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THE GIFT OF GUILT
A Service in Poems

First poem by Ellen Dugan who writes for Chesapeake Style and attends the writers group at The First Unitarian-Universalist Church in Richmond. UPRIGHT. (6 min)

The following copyrighted poem was first published in the December 2010 issue of RATTLE and is provided with permission.

YOU SAID YOU HATED POEMS
Because you didn't get what they meant.
I said poetry is a language of pictures.
I meant to show you how to pick a calming
song for singing to yourself. You asked:
How can you calm yourself; you are yourself.
I said, none of us is single-minded.

I meant: Feel the breath of your lost
daughters in the wind.
Let songbirds into your room, and when
the naked child, you know is you,
runs screaming in fear,
scoop her up. Wash her. Clothe her in dreams.
Rock her in your arms. Tell her, hush, lost-girl,
I've found you.

Helen Montague Foster, MD
(from RATTLE, December 2010 issue)

As you may know I'm a psychiatrist. I specialize in psychotherapy. Sometimes a person comes for treatment with the goal of becoming free of anxiety and free of guilt. When I was an adolescent I was in therapy myself, and I know I wanted to get past my anxiety and my feeling of guilt. I remember being shocked later when I learned in college that the psychologist Hobart Mowrer was remembered for saying that if you felt guilty it was because you were guilty. Ouch. Given how hard I'd worked to tame my own guilt, I thought his ideas were ludicrous. He even

claimed that actual guilt was one of the causes of schizophrenia. I had learned in my own treatment that what other people do to you when you are five-years-old doesn't make you guilty of their acts.

I think of guilt as a manifestation of signal anxiety. Signal anxiety is the unpleasant feeling that warns us when something is about to go wrong. It's like that awful sound before a weather alert.

Buzz: Doppler radar has identified severe thunderstorms capable of producing hail and gail force winds in Lancaster and Northumberland Counties. Buzzzz.

Guilt comes from the same roots as other signal anxiety. It's meant to warn us when we are about to violate rules that have become our own. If a lucky child pulls on the cord of a hot iron, his caregivers will shout NO and rush to stop him or her. They'll do the same if he hits another child or steals from a store. The people who care for us teach us to avoid trouble. Their reactions provoke our anxiety when we do things that are dangerous or when we do things that violate the rules of our groups. We keep some of their rules for ourselves and patch together a conscience that, if it goes well, advocates for positive values, such as our well being and the well being of those we care about.

I think Mowrer was right though. If you feel gully it is because you have not lived up to your own value system in some way. Guilt, especially after-the-fact guilt, is painful and sometimes disabling. Mowrer understood the pain, because he had some actual guilt and struggled with depression. It's hard to get over the guilt for actual misdeeds, especially if they lead to big consequences and/or if we keep our guilt secret from ourselves or others.

Guilt works best as a state of the art warning system that keeps us on paths consistent with our values. When we avoid thinking about our guilt, it's hard to learn from it. It takes some wisdom and thought to program our guilt warning system. For example the optimal conscience of a child is different from that of an adult. You aren't allowed to disobey. Later you may transgress by obeying without thinking.

Inappropriate guilt is part of depression. You can hate yourself when you experience guilt and don't make behavioral changes or mental changes. Appropriate guilt reminds us to do what we should and keeps us from doing what we shouldn't. Inappropriate guilt is often after-the fact guilt that does not provide helpful guidance in making life choices.

What I'd like to do today is offer some psychological and poetic perspective about how we view ourselves. People say Psychology and Psychiatry are just common sense. In the process of living we learn many lessons on our own, straight from the trial and error of living and from the teachings of others. The formal disciplines such as the medical field of psychiatry and the academic and clinical fields of psychology borrow heavily on the same kind of experience that leads to our own wisdom and I think, hence to the idea that psychology is just common sense So if the ideas I introduce today are very familiar given your life experiences, then that's great. I hope you'll enjoy the poems.

Gifts of Guilt

Clips of fear
arise like gifts
just before
I need them.
They won't let me lean
over the cliff,
stamp thin ice,
grab the hot pan
barehanded.
Heirloom wisdom,
hems my nature
quilting square
by frayed square.
In a way that seems
unfair as if I'm afraid
for no good reason.
I forget it's right
to know not to run
in the street and that
even rules I dislike
are some of them gifts.
So I stitch and rip.
stitch again.
Call the friend
whose mother died,
Say sorry to my brother.
Clean my room.
Take out the trash.
Napkin in my lap.
Sex? Be wary.
Love my neighbor
From afar
Try much harder.
Shame, no telling,
Shame, no harming.
Watch those instincts.
Rip and stitch.
Stop and think.
Stand up to bullies.
Catch mistakes.
Mend, rip, stitch
Hem the quilt square.
Hem the impulse
Stitch in guilt.

Rip out the shame.

