The experience of self is partially a narrative of one’s history; without memory, there is no self. Central to personal histories are accounts of significant relationships and their successes and failures. Accounts of failed relationships tend to gravitate toward two narrative themes: self-pity and guilt. This essay explores some aspects of the nature of guilt and self-pity, the different forms in which they surface, and their relationship to each other.

We are on the run. We believe happiness is a matter of geography, or a matter of class, or of color, or that happiness hides its wiles inside a pile of money. Motion to somewhere is what we wish for. All along the run, the blues disturbs and reminds us, hiding like a pebble inside our favorite jogging shoes or sitting just under our skin, a long splinter of emotional recognition denied. The blues never refuses to tell us whenever we are fugitives from the mirror [Stanley Crouch, Always in Pursuit: Fresh American Perspectives, 1998].

Among the most suggestive concepts in contemporary theories of self—what it means for a person to be or have a self—is the notion of narrative. We are our stories, our accounts of what has happened to us. It is not our memories alone that sustain a sense of personhood. The past is too multifaceted and full of details. To have a self, we need a protagonist, someone who does things and to whom things happen. The past needs to be organized into a narrative, or several alternative narratives. No stories, no self.

The stories of a life can be told in many different ways, for many different purposes. Sometimes one tells one’s story to elicit particular feelings in the listener: admiration, excitement, arousal, understanding or pity. Sometimes one tells one’s story to stir the listener to action, to stimulate: help, opposition, collaboration or submission. And, of course, each of us has many stories to tell. Lifetimes are full of different kinds of experiences.

For most of us, our romantic fate, the account of our romantic lives, is a central, recurrent narrative within the stories we tell others about ourselves and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves to maintain a sense of who we are. And no romantic narrative, if it is to avoid degenerating into a fairy tale (and they lived happily ever after), is without pain, hurt, and loss. That is why the blues is such a popular musical genre.
In romance, as in life in general, there is perhaps no better way to determine one's identity, to symbolize one's uniqueness, than to catalogue the scars that serve as the remains and reminders of past injuries. Homer understood this. Part of what keeps Homer's Odyssey fresh and relevant to contemporary readers is its rich reflections on the theme of identity—the question of what makes a person the particular person he is. Who is Odysseus, the hero of Troy, in each new adventure, with its different set of circumstances and its different cast of characters?

In some situations, as with the Cyclops, Odysseus's concealment of his identity saves him. “I am nobody,” he tells the Cyclops. After being blinded by Odysseus, the Cyclops screams in agony, “Nobody has blinded me,” thereby ensuring the futility of his calls for help. In other situations, as on the island of Circe, Odysseus saves himself by securing Athena's help to preserve his identity, thereby preventing Circe from turning him into a barnyard animal, as she has done with his crew. Then again, when he reaches Ithaca, everything depends on Odysseus's concealment of his identity as he prepares to take revenge against the suitors of his wife, Penelope. Master of disguises, he transforms himself into an old beggar. Yet, he is recognized by the servant who was his nurse years before. How? Penelope asks her to bathe the beggar, and the servant recognizes an old scar on his leg—the result of an encounter with a wild boar during a hunting accident in his youth. When all is said and done, Homer tells us, we are recognizable, both to others and to ourselves, by our scars, by old wounds, by damage inflicted by life.

The psychoanalytic process may be characterized as the exposure and consideration of such scars, old wounds, damaging encounters with life. “See what has happened to me,” the analysand tells the analyst, sometimes in narrative form, sometimes through unintentional, indirect revelation (as with Odysseus's scar) and sometimes through reenactments in which the analysand and analyst unknowingly play out old, painful scenarios. As the scars and wounds of past and present injuries are displayed, the question of why is never far off. Why did this happen? The analysand needs to determine this to make sense of the past, to account for the present, and to guide himself in the future. And answers to the question “why” tend to gravitate toward two contrasting poles: “This damage was inflicted on me through no fault of my own” or “I brought this on myself and others.” Consequently, life stories are sorted out around the axis of self-pity and guilt.

