

THE ANATOMY OF WHITE GUILT

The paper entitled “The Emotional Lives of White People” describes the variety of feelings we have as white people including fear, hatred, indifference, amnesia, anesthesia, denial, loneliness, anger, and hopelessness.

In that paper I contend that amnesia, anesthesia, indifference, and denial (what I call AAID for shorthand) cut us off from having strong feelings about racial injustice.

At least when we experience guilt we have gone beyond amnesia, anesthesia, indifference, and denial. (AAID)

From my point of view coming out of AAID is a positive thing because at least we are starting to feel something!!! If we experience real guilt we may discover that there is indeed something wrong. And guilt can make us as white people want to do something about racism.

In this brief paper I want to explore the anatomy of white guilt. First I will share some general thoughts on guilt. Second I will reflection on different ways that white people feel guilt. And third I will discuss how we can transform our guilt into a creative force for change.

WHAT IS GUILT?

In its simplest form guilt is our response to doing something wrong.

Willard Gaylin writes, “Guilt is the emotion that shapes so much of our goodness and generosity. It signals us when we have transgressed from codes of behavior that we personally want to sustain. Feeling guilty informs us that we have failed our own ideals.” At its best guilt means we care for one another and are responsible for one another.

Guilt implies that our relationships are somehow broken.

Guilt involves an inner feeling which we express when we say “I feel guilty.”

But our inner feeling arises in a social context where a community shapes what we believe to be right or wrong. The Taliban in Southeast Asia have one sense of what is right and wrong. Liberals in the United States have a different sense of what is “politically correct.”

Guilt can be experienced by individual persons. It can also be felt by whole societies. A good example is the collective guilt of the German people for the Holocaust of the Jewish people.

Guilt is an important part of having a healthy moral community. Without guilt there would be no sense of responsibility for one another. We would be living in world of sociopaths. Archibald MacLeish writes in his play JB “Guilt matters. Guilt must always matter. Unless guilt matters the whole world is meaningless.”

Different disciplines view guilt in different ways.

In the criminal justice system guilt is a crime. The lawyer is not concerned with feelings of guilt, but with what constitutes a criminal act. The focus is not on what a person feels but what they did. If they did something unlawful they will be punished. Watch CSI.

In the therapeutic model guilt is more of a sickness than it is a moral problem. Guilt is an expression of inner feeling – an interiorized self concept – an experience of repression. Guilt is caused by rigid authoritarian moral systems. Going to therapy helps us overcome our neurotic guilt.

In theology guilt is related to sin. Guilt is separation from God and estrangement from people. We are not what we might be or ought to be. God forgives our fallen ways. But we need to repent and seek redemption. Through redemption we are reconnected to God and to one another.

GUILT CAN INCLUDE OTHER RELATED FEELINGS:

I want to argue that what we call guilt actually embraces a variety of different feelings. We use the word guilt when we may actually be referring to a wide variety of painful feelings.

There is an exercise that we do in racial justice training where we ask people to construct a wall of history. During the training people write on the wall of history examples of racial oppression and resistance. At the end of the training the participants reflect on what has written on the wall. We see countless examples of oppression and injustice. We learn of wonderful stories of resistance. During that time of group reflection I feel pain, horror, remorse, and sadness. Often times I am in tears.

How do we feel when we contemplate the injustice of our time today? If we as white people are true to our feelings do we say “O this is terrific? I am so glad that people of color are being oppressed” Of course we don’t! We say I feel outrage, anger, sadness, and betrayal.

What I experience includes guilt but it is more than that. It also includes pain, horror, despair, confusion, uncertainty, and feeling overwhelmed. In brief, I don’t feel good about racism. How could I? I feel bad about it.

We have these feelings because we experience the pain of living in a racist society. We see the suffering, violence, and the disorder it creates in the lives of all our people. We may even feel empathy and compassion.

I believe that what we call white guilt is actually shorthand for all these complex feelings.

DIFFERENT WAYS THAT WHITE PEOPLE FEEL GUILTY

SINS OF THE FATHERS AND MOTHERS:

There are a significant number of people in the United States who are descendents of those who settled in America in the 1600s and 1700s – the times of the extermination of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans.