Helen Montague Foster MD 1-26-2011, revised 6-27-11

About the Fear (30 sec)

This morning I thought about the fear,
the ice in the parking lot
how I knew I would slip
where I fell last year if
I didn't slow to walk like an old woman.
I need to pay the bill before it's due,
prepare the taxes, watch out for traffic
at the intersection where the pickup
sped from nowhere into a skid last week.

Helen Montague Foster 1-26-2011, revised 7-24-2011 Helen Montague Foster MD 1-26-2011

THE SHAMEFUL THING (1 min)

How would you feel if they knew
the shameful thing you did that time?
You know that what I mean is true
You know that guilt soon follows crime.

The blush. The tightening chest The fear.
Recall the time you failed to think
And someone suffered. It's all too clear.
You could collapse, your heart might sink.

You might implode in waves of shame.
Remember when you spoke too long?
Your friend's chagrin when you forgot his name?
Your unwise choice? Your thoughtless wrong?

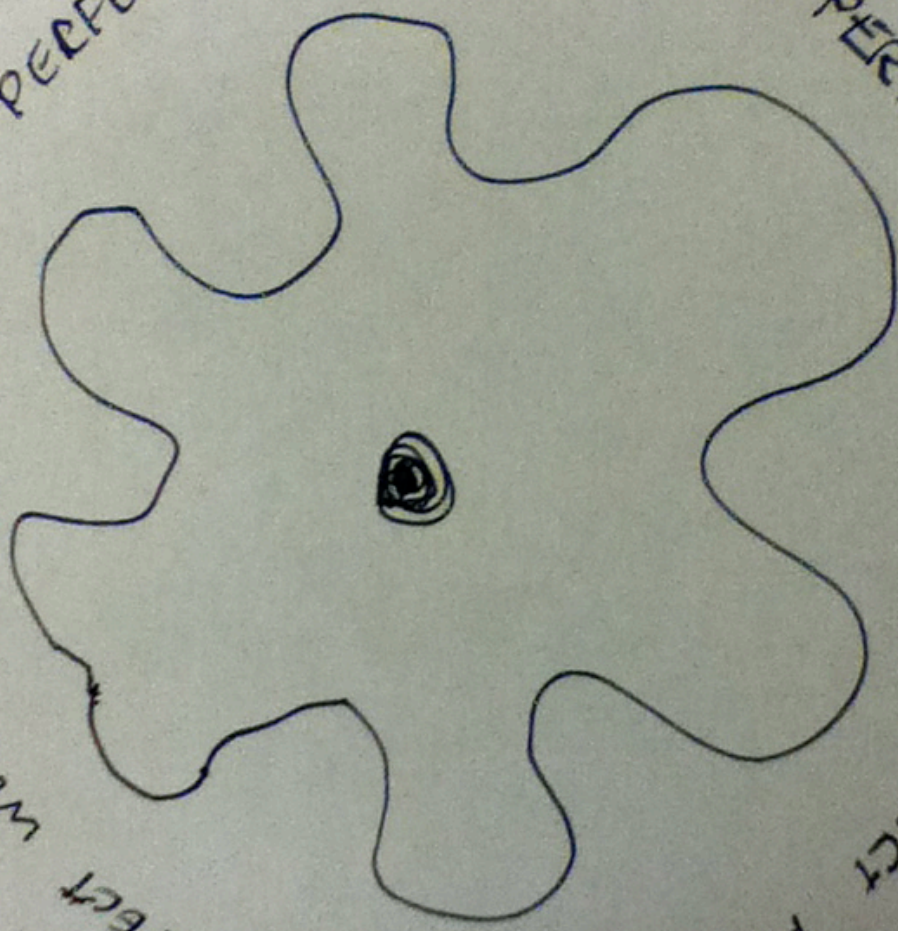
And what about the plain old truth?
You sang off key today, you know.
You put on pounds. You've lost your youth.
You talked too long. You ran too slow.

You got too jealous. It's just not right.
You snuck the ice cream in the night.
But here's the part I hope you know
You can't be perfect but you can grow.

Helen Montague Foster

OK. More common sense. We all know can't be perfect, but I'd like to illustrate some related ideas by showing you a diagram of an amoeba in a circle. The diagram represents self-image.

PERFECT PERFECT GREAT BEST PERFECT
PERFECT
WONDERFUL PERFECT
PERFECT PERFECT PERFECT PERFECT PERFECT
GREAT PERFECT



Think of the circle as your ideal, perfect self. This is how you wish to be. This circle represents your wish not to sing off key. This is how you would be if you were perfect. You aren't perfect. So if you convince yourself you are as unflawed as the circle, you'll have an inaccurate self image. And hence an unstable self image. Sooner or later you're going to get some feedback that you have a flaw or two. Inside the circle of unrealistic perfection is an amoeba. That stands for realistic self image. Because our actual level of functioning fluctuates, the amoeba changes shape like real amoeba, and our self image requires readjustment to be accurate.

