

The Power of Guilt

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**THE
POWER
OF
GUILT**

Chris Moore Ph.D





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For the victims of the accident.
You showed me the power of guilt and forgiveness.

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Introduction

A Personal Experience of Guilt

When I was twenty, after finishing exams at the end of my second year at university, I attended a house party a little way out of town. It was a warm, late-spring evening, and the exuberance of the end of the year was rampant among the partygoers. I was feeling exhilarated—I had completed my final psychology exam of the year, and after beginning my university career with considerable uncertainty about my career path, had discovered my true intellectual passion, a passion that remains with me even now, over forty years later.

Late into the evening, after too many drinks, I was standing in the driveway with three friends, all of us equally intoxicated. The party was still in full swing, but we were ready to call it a night. We noticed a car in the driveway with the keys in the ignition. One of us—I do not remember whom—suggested we get in and drive back to college. It was a fair distance back, there were no buses, and we certainly couldn't walk. How else were we to get home? I took the seat on the front passenger side and promptly fell asleep. The next thing I remember, I was sitting by the side of the road, with blood on my face and the flashing lights of police and ambulance vehicles all around.

Evidently, we had gotten into an accident, and I had hit the windshield, which shattered, lacerating my forehead. My friends were talking to the police, but I was loaded into an ambulance and taken to the hospital for emergency surgery. I remember nothing more about that night. It was only after I awoke from surgery early the next morning that I learned what had happened. We had hit a group of fellow students cycling the same road back to town. Some of them had been injured and one had been killed.

I spent the next week in the hospital, in a bed on the plastic surgery ward, as my head healed. It was a traditional hospital ward with perhaps

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a dozen beds, most of which were occupied by patients requiring skin grafts. I was there because the damage to my forehead was quite extensive and the surgeon's team had explored the possibility of skin grafts to complete the work, but fortunately, they managed to stitch the wound in a patchwork that would allow much faster healing. It would also leave me with a scar reminding me of the accident for the rest of my life.

On the ward, I was nervous to engage with my fellow in-patients, afraid that they would be aware of the reasons for my confinement. I lay in bed with little to do but reflect on what had happened and what I had done. My memory of the events of that night was patchy—not surprising given my intoxication and the injury I had sustained. But the facts were clear, and they were devastating. Even though societal attitudes toward drunk driving were not nearly as condemning then as they are today, I had taken a car that did not belong to me, enabled a friend to drive while drunk, and thereby participated in a chain of events that led to the death of a fellow student, as well as injuries to others.

When something so drastic happens, it is natural for our thoughts to go first to the people in our lives who are affected. In my case, the list was long. I thought first of my family. My relationship with my parents was sometimes strained. And now I had been irresponsible in a completely unprecedented and damaging way. I had disrupted their carefully constructed middle-class Catholic family existence. How would I cope with their inevitable rejection? I thought of my friends in the accident with me. How could we look at each other again? Why had we participated in this rash and endangering action? Had I encouraged the others, who might have otherwise stepped away? I thought of the injured students and, in particular, the one who had died. I did not know them, but they were my peers, just starting out in their adult lives. I might easily have been in their place, but instead, I was responsible for derailing their journeys and, in one tragic case, terminating it. It was difficult to contemplate a more damaging act. Entwined with all these thoughts was my concern about the implications for me. Had I, in one act of reckless impulsivity, ruined my chosen career path? Given all of this, how could I live with myself knowing that my actions had cost someone his life?

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As these thoughts tumbled over each other in those first hours after learning the awful truth of that night, I fell into a morass of guilt, shame, remorse, and fear. At the time, I could hardly parse these emotions; I was simply stunned by their intensity.

As the week passed, my agonizing was punctuated by visitors. Remarkably, with each visit, I felt a bit better. It was as if each visitor added a length of rope to pull me out of the deep pit of my misery. Even then, I was struck by how the kindness of my visitors worked to counteract the negativity of my mental state. As I recall that time now, I see that it was the reconciliation offered by these visitors that effected my recovery from my emotional desperation.

