5. GUILT: CHALLENGE TO ADULTHOOD III

All self-knowledge is purchased at the cost of guilt.
—Paul Tillich

Appropriate Guilt and My Truth

Appropriate guilt precedes or follows unethical behavior. It flows from an internal organismic resonance (conscience) that evaluates action in accord with personal conviction. "We are born with an inherent bodily wisdom which helps us distinguish experiences that actualize or do not actualize our potential," says Carl Rogers. This is our functional ego telling us when we have stepped out of our own truth. This guilt indicates a rending of our integrity or an upsetting of a natural balance between ourselves and others. The balance is restored by admission and restitution.

Neurotic Guilt and Their Truth

Neurotic guilt is a learned (non-organismic) response to an external injunction or demand that we have internalized. We have stepped out of others' truth. This guilt is not let go of by amends and restitution but hangs on. Its origin is in the neurotic ego and it leads to an inner conflict, not to balance.

Guilt is not a feeling but a belief or judgment. Appropriate guilt is a judgment that is self-confronting and leads to resolution. Neurotic guilt is a judgment that is self-defeating and leads to unproductive pain. Appropriate guilt is resolved in reconciliation and restitution. Neurotic guilt seeks to be resolved by punishment. In appropriate guilt there is accountability. In neurotic guilt there

is blame. In short, appropriate guilt is an adult response; neurotic guilt is the response of a scared child within us.

Guilt Tricks

In every experience of neurotic guilt, there is something we are refusing to acknowledge. This guilt is a tactic we use to avoid feelings and truths:

1. A Disguise for Fear

Guilt that holds us back from acting can be a disguise for the fear of assertiveness. Guilt that follows a strong choice can be a fear of toss of love or of approval. We may fear the consequences of not being liked or of our losing control when we have strayed too far from an inhibition. The prior guilt can paralyze us and we then remain stuck or passive. The consequent guilt makes us ashamed and frightened of reprisals or of being known (or of knowing ourselves) in a new way.

2. A Downplay of Responsibility

Neurotic guilt limits us to one single course of legitimate behavior. In this respect, guilt inhibits imagination, the creative basis of choice. As long as we are caught in guilt, we do not see possibilites or know what we really want. This is how guilt subverts assertiveness.

Guilt after acting or after the omission of an act can also be a way of minimizing the power of the choice we have made. We are less responsible if we judge ourselves guilty because then our whole self was not committed! Paradoxically, guilt thus lets us off the hook and creates a false sense of righteousness.

3. A Mask for Anger

Guilt can mean justifiable anger toward a respected parent, authority figure, or friend who seems to have obligated or inhibited us. We believe it is unsafe or wrong to feel or to express this anger. This leaves only us to be wrong and so the unexpressed anger turns

inward as guilt. Thus guilt lets others off the hook while we abuse ourselves with anger that was meant for them.

4. A Dodge of Truth

Guilt is sometimes used to avoid an unacceptable truth. For example, during childhood, rather than face the painful truth that my parents did not love me, I believed myself to be guilty of not measuring up to their expectations. Then their lack of love became all my fault. "They had the love stored up for me, but I could not merit its release." Guilt about my own "inadequate behavior" kept the truth about them a secret. What I do not know, even now, I never have to face or get past. In this way guilt keeps me in others' power, i.e., always trying to please them. People-pleasing and a sense of inadequacy grow from this same pillaged wilderness of self-doubt.

Working with Guilt: Moving Toward Health

NEUROTIC

It is impossible to eliminate neurotic guilt entirely. Allow this guilt to be in your mind but no longer let it lead you to act or not to act. Make choices *with* guilt, not because of it. Simply notice what your guilt may be covering up. Is it a mask for fear, refusal to take responsibility, anger, denial of a truth, etc.? Then each time you experience neurotic guilt you acknowledge it as a signal of some avoidance. The guilt then dissipates enough so that you can address the authentic excitement and feeling underlying it. The guilt becomes what it always was: a concept not a precept, a belief not a verdict, a thought not a reality.

Fear is blocked excitement; anger is ignited excitement; guilt is mistaken excitement.

APPROPRIATE

It is unnecessary and dangerous to eliminate appropriate guilt. Appropriate guilt helps us know when we have disturbed a moral balance. Unlike neurotic guilt which hangs on, appropriate guilt vanishes automatically with a program of admission, amends,

and affirmation. Work through appropriate guilt with this "Triple A" approach:

1. Admission

Admit directly to the person involved that you hurt him or acted irresponsibly or neglectfully. Ask to hear about the pain he feels and listen to it. Thereby you live through the pain and become fully conscious of your behavior and its consequences. This is a powerful way finally to take full responsibility for your actions. In this process, genuine intimacy becomes possible in relationships.

2. Amendment

Make amends in two ways: first, cease the behavior; second, make restitution directly or to a charity or to a substitute person if the original person is unavailable or unready for your amendment. Amendment is authentic when it includes a dedication to change the behavior for the future. Remorse is sorrow without amendment. It lowers self-esteem and prevents release from guilt.

3. Affirmation

Affirmation following this guilt work takes two forms:

First, use any of the affirmations at the end of this book that resonate for you personally. Designing your own affirmations is even more useful.

Second, affirm (congratulate) yourself for the adult choice and the follow-through that made the guilt process ultimately empowering.

As a result of these three steps, a spiritual shift may occur: you become compassionate toward yourself and others. Now, instead of an immediate recrimination, you notice the connection between present unacceptable behavior and past or early learning. In other words, you see yourself (and others) in the context of compassionate understanding.

You then hold yourself *accountable* but not to *blame*. Blame leads to an emotionally-charged self-repudiation. Accountability leads to matter-of-fact amendment and higher self-esteem. By

compassion and accountability, we affirm a self-forgiveness, the authentic and final name for self-actualization. "That by which we fall is that by which we rise" (Tantric saying).

> *By noon, the island had gone down in the horizon; and all before us was the wide Pacific.*
>
> —Herman Melville: *Omoo*