In narratives of romance (accounts of one's fate in love), self-pity takes the form of victimization: “She done me wrong” is the central theme. Self-pity organizes stories of relationships both past and present—loves in which one has been betrayed or abandoned and present relationships in which one lives with a perpetual sense of disappointment and renunciation. In other narratives of romance, guilt suggests a betrayal not by the other but by oneself: “I was a fool” is the central theme. Guilt often organizes stories of past relationships: One's faithlessness or lack of devotion drove away one's true love. And guilt often organizes stories of present relationships: One lives with a perpetual sense of being undeserving, unworthy of a love that is at hand but cannot be enjoyed.
A brief episode with one of my analysands highlights for me both the surprising ways in which personal stories are brought to life in psychoanalysis and the centrality of the self-pity/guilt axis in making sense of those stories.

Bearing Responsibility

Ed is an engaging, talented man in his 40s who grew up as the only child of immigrant parents. Survivors of the Holocaust, his parents had lost most of their families. They suffered from chronic depression and guilt. They regarded Ed as both the embodiment of all their hopes in the “new world” and their subsequent disappointment that their profound pain and losses could never be made whole again. Ed had experienced considerable, intense struggles for independence from his parents in his adolescence and young adulthood and had built a rich and fulfilling life for himself. Yet he suffered from bouts of depression and explosive rage, and his close relationships were strangled by tentacles of constriction and guilt, the residue of his childhood. He had long feared psychoanalysis as another entanglement, but recent successes in several areas of his life had emboldened him to face the demons of his childhood and begin analytic treatment. We had accomplished considerable important work over the course of about a year when the following situation arose.

Ed was my first patient on one morning each week. He needed to schedule some urgent dental work into his busy life and asked me if I could meet with him half an hour early so as to make the dental appointment possible. I am an early riser, and this did not pose much of a sacrifice. So, I agreed to the arrangement for the following week.

On the appointed day, a clear but particularly cold winter morning, I bought some coffee, as is my custom, at a store on the corner of the block where my office is located and was somewhat absentmindedly making my way along, fighting the icy wind coming off the Hudson River. As soon as I saw Ed in front of my building, I realized I had forgotten our agreement. I had thought I was five minutes early but I was actually 25 minutes late. Ed greeted me by saying, “So, you’re a creature of habit.” “I’m really sorry,” I said, “I just completely forgot,” and tried to hurry us both into the office as quickly as possible.

Ed was silent as he settled onto the couch. I asked myself whether my forgetting about the change in our starting time had something to do with my feelings about Ed and our relationship that we would need to address. Of course, there was some inconvenience in the rescheduling, but that was minor. I decided the real problem was my failure to write the change into my appointment book. Up until a few years ago, I hardly ever wrote anything down in my appointment book and was able to remember what I needed to do. With the encroachment of age, my memory had become less reliable. I was increasingly forgetting things like this, but my narcissism seemed to prevent me from biting the bullet and using my book, memory crutch that I considered it to be. All this seemed not terribly relevant to Ed and his
experience, so I suspended my reflections on my forgetting. Ed sometimes, quite usefully, takes some
time at the beginning of sessions to assess his emotional state. On this day, I was mindful of how little

time we had. I felt it was important to talk about what had happened, as I would not be seeing him for
several days. So, I started by saying, “That must have been really difficult for you.”

At first, Ed reported, when he began to realize that I must have forgotten, he actually felt “great.” We
had often spoken of his need to regard me as an ideal figure in every respect, under whose tutelage he
would also become perfect. And he was indeed a very conscientious analysand. Recently, he had been
going through rough times, and had not felt very good about himself at all. So, for about the first 10 or
15 minutes of this session, which he was forced to experience outdoors on his own, he felt an enormous
sense of relief. I had screwed up, and that was great. If I was not perfect, he could be imperfect without
having to feel so bad about himself.

However, it was cold outside my building. “As I began to freeze my ass off,” he recounted, “I began to
get angry.” “It was great that I screwed up,” I suggested, “but it would have been better if I had screwed
up not quite so much.” He lingered on both his relief and his anger for a while and then shifted the focus
onto what I had come to recognize as his characteristic self-recriminations. How petty of him to feel
relief at my failings, he pointed out. Why did he need to maintain this self-destructive idealization of me
in the first place?

