing. This, for instance, is why we don't perform baptisms in Unitarian Universalist congregations, it's our belief in the inherent worth and goodness of every child. So our ceremony is a dedication and naming ceremony instead.

There's still a lot of guilt that we end up carrying around, even if one doesn't necessarily believe that we were born with it. Some of this guilt can serve good purposes for us. Certainly not all of it though – and we'll talk about that in just a minute. But some of it can have a useful purpose for us. Earth Day is later this month, and the increased focus on environmental awareness in April brings to my mind one of my own regular guilt practices. This is guilt that serves a good purpose for us, guilt that serves as awareness raising and as a motivation for actions. Maybe once a year, I go through an ecological footprinting practice for myself and my family. Sometimes I do it on paper or with a combination of excel spreadsheets, and sometimes I use an online calculator, some with more cutesy graphics than others. There's one that creates a little neighborhood world based on my responses to each question. Each time it asks me something, an object representing my response falls with a thud into the overall picture, like a trash can or recycling bin based on how much I say I recycle, electrical wires if I use electricity, and different types of grocery stores depending on where I say I get my food from. All the while, an avatar that represents me walks around and stands with all of these things. I get to customize her, so sometimes she has green spiked hair.

As much as I'm drawn to these footprinting exercises, I hate them, too. Not only can I not get away from having to measure and quantify my own impact on the planet, but I'm sunk from the very first question! "Pick the region where you live." I can't escape it. These footprint calculators add in a certain chunk, a pretty huge one actually, based on the overall systemic environmental impact of the infrastructure here. The world is an incredibly unbalanced place, and this forces me to acknowledge my own place in that overall scale, a place of significant

privilege compared with so much of the rest of the world. I feel plenty guilty about the parts that I can control – my own lifestyle choices and their environmental impacts – and I also feel guilty about the parts that I can't. But this particular guilt doesn't have to be misery-making – it can be motivating instead. Trauma social worker Laura van Dernoot Lipsky posed an incredible question about this kind of guilt. She called for the guilt to ask us “how do we participate in our own privileges in a responsible manner?”¹ How can we participate in and benefit from our own privileges in a way that's responsible, in a way that takes into consideration both everyone and everything else while not forgetting our own needs too.

I still need a lot more time to sit with this question, but it's shifted something for me. So often privilege, whether environmental or otherwise, ends up feeling like it's framed with guilt, and one should feel guilty for any use or benefit from this privilege. But instead she asks how one can participate – that's more active than just benefitting from – how one can participate in one's own privilege in a way that's responsible. That's not guilt-based. It's based on participation and awareness.

Van Dernoot Lipsky has a particular perspective that she brings about guilt. As a trauma social worker, she serves people who are in service roles themselves, working for organizations that are working for change in the world and change in people's lives. She names guilt as one of the strongest signs of stress and trauma exposure.² This type of guilt is not motivating but rather guilt that is holding us down and eating us up from the inside.

Here are two quotes from activists:

A community activist in New Orleans, nine months after Hurricane Katrina said “I went shopping last week for a pair of shoes, and I thought to myself, ‘What kind of person would go shopping for a pair of shoes right now?’”

And a housing rights advocate said, “I feel guilty because I can leave at the end of the day.”³

This guilt interrupts our ability to connect with others and blocks our ability to let ourselves even enjoy life. It blocks our living and our relationships. It eats away at commitment and passion and calling. I think I'd put the “what if” guilts in with the guilts that eat away at us too. I especially hear caregivers talk about these “what if's” but I think many of us have faced them at some point, too. What if I had gone to the doctor sooner. What if I had been somewhere so something wouldn't have happened the way it did. What if I had spoken up or said something different. What if I had reached out – would that have made a difference. Even though we know it's in the past and can't be changed, that sure doesn't stop most of us from beating ourselves up about it. These are particularly vicious guilts.

¹ Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, *Trauma Stewardship*, page 96.

² Van Dernoot Lipsky, page 98.

³ Van Dernoot Lipsky, pages 95 & 97.

In many ways, guilt is inherent to being human. It's what the late UU minister Forrest Church named as a counterpart to original sin and called it original guilt. This is the guilt that is endemic to human experience, guilt coming from the fact that we will always fall short! We will always have what if's and barriers in our lives and our relationships. And, Church says, "until we can accept this of ourselves and forgive others for it, no lifeline exists that will connect our hearts."⁴ This is the guilt inherent to us as humans, the guilt that we spend our energy carrying around.