Two visits stand out in my memory even now. First, my parents made the long drive from our hometown immediately. They appeared at my bedside the day after my surgery. Both were dressed neatly, which was consistent with their carefully nurtured middle-class style. Normally, they would be restrained in public, but that day, their emotion was clear on their faces as they approached my bed. There was a softness in their demeanor that was unfamiliar to me. They told me that yes, I had done an extraordinarily stupid and harmful thing, but nevertheless, they still loved me and had faith in me. These were not the kind of words that, with their stoic British reserve, my parents were known for. I listened to them with my head bowed; I could not look at them in that moment. It took a minute for their words to sink in. I remember well thinking at the time that this was the first occasion in my life that they had talked to me in this way. It had taken an extremely regrettable act to provoke a reaction from them that allowed me to feel truly, unconditionally loved by them. I realized then that without really knowing it, I had, up to that point, believed that my parents' love for me depended on my being good, or obedient, or successful in school. Their visit was critical, not just for revealing to me that my parents loved me, but for dissipating my shame. I was not a bad person; I had just acted stupidly.

The second significant visit was from friends of the student who had died. I do not remember exactly how many came, but one of them had been in the group of cyclists we had hit, and others were part of their circle of friends. I did not know them at all and was shocked to see them. I had no resources to handle this situation and lay in my hospital bed, dumbstruck as they stood around me. It turned out they were members of the Christian Union, for whom a life of forgiveness

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was fundamental. They had come to let me know that they forgave me and held no ill feelings toward me. Furthermore, they assured me that the student who had died and his family would hold no hard feelings toward me. For them, these events were inevitably part of God's plan. Only God could judge; their responsibility was to love and serve Him.

By that time in my life, I had renounced the Christianity of my own upbringing, but I knew the significance of forgiveness to leading a virtuous Christian life. It is difficult to overestimate the impact this visit had on me. Even now, thinking about it decades later and reliving that moment, my eyes well up. What I remember clearly is that with this visit, incredibly, the intense guilt I felt began to dissolve.

After a week in the hospital, my head had healed enough for me to be discharged into the hands of the police. As I sat in the back of the squad car, the two officers in front berated me with their opinions of my character. They asked me how I could live with myself. Quite reasonably, they viewed me as an entitled and privileged student with no sense of responsibility, who deserved to be severely punished. But their verbal assault washed over me. I remember looking at the backs of their heads and thinking, *Who are you to rebuke me in this way when the people who were harmed have already forgiven me?* I knew I had broken the law and I deserved to be punished for what I had done, but I also knew my real mistake was to get so drunk that I lost all sense of responsibility and control. At that moment, I *knew* I was guilty of the crime of unlawfully taking a car, but I did not really *feel* guilty about it.

I was taken to the local police station and charged with what, in the circumstances, seemed like a rather minor crime: "taking and driving away," a lesser form of automobile theft, as there was no intent on our part to keep the car. Only my friend who had driven the car and directly caused the accident was charged with the more serious crime of "causing death by dangerous driving." I was released on bail and ordered to appear in court at a later date. I went back to my parents' house for the summer and, after hearing from my college that I had been suspended for a year, prepared to take that year to work and try to get my life back on track.

The trial was scheduled for three months after the accident. My lawyer prepared carefully for the hearing. He assured me that for a first-time offender on a relatively minor charge, I would receive a fine and likely some form of community service. In court, I sat next to my three

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friends as we listened to the prosecution recount the events of that night. We could not help but be profoundly remorseful. Like the others, I pled guilty to the charge and apologized to the court for my action. The judge was unimpressed. My lawyer was as shocked as I was when the judge announced a sentence of six months in prison for me and my two friends who were also passengers. Our friend who had driven the car received a sentence of nine months in prison, a relatively lenient sentence for his crime. In his remarks, the judge argued that, despite the different charges, in his view we were all similarly responsible for the terrible outcome, and he was reluctant to differentiate significantly among us in the punishment meted out.

After sentencing, I was immediately taken into custody and spent the next week in a holding cell in a high-security prison before being transferred to an open prison to serve out my time reading and playing cards with white-collar criminals. To be perfectly honest, there was a part of me that was grateful for that time. Although the intense guilt I had felt in the immediate aftermath of the accident had been largely dissipated by my hospital visitors, I was responsible for the events of that night, and I needed to accept a suitable punishment. At the time, a prison term and a criminal record was the stigma that seemed appropriate. I also could not shake the feeling that, as the judge had suggested, I was almost as responsible for the death of our fellow student as my friend who had driven the car. In fact, I felt guilty that the driver would have to carry the burden of this crime in a way that the rest of us would be spared. To receive an equal punishment as he did felt right.

