

Thinking Allowed - Guilt

Discussion at the first 'Thinking Allowed' meeting raised many new themes, one of which was guilt, and Andy and Brian have asked me to introduce this as a basis for the next meeting (which is ironic really as I went home feeling guilty that I had talked too much! Perhaps this is my punishment!) The question was raised, in passing, as to whether animals ever feel guilt and that reminded me of this beautiful poem by Walt Whitman....

I think I could turn and live with animals,
They are so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins.
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.

I wonder where they get those tokens,
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?

(I Think I Could Turn And Live With Animals..... from Song of Myself)

In this extract Whitman praises the animals for possessing qualities that humans lack, or have forgotten, like calmness, a lack of greed and an ability to stay contained and happy. The poet wants to live among the animals and experience a life where no one complains and where they are free from sins and sorrows. He does present a rather idealised and, possibly in places, inaccurate view of animals but there is much that we can take from this poem about the essence of being human, about conscience and guilt, and about a belief in God.

It is of course possible to feel guilt and shame without believing in God, but does that belief compound those feelings?

or

One doesn't have to believe in God to feel guilt - but how far does a belief in God guide and affect our feelings of guilt?

Much has been written about Catholic guilt and as I was brought up in the Catholic faith a lot of this resonates with me. Catholic guilt is an excess of guilt supposedly felt by Catholics (I am talking here of individual guilt, not the collective guilt of the Catholic Church itself). Guilt as a by-product of an informed conscience should be a good thing, Catholic guilt is exaggerated and therefore not healthy. When I was a very little girl the nuns at the convent

told us the story of the crucifixion, and we listened, enthralled. However, they then taught us this: 'Every time you do something wrong, commit a sin, you are hammering those nails into Christ's hands and feet.' It was a lot of guilt to dump on a six year old.....and perhaps the very thing Walt Whitman was talking about.

But the Bible also teaches us that God sees our mistakes and failures and is willing to forgive them if we ask; but to ask we must be truly sorry. This, as a child, I found to be a more positive side of the Catholic Church, for it allowed one to rid oneself of negative and destructive feelings of guilt, and to make a fresh start. But you **had** to be sorry....

Feelings of guilt prompted by a belief in God can also bring about a fear of God's punishment which then can lead us to make a bargain with Him, if you don't punish me, I promise I won't do it again. But you have to keep the promise, Graham Greene shows this in one of my favourite novels 'The End of the Affair'. Set in wartime London it tells of an affair between Sarah Miles and her husband's friend Maurice Bendrix.

Sarah has no belief in God, no understanding of the hurt she might cause her husband, and she feels no guilt about her affair with Maurice. However, this all changes on their last day together. They had been in bed when bombs begin to fall. Bendrix goes to see if their landlady is safe and while he is looking a falling door knocks him unconscious.

Seeing him in the hallway Sarah thinks he is dead or dying and she goes back into the bedroom to plead, with a God she doesn't believe in, to let him live. Later she records it in her diary:

'Dear God, make me believe. Let him be alive and I will believe. I love him and I'll do anything if you'll make him alive, I'll give him up forever, only let him be alive.....and then he came in the door and he was alive, and I thought now the agony of being without him starts, and I wished he was safely back dead again under the door.'

For now, she had to keep her side of the bargain.

So, are these feelings of guilt a positive or a negative result of what it is to be human?

When is it good? When is it bad?

Guilt should be a valuable emotion. It can serve as a warning from your conscience that what you have done, or are about to do, is morally wrong or hurtful to others. It can impel you towards the right action, or stop you making the same mistake again. In this way it is an important tool in maintaining the standards of right and wrong in individuals and in society.

It is there to protect you.....

But this is not always the case. Sometimes guilt is misplaced, sometimes you can feel guilt for something you are not even responsible for, and sometimes others can use it to make

you feel bad. In this instance it can become a weapon. At our last meeting someone compared guilt to bits of Velcro given to you by others, you can either let them stick to you, or pull them off and give them back.

If allowed guilt can eat away at a person, consume their peace of mind and therefore their freedom to function. It is a good thing if it stops you making mistakes, but a bad thing if it takes you on a long journey, and prevents you from moving forward. And over the years it can grow...as is shown in the following poem A Case of Murder.

It is an unusual topic, the murder of a cat by a nine year old boy, but the main theme of the poem is all to do with guilt. It is a narrative poem, so best read in its entirety..

A Case of Murder

They should not have left him home alone,
Alone that is except for the cat.
He was only nine, not old enough
To be left alone in a basement flat,
Alone, that is, except for the cat.
A dog would have been a different thing,
A big gruff dog with slashing jaws,
But a cat with round eyes mad as gold.
Plump as a cushion with tucked-in paws-
Better have left him with a fair-sized rat!
But what they did was leave him with a cat.
He hated that cat; he watched it sit,
A buzzing machine of soft black stuff,
He sat and watched and he hated it,
Snug in its fur, hot blood in a muff,
And its mad gold stare and the way it sat
Crooning dark warmth: he loathed all that.
So he took Daddy's stick and he hit the cat,
Then quick as a sudden crack in glass
It hissed, black flash, to a hiding place
In the dust and dark beneath the couch,
And he followed the grin on his new-made face,
A wide-eyed, frightened snarl of a grin,
And he took the stick and he thrust it in,
Hard and quick in the furry dark,
The black fur squealed and he felt his skin
Prickle with sparks of dry delight.
Then the cat again came into sight,
Shot for the door that wasn't quite shut,
But the boy, quick too, slammed fast the door:
The cat, half-through, was cracked like a nut
And the soft black thud was dumped on the floor.

Then the boy was suddenly terrified
And he bit his knuckles and cried and cried;
But he had to do something with the dead thing there.
His eyes squeezed beads of salty prayer
But the wound of fear gaped wide and raw;
He dared not touch the thing with his hands
So he fetched a spade and shovelled it
And dumped the load of heavy fur
In the spidery cupboard under the stair
Where it's been for years, and though it died
It's grown in that cupboard and its hot low purr
Grows slowly louder year by year:
There'll not be a corner for the boy to hide
When the cupboard swells and all sides split
And the huge black cat pads out of it.

Vernon Scannell

The cat grows in the cupboard as the guilt grows in the boy, and one day it will pad out....

So finally...

If we accept that guilt can be both a good and a bad thing, How do we make it good?

NB The questions emboldened are there to give structure to the discussion and to ensure that we keep to the topic. They may lead to other questions such as:

- What does guilt feel like?
- What is conscience?
- What is the difference between guilt and shame?
- How important is forgiveness to guilt?

Mary