I don't know any perfect ways to rid ourselves of this guilt, but I've at least found a couple of ways to laugh at it. I think I've introduced some folks to one of my clown personas. When I was in San Francisco, I served with the Faithful Fools Street Ministry for a year. Now, in addition to the commitments and shared work that folks at the Fools did, many of them has something else in common. They all had clown personas. So naturally, I had to create a couple of my own. Now these clowns aren't just fun outfits and performer personas, although they are also that. These clowns are often designed to make a point, either for yourself or for others. I'd like to tell you about one of my clowns today, and the other I'll have to keep waiting for a theme that she fits just right.

This one of my clown's names is *Perfecta*. She is exactly like her name sounds, absolutely perfect at everything that she does. Perfecta gets everything done that she needs to, and always knows what she needs to do. She can easily be in many places at once, and never ever makes any mistakes or drops any balls with anything. She knows exactly what needs to be done anytime anything needs doing. Now, in order to achieve all of this, Perfecta is a superhero. You'd have to be, to have these kinds of standards. But here's the thing. Not only is Perfecta a superhero, she's also a clown, because of her inherent impossibility. Perfecta the superhero, as fabulous as she sounds – and I really would love to be her many days – Perfecta is ridiculously impossible. She is a clown, with her very existence making fun of all of my own aspirations to never messing up. I need Perfecta, and when I start to get carried away with something, going too far with it rather than just letting it be, then I need to bring Perfecta to my mind and try to laugh. She is so exaggerated that it's impossible not to get the point that she is making. Perfecta is my reminder to give myself a little grace and not let my resident guilt about not being perfect linger, well, as best I can.

If Perfecta did actually exist, as a person, or think that she existed, I imagine that she'd end up feeling guilty pretty much all of the time. If she expected herself to be perfect, she'd never hit the mark. Forrest Church shares about one woman and her experience trying to be perfect like this.

This was "a woman whom everyone, especially the members of her family, considered to be a complete success. She was a perfect mother, wife, and daughter; a powerful, remarkably successful lawyer—she had it all. What they didn't know she one day confessed to Church. Her

⁴ Forrest Church, *Life Lines: Holding On (and Letting Go)*, page 58.

life was torture. She lived in daily pain, fearful that her self-destructive secret life might be discovered—her multiple affairs, her loneliness, her profound sense of unworthiness. Until then she had maintained perfect pretense. In truth, brilliant and successful as it appeared, her life was a shambles.

She earnestly wished to break the pattern, end her empty marriage, and ‘come out’ as a flawed and broken person but remained terrified that, if she did, her friends and family would reject her. Finally, she couldn’t endure the pretense any longer. In full detail, she confessed to her parents and sisters the wreck her life had become, praying for their support and understanding. She received more than she ever had hoped for. For the first time in all their years together, the family felt able to share their own pain and insecurities with her. They could finally risk this, because they knew that she would empathize. She wouldn’t judge them severely for being less than perfect themselves. A whole system of family challenges, boxes within boxes, finally began to be unpacked. True bonds of sympathy replaced the yoke of pretense that before had held the family together while keeping its members apart.”⁵

Her guilt and her pretense had kept her family separated and had held them apart. I hear this story and I hear a story of transformation. At first, she’s bound by this unbearable guilt and feelings of unworthiness, but by opening that part of herself to her family, instead she finds her own inherent goodness and inherent worthiness. It wasn’t that they didn’t care about her the whole time – they did. That wasn’t what transformed. What transformed was their connections, their openness, each family member’s willingness and safety to share more of themselves, parts they had held back for years. Her guilt was transformed into being a door to seeing her inherent goodness.

We can transform our guilt. We can transform it into participating in our own privileges in a responsible manner, rather than feeling guilty each time we notice them. Blessings like shoes and homes as were mentioned by the activists are blessings. Our own gifts and blessings, like the sound of hummingbirds in a silk tree, they are gifts and beauty that are meant to be held with joy, not guilt. And we can transform it through humor and laughter as well, as some clown personas do.

I don’t think we can ever actually rid the world of guilt, much as I would like to. It’s inherent to being human. But so is the goodness that’s here in every one of us. May our inherent goodness find ways to outweigh the guilt we might be carrying and may we transform our guilt to bring us closer to one another. Blessed be.

⁵ Church, pages 83-84.