

GUILT

with a



TWIST

THE PROMETHEAN WAY

LAWRENCE H. STAPLES PH.D.

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Fisher King Press
www.fisherkingpress.com
info@fisherkingpress.com
+1-831-238-7799

Guilt with a Twist: The Promethean Way
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The choice is always ours. Then, let me choose
The longest art, the hard Promethean way
Cherishingly to tend and feed and fan
That inward fire, whose small precarious flame,
Kindled or quenched, creates
The noble or ignoble men we are,
The worlds we live in, and the very fates—
Our bright or muddy star.

—Aldous Huxley¹

*To
Nancy Carter Pennington*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is not intended to be a scholarly work. It is unapologetically experiential. We don't have to read books to learn a great deal about guilt. It seeps in through our pores, our eyes and our ears. Not a word has to be spoken. We can remember that look we got from mom or dad and the shock waves of humiliation and pain that suffused our bodies and minds. It would have been easier and less painful if we could have learned it all by just reading. The reading comes later when we are trying to understand and comfort the pain.

This book is the result of more than twenty years of thought and writing. It is also the result of many years of clinical work as a Jungian Analyst. Many streams have coalesced to form my experience and help me write it. I feel grateful to and wish to offer special thanks to the hundreds of men and women who have shared stories and insights that have deepened and enriched my understanding of this subject. In order to protect their confidentiality and privacy, I want them to know that the stories I tell in this book are fictionalized composites that have emerged from many years of professional and personal experience. The stories are true to life and to psychological principle without being based on the actual experience of any particular individual.

Since its inception many years ago, my friend and colleague, Nancy Carter Pennington, has accompanied and assisted me in the production of this work. We have spent hundreds of hours discussing, working and reworking the material. I can't imagine having written it without her. Her knowledge of the psyche, her unusual capacity for psychological insight, and her remarkably practical clinical skills helped me understand and synthesize the large body of psychological data I had collected. She helped in many other ways that freed me to write. She also encouraged me when I was blocked or otherwise stuck and tempted to chuck it all. I am deeply grateful for her support and care.

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There are many others without whom this book could not have made its way safely home. My gratitude to David Coleman who offered an enormously important suggestion that helped me see the need for two manuscripts, that there were two separate but related aspects of guilt I needed to deal with. The first aspect is the effect of guilt on psychological development. That's the subject of this present book. The second aspect to be covered in a book later to be released is the influence of guilt on our mental health and well-being. David made many other valuable suggestions in the long course of this manuscript's development. April Barrett has supported my work on guilt through all its ups and downs. She encouraged me to give lectures and workshops that helped refine and bring greater coherence to a subject I had been thinking and writing about for more than twenty years. She also brought to my attention the beautiful poem by Aldous Huxley that appears on the frontispiece and forms the mythological basis for the book's central theme.

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While I received much encouragement, help and support in writing this book, I am solely responsible for the views and ideas expressed therein.

OVERVIEW

We have to sin and incur guilt if we are to grow and reach our full potential. That's the central message of this book. It is a message that is inspired and informed by the myth^a of Prometheus. Myth tells us Prometheus stole fire from the gods and made it available for use by humans. He suffered for his sin. Zeus had him chained to a rock where an eagle pecked and tore daily at his liver. But human society would have suffered if he had not committed it. Thus, the life of Prometheus portrays a mythological model for guilt that is different from the conventional view. The Promethean model of guilt suggests the importance of sinning and incurring guilt in order to obtain needed—but forbidden things.

The conventional view of guilt is that it helps us remain “good.” Guilt keeps us within boundaries deemed acceptable. It helps us resist doing things that would disturb or harm our individual and collective interests. It can remind us of the apology we should make to help repair a harm we may have done. This conventional view of guilt has an important role in the maintenance of conventional life.

The conventional view, important as it is, also creates an enormous problem. It can deter us from being “bad” when that is exactly what is needed. While the conventional view is part of the truth, it is not the whole truth. The meaning of sin and guilt is far more complicated.

If individuals could not sin, and then suffer the subsequent guilt, they could not fully develop themselves and their gifts. If individuals could not develop fully, neither could society, as society is a sum of the individuals that comprise it. If, however,

^a The Promethean myth provides a picture of an important aspect of humanity's experience of guilt. Prometheus stole fire from the Gods on Olympus and brought it back to earth for the benefit of mankind. Zeus had him bound to a rock where eagles pecked at his liver daily. Eventually, Zeus allowed Hercules to free him from his suffering.

individuals could sin and not suffer painful guilt for their sins, they might well just be selfish beings that refuse to share their gifts with the community. They might keep the fire for themselves.

