

## **False Guilt and True Sins<sup>1</sup>**

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*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

*Excerpt from the Reading: The head of the year by Marge Piercy<sup>2</sup>*

The moon is dark tonight, a new  
moon for a new year. It is  
hollow and hungers to be full.  
It is the black zero of beginning.

Now you must void yourself  
of injuries, insults, incursions.  
Go with empty hands to those  
you have hurt and make amends...

*Sermon False Guilt and True Sins*

Many years ago I read the novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, by Chinese American writer Amy Tan. I was struck at one point by a character's proclamation that she was unlucky in love. At that time, I might also have said I was unlucky in love, having recently been left by a partner. But it wasn't just an expression for her. In fact, she believed—and it seemed this was an assumption of Chinese culture—that one could be afflicted with good luck or bad luck in such matters. But what I believed was that I had somehow caused my breakup troubles, and must be subverting all my relationships because of some hidden character flaws. I realized then that Americans don't really believe in luck. We assume, fundamentally, down beneath any conscious logic, that we are responsible for whatever happens to us.

It must be the flip side of the American dream. The American dream says that anybody can grow up to be president—that with ingenuity and determination, a person of humble origins can become wealthy, powerful, and famous. The stories of people who went from rags to riches are our quintessential hero stories. But then, on the other hand, if I am not the president, or wealthy, or famous, the implication is that it must be my own fault. We also connect success with moral goodness. In fact, we have to have a book to explain why bad things happen to good people. Because of course, we believe that if we are good, good things should happen to us. So if bad things happen, we assume it must be our fault.

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<sup>2</sup> From her book, *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme*, 2000.

I started to make a list the other day of troubles that Americans generally believe are our own fault—the list included financial troubles, lousy jobs or lack of jobs, bad health, emotional depression or anxiety, our body shape and size, and so on. Our culture reinforces this view in many ways. For example, just this week the Associated Press reported a new trend in business—there are companies where employees may now be docked an extra insurance surcharge if they have high blood pressure, high cholesterol or high weight. Workers will be required to complete an annual health risk assessment and can appeal to have their fees dropped if they show improvement. The supposed purpose of such fees is to encourage employees to participate in wellness programs.<sup>3</sup>

I have to say that such false oversimplification makes me crazy. I know from my own experience it doesn't work like that. I was really skinny for forty years of my life, and now I would be classified as somewhat overweight. I know I really didn't do anything to make myself skinny, and I don't think I did anything to make myself gain weight. I have tried to eat healthy foods—and also loved chocolate and other sweets—during the whole time. The point is—what I ate did not correlate with my weight. In my family, we tend to start out skinny, and put on weight as we get older. It is the luck of the genetic pool, and living in a culture where various kinds of foods are readily available.

So I find it offensive that companies would penalize workers who already have the bad luck of genetic inclinations to higher blood pressure, cholesterol and weight. Now I am not saying that we can't contribute anything to our health and fitness. Exercise is good for most people who have basic good health. Eating more vegetables is always beneficial. But we are not working on a blank slate. Plus, did anyone happen to remember that poor people and people of color and older people often have higher blood pressure and worse health in general?

But we are fed a constant barrage of information meant to convince us that we all could be healthy and skinny if we just tried hard enough. So we feel guilty for being overweight, and probably a good 80% of New Year's resolutions involve losing weight or exercising. That may be fine—but let me make my point here: these are not moral issues. I wish we could open a window into our subconscious cultural assumptions and take away the false feeling of guilt for what we weigh, or how high our blood pressure is. I wish instead we would be able to say —“Boy, am I lucky in health matters!” or “Boy, am I unlucky in health matters!” Just the lowering of stress would do us a world of good.

The Jewish high holy days are upon us, and the Islamic month of Ramadan. It is the time in which some people fast from food—which isn't about dieting, but about shifting their attention away from such distractions as what they are going to put into their mouths. It is the time for examining one's conscience, for taking moral inventory. And most of us are so distracted by feelings of false guilt, that it is hard for us to take moral inventory. It isn't the overweight or the sick or the jobless who should feel guilty. For that matter, it isn't the skinny,

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<sup>3</sup> In the Portland Press Herald, September 10, 2007, p. A4.

the healthy, or those with jobs who should feel guilty. When we get trapped by false guilt, we might not pay attention to the real questions of conscience.