Some of these descendents own the crimes committed by their ancestors. Katrina Brown worked with her family to make a DVD called “Traces of the Trade.” “Traces” tells the story of the De Wolfs who were the largest slave trading family in early America. The film follows ten descendants of the De Wolf family as they retrace the steps of the triangle trade visiting the family home in Bristol, Rhode Island, the slave forts in Ghana, and the family plantations in Cuba. The family members honestly grapple with their ancestor’s involvement in this horrible enterprise. They genuinely struggle with the issues of white privilege that they experience on their journey. They express genuine remorse.

Other whites passionately declare their innocence of the crimes of their ancestors. They will say “Yes, my ancestors were involved, but I personally didn’t force people to come from Africa.” “I didn’t enslave people.” “I didn’t kill the Native Americans.” “I wasn’t born then.” “I didn’t have anything to do with what happened back then.” “I am not responsible for what my ancestors did.” “I can’t apologize for them - that is their responsibility.” “I don’t feel any obligation to do anything today.” They may even see themselves as victims feeling they are accused of being racists.

And then there are those who still participate in white supremacy groups, Confederate Army memorial gatherings, and states rights organizations as a way of honoring their white ancestors. There is no remorse or moral reckoning among these folks – only anger, bitterness, and the desire to keep white power in place.

WHITES WHO IMMIGRATED TO THE US AFTER THE CIVIL WAR:

Whites whose families came to the US after the Civil War will often make comments similar to the descendants of colonial families. Instead of saying they weren’t born in the days of slavery they will say their families were not here when these terrible things happened. They will assert, “My family wasn’t here at the time of slavery so we aren’t responsible today for what happened back then.”

Often such folks are unwilling to acknowledge the opportunities that were open to them as white immigrants that were not open to people of color. And they will not acknowledge that following World War Two white veterans got educational opportunities and access to housing (through FHA) that soldiers of color did not get.

SINS OF COMMISSION:

For some whites guilt is a response to our actually acting and doing racist things. In moral theory acts of commission are actions that people actually take. So here we are talking about racist acts. People feel “bad conscience” or real remorse.

I have heard dozens of white people confess their sins of commission. For example, there was a man who participated actively in George Wallace’s presidential campaign who expressed his regret. A man who threw rocks at busses transporting African American students during school desegregation in Boston who expressed remorse. And a woman who refused to date an Asian man because of his race who shared her feelings of shame.

SINS OF OMISSION:

While some white people feel guilty for racist acts they have committed other whites may feel guilty because they have not acted! Sins of omission occur when we fail to do the good things we should do and stop the bad things that go on around us. We feel guilty for not speaking out and for not doing more to work for justice.

Here we are talking about our response not simply as people who commit individual acts of racism. Here we are concerned about the collective sins of our whole racist society.

I once had a discussion with a white woman at the end of a two and a half day anti-racism training. She told me “I dreaded coming to this training I know these terrible things are going on. I have felt so helpless and powerless to do anything. And this inaction makes me feel even more guilty!

THE PAIN OF BENEFITING FROM AN IMMORAL SYSTEM:

Another form of white guilt – related to the sin of omission - is the response to our participating in and benefiting from an immoral system. As whites, we live in a society based on race. We as whites benefit from this system because of . This makes our system immoral.

Some of us who enjoy white privilege cannot help measuring our lives against the pain and deprivation that people of color experience. We feel guilty for benefiting from the pain and exploitation of others. This awareness causes us moral pain.

One of the powerful themes of American history is the growth of human freedom. Unfortunately this growth of freedom was for significant times in our history “for whites only.” The development of democracy and the emphasis on Republicanism goes hand in hand with the denial of political power to people of color. We see then that white freedom is based on the oppression of other races. As Phillip Rubio observes, “Whiteness creates a divided consciousness of claiming liberty in an unfree land. And white people have resented and feared the protest against the contradiction.” Rubio observes that white people have merged being American with being white so that whites don’t have to justify the contradiction between egalitarian ideology and caste superiority. (Philip Rubio History of Affirmative Action p.169)

In terms of white identity today many whites are sensitive to the immorality of our racist system. We are aware of the powerful contradictions between political power for whites and the oppression of people of color and our commitment to a meritocracy that serves the needs of white people while it excludes people of color. We experience ourselves as being immoral people benefiting from an immoral system. We feel burdened by the guilt of this awareness.