The contribution of Prometheus' sin to humanity led me to the idea of "Good Guilt." In common parlance, the words "good" and "guilt" don't belong together. Personal and clinical experience has repeatedly confirmed for me the useful role of sin and guilt. I began to notice that there are times in our lives when the experience of guilt actually was a signal of having done something good, even essential to nurture us. While the guilt probably did not feel like "Good Guilt" at the time of transgression, the "sin" that caused the guilt is sometimes viewed in retrospect as having brought something valuable to our life. Examples might include divorces, separations from partners and friends, giving up family-approved or family-dictated careers, or even marriages that are opposed by one's family on the grounds of race, religion, gender, or social status. It might also include the expression of qualities previously rejected as unacceptable, like anger and selfishness or the contra-sexual sides of ourselves. Later in life we may look at guilt thus incurred in a different light.

Promethean Guilt^b and Good Guilt, therefore, are the guilt we incur for the sins we need to commit if we are to grow and fulfill ourselves. Those sins that benefit us could not be committed without a creative, Promethean spirit that is supported by an

^b Jung talked about Promethean guilt in his *Collected Works* (CW7, par. 243n). Here Jung was talking about the state of inflation that analysts often reach when they begin to experience an increase in consciousness as a result of insights that come from accessing the collective unconscious. Jung goes on to say in the note that "every step toward greater consciousness is a kind of Promethean guilt: through knowledge, the gods are as it were robbed of their fire, that is, something that was the property of the unconscious powers is torn out of its natural context and subordinated to the whims of the conscious mind. The man who has usurped the new knowledge suffers, however, a transformation or enlargement of consciousness, which no longer resembles that of his fellow men." This results in a loneliness, the pain of which "is the vengeance of the Gods."

obstinate and irreverent insolence toward authority that is informed by a love of freedom.

As the myth of Prometheus demonstrates, therefore, there can be an upside to the sins and the consequent guilt^c we suffer when we violate conventional boundaries. Galileo, Copernicus, Socrates, Rosa Parks, and Susan B. Anthony were guilty in this way. They gave much to society. But they suffered terribly for their “sins.” So did many lesser lights whose individual contributions to society were less dramatic but whose good may be quite extraordinary. Whether we are poets or cobblers, we will contribute the most to society if we commit the sins and bear the guilt necessary to develop ourselves as fully as we can. We can give society fire or we can give society our more developed selves as teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers or writers.

Guilt is the only feeling that is palpably experienced by us as indisputable evidence that we have done something “bad,” that we have somehow sinned. However, we can feel guilty about a wide range of behaviors that do not fit what is commonly defined as sin. Although some may try to define sin as breaking only those rules prescribed by religion, our experience in life asserts that this is not so. Intellectually, we may make a distinction between ecclesiastical and secular rules and laws, but emotionally we experience them as the same. That is, our visceral *feeling* of guilt when breaking a religious rule can be just like our feeling of guilt from breaking a secular rule. We feel we have done something bad after violating either one. At some deep level, it appears the psyche links violations of any authority—divine, secular or parental—to the feeling of guilt. This is probably because parents in our infancy are the first authority figures we encounter. They are also our first

^c We do not know if Prometheus actually *felt* guilt; the myth of Prometheus does not address that. But stealing from the gods is a sin, as society ordinarily defines sin. By that definition, any state of transgression against god or his commands is sin. Zeus’s punishment of Prometheus must imply that he (Zeus) held Prometheus guilty of something. If Prometheus did not feel guilt, it suggests that he was a sociopath or that he was exempt from mortal rules by virtue of being a demigod. But, Prometheus brought society something of great value and that act in itself seems incompatible with sociopathy.

image of God.^d We are challenged to distinguish between “sins” against parents and sins against God. Jung believed that the purpose of the institution of Godparents was to help us make this distinction by helping us to see our parents as merely human.

We are led, therefore, to a psychological definition of sin that cuts a much broader swath than the conventional one. In this book “sin” and the guilt that goes with it refers to anything that makes us feel we are worthless or bad. This goes far beyond the violation of canonical rules, admonitions of the church, or even secular laws.