My lawyer, like those of the other two passengers, did not share this perspective and convinced my parents that my sentence should be appealed. He was sure that the judge had overstepped the mark and should not have punished the passengers so severely. Even if we did share responsibility, the fact was that the crime we had been convicted of was a minor offense, and there was no legal precedent for a punishment as harsh as ours. He also suggested that the judge had responded to implicit pressure to make an example of reckless and dangerous student behavior in a city where town and gown relations could be fraught.

He was right. On appeal, he argued that we had been punished for the severity of the consequences and not for the crime we had committed. The appeal hearing judge agreed, and my sentence, like those of the other two passengers, was reduced to time served—three

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months. I was immediately released from prison to return home and reflect on a set of experiences I had certainly not anticipated when I set out for university.

During the rest of the year that I was suspended from university, I read broadly in the areas of emotional and personality psychology. I was intent on making a career in psychology, and now I had a new motivation for studying: trying to make sense of my experience. Why had I acted in the way that I did? But even more significantly, why had I responded to learning of the accident as I did and how was it that the reactions of those around me had such an impact on my recovery from the depths of despair I first experienced?

My feelings of guilt grew in the first few hours as I learned of the consequences of my action. But although there was a single action, there was not a single source of guilt. I felt guilt in relation to my parents, to my friends, and to the victims of our crime. These manifestations of guilt were quite independent, and they reflected the different ways I related to these different people. I felt guilt in relation to my parents because I had let them down, failed to meet their expectations and, indeed, any reasonable standard of a dutiful son. I felt guilt in relation to my friends because I could not dismiss the possibility that I was in part responsible for the circumstances that befell them as well as me. I felt the most intense guilt in relation to the victims, because they were the ones most directly and dramatically harmed. Overall, it was clear that my action had different repercussions for different relationships, and a different manifestation of guilt was attached to each.

Although difficult to articulate, the emotional flavor of these diverse forms of guilt also seemed different. With my friends, with whom I had essentially symmetrical relationships as peers, my guilt was more a sense of uneasiness that our friendships were threatened by what had happened. I searched my memory for a record of the conversation that led us to take the car, but it was blank. What if it had been my suggestion initially? If, as I worried, I had been more of a leader than a follower in the decision to take the car that night, then I had greater responsibility and I needed to find a way to make things right with them. This guilt was the least intense of them all, and it appeared even then to have a clear and obvious motivating purpose: to heal any possible harm to our friendships.

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My relationship with my parents, naturally, was very different from my relationship with my friends. Even when we are adults, our relationships with our parents are colored by the long history of obedience and subordination to them. We look to our parents for love, guidance, and direction, and we generally want to please them. The guilt in relation to my parents weighed more heavily on my sense of self and was more akin to shame—my action had revealed me to be a bad person. I say *revealed* because I did not think that my action *made* me a bad person. Rather, I believed I was *already* a bad person and this action had demonstrated that fact to my parents and to the world. This shame made me feel depressed and helpless.

Even though I did not know the victims of the accident, the guilt I felt in relation to them was a much more powerful, existential guilt, consonant with the extent of the harm caused, that left me feeling that a seismic shift had occurred in my life. That guilt encompassed both the hurt I had caused to the victims and their families and the repercussions for my own life. I could not imagine at that time how it would ever be possible to escape from under the oppressive weight of that remorse. I knew that everything was changed for me that night and there was no way back to the life that I had had before.

Of course, I was also guilty of a crime. This guilt seemed at the time—and still now seems—of a very different kind. I fully accepted that I was guilty of the crime I was charged with, but I also knew that my recklessness with alcohol was the real culprit, and so I did not really *feel* guilty about taking the car.