THE GUILTY MAN/WOMAN’S FEELING OF MORAL FAILURE:

The guilty man/woman suffers from feelings of moral failure.

Some white liberals today are guilty men and women experiencing the moral failure of racism. We feel deeply the pain of the horrors of all the crimes that have been committed against people of color in our history. We experience the ongoing racial oppression of our own time.

I learned about the concept of the guilty man/woman from Joseph Amato. In his book Guilt and Gratitude; A Study of the Origins of Contemporary Conscience Amato talks about the difference between the modern man of guilt and the guilty man.

The modern man of guilt comes out of the Enlightenment in Europe. The modern man of guilt arose in response to the breakdown of the medieval world view. The modern man made several important assertions.

- This world has intrinsic meaning – not the next
- Humanity is the agency of its own history – not just God
- Humanity is its own proper end
- Each individual is morally responsible for the collective well being of all humanity
- We can hope for a progressive future – human life will get better.

The guilty man/woman comes out of the experiences of World War One and World War Two. Millions of men killed in the trenches during World War One. Then came the death camps and the bombed out cities of World War Two. As a result the man of guilt of the Enlightenment was replaced by the guilty man. The guilty man is one whose guilt no longer drives him to progressive action but is overwhelmed with a sense of moral failure.

In the United States it wasn't the experience of World War One or World War Two that brought a feeling of disillusionment and a sense of moral failure. Rather it was the Vietnam War that caused some Americans to feel this way.

It is my belief that some whites in America are guilty men and women. We experience a profound sense of moral failure when regarding relations between different racial groups in our country.

WHEN OUR FEELINGS OF GUILT AS WHITES BECOMES THE FOCUS AND NOT THE INJUSTICES OF RACISM:

For me there is healthy white guilt and unhealthy white guilt. Healthy white guilt leads to change, transformation, and new life. Unhealthy white guilt leads to paralysis and inaction.

What is unhealthy white guilt?

For some white people their primary concern is how they feel about the issue of race and racism not the injustices of a racist system.

These white people will not engage in discussion or action about race because they don't want to feel bad. They say that people who are working for racial justice are trying to make them feel guilty.

But let's notice what happens here. The focus becomes how we feel as white people and not on racism. If we focus simply on our feelings then it becomes about us and our feelings and not about the injustices of a racist society. As whites we don't want to feel bad do we? And so we don't deal with racism. This becomes another part of our amnesia, our anesthesia, and our denial. It is another dynamic that stands in the way of our making change.

There is another form of unhealthy white guilt. Our guilt feelings may be so strong that we feel overwhelmed with guilt. We can be so overwhelmed with guilt that we become paralyzed and unable to act. Surely this is an unhealthy form of white guilt.

Theologian Letty Russell writes "The poor do not ask us to feel guilty, for they can't eat guilt. What they ask is that we act to address the causes of injustice so they can obtain food." (Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective) Letty Russell helps us to see this distinction between our guilt feelings and action in the world.

If we are feeling bad about racism we need to ask ourselves does our guilt lead to change or is it simply self absorption. If it is all about how we as white people feel then it is unhealthy white guilt

WHEN GUILT CAN LEAD TO POSITIVE CHANGE:

The experience of guilt can also be healthy in that it leads to change. Through an experience of guilt we can become empowered to break out of our socialization in white supremacy to create new and positive ways of being white.

In Janet Helms' theory of identity development of white people there are six stages: contact or pre-encounter (2) encounter or disintegration (3) reintegration, (4) pseudo-independence (5) immersion-emersion and

(6) autonomy

In the second stage – encounter or disintegration - white people experience guilt, shame, and anger.

In this second stage a white person has an encounter - an experience that shows us the reality of racism. We realize that race does matter, that racism does exist, and that we are white. This experience shatters the white Person's ego structure – he or she feels they are falling apart- hence the term disintegration. There is a loss of innocence. There is recognition that whites are part of “the system”. This leads to feelings of guilt, shame, and sometimes anger.