When we look at sin and guilt (or shame)^e in this broader way, the way we actually experience them psychologically, we

^d When I refer to God, I mean to include all the conceptions of God that suggest the deepest unity that originates and sustains creation, whether God is a he/she/it or whether a light, a word, a thought, a person, pure reason, pure energy, a cell, a particle, a wave, a string, a tendency toward natural selection, or a psychological construct—among other possibilities.

^e Without some explanation and clarifying definition there could be some confusion in my use of the words shame and guilt. I suspect that some therapists would be troubled. Therefore, let me explain my use of shame and guilt. First, I need to comment about the distinction that some will draw between guilt and shame. At the intellectual level, there certainly are distinctions to be made, and the differences are significant. However, the differences at the visceral level are much harder to distinguish. At the gut level, we experience these two as identical.

Briefly, with guilt we are rejected for something we did or did not do; with shame we are rejected for who we are. *Guilt* can be explained as “experiencing myself as a bad person because I have done something bad or because I have fantasized about doing something bad.” *Shame* can be explained as meaning “I am bad intrinsically.” It is a sense of humiliation in which I am devalued as a person.

We feel guilt at transgressions of commandments and rules imposed on us by various authorities. On the other hand, we feel shame because we fall short of some ideal appearance: we are not tall enough, or slim enough, or we are not pretty enough, or we have a crooked nose.

can see how they can be such a powerful deterrent to human development. Much that is needed to live life fully is forbidden. Collectively shared beliefs of what is right and wrong, as well as widely varying individual beliefs of parents and other authority figures, present us with an enormous moral minefield that must be traversed. It is a field that is fraught with the potential to wound us, sometimes grievously, at every step.

At a deep level, the urge to sin may be identical with the urge to individuate, a Jungian term for the psychological process by which we become the unique person we are meant to be. Both sin and individuation appear to be a common urge to follow our own promptings rather than follow slavishly conventional ones.

Society has and should have a powerful instinct to defend its collective self. One could argue that society should demand a high price for individuation, for becoming one's self.^f It probably should cost much to purchase something as valuable to the individual as that.

Guilt feels as though it is a violation of something God said; shame feels as though it is related to something parents said. However, because parents are the child's first images of God, to the child the two feelings seem to come from the same pool. They get hit with guilt and shame long before they are able to make these fine distinctions. For this reason, it seems to me that the visceral feelings we experience from guilt and shame are identical. I am sometimes suspicious that the fine parsing of the technical and intellectual differences between these two concepts can serve as a defense against experiencing the underlying feeling. There may be highly developed feeling individuals who can make this fine differentiation in feeling for themselves, but I think they are pretty rare. For this reason, I lump guilt and shame together.

^f It is useful here to clarify the uses of the word self in this book. The self with a lower case 's' represents the psychic totality of the individual and embraces both the conscious and unconscious minds. The self is the center of this totality just as the ego is the center of the conscious mind. The self is similar to the religious idea of God within. Self with an upper case 'S' is a psychological representation that is similar to the more general religious idea of God, or whatever one wishes to call the creative mystery behind the totality of the universe.

The community, however, also suffers if its individuals are unable to complete themselves. Incomplete selves, like incomplete buildings, have less to give to the community. The community is a collection of individuals, and it can be only as big as the sum of the individuals who comprise it.

Life inevitably confronts us with the Promethean dilemma: Do we live our lives without fire and the heat and light it provides or do we sin and incur guilt to achieve the important developments we need? The contribution virtue can make to society must be acknowledged. There indeed are sins that are destructive; there also are sins that benefit. There are many books about the need to remain upright; this one is about the need to sin. A reason for writing this book is to comfort us in the “sins” we inevitably need to commit in pursuit of personal growth.

Making the case for sin and guilt is complicated by their ambivalent role in human development. They can help us or hurt us depending upon our needs at various stages of growth. During the first half of life, guilt can contribute to our development by assisting in the creation of consciousness⁹ and in the process of ego formation. Guilt is critical to the formation of human consciousness because it is closely related to the formation of the opposites in our psychic anatomy. Guilt may aid our early development by helping us adapt in ways necessary for a conventionally successful life. Guilt facilitates adaptation by inhibiting our embrace of sins. In both halves guilt plays an essential role in the operation of the psyche’s self-regulating function that is similar to the body’s homeostatic systems. Guilt appears to be a painful necessity.