The legal case, and the way the judge attempted to treat the four of us similarly even though we were charged with crimes of different severity, brought home to me the fact that ours was really a group crime, and as such we shared the guilt. Would any of us have taken the car that night if we had been on our own? I think it is very unlikely. We were all conscientious, law-abiding youths. Alone, our standards for responsible behavior would have prevented such an event. But together, a different, group mentality kicked in. We encouraged each other, testing our own ability to be reckless against that of the others. The crime was a result of the group of the four of us acting together, acting in a way that none of us would have alone. If the action depended on the existence of our group, then it makes sense to say that *the group* was responsible, and *the group* was collectively guilty. That is why the judge felt he could

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reasonably require a similar level of punishment for all of us. But the law is not designed to manage collective guilt. It is individuals who are charged with crimes and individuals who are punished, and so the legal appropriateness of his sentencing was dismissed on appeal.

Understanding these different forms of guilt is not complete without also understanding the ways in which they are resolved. I consider myself to be almost unbelievably fortunate that they were all addressed in such a short space of time for me. It could so easily have been otherwise. I was lucky to have parents who, although they rarely showed it in everyday life and often came across as judgmental, were able to express their unconditional love for me when it was most needed. Not long after I got out of the hospital, I was able to get together with my friends, and we shared apologies and committed to a completely joint responsibility for what we had done. I still marvel to this day that some of the innocent victims of our gross irresponsibility came to my bedside and explicitly forgave me for my action, absolving me. Finally, my guilt over breaking the law was dealt with through the workings of the legal system. Within a year, having plumbed the depths of despair in the immediate aftermath of the accident, I had been pulled through the emotional and legal repercussions of the episode and had come out the other side.

In the years since, I have imagined what might have happened if I had not been so lucky. What if my parents had judged me harshly, punished me in some way, and continued to hold this action against me for dishonoring them or my family? Would this evaluation have contributed to the shame of a negative self-image weighing me down throughout my life? Imagine if one of my friends had also died in the accident while I survived. Would I have been plagued by “survivor guilt”—the guilt that can arise in people who have been exposed to or witnessed death and stayed alive—whenever I thought about those events? And most troubling, the victims or their families might not have been committed Christians who prioritized forgiveness as a core value, and might never have forgiven us. It is interesting to me that the imagination of these alternative outcomes leads me even now to genuinely experience, although in a somewhat attenuated way, feelings of guilt. Under any of these circumstances, it is very likely that I would still be dealing with significant guilt today. These speculations have convinced me that a healthy recovery from guilt is fundamentally

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dependent on forgiveness by and reconciliation with those whom one has harmed. When forgiveness and reconciliation do not happen, guilt will fester.

Forgiveness and reconciliation usually have to be earned. Again, I was fortunate that they were offered to me without me having to work for them or show I deserved them. My parents and the students who visited me in the hospital spontaneously offered their forgiveness. My friends and I were all in the same position; none of us bore any greater responsibility than the others, and the shared experience, if anything, brought us closer together in the immediate aftermath. My wider circle of friends were all equally spontaneously compassionate—in no case was there judgment; instead, there was sympathy and support. Only in the case of my legal guilt did I have to earn society's forgiveness by taking my punishment. The prison sentence I received was supposed to serve that function. (And although my legal guilt was resolved by serving my prison sentence, I do believe that for this kind of crime, incarceration is poorly suited to genuine reconciliation, and perhaps a form of community service would have been more meaningful.)

This episode in my early adulthood taught me an enormous amount about guilt and the role it played in my own experience. Perhaps my most fundamental takeaway was that guilt is not simply the result of doing something wrong, whatever that may mean. Rather, guilt arises from doing something that has damaged a social relationship. Of course, hurting a social relationship often overlaps with what is considered wrong by society, but it is the damage to the relationship that is critical to the experience of guilt. That is why I felt guilt in different ways—through a single act, I had caused damage to different relationships.

This idea stands in contrast to the typical dictionary definitions of guilt. If you look up *guilt* in dictionaries, you will generally find two kinds. For example, the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines guilt as “a *feeling* of worry or unhappiness that you have because you have done something wrong, such as causing harm to another person,” or “the *fact* of having done something wrong or committed a crime.”¹ Other standard dictionaries make the same distinction. The first definition focuses on guilt as a negative feeling in connection with having done something wrong. The second definition equates guilt as the state of transgression of a rule imposed by some authority. The first treats guilt

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as a subjective or psychological experience; the second as an objective fact.