Following an encounter experience a white person can respond in one of two ways. Whites can go into denial or withdrawal convincing themselves that racism doesn't exist and people of color create their own problems.

In addition, if we as white people begin to speak out about racial injustice in the white community other whites will put on pressure to conform. We may be rejected by other white people. This can lead to stage three which Helms describes as reintegration with the white community. We go back to where we were before we had the encounter. And we refuse to deal with the moral dilemma of white power and privilege.

Or the moral discomfort (guilt) we experience can lead us to face the reality of racism and make change. We can acknowledge how whites benefit from a racist system while people of color are oppressed by this system- what Helms calls pseudo-independence. We can learn about white anti-racist identity and history – what Helms describes as immersion and emersion. And we can engage in anti-racist action – which Helms calls autonomy.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition guilt honestly faced can bring healing, reconciliation, and new life. As Paul Ricoeur writes, “Sin is alienation from oneself and it can lead to “rich interrogation of thought.” (Paul Ricoeur Symbolism of Evil p. 8)

In theology guilt and sin are connected to confession, repentance, seeking forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Confession is acknowledging the sin of racism. We recognize that wrong has been done. For those of us who are white confession means moving beyond amnesia, anesthesia and denial to face the realities of racism in our history and in our current day.

Repentance is apologizing for the sins that have been and continue to be done. It involves saying we are sorry. Repentance is the door to grace.

We ask for forgiveness and if forgiveness is offered, we experience reconciliation and healing. We are able to start anew.

When healing takes place right relations are established and new ways of sharing power and shaping accountability are created.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF GUILT CALL FOR DIFFERENT KINDS OF RESPONSES:

SINS OF THE FATHERS AND MOTHERS:

In dealing with the sins of the fathers and mothers we have to ask ourselves how much responsibility do we have for the sins of our ancestors? That is certainly a complicated question.

In the Nuremberg trials it was determined that the children of Nazi war criminals could not be punished for their crimes.

Yet, in his book Born Guilty: Children of Nazi Families Peter Sichrovsky describes the moral pain of these children and how guilty they feel about the crimes of their parents.

I believe there is a similar dynamic here in the United States for descendants of Americans living in colonial times. For me it is powerful that the members of the De Wolf family can attempt to come to terms with their family's involvement in the crimes of the past.

South Africa has made a powerful contribution to the world in the truth and reconciliation process they used at the end of apartheid.

The Unitarian Universalist movement has its own truth and reconciliation process. At the 2009 General Assembly we learned of the attempt to heal the broken relation with the Ute tribe because of the boarding schools our religious ancestors once ran for their children.

Some Unitarian Universalist congregations are using the truth and reconciliation model to come to terms with their own racist past. For example, the congregation in Brewster, Massachusetts has acknowledged that the sea captains who founded the church were involved in the slave trade.

SINS OF COMMISSION:

How do we address our white sins of commission- the racist acts we do against people of color? We can use the methods of our religious heritage: confession, repentance, asking for forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation.

SINS OF OMISSION:

In dealing with white sins of omission we need to take some action. We need to find small ways to act and hopefully those small steps will lead to meaningful change. As individuals we can't dismantle the whole huge system of racism. But we can create anti-racist personal relationships, anti-racist families, anti-racist religious communities, and anti-racist communities. Let's remember the millions of people who took action in their communities to end legalized segregation in the United States. All of the small changes that we make start to add up to big changes in our world.

THE PAIN OF BENEFITING FROM AN IMMORAL SYSTEM

As whites, we feel immoral because we benefit from an immoral system. The only way to become moral in the context of our racist society is to change this immoral system. Let's get organized. Let's use the best methods we can find to change the ways racist institutions operate. Let's work in our schools, congregations, and work places to develop anti-racist identity and practice.

HEALTHY WHITE GUILT

Reinhold Niebuhr observed "the conscience of a Christian should always be uneasy." I would say similarly that the conscience of a white anti-racist activist also should always be uneasy. But we have also noted the dangers of getting stuck in how we feel as whites rather than how racism is destroying everyone in our racist society. A healthy white guilt keeps us focused on ending racism and not simply on our feeling bad about it. A healthy white guilt empowers us to see that the small steps we take –working persistently over time – can bring substantial change.