⁹ Jung, Edinger and others have made the point that consciousness depends upon the existence of polar opposites that are basic to the architecture and anatomy of the psyche. The eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden is the mythical basis for this consciousness. We lose our paradisiacal innocence when we become aware of the opposites, symbolized as “good” and “evil.” Edinger pointed out: “An understanding of the opposites is key to the psyche” (Edinger, Edward F., *The Mystery of the Coniunctio*, Inner City Books, Toronto, 1995, page 14).

Despite its necessity, however, guilt can also interfere with our growth. At midlife, the conflict between individual needs and collective needs often expresses itself most powerfully as a crisis of belief and identity. The result is the so-called midlife crisis. The very guilt that can help us adapt in the first half of life may interfere with our development in the second half. Some behaviors that were forbidden now become beneficial. At midlife, the urge toward individuation is often felt most strongly and pursued most earnestly.

Whether we are in the first or second half of life, guilt can be ambivalent and difficult to interpret. Guilty deeds that serve our best interests are not always easy to distinguish from the ones that don't. A lot of guilt is meaningless no matter when we incur it. The ambivalence of guilt led Jung to point out that "in the last resort there is no good that cannot produce evil and no evil that cannot produce good."²

Guilt disturbs our emotional and mental tranquility. Like Prometheus, we suffer the pain of guilt, even if it was incurred for something beneficial. Promethean Guilt contains the seeds of its own atonement. What is "sinfully" and "guiltily" acquired is given back to the community as an expiation. There are also other spiritual and psychological tools that can mitigate our suffering. Because guilt is both painful and necessary, these tools play an important role in softening the damage and the hurt that guilt inevitably inflicts.

A real life human example of the Promethean Way is Rosa Parks. A recent editorial in the *Washington Post* printed a tribute to Rosa Parks, stating, "She had no army behind her. The law was against her. Only a few people knew her name. But Rosa Parks' individual act of courage and determination on December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, ultimately changed a way of life." On that day she was on a bus and was asked to yield her seat to a white man. With unsurpassed dignity she replied simply and eloquently: "I'm a lady and I would like to remain in my seat, please." These words were a shot heard round the world for the civil rights movement.

Initially, "A Montgomery court found her guilty. Local and

state leaders in Alabama ... moved heaven and earth to keep segregation laws on the books. Mrs. Parks was rewarded with telephoned death threats and fire bombings of her supporters' houses. She and her husband lost their jobs."³ In the end her defiance of the community's mores helped bring great changes, but at a high price, as the dominant powers of the community deemed her "bad." From these contributions alone, we could conclude that "sin" can be accompanied by positive value. Rosa Parks gave us grounds for hope that we too can act in the face of overwhelming odds. By honoring her feelings and needs she helped fulfill the collective needs of millions.

PART I

SIN AND PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH

CHAPTER 1

Psychological Growth and Development: A Jungian Model

INDIVIDUATION

The Jungian model for psychological growth and development is called individuation. It is the process by which we achieve our unique potential as an individual. All psychological growth is difficult and often painful. The Jungian way, however, is especially so because it requires us to sin and bear guilt. The path is strewn with guilt mines. We must step on many of them to complete our journey. The guilt that lies along this path creates a formidable deterrent.

Individuation describes a person's "process of personal growth, of becoming himself, whole, indivisible, and distinct. Key attributes that describe the process of individuation emphasize: (1) the goal of the process is the development of the personality; (2) it presupposes and includes collective relationships (i.e., it does not occur in a state of isolation); and (3) it involves a degree of opposition to social norms that have no validity. The more an individuating person's life has previously been shaped by the collective norm, the greater is his individual immorality."⁴

Jung, of course, clearly saw the conflict between his developmental concept of individuation and collective mores. He knew that we couldn't individuate without sinning and incurring guilt. He explains the consequences in a brief passage:

Individuation and collectivity is a pair of opposites, two divergent destinies. They are related to one another by

guilt... Individuation cuts one off from personal conformity and hence from collectivity... It means stepping over into solitude, into the cloister of the inner self... Since the breaking of personal conformity means the destruction of an aesthetic and moral ideal, the first step in individuation is a tragic guilt... The accumulation of guilt demands expiation... Every [further]step in individuation creates new guilt and necessitates new expiation.⁵

Jung was clear and emphatic that there is a high and demanding price of guilt to be paid when one gives up conventional life and travels the path of individuation. We cannot grow without suffering guilt. It's a path that requires courage.

