

Guilt

There really is such a thing as guilt, and we have a specific program for dealing with it

IS GUILT simply the residue of conditioning and outmoded views of conscience--or is it the natural result of irresponsible, dishonest living?

A growing measure of responsible opinion provides compelling answers to that question. This group argues convincingly that if religion had been doing the job it should have done, psychiatry never would have arisen as a profession. Proponents of this view say that the problem is generally not a guilt complex. The problem is guilt. Lying, stealing, cheating, and other forms of irresponsible behavior exact their inevitable price in depression, fear, tension, anxiety, and other "diseases of the conscience." As writer-scientist Paul Korzybski put it, "God may forgive your sins, but your nervous system won't."

On this basis, the only way to have a good life is to live a life that is good. Misbehavior generates guilt, which, in turn, creates painful inner states. The answer is not to hide behind a pill or deny the voice of the conscience, but to clean up and shape up. Our traditional religious legacies provide specific, powerful tools designed to restore the person who uses them to health and community. Unfortunately, the religions themselves have pretty much misplaced the method and abdicated their responsibilities to psychiatry.

Just recently, the dean of the U.S. psychiatric establishment, Dr. Karl Menninger, wrote a book called *Whatever Became of Sin?* Describing this method, he said: "The early Christian church cells were comprised of small groups of people who met regularly--often secretly. The order of worship was, first of all, self-disclosure and confession of sin, called exomologesis. This was followed by appropriate announcement of penance, pleas for forgiveness, and plans for making restitution. A final period of friendly fellowship (koinonia) closed the meeting."

A staunch Freudian for years, Dr. Menninger has done a 180-degree turn and now concludes that mental health and moral health are inseparable. The pointed probing of psychiatry's verbal scalpel has been the subject of extensive theorizing, philosophizing, and, finally, satirizing. While the patients gain increasing insight into why they feel as they do, they never seem to get well. It's refreshing, indeed, to see a man of Menninger's reputation embrace principles that *will* bring recovery.

Belatedly, Menninger acknowledges a condition that others in his field recognized years ago. Among them is Dr. Hobart Mowrer, a psychologist at the University of Illinois. Some years ago, he became disenchanted with the poor clinical results of the traditional approach in treating mental and emotional disorders. Rather than viewing the problems as a result of too strict consciences, he began helping people improve their performances and live *up* to their consciences. The results have been dramatic. Again and again, honest, responsible living has improved mental and emotional health. As Mowrer pointed out, "integration" and "integrity" come from the same root word. There can be no integration within a human being unless he aims for a life of integrity.

Honesty, openness, restitution, and willingness to help others are keystones in this approach. Openness means letting "significant others" know us as we really are. It means taking literally the injunction in James 5:16 to "Confess your faults one to another." On the same subject, the authors of the Old Testament wrote in Proverbs 28:13, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." This powerfully simple prescription is found in both Judaism and Christianity. . .but how often is it used?

Invariably, someone asks, "Is there *really* help in telling others the entire truth about ourselves, including those things we're most ashamed of?"

"Absolutely," reply those who have tried it.

"If secret confession, to priests and psychiatrists, had a really good record of accomplishment," says Dr. Mowrer, "we should be spared the embarrassment of having the 'ordinary' people in our lives know who we are. But the record is *not* good; and, reluctantly, many people are today experimenting with open confession of one kind or another. When you stop to think of it, *secret* confession is a contradiction in terms--secrecy is what makes confession necessary. And it is not surprising that the attempt to cope with unresolved personal guilt by means of continued furtiveness does not work very well."

A longtime admirer of AA, Mowrer stresses the need for restitution for harm done to others. Again, we find specific tools that have been largely discarded by our society. For example, the twenty-third and twenty-fourth verses of the fifth chapter of Matthew outline the way with precise clarity: "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee,/Leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." As these verses beautifully illustrate, my relationships with other human beings provide an accurate measuring stick for the state of my relationship with God. Here, as in James 5:16 and Proverbs 28:13, the prescription is simple and powerful. The Jewish Day of Atonement, too, is a time to make amends to those who have been harmed.

Sin--that old-fashioned word--thrusts the sinner out of community. Alone, alienated, afraid, he can still find an answer: to let others know him as he really is and then to make amends for harm he has caused. This approach has been dramatically successful. It rejects deterministic theories that make man a victim of heredity or environment. Instead, it declares the individual's responsibility for his own life.

This sounds familiar to us in AA, because the Twelve Steps provide the method with graphic simplicity. The therapeutic communities for drug addicts, such as Gateway House in Chicago and Daytop Village in New York, use these principles to bring health and wholeness to desperately sick men and women. They, too, take literally the injunction to "Confess your faults one to another." *Honesty, openness, and responsibility* are the foundation stones in these facilities, which offer one of the few hopeful vistas in the nation's bleak drug picture.

Msgr. William O'Brien is president of the board of directors of Daytop Village. A year and a half ago, he told me an impressive story of the role honesty plays in their rehabilitation program.

A father had just seen his son for the first time during the youth's nine months in Daytop. "It's amazing," the man told Msgr. O'Brien. "You've given us our boy back. When he came up the path toward me, I went to shake hands with him, and he threw his arms around me and said he loved me. He hasn't done that for years. But there's one thing that bothers me."