This is the shadow side of our American protestant work ethic. It links moral goodness to success, and castigates those who are suffering from injustice and tragedy. Edward Luce, in the July 16, 2006, *Financial Times*, reported that “By large majorities Americans say that individuals are responsible for their own failures and that the state owes nothing to the poor.” But when I turn back to biblical messages about good and evil—I find different admonitions there.

I find the prophet Isaiah challenging people who devote themselves to their fasting rituals but neglect truly important matters. He said, in the voice of his God, “Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the five pillars of Islam is Zakat, which requires Muslims to give a portion of their resources to help the poor, the oppressed, and travelers in need. And listen to the moral inventory of Jesus. Here is how he identified true sin: “I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no water, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”<sup>5</sup>

What would Isaiah or Mohammed or Jesus be concerned about if they came to our times and our country? I think they would ask: How are we taking care of the hungry and homeless? How are we taking care of the sick and those in prison? How are we taking care of the strangers among us?

This summer, Margy and I watched the Michael Moore documentary, *Sicko*. If you haven’t seen it yet, I highly recommend it. He explores the contrast between our health care system and the universal health care of such countries as Canada, England & France. He tells the stories of people in America who thought they were covered by insurance, but then, when faced with a health crisis, were denied coverage. He talks to people who went bankrupt, people whose loved ones died, because insurance companies denied their claims. He talked to people who had volunteered to help at ground zero on 911, but then when they began to have health problems as a result of it, the government refused to help them. I believe one moral question we should be asking is why we as a country don’t take good care of all of the people who have had the bad luck to fall ill.

Moore presents the example of countries that assume a moral obligation to take care of the sick, and by doing so brings to light the immoral situation of our own country. Our country virtually abandons the sick who can’t afford to pay for health care. Workers in insurance companies are instructed to deny as many claims as possible, because their purpose is not

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 58:6-7

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:42-43

healing, but making a profit for the company. When the goal is making a profit, then companies seek to keep the healthiest in their insurance pool, and eliminate the people who most need care. If people become too sick to work, their health care coverage is at risk. What kind of logic is that?

Yet most of us feel guilty if we get sick, and need help. Why? Because we are taught to attach moral value to everything that happens to us. If we had just tried harder, ate better, exercised more, we shouldn't have gotten cancer or heart disease. There is a new version of this moralizing in some alternative health care approaches, too. Don't get me wrong. I value alternative healing, and have benefited from acupuncture and chiropractic in my own health. But when I hear certain kinds of "mind-over-matter" pronouncements—where the message is that if you just change your inner attitude, then you can heal all your diseases, I get really angry. Such words are like rubbing salt into the wounds of those who are suffering. Isn't it enough to be suffering, much less to be blamed and disdained for it?

This issue is as new as the New Age movement, but also as old as the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible. After Job lost his family, his wealth, and his health, his friends tried to tell him that he must have sinned to deserve all the bad things that were happening to him. But Job proclaimed his innocence, and the story proclaims his innocence. It is only people who are healthy and successful who can feel good by imagining they are in control of their own reality. There is no way to mentally ward off all disease and death—it is part of the human condition that all of us will eventually die, and most of us will die from disease of one kind or another. That is just life.

So why do we do this to ourselves and each other—why do we cling to false guilt and blame? Psychologists say that victims of abuse or oppression tend to blame themselves in order to feel less powerless over their situation. Others tend to blame those who are suffering, in order to shore up their belief that such a fate can't happen to them. So when all of us are at risk—when we live in a society where most of us are one major illness away from bankruptcy, we assuage our fears by supposing it can't happen to us. But by falling prey to such false guilt or blame, we neglect to notice the true sin of abandoning those who are sick.

There are other areas of such false guilt that can distract us from true sins. In our country, the poor feel guilty for needing help, immigrants feel guilty for having no documentation, and people who are unemployed feel guilty for losing their jobs. People who are grieving or depressed or losing their homes or going bankrupt feel guilty. Even people who cry or lose control of their emotions in public feel guilty. In fact, everyone whom I would see as a victim of some kind of injustice or tragedy is pressured to feel guilt and shame for their own suffering.