But Jung also offered ideas as to how this guilt might be redeemed:

[The individuating person]... must offer a ransom in place of himself, that is, he must bring forth values, which are an equivalent substitute for his absence in the collective, personal sphere. Without this production of values, final individuation is immoral and-more than that-suicidal...

Not only has society a right, it also has a duty to condemn the individuant if he fails to create equivalent values, for he is a deserter... Individuation remains a pose so long as no values are created.

The individual is obliged by the collective demands to purchase his individuation at the cost of an equivalent work for the benefit of society.^h Only by accomplishing an equivalent is one exempt from the conventional, collective path. A person [who individuates] must accept the contempt of society until such time as he has accomplished his equivalent.⁶

Jung's way is essentially the Promethean way where "sin" eventually leads to something good for humanity. In order to accomplish our equivalent, we have to turn inward to the unconscious. We have to search there for what needs to be developed within ourselves in order to become the complete

^h Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed similar ideas in his essay, "Compensation." He writes, "A wise man will know it is the part of prudence to face every claimant and pay every just demand on your time, your talents, or your heart. Always pay." (Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Essays*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1883)

persons we are called to be. Only then do we have the capacity to give back the most we are capable of giving.

A similar idea is presented in Plato's *The Republic*, in the allegory of the cave, where the philosopher king goes away to the cave, the symbolic equivalent of the unconscious, and returns to give his society the wisdom and the fundamental forms underlying life that he found there. Analogies are the vision quests of the shaman and medicine men of the Native Americans and other primitive tribal societies, who enter the world of the unconscious and bring back knowledge and skills that benefit their people. In Greek mythology, Prometheus went far away to where the gods lived, stole fire, and brought it back. He offended the gods and incurred guilt and punishment for his deed. But his guilty deed brought great benefit to mankind.

GOOD GUILT

It is difficult to "get one's arms around" the seeming contradiction that the very individuation that suggests to Jungians that we are doing something good in our lives is the same individuation that produces tragic guilt and makes us feel we are doing something bad. A prolonged effort to understand and, if possible, resolve this apparent contradiction eventually led me to a concept I came to call "Good Guilt."

As I indicated earlier in the Overview, in common parlance, the words "good," "sin" and "guilt" really don't belong together. However, at some point I began to notice that the experience of guilt, the feeling of having done something bad in our lives, sometimes later, in retrospect, turns out to be something good, even essential.

I also began to notice that the lives of many "sinners" we now call great are luminous models for the idea that some guilt may actually be "Good Guilt." Their "sins" produced a lot of good for the societies in which they lived and, sometimes, for the entire world. A short list would include Joan of Arc, Mahatma

Gandhi, Socrates, Copernicus, Galileo, Martin Luther King, Alfred Kinsey, Betty Friedan, Darwin, Solzhenitsyn, Susan B. Anthony, and other audacious people who pushed themselves far outside conventional fences. Life is clearly full of examples of “bad” people giving something good to society. As Meister Eckhart wrote, “God is willing to bear the brunt of sins and often winks at them, mostly sending them to people for whom he has prepared some high destiny. See! Who was dearer to our Lord or more intimate with him than his apostles? Not one of them but fell on mortal sin and all were mortal sinners.”⁷ We could add King David and Solomon, as well as St. Augustine to this list.

We might better serve ourselves if we could look at people and their ideas in terms of their overall contribution to society, not just in terms of their apparent morality. Jonathan Yardley, in his critique of *A Life in Literature*, a book about Edmund Wilson, noted that Wilson’s personal life was not entirely admirable by conventional standards. Yardley quoted Wilson’s fourth wife as saying, “When I read his work I forgive him all his sins.”⁸ For her, at least, what he gave back was sufficient compensation to earn forgiveness and appreciation. Another example, Louis Kahn, whose contributions to American architecture are widely recognized, also led a personal life that strayed significantly from convention. He was a difficult man to work or to live with, but his wives, lovers, and colleagues forgave him because of what he gave back in the form of his art.⁹

An example of what can happen when we judge people only on the basis of their morality, rather than a balanced judgment that includes their contributions to society, can be seen in the case of Alan Turing. He’s an example of how the moral judgment itself may be more of a threat to society than the behavior of the person being judged. Turing’s case is an example of how collective morality can punish those that society needs. It’s the way collective morality can shoot itself in the foot.