"What's that?" asked O'Brien.

"He says he can't work for me because I cheat," replied the man. "He said they're taught that they have to be honest or they can't survive." The father was a butcher who owned his own shop in New York City and kept his thumb on the scale because he felt this was the only way he could compete with the large supermarket chains. "I don't know what to do," he continued.

"Why don't you throw it out for discussion in the next meeting of your parents' group?" suggested O'Brien.

As the name indicates, these groups are composed of parents of the Daytop residents and are designed to help the parents change attitudes within themselves that have been sabotaging relationships with their children. The New York butcher followed O'Brien's suggestion and told his group that he had been cheating his customers for years. He came out of that meeting with two commitments: (1) He would go out of business before he would cheat any more, and (2) for the first three days he was back in his butcher shop, he would tell every customer who entered that he had been cheating. Further, he would explain that he was through cheating and would have to raise prices to stay in business.

Two weeks after that meeting, Msgr. O'Brien saw the man again and asked, "How did you make out when you told the truth to your customers?"

"Let me tell you what happened!" exclaimed the butcher. "They threw their arms around me. They cried with me. They said such an honest man in New York they had never seen. Today, my business is better than ever."

It's a stunning example of the primary role of honesty in enabling desperately sick drug addicts to break loose from their destructive habits. It provides an arresting insight into the way this strength is reflected in an ever-widening circle in the lives of others. Extensive experience shows with compelling clarity that these principles of honesty, openness, responsibility, and integrity are equally effective with men and women whose mental and emotional symptoms have not taken the form of addiction to alcohol or hard drugs.

I was brought up in one of the traditional Christian religions. It stressed the importance of faith, but failed to give me a method for living. There were no tools to keep me on the track or to straighten me out when I got off the track. With becoming humility, its adherents declared that they had the only *true* way to God. At the time of my entrance into AA, I believed in nothing. Looking back, it seems to me now that the problem was not an unwillingness to believe in God. I was simply unable to believe in that totally unworkable concept of God and didn't know any other way to find Him.

When AA members first began to talk to me about "God *as we understood Him*," the bewilderment and antagonisms of years started to melt, thawed by their sincere and *obviously real* faith. This was faith that was different, however. It included a specific, potent program to follow for personal change.

If I'm drowning, I want a life preserver, not a serving of cotton-candy philosophy, theology, or positive thinking. These AAs gave me a life preserver in the Twelve Steps. They spoke to me from experience, not theory, and said, "Do these things and your life will change." That is precisely what happened.

They gave me a way to deal with guilt in Steps Four, Five, Eight, and Nine. The first attempt with the Fifth Step gave me considerable *relief* from character defects. Continuing work with it by opening up with more and more people in ever-widening circles of personal transparency showed that this was the route to *release* from these defects. (To me, there is a major distinction between relief and release.) Making amends cleared out more sick spots within me. Daily work with Steps Ten and Eleven keeps me aware of the state of my life and alert to trouble areas. Regular reworking of all the Steps helps me become flexible and responsive to God's will and is the key to growing freedom.

The religion of my youth spoke frequently about God's forgiveness, but provided no method to make me *feel* forgiven by excising guilt. Being told that God had forgiven me didn't do it. It has long seemed significant to me that nowhere do the Steps say anything about forgiveness, either divine or human. Instead, they show us how to *experience* forgiveness. The program says: Use these principles and wake up spiritually; then, you'll be able to live freely, joyously, and usefully,

because these are the qualities of an awakened soul. This is the message we can carry to other alcoholics.

Guilt burns up energy and lowers vitality. It will not go away by our wishing or by our blaming others; specific actions are demanded for its removal. As more and more persons know all about us, we find freedom from the nagging fear of being found out. We can either change the past by dealing with it consciously in the present, or spend the rest of our lives reacting to it unconsciously. Positive work on the Steps removes guilt and releases a noticeable amount of energy as a result. With the present no longer a hostage of the past, we begin to live effectively in the moment.

Reality is *never* ethically neutral. Kick at the universe, and it kicks back. If a man jumps out of a tenth-story window, he doesn't break the law of gravity; he just proves that it exists. A guilt complex has never caused me a single problem in my life. Guilt, on the other hand, has created substantial difficulties on those too-frequent occasions when I've failed to live up to the requirements of my conscience. While it may be true that "morality is a matter of geography," we're bound by the ethic of our societies and will inevitably feel guilty unless we honestly observe that ethic. For me, the restoration to sanity described in Step Two is contingent on honesty; any time I'm dishonest, it's a direct route to insanity and disintegration.

Today, I believe in God, the AA program, and the AA community. I could not separate any one of these from the others, because it's you men and women who have taught me the truths that transformed my life. Each time self-will gets me off the track, you put me back on course by showing me what needs to be done in the Steps. It's obvious to me today that the only way to feel right is to do right; but that knowledge alone would be insufficient if I did not have your continuing help in *living* what I have learned.

With limitless power and deceptive simplicity, the Twelve Steps outline the course to follow for freedom from guilt and release from the actions that create guilt. In the process, the program brings a life of wholeness, balance, and meaning. It gives me those things I always wanted, but could never find anywhere else.

Paul M.
Riverside, Illinois