I began to have the sense, at once both reassuring and disquieting, that I was being let gently off the
hook. I found myself saying something like, “Your relief and also your anger in relation to my forgetting
are really important. It seems to me that they bring us into a different sort of relationship with each
other. By falling back into your self-recriminations about idealizing me in the first place, I feel as though
you are letting me off the hook and tucking us both back into more familiar and more comfortable
roles.” As I said this, I was struck by the oddness of my choice of the word tucking. Then I had an
association to a story Ed had told me about his childhood.

As a boy, Ed had spent a great deal of time daydreaming, and also sometimes nightdreaming, about
World War II. There were recurrent stories of his parents and other relatives being trapped in perilous
situations, with Ed managing heroic rescues, saving them and himself as well. As a boy, he had also
fallen into playing a game when he went to sleep at night: he wrapped himself under his sheets and
blankets, sealing himself off. He quietly smothered himself until, at the last desperate moment, he
threw off the covers and gasped for air. I found this story particularly poignant and realized instantly its
connection with my description of Ed’s “tucking” us both back into our customary
roles—me as presumably ideal and him as flawed, guilty, and conscientious.

Ed responded to my suggestion about his letting me off the hook, and I shared with him my association to his suffocation game. He described how difficult it is for him to find ways of regarding either himself or me other than as heroic ideals or utter failures. We spoke about how caring in his family was defined in terms of desperation and upset—and goodness in terms of sacrifice and heightened intensity. I suggested that, in their passionate involvement in the son they needed him to be, his parents rarely got to know the boy and then the man he was. I floated the possibility that my forgetting might have been a way for me to escape the suffocating role of perfection I was assigned. He described the world of options between heroic ideals and utter failures as a “no-man's-land” in which he had trouble staying very long. By then, Ed had to leave to keep his dentist appointment, and the shortened session ended.

Several sessions later, Ed began by talking about his anger over the bill I had given him the previous session. I hadn't quite known what to do about the abbreviated session. It had been slightly longer than one third our usual time, so I ended up charging him one third our usual fee. Ed was very angry about this. He felt that, given my forgetting and given his “freezing his ass off” in the cold outside my building, I should not have charged him at all for the session. To him, my decision was petty, strikingly ungenerous; it reflected a failure to take responsibility for my own mistake. Did I think it hadn't mattered that I had kept him waiting? He had come to think of (idealize) me as responsible and caring, gracious and generous, and so forth. My decision was annoying and really disappointing to him.

We explored Ed's reactions for a considerable time during which I was silently scurrying around in my own mind trying to figure out what I thought about his blistering attack. At first, I felt like a creep. Certainly I had felt bad about my (uncharacteristic) lateness. Why hadn't I just waived the fee for the third of a session? It seemed petty to me too. I remembered very briefly considering and then rejecting the idea of not charging him, but I hadn't really fully spelled out my reasons to myself. Now I felt I owed him an explanation, and so I began to explain why I had decided to include the partial session on the bill. I wasn't completely sure what I was going to say as I began to speak, but I felt confident that wherever this went it would be relevant and important.

- 718 -

I said that I hadn't felt at all flippant about my lateness—that I had felt bad about it. Yet, I hadn't really seriously considered not charging him, and I wasn't sure why not. The money itself was not important and seemed an insignificant amount to both of us. It would have been easy enough to forget about it. But it seemed to me that I would have been appeasing him, buying him off, if I hadn't charged him. I was curious about his feeling that the appropriate way to deal with guilt is to make a reparative gesture of some sort.

This led to a comparison between our approaches to guilt. For Ed, guilt requires compensation, even if only symbolic, some form of reparation to set it right. Failure to make the gesture suggests an avoidance of responsibility and an absence of genuine regret. For me, one of the main features of guilt is that it is
difficult to bear. One way not to bear it is to do penance or enact rituals to erase it. We teach our children to say “magic words” like please, thank-you, and I'm sorry. I've finally come to believe that magic words and gestures don't count for much in themselves. When I feel wronged, I much prefer that the other person spend time thinking about why they did what they did so they won't do it again rather than offer penitent gestures. I felt that not charging him would have been irresponsible because it would have enabled me fairly easily to shift from feeling bad to feeling magnanimous. In subsequent sessions, Ed and I discussed the possibility of reparation accompanied by an acceptance of guilt rather than as a defense against guilt. Melanie Klein made the same distinction between what she called “true reparation” and “manic, magic reparation” (cf. Segal, 1964, p. 95). We take up Klein's illuminating approach to guilt shortly.