One cause of emotional pain and of inappropriate guilt is having too high expectations. The protrusions on this amoeba stand for areas of strength and the dips and valleys stand for weakness. Let's say, you think you have a wonderful fund of knowledge. Here's the ideal circle. But you miss something, and you give incorrect information. Now your self-image takes a hit. Your image of yourself dents from the outside circle to the dip in the amoeba, Ouch. Like a punch in the gut. That's a trial and error correction. That's how we learn. Trial and error is the deepest mechanism of learning. After you miss a word in a spelling bee, you'll probably learn it better than the one you guessed right. That's how we learn to walk too. Take a wrong step. Fall over.

We're such emotional creatures. Which is good but often problematic. Emotions both promote learning and can interfere. Partly that's because they're like juice that squirts out in response to our environments setting off a general rather than a specific alarm. It washes through our whole brain and body, and even though we have elegant, automatically programmed internal alarm systems built into our bodies, sometimes our alarms gets triggered by things that aren't really dangerous. The uncomfortable fight or flight emotional juice that gets secreted when we even think about stressors, can scare us away from problem solving. And that can lead to inertia. Especially about self-esteem.

We can be experiencing feed back in our trial and error learning, and our self-images can drop too far. That happens to all of us sometimes. If we are too invested in being perfect. Out comes the emotional juice. Our self images may sink past what's realistic and reach the blot in the center of the diagram.

Are you with me so far?

The blot in the center is reactive depressed mood. Sometimes we defend against depression by lashing out at those who criticize us. If we're lucky enough to feel mostly loved, then when we get feedback about our errors, we may be resilient enough to readjust our amoebas rather than sinking to the blot in the center. We have to make a readjustment of self-image. That's good. Realistic self image promotes stable mood.

Depression and irritability are not the only risks from keeping self image in the perfect circle. It also causes relationship troubles. Someone notices our weakness and to prevent self image from plummeting, we blame someone else or attack their weakness, and unless they have a realistic amoeba self image, they can plummet to the depressive core. Or blame us back.

These aren't new concepts, but a way to keep the principles of self-image in mind. For instance if a person's ideal self-image is of a hard-working, mostly good person muddling through by trial and error, that lends emotional stability as well intimacy and depth in relationships. Perfect seems fake.

On the other hand, when we around rivals, it may be useful to project an unrealistic image of ourselves. Bluffing can be useful if we don't take our bluffs too seriously.

Here are some more poems and then we can have a discussion.
(For copyright protection, some poems actually read in the service have been omitted. If you attend UUFR and email me I will send you an email with the omitted poems.)

WHAT I DON'T KNOW (one minute)

We walk past shops after dining
on salmon, salad, wine.
He crouches where beggars
stalk out of town walkers.
My apartment burned, I need..
He calls. I glimpse his
stained trousers, unkempt
whiskers, lean stare,
yet we pass without giving.
His under-the-breath
curses skid like blown trash.

He doesn't know: because
I denied him, I'll give
the Foodbank what I can.

I don't know he slept
last night in the alley
by the dumpster,

Or that his mother died when
he was four. or that he hears
the voice of his cruel stepfather.

He doesn't know I'll try to write
a poem about how he doesn't understand,
and past midway it will become this poem
about how I'm the one who
doesn't come close to understanding.

Helen Montague Foster 2/21/2011

We've been talking about self-image, and I've chosen the hymn "Sleep my child" for us to sing, because so much of self image comes from parents. This lovely song from the opera Hansel and Gretel evokes much more love than the Hansel and Gretel story with its jealousy, temptations, and the witch. In the 1970's Bruno Bettelheim, the Austrian born child psychologist, wrote a book called the Uses of Enchantment about fairy tales. His premise was that fairy tales reach the unconscious to evoke feelings that adults may not admit to themselves. For instance he points out that adults may not admit to the oral greed or the separation anxiety expressed in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, yet they are affected by the story. I think music and poetry, like fairy tales also can get through to the unconscious. Anyhow, this is a lovely song.

Please stand and turn to Hymn 409.

Now let's make our closing circle..

WHILE WE WERE ON THE CREEK (one min 10 sec)

Here is what happened:

Our canoe slid on the dipping surface
Our paddles spooned us along
The wide creek. A pier slid past
Then another, and when we sloshed
Near the boathouse, gulls
Flew up with wings
So white, so strong that
They dragged
My heart aloft
Like you did
When you told me you
Hadn't meant to cry in the car
But it meant so much
Our thirty-five years, our grandchild's
Birth, they way our child held
Her child, that you couldn't help
It. This was the creek
Where you rowed my father that last
Time. He was thin as
A heron. The gulls
Whoosh like ghosts
As they rise.
The sun comes
Through their feathers
Making them glow white.
Their tails perfect
Fans. In that instant, with

You behind me in the canoe,
I understand
All of it.

But before we
Reach the dock,
My heart flaps back to my chest.
Whatever I knew,
I don't know anymore. All I can
Say is: It is enough for a lifetime.
Those gulls say more than I ever could.

Helen Montague Foster, M.D. 10/13/2003, 7-4-2004, 7-14-2004