

## Just Outside the City of Good People Parable of the Remorseful Serial Killer

By

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April 26, 2020

*According to a Sufi parable, there once lived a man who had heartlessly murdered ninety-nine people. He eventually grew remorseful and went to a renowned scholar to ask if it were possible for Allah to forgive him if he repented and reformed his ways. Unfortunately, this particular scholar, for all his knowledge, wasn't very wise and told the man that he could not possibly be pardoned for such evil deeds. The murderer flew into a rage. "In that case I might as well kill you too!" After doing so, feeling more remorseful than ever, he went to another learned religious scholar, explaining that he had now killed one hundred people and asked if it were possible for Allah to forgive him if he repented and changed. Being a truly wise man, the scholar replied, "Of course Allah will forgive you! You should repent at once!" He then suggested the man should avoid associating with wicked people because bad company naturally leads to bad behavior. The man broke down in tears and asked Allah's forgiveness. He then did as the wise man said by turning his back on bad company by setting out for the City of Good people.*

Before continuing with this parable, I'd like to discuss some of its implications so far. Anyone immersed in Western culture knows the key role *forgiveness* plays in the Christian religion. According to its mythos, ever since the first man and woman disobeyed God everyone is born contaminated with their *original sin*. It's such a serious condition that it's required the blood sacrifice of God's own son to cleanse us of all our sin and sins. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "as all die in Adam, all will be made alive in Christ."<sup>1</sup>

The centrality of this doctrine is demonstrated by a conversation I had with a young woman at a coffee shop several years ago. She was a student at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and told me she had been "saved" from her sins when she was only eight years old. I listened respectfully and didn't argue, but I couldn't help but wonder what terrible things a wonderful eight-year-old child could have committed that required a blood sacrifice before she could be forgiven. Even as a former Southern Baptist myself, this isn't a question I could ever reasonably answer.

The deep sense of shame many of us carry, however, isn't exclusive to any particular religion, although it may be an outgrowth of the strong foothold this Doctrine of Original Sin continues to hold in Western culture. Even the nonbelievers among us tend to have an inherently negative view of human nature, which I suspect is embedded deeply in our culture and is, therefore, part of our enculturation. Humanism, both formal Humanism with a capital "H" and Enlightenment humanism with a small "h," portend to value human goodness and agency, which is quite a contrast to this idea there's something fundamentally wrong with all of us, but even the more humanistic thinkers among us tend toward a negative view of human nature—a view that seems automatic and paradigmatic in our thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 15:22

In his book, *Homecoming*, John Bradshaw writes about the profound sense of shame we often inherit from our families, our peers, our schools, in addition to our churches. “Parents who call their children ‘stupid,’ ‘silly,’ ‘crazy,’ ... and so on wound them with every word ... You shouldn’t feel what you feel, your ideas are crazy, your desires are stupid. You are continuously flawed and defective.”<sup>2</sup> Regarding shame at school, Bradshaw says, “You are immediately judged and graded. You compete to be okay. Children stand at the blackboard being publicly shamed. Grading itself can be shaming.”<sup>3</sup> Hopefully that’s not happening as much these days. Knowing a lot of teachers and being married to one, I don’t think it is. But it is a dead on description of my childhood education, and I was one of the dunces who froze before the ominous blackboard, and was punished by having to stay after school if I didn’t get the answer right, which I seldom did.

Bradshaw recounts his own experience at an elementary school in Texas where Mexican children were punished for using their own language. As for our peers, he points to the cultural obsession with perfect 10’s and of the ridicule many an adolescent experiences in the high school locker room. And Bradshaw wrote his book long before social media made it even harder to get away from the chronic angst of peer pressure. And for the kids who didn’t meet these expectations, he writes, “they lived a daily nightmare just coming to school. The awkward kids, the ones who were non-athletic, also took a shaming at recess and during games.”<sup>4</sup> Growing up poor and unable to afford the latest fashions and technologies can also be a source of shame.

I came upon you when you were magical  
Before you could know I was there  
I severed your soul  
I pierced you to the core  
I brought you feelings of being  
flawed and defective  
I brought you feelings of distrust,  
ugliness, stupidity, doubt,  
worthlessness, inferiority, and unworthiness  
I made you feel different  
I told you there was something wrong with you  
I soiled your Godlikeness  
MY NAME IS TOXIC SHAME.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to this Western paradigm, claiming, as Paul succinctly said, “there is no one who is righteous, not even one,”<sup>6</sup> our Sufi parable begins not with an eight-year-old whose worse sin was that she didn’t make her bed in the morning, but with a grown man who has deliberately and heartlessly murdered ninety nine people. The story doesn’t begin with the

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<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw, John, *Homecoming*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1990, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 3:10

first human being to disobey God, or with a little baby born with Original Sin, but with an adult who has repeatedly committed the most heinous of human evils. If it is possible for one such as this to be forgiven, then what do most the rest of us have to worry about? What horrible things have we done in our lives that we should feel the kind of toxic shame Bradshaw describes?