How do these two meanings of guilt—the subjective and the objective—manage to live side by side? Both meanings cast guilt primarily as the result of wrongdoing. But the subjective definition focuses on *why* we care about guilt—because it is a negative emotional experience. It does not really help us understand what we feel guilty about or what counts as wrongdoing. The objective definition tells us whether we *are* guilty, but it doesn't tell us why we should care.

The traditional approach to the reconciliation of these two meanings of guilt is that the objective meaning came first and the subjective meaning was derived from it. This approach is consistent with the etymology of the word *guilt*, which originates in English from the Old English word *gylt*, meaning “crime” or “debt.”² According to this view, moral—and subsequently legal—rules were passed down from authority (God, the king, lawmakers, etc.) and were to be obeyed under threat of punishment. Transgression of such rules resulted in objective guilt and consequently punishment. Inevitably, the breaking of such rules, or even the thought of breaking the rules, led to feelings of distress or concern, and these feelings came to be known as subjective guilt. These days, it is common for *guilt* to be defined as a “moral emotion.” For example, Wikipedia presently defines *guilt* as “a moral emotion that occurs when a person believes or realizes—accurately or not—that they have compromised their own standards of conduct or have violated universal moral standards and bear significant responsibility for that violation.”³ This definition explicitly links the feeling of guilt with the fact of moral rule violation.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the two kinds of guilt may exist quite easily in isolation from each other. Someone may feel guilty about an action without it involving the explicit transgression of any moral rule. (I feel guilty that I spend more time working than my wife would like me to.) And one may be guilty of acting illegally with no experience of guilt. (I'm happy to jaywalk if it will get me to where I'm going faster.) This loose association between the subjective and the objective forms of guilt points to something missing from our understanding of guilt.

To my mind, this standard approach to understanding guilt misses a critical piece of the picture: why certain kinds of actions are deemed wrong by moral or legal authorities in the first place. In fact, almost all

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acts of wrongdoing are ones that harm other people with whom we have some form of social relationship. Rather than interpret guilt in terms of wrongdoing, we need to begin our understanding of guilt by considering its role in managing our social relationships. We must think of guilt as primarily an interpersonal phenomenon. What I mean by this is that guilt is something that occurs in the context of relationships *between* people rather than simply *within* a person or with reference to a set of rules.⁴ That's not to say we do not *feel* guilt "inside us." Guilt is a real emotional experience. However, the experience of guilt is fundamentally tied to the ways in which we interact with other people. In the simplest terms, guilt arises when a person perceives that their relationship with another person has been damaged in some way. Most guilt follows from doing something that harms the other person in the relationship. But, sometimes guilt can arise even when we did nothing to cause harm. Perhaps we feel guilty that we got a promotion when our colleague and friend did not. The fact that guilt can arise in situations where we have little or no direct responsibility for a challenge to a relationship tells us that it is the threat to the relationship that is central to the experience of guilt. Guilt is the emotional signal that tells us we should attempt to repair this damage. That is why it is relieved by forgiveness—forgiveness by the other tells us that the relationship has been repaired.

The kind of event that I experienced at twenty can shape a life. Even after more than forty years, the memory of this episode is still quite fresh in my mind, perhaps because I have thought about it so frequently over the years. And just as I can still feel and see in the mirror the physical evidence of the accident on my forehead, the experience has left its mark internally. Looking back now, I can see how the experience at the end of my second year as an undergraduate set me on a path of discovery that leads all the way to this book. Those events and the ways my emotional reaction to learning of the accident was tempered and profoundly redirected by the reactions of those most affected led to an enduring fascination with how relationships are damaged and repaired. As a person, I listen to my feelings of guilt to tell me when I might need to work on my relationships. As an academic psychologist, I have been intrigued by the variety of ways in which guilt manifests in our lives and by how the resolution of guilt is dependent on forgiveness and reconciliation. This book tells the story of guilt, a story that is at the

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same time complicated—guilt shows up in so many areas of our lives—and simple in that in all cases, guilt is the signal that a relationship has been damaged and needs to be healed. We will see that we need to shed the image of guilt as a negative emotional scourge. Instead, guilt is, at its core, a positive force for healthy relationships.