Turing, according to a recent *New Yorker* article,¹⁰ was chiefly responsible for breaking the German Enigma Code during World

War II. It was an achievement that was critically important to saving Britain and, perhaps, the free world from defeat. His code-breaking work also led him to create the blueprint for modern computers.

Before he died, however, Turing was convicted of “gross indecency” for having a homosexual affair. This “sinner” could have been perceived instead as a national hero if his code breaking had not remained a classified secret until well after his conviction.

Turing’s is Promethean guilt; although his “sin” was not related to the benefit he brought to society. He offended society’s rules, but produced something of indispensable value to the very society he offended. One can imagine that the ideals that led to the punishment of Turing represented a much bigger threat to the community than a homosexual affair. We can legitimately ask: If it is society’s welfare that we want to promote, what does it better, the enforcement of the ideal that put Turing in prison or the achievements of Turing and others like him? It could be argued that Turing’s fate is an example of a religious ideal that is reflected in our public laws, but is absurd. Such laws can punish many who also help preserve the very society that condemns them.

Many scientific breakthroughs and other good ideas are not so controversial that the authors and advocates are rejected. These new things simply enter the mainstream without disabling controversy. These fine people make enormous contributions, but so do many of the so-called sinners. The problem for new ideas arises mainly when they run counter to conventional and religious ideologies. This sparks a controversy. Stem cell research is currently bogged down in religious controversy. Spirited and courageous outsiders may need to come to the rescue.

It is also important to point out that the people who live most of their lives in a fundamentally decent, conventional way are not entirely free of guilt. Walking through life’s field of guilt-inducing mines without striking one is virtually impossible. They may even feel the guilt of un-lived life. Some people incur much less guilt than others, and some appear

decent and conventional only because they have not been caught. The latter may be the only ones who know they have “struck a mine,” but they feel secret guilt. Some of the things that happen and the experiences we have cause us to question whether those who are considered devout behave any more morally than anyone else. Still, even the apparently innocent ones need comfort for their guilt. Some of what they give back may be motivated by an intuition that giving back helps to resolve their guilt.

In summary, there are a lot of gutsy people who were viewed as heretics at the time of their contributions. They were not acceptable to the dominant figures, who made the rules and had the power. These heretics—like Galileo, Socrates, and Rosa Parks—were condemned and often punished. They were loved and accepted only by other outsiders. In fact, the feeling of being an outsider is akin to feeling guilt, and it is the outsiders who are often the producers of new ideas. These heretics of their day are considered heroes today; they were not executors of the existing order. They brought fresh new ideas to the world and they suffered for it. Fortunately for us, their ideas survived and, eventually, were brought “inside the fence” where they could add to or improve existing knowledge. The conclusion seems inescapable. If these people had not committed their “sins,” as defined by the standards of the societies in which they lived, the world would have been deprived of their important contributions. And the concept of Good Guilt would have less meaning.

Our fear of guilt often prevents us from doing things we are not supposed to do. We are afraid to “go there” because there is a big price to pay for going there. There is also a big price to pay for not going there. George Bernard Shaw wrote, “All great truths begin as blasphemies.”¹¹ I am not sure that all great truths began that way, but we know that a great many did—i.e. the earth is not the center of the universe. If the fear of guilt had been completely effective and if brave people had been unable to find some way to bear it, the world would have

missed many of the great ideas produced by those who violated the rules of their communities to make their contributions.

English historian Arnold Toynbee in his classic *A Study of History* noted that older civilizations that eventually failed had a propensity to keep trying things that in the past had been successful, but that were no longer appropriate.¹²

Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, expresses a similar idea:

Schism in the soul, schism in body social, will not be resolved by any scheme of return to the good old days, or by programs guaranteed to render an ideal projected future, or even by the most realistic, hardheaded work to weld together again the deteriorating elements. Only birth can conquer death—the birth not of the old thing again but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be—if we are to experience long survival—a continuous recurrence of birth to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death.¹³

Campbell knew that declining civilizations were often saved in the end by those who dared to look outside the box, to go to the “other,” which is unacceptable to those charged with preserving the structures inside the fence. If we have succumbed to these limitations, we have limited what sacred ground is. If we have limited what God is, we have limited what our self is or can become without sinning. We must search in forbidden territory to grow, partly because we have created gods and sacred boundaries out of false Gods (e.g., parents, preachers, teachers, doctors, and bosses) or out of capitalism, communism, or formal religions.

