

Guilt:

When I walk past a homeless person in the street I invariably experience a wave of guilt sweep through me. It is a vague feeling that maybe I am somehow complicit in his ending up like this. My own comfort and security becomes momentarily tainted. Is there a price to be paid for my sense of security in the world? Has this homeless man sleeping by the door of Burger King paid the price for the security I have in my life?

Maybe you can identify with these feelings. If you can, you can begin to get a sense of how all of us experience guilt and how it is a part of our existence. These concerns tend to be brought to the forefront of our experience as a consequence of tragedy. The harrowing trial in Cork recently regarding the death of dear Robert Houlihan has evoked these issues in more profound ways.

While issues of behavioural guilt and non-guilt have been established in the verdict there is another level of guilt, which courts are unable to ever address. This is the emotional and psychological guilt that continues long after a tragic death. The perpetrator guilt carried by the offender and the survivor guilt of the bereaved is something almost too deep for words to express.

Guilt is one of the most difficult emotions to resolve because it emerges from the core of our being. Guilt, in an emotional sense, is less about right and wrong and more about worthiness and survival. It gets at the heart of who we are. Are we worthy as people? Are we worthwhile? Do we deserve the good things that happen to us? Do we deserve to escape tragedy?

When witnessing poverty or starvation discomferts our security, the guilt we feel is about our worthiness and entitlement. "Am I entitled to the life I have?" "Am I worthy of the life I have?" These are the deepest of questions that emerge from our proximity to suffering?

There is one particular kind of guilt that is often experienced by those who are traumatised and bereaved by sudden tragic death – that is survivor guilt. This experience surfaced in the writings of those who survived the Holocaust. It refers to the sense of guilt that remained with those who were spared when those they loved had been taken from them.

Survivor guilt is that deeply felt conviction that one has somehow inherited the life that was surrendered by the dearly departed. This kind of guilt is almost wordless, for it is a deeply felt unease about continuing to exist after a loved one has died. If you let the full truth of that in you can begin to feel how profound that can be. Many will know of this first hand - you may be a mother who has had a miscarriage, a brother who has lost a brother, or a parent who has lost a child.

When someone you love passes away a part of you wants to go with them. Part of you feels that you are not worthy to live a life that was taken from them. It, at times, can be too much to bear for the bereaved survivor. It can even feel cruel that you have been spared while someone so close to you have had his or her life taken. We are often left with the challenging question: "How can I be happy, knowing that he/she is not here to celebrate with us".

Guilt expresses itself by creating a sensation that we are far more responsible than we rightly should feel. Even if you are not remotely responsible for the death of someone you love, your heart and mind try to claim some control of the tragedy by trying to give yourself some agency. "If only I had not done that." "If only I had said something". "If only I tried harder." In our guilt we try to undo something over which we had no control. "Maybe if we had gone to a different doctor?" "I should have seen that he was ill much sooner". We search for understandable relief from our helplessness.

We understand then that guilt tries to counteract intolerable helplessness. Being helpless in the face of a traumatic death is perhaps the most distressing experience for family members.

Guilt is also a way of trying to work through grief and bereavement. In a deeply compassionate way, these experiences of guilt serve a commemorative function of keeping alive the spirit of those who have departed. One cannot and must not "let go" of the loved one, but keep them alive in emotional conversation and everyday memory. Guilt is one part of this necessary and deeply moving mourning and grief.

"Are you ashamed because you are alive in place of another?" Primo Levi who chronicled the events of the Holocaust in his extraordinary book "This Was a Man" writes:

"It is no more than a supposition. Indeed the shadow of a suspicion: that each man is his brother's Cain, that each of us has usurped our neighbour's place and lived in their stead. It is a supposition, but it gnaws at us; it has nestled deeply like a woodworm; although unseen from the outside, it gnaws and rasps."

Bystander guilt affects all of us who have witnessed the tragic death of dearly beloved Robert Houlihan. What parent has not felt that awful sensation that it could have been mine? What parent has not felt that frightening realization that my child was spared? What parent, in hearing of the tragic death of any child be it through a car-accident, trauma, or illness does not get a shock at the proximity of death.

For all of these reasons we are rarely indifferent to the death of someone else; we are evoked by a wordless guilt. "Oh, it is not fair, it is not right. Why does it have to be this way?" we ask. Be it the death of a child by starvation in sub-Saharan Africa, or the death of a beautiful young boy in East Cork, our compassion moves us toward an appreciation of being spared, a realization of the sacredness of living, and a gratitude for the fragile gift of life. In the face of suffering, psychology eventually has to drop us off on the doorstep of faith and religion. We can only exclaim: "Lord, that I may be worthy of my suffering".