Of course, there are two opinions about whether or not this serial killer can be forgiven. The first scholar tells him he cannot be pardoned for his heinous crimes and the second says he can. The murderer responds to the first by saying, "If I can't be forgiven, what's the point of changing. I might as well continue doing the worst." It's an important reminder of what a chronic sense of feeling ashamed, unworthy, and unlovable can do to a person. Why even try if we believe it's not possible for us to be better, or to transcend what we have been taught is just part of human nature? Those who feel unloved may behave in unloving ways. As one of my own college theology professors used to say, "You will treat others the way you think God treats you."

In 2008, Evolutionary psychologist Kevin J. Flannelly and his team of researches verified this in a study examining how mental health corresponds to the beliefs God is *close and loving*, *Approving and Forgiving*, or *Creating and Judging*.<sup>7</sup> "A meta-analysis of these studies," Flannelly says, "suggests that feeling one has a positive relationship with God is associated with better psychological adjustment, whereas feeling one has a negative relationship with God is associated with poorer psychological adjustment."<sup>8</sup> In brief, those with beliefs in a close and loving God have fewer psychological symptoms in general; those with beliefs in an approving and loving god have less social anxiety; and those with beliefs in a God mostly as a creator and judge have more psychiatric symptoms. That's what the Sufi parable is getting at; that when the man believes he is unforgivable, he behaves unforgivably. As Alice Miller says in her book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, "Contempt for those who are smaller and weaker thus is the best defense against a breakthrough of one's own feelings of helplessness."<sup>9</sup> Rather than dealing with the pain of being unloved, we cover it by tormenting others.

But the serial killer breaks down in tears as soon as the second scholar tells him he can be forgiven. "That probably greatest of narcissistic wounds," Miller continues, "—not to have been loved just as one truly was—cannot heal without the work of mourning."<sup>10</sup> So this violent man's tears are a positive sign that he has truly repented and is prepared to begin reforming his ways. But it's important to recognize that reformation comes after forgiveness, not before. It's only after experiencing *unconditional love* that this man is able to stop his pattern of violence. The wiser of the two scholars doesn't say, "You must first turn your back on your evil ways, then you will be forgiven." It's only after he says he's forgiven that the man heads for the city of good people to live a different kind of life. Remember what Jesus said to

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<sup>7</sup> Flannelly, Kevin J., Ellison, Christopher G., Galek, Kathleen, Koenig, Harold G., *Beliefs about God, Psychiatric Symptoms, and Evolutionary Psychology*, **Journal of Religion and Health**, (2010) 49:246-261337-350, Published online, March 27, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 246.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, Alice, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Basic Books, Inc., U.S., 1981, 1999, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

the woman about to be stoned to death after she was wrongly accused of adultery? After he brilliantly challenges the flash mob's puritanical and petty self-righteousness, he asks, "Where are your accusers? Is nobody left?"

"Nobody," she says.

"I'm not going to judge you either. Now go and sin no more."<sup>11</sup>

If one must change before they are forgiven, then it's not *for-giveness*. That's the cart before the horse. The forgiveness part, the transformative unconditional love, comes first in these stories. For if we're only loved after meeting the expectations of others, then we're not loved for who we are, and we end up with the kind of narcissistic wounds Bradshaw and Miller are speaking of.

*Moving on with our parable, it so happens that while the man was on his new path in search of the City of Good People, his appointed hour of death had arrived. But because he had lived such wretched life, and only received forgiveness at the last moment, both the angels of mercy and the angels of punishment came to claim his soul. The angels of mercy argued that because he had repented and was already on his way to the City of Good People, his soul belonged to them. But the angels of punishment argued that because he had not yet reached the city his soul belonged to them. So the archangel Gabriel was called upon to help settle the dispute. Gabriel instructed them to measure how far the spot where the man had died was from the two cities. If it was closer to the City of Good People, his soul belonged to the angels of mercy. If it was closer to the wicked people, it belonged to the angels of punishment. Unfortunately, because the man had only just begun his journey, he was still much closer to the wicked people, and had not yet had time to do anything good with his life. It would seem the man's soul was doomed, but because Allah is merciful (Al Rahim) and unconditionally loved the man, he reached down, lifted the spot where the man's body lay, and placed it just outside the City of Good People so his soul could be given to the angels of mercy.*