Our culture encourages us in this guilt and blame. But the great religious traditions say differently. They say we have a moral obligation to take care of each other. They say troubles can happen to anyone—it is how we respond to each other that is the moral question.

And this is the point—this is the good news or maybe it is the bad news—any of us could be in trouble when we least expect it, but if we take care of each other, we will all be okay. We are all in this together—we are one family. That is where true moral value lies—not in what we look like, or how much money we make, or how successful we are—but in how we care for each other, and how we respond to each other when we are most in need. When we measure our lives and our values, we should ask ourselves questions about kindness and compassion.

When I measure our country and community against such standards, it is easy to feel discouraged. How do we treat the strangers among us? Just ask the Latino immigrant community of Portland. Did you know that in our own state of Maine, people are disappearing? Every week, there are husbands or wives, fathers or mothers who don't come home. People are arrested without access to legal help, without even the proverbial phone call. Maybe, if they are lucky, someone finds them in a county jail the following week. If they are unlucky, maybe they are deported. These stories don't make the evening news. I hear about them from my colleague, Episcopal priest, Rev. Virginia Marie Rincon. She is the one who goes looking for people, calls the jails and tries to intercede. I remember the moral outrage I felt when we heard about disappearances in Latin American dictatorships. Now it is happening under our noses. This is how we treat the strangers among us.

The answers aren't much better for the hungry, the prisoners, the homeless. What would it mean to live as if we are all one family? The poor and hungry are not a separate species; they are part of our family. Immigrants—whether legal or undocumented—are part of our family. People who are sick are part of our family. We must start by letting go of blaming people who are in trouble—with the recognition that any of these situations could happen to us.

We as human beings have been wrestling with these questions for thousands of years. Humanity has faced a constant struggle between self-interest and the practice of loving kindness. No one of us alone can fix the situation. We know that it isn't as simple as working at a soup kitchen, or volunteering at the local hospital. But there have been times when society has worked harder to create communities of care. Thom Hartmann, one of the speakers at this year's General Assembly, talked about how rare it has been in history for there to be a strong middle class—that most societies have been divided between the very rich and the very poor. But with certain types of legislation, taxation, and regulation of business, our society fostered such widespread prosperity after World War Two.<sup>6</sup>

When we work together, we can create societies that make it easier to care for each other. Or we can create societies that make it harder. What would it take to have universal health care in our country? What would it take to make it easier to own your own home? What would it take to make it easier to start your own business? What would it take to bring higher education to anyone who wanted it?

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<sup>6</sup> Thom Hartmann, *Screwed: The Undeclared War Against the Middle Class—and What We Can Do About It*, (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006)

Right now, the situation seems discouraging. Maybe that's why we need a fresh start every year. A chance for a change of heart. A chance to let go of the pressures that we absorb every day from our culture—to succeed on our own, to buy more products, to lose more weight—we need a chance to take a deep breath and say, what are the values I want to choose this year? How about loving kindness?

I believe that each time we choose kindness and compassion, instead of guilt and blame, we are turning the world around—even if just a little bit. When we choose loving kindness, we are freeing ourselves, too, from the load of false guilt that we have been carrying. We make room to be kind to ourselves as well as others. We are planting seeds for the world we hope for.

There are many ways to turn the world around. Any time we respond to someone's trouble with a listening ear, we turn the world around. Anytime we put a can of fruit into the Project Feed box, we turn the world around. Anytime we join with others to strategize about universal health care, we turn the world around. Anytime we serve meals at the Wayside Soup Kitchen, we turn the world around. Anytime we help build a Habitat for Humanity house, we turn the world around. Anytime we give some money away to others in need, we turn the world around. Anytime we teach our children to share what they have, we turn the world around. Anytime we use our influence to shift policies in favor of compassion, we turn the world around.

Each of us is invited to help shape the world as we are able. None of us can do it all, but we are each invited to do something. This is the time of turning. May our light begin to shine like the dawn, and grow like the waxing moon.