The preceding discussion is intended to explain how I arrived at the concept of Good Guilt. Simply put, Good Guilt is the guilt that we feel when we follow the path of individuation, which leads us outside the conventional fence into the realm of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that are unacceptable.

In the struggle between the conflicting human tendencies to be both “good” and “bad,” there is a problem if we try to be exclusively good. We may, by staying inside the fence, avoid being castigated by society. We may also avoid castigating

ourselves with self-punishing guilt. In the process, however, we also avoid large parts of our self. In so doing, we may please parents and society, but sin against our self. Nevertheless, if we are going to be acceptable to the collective, and to all those who identify with it, we cannot reveal our larger selves; we can express only our smaller egos. That is the dilemma. What we would like, of course, is to truly be our selves and be accepted. We want to have our cake and eat it, too, but the collective, conventional values make that impossible. It forces us to choose between becoming our authentic selves, or being accepted by the conventional world. We must choose between being insiders or outsiders, between being good sons or prodigal sons.

An important lesson we need to learn is simply this: If we are feeling guilty, especially in the second half of life, we should not be too quick to conclude or interpret that those feelings of guilt necessarily mean that we are doing something “bad.” We may actually be doing something “good” for our own growth as well as society’s. The guilt feelings always need to be acknowledged and always, and I emphasize *always*, need to be examined and evaluated on their merits and in accordance with one’s conscience. But it is important to note that the meaning of guilt is probably far more complicated than we have ever been taught. It may be at midlife that we discover this most poignantly.

In the psychic triad of sin, guilt, and repentance, sin lies more behind the urge for individual development. We build ourselves so that we have something valuable to give. Guilt and repentance lie more behind the urge to give one’s fuller self back to the community. Ultimately, the community’s growth depends upon the growth of the individual. In this psychological and spiritual sequence, guilt is the painful bridge, the connector that leads from sin to repentance to atonement. Without guilt, or some other psychic mechanism that causes pain when one sins, there probably would be no atonement, no urge to improve or to give back as expiation.

The views expressed above, my professional experience as an analyst, and my own personal life, have led me to conclude

that sin and the guilt that goes with it are sacred, that the sacred and the profane are but two sides of a single underlying reality whose meaning depends upon the existence of each other. It is the unbearable suffering from our sins, from our profanity, that leads us on a spiritual journey in search of the sacred, in search of whatever we may have come to call God. We seek God in the hope of finding some answer to our profound suffering.

All recovered alcoholics I have known have suffered hugely from guilt. Almost without exception, they attribute their transformation and their healing to a spiritual experience that involves some kind of connection to what they call a higher power. Based on my work with alcoholics, they also will say that the spiritual experience of being saved from alcohol was so powerful that they can actually feel grateful for the sins and the suffering that led them to that experience. Somehow they sense that without the sins and the guilt they would not have found their higher power. They probably would not even have searched so desperately for an answer. For them, then, the sin becomes sacred because it was the sin that led them to God, as they understand him. It appears that God wants a relationship with humans and, one way or another, will have it, even if it requires inflicting pain.

The dream of a patient illustrates how close the sacred and profane may be.

I am in my college dorm room studying. My girlfriend is there. She was promiscuous before I met her and I am suspecting she still is. She leaves the room to go some place. I am suspicious that she is going to meet up and have sex with another guy. After she leaves, I follow her. She eventually comes to a plaza that is dark and disappears into the dark shadows. I follow her into the shadow in the direction she went. When I come to the point that I lost sight of her, I see a statue. She has somehow merged into it. It is the statue of the *Pieta*.