That's an amazing ending for many reasons, perhaps the least of which is Allah's miraculous power to alter time and space. But the real point is human, not miraculous, because it addresses the narcissistic wound of this man, and parabolically, those of us all, those wounds, that is, of being unloved and unaccepted for who we are truly are, even with all our warts and faults. It is this feeling of being unloved, of not being truly love for who we are, that causes us to feel separate, unworthy of unconditional, divine love, and as social outsiders, too far beyond the City of Good People for our lives to be of any worth.

And all of us carry this narcissistic wound, all of us, no matter our color, gender, sexuality, economic background, or the imagined place of perfect "privilege" projected onto us. As philosopher Lou Marinoff says, "suffering is a unitary experience"<sup>12</sup> and "we suffer primarily because we are human."<sup>13</sup> Suffering is a universal human experience that is fundamentally caused by the kind of narcissistic wounds I've been talking about, the experience of not being

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<sup>11</sup> John 8:10-11

<sup>12</sup> Marinoff, Lou, *Philosophical Counseling*, Academic Press, San Diego, CA, 2002, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

loved and embraced for who we truly are, not being allowed to fully unfold without being made to feel ashamed of ourselves. Again, as Marinoff writes:

The Tibetans are fond of saying that there are two kinds of misery: that of having, and that of not having. Children who have families, no matter how loving, will be disturbed, abused, or traumatized by them. Children who have no families will be equally disturbed, abused, or traumatized in their absence, or else by their surrogates ... Children whose parents are alcoholics or drug addicts will suffer potentially many ill effects of their parents' substance abuse; yet children whose parents are perfectly normal will suffer potentially many ill effects of their parents' normalcy. Children born to poverty may suffer and strive to overcome its disadvantages; Children born to wealth may likewise suffer and strive to overcome its disadvantages. Children born into any race, class, or gender may suffer because of it. Anything in one's environment may become a link to the chain of suffering.<sup>14</sup>

So maybe we should be talking about Original Suffering, instead of Original Sin. If the notion of sin, whether original sin, or the personal sins of someone like this serial killer, is best defined as separation, as theologian Paul Tillich said, this parable reminds us it's really a human invention, not something that can rightly be ascribed to our ideas of God. The serial killer kills because he believes he is separate, beyond forgiveness. The first scholar condemns him because he believes the man is separate, beyond redemption. The angels argue over his soul based on which community he most separated from. But this isn't an argument Allah gives a second's thought to. There is no difference between the good and the bad, there is only love for all her children and the whole of her creation. As the Sufi poet Rumi said, "Out beyond all ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

What a welcome contrast this is to the idea of Original Sin that has penetrated the Western psyche and influenced our notions of humanity, even among nonbelievers who too often speak cynically of human nature. Somebody does something unsavory, "That's just human nature," we say. In his book, *Original Blessing*, theologian Matthew Fox likewise reminds us the Doctrine of Original sin is but a human invention. "Fall/redemption theology has ignored the blessing that creation is because of its anthropomorphic preoccupation with sin!" He says. "The result has been, among other things, the loss of pleasure in spirituality, and with this loss the increase of pain, of injustice, of sado-masochism, and of distrust. [Fourteen] billion years before there was any sin on earth, there was blessing."<sup>15</sup> In fact, the idea of Original Sin is only a few hundred years old. It can't rightly be attributed to God or to Nature, but to a group of cynical church official in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

By contrast to this notion, that makes an eight year old girl believes she's so innately rotten that she needs to be forgiven and redeemed, our Sufi parable starts with a rampaging serial killer. That's the point of this story, that if even a man such as this belongs to the angels of mercy, what do any of us have to worry about? What have any of us done that we can justify not forgiving one another, or welcoming one another into our company, or including each other in our communities? Perhaps we'd all do well, believers and nonbelievers, to let go of the hellish notions of both God and humanity we've grown up with over the ages, to embrace

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 98f.

<sup>15</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1983, 2000, p. 46.

this image of Al Rahim, God is merciful. But God, in my opinion, is only a projection of our highest aspirations. Theology only means something if we embody and incarnate the gods we believe in. Walk towards this kind of god, Muhammed said, “and God comes running toward you.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fadiman & Frager, *ibid.*, p. 228.