The dream unites two opposites—the sacred and the profane. They become one, merged in the image of the *Pieta*. In men, these are experienced as the whore and the Virgin Mary. In male consciousness, feelings are split off from the underlying unity that the dream expresses. They experience the two images

as separate. This split leads men to have a “pure” sweetheart whom they love romantically, but do not have sex with; rather they have sex with the “loose” girl. This is unfortunate for women. A woman’s reality is actually more like the dream, where she is both. For women, it can create a painful dilemma. She wants to be her real self. She wants to be both—to be loved and respected and passionately fucked. She cannot live her completeness, both sides of her duality, any more than he can, when he splits them in two. Christ’s relationship to and love for Mary Magdalene joins the sacred and the profane just as the image of the Pieta in the dream does.

At a deep, inner level the sacred and the profane are united by an underlying reality that acknowledges their interdependence and the truth that one has no meaning without the other. Without the contrast provided by the profane we could not become conscious of the sacred. We hide our sins for the same reason that we hide and keep out of sight what is most valuable so that thieves will not break in and steal our treasure. When we become conscious of how sacred our sins are, we can bring them into the light and share their sacredness and their worth. Sharing secrets is an act of intimacy. The sharing connects us to others and is a major cure for loneliness. Folks in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) learned that a long time ago. Jung said that the shadow, where we hide our sins in secret, is 90% pure gold.

The sins we commit eventually catapult us onto a path that leads us to psychological as well as spiritual development. The path leads us to our self, a Jungian term for the totality of our being and a psychological construct for god within. It also leads us to pain and suffering that we seek to assuage.

Churches that denounce sin might notice, if they read sacred texts honestly, that what they are denouncing is the very thing that would bring people close to God. The New Testament is quite clear that Christ hung out with sinners rather than with the righteous.

The propinquity of the sacred to the profane is not a new idea. It is not only contained in our sacred texts but also in great literature. Thomas Mann’s book, *The Holy Sinner*, portrays

the sacredness of incest that is forbidden by our most powerful taboos. Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*, portrays the sacred and profane side by side in the person of a clergyman. We may also sense the truth of the words in Delbert McClinton's song, *I Had a Real Good Time*: "You learn a whole lot more about life from the things you're not supposed to do."

END NOTES

- ¹ Huxley, Aldous, from the poem “Orion”, THE CICADAS AND OTHER POEMS. Copyright @ 1931, 1958 by Aldous Huxley. Reprinted by permission of Georges Borchardt, Inc., for the Estate of Aldous Huxley.
- ² Jung C. G. (1954), *Collected Works* (CW), Edited by Gerhard Adler et al. Bollingen Series XX. Princeton University Press, vol. 12, par. 36.
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- ¹⁶ These ideas about midlife are summaries and restatements of many of Jung’s ideas found especially in *Collected Works* 7, pars. 114–116, CW 4, pars. 415–418, CW 8, essay, “The Stages of Life,” pars. 772–795, CW 5, pars 458–459, CW 16, pars. 110–474. I read many of these pieces years ago and realize that some of the “paraphrases” may be direct quotes. But, because of the limitations of the old indexes or the absence of indexes as in his letters, and the unavailability of

the CW on discs, I was unable to verify at times whether something was a quote or a paraphrase.

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- ⁴⁵ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/fighter_command.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Holy Bible, John 1:1-3.
- ⁴⁷ *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* [2nd edition, unabridged] and *Encyclopedia Mythica*.
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- ⁴⁹ Neumann, Erich (1974), *Art and the Creative Unconscious*, Princeton, The Princeton University Press, pp. 181 and following, especially 185,191 and 192.
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- ⁵¹ McGahern, John (2007), *All Will Be Well: A Memoir*, New York, First Vintage International Edition. P. 217-218.
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- ⁷⁰ This remark was told to me by one of my supervising analysts in Zurich who had known Jung. I am pretty sure that I have seen this among Jung's writings but could not find the reference.
- ⁷¹ Jung, C.G., *From MEMORIES, DREAMS, AND REFLECTIONS*, edited by Aniela Jaffe, translated by Richard & Clara Winton, copyright @ 1961, 1962, 1963, and renewed 1989,1990,1991 by Random House, Inc. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc. p. 36.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, p. 69.
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Lawrence Staples has a Ph.D. in psychology; his special areas of interest are the problems of midlife, guilt, and creativity. Dr. Staples is a diplomate of the C.G. Jung Institute, Zürich, Switzerland, and also holds AB and MBA degrees from Harvard. In addition to *Guilt with a Twist: The Promethean Way*, Lawrence is author of the popular book *The Creative Soul: Art and the Quest for Wholeness*.

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