As with most useful events in psychoanalysis, exploring the rippling associations to our interaction proved more important than any decision arrived at. In many respects, the issues involved in our early-morning episode represented a microcosm of Ed's struggle with his parents, as well as the central motifs in all his romantic involvements with women.

What precisely is the relationship between pain and guilt, or between Ed's parents' demands for reparations for his boyhood failures and the formal reparations of the postwar German government? How does one evade guilt? How does one best bear guilt? A striking aspect of the issue before us was the close relationship between Ed's pain and victimization and my guilt. He could have left after it was clear that I had forgotten the session. In some respects, his very conscientiousness and the pain it cost him, his very suffering, laced with a subtle self-pity, partially caused and determined the amount of my guilt.

Several months later, Ed's mother blamed him for causing her pain by not inquiring about the results of a doctor's appointment she had that he did not even know about. This became the occasion for returning to his vigil outside my door that cold morning. As we spelled out the details of his system of double-entry bookkeeping, it became clearer why he felt it was important to build up “credits” in relation to me. It was clear I had done something to make him suffer. And the more he suffered at my hands, the more protection he had against future attacks in which I would assign him guilt for victimizing me and causing me pain. This double-entry bookkeeping, we later discovered, was a key reason Ed's romantic relationships with women tended to drift into a supervised, measured distance. Passion and desire receded into the background as hurts and the resulting credits were carefully noted and collected.

The Zero-Sum Game

Guilt and self-pity often have a complex relationship with each other. Sometimes they are locked together in a kind of zero-sum game: The more there is of one, the less there is of the other. Couples
frequently coauthor this kind of complementarity in their most hateful fights. In the intricate reciprocity required for passionate intensity, each is both the victim of the other's insensitivity and cruelty as well as the intentional and unintentional agent of the other's pain. In prototypical couple arguments, each participant highlights their victimization and minimizes their agency, elaborating self-pity and dodging guilt. The zero-sum premise locks such arguments in futility. Each feels their pain is real. And each feels that to assume some responsibility for their own guilt amounts to surrendering claims to pity from, and assuming responsibility by, the other. The couple’s ability to gradually work their way free of the zero-sum assumption can unlock such arguments. Each member of the couple can tentatively acknowledge that both have been both objects and agents, or, in Albert Camus's terms, both victims and executioners. The pain of each is real and requires acknowledgment; the failure of each is real and requires accountability.

Self-pity and guilt can also become locked in a zero-sum game within the mind of a single individual. Children who grow up in abusive or chaotic households exist in a reality that is too frightening and painful to accept. Because it is impossible to live in a world in which they are the object of so much random abuse, so much undeserved suffering, they organize their narrative about their own experience around the presumption of their own guilt. To truly pity themselves, to directly face the hopeless impossibility of their situation, is simply unbearable. It must be their own badness that causes their caregivers to abuse them; if they were good, this nightmare would not be happening. Fairbairn (1952) termed this desperate maneuver the “moral defense.”

On a microcosmic level, this strategy plays out the problem that has daunted theists since the advent of religious belief systems anchored in the conviction that god is both all-powerful and just. The suffering of humankind, especially that of innocent children, has been difficult to reconcile with an omnipotent and fair deity. The most compelling answer in many religious traditions has been the assumption of human guilt. From pagan notions of insulted and offended gods to the subtleties of the doctrine of original sin, humankind has tended to purchase culpability in exchange for relief from a sense of pitiful helplessness. As Fairbairn (1952) put it, “It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil” (pp. 66-67).

Both self-pity and guilt come in many forms, and distinguishing among these forms is tricky. The psychoanalytic literature has provided little illumination about self-pity, but psychoanalytic authors have had a lot to say about guilt. These accounts have been powerful and clinically useful, but they have also left unaddressed what I have found to be important features of guilt and, by extension, self-pity.

Psychoanalytic Accounts of Guilt
Guilt was central to Freud's understanding of human difficulties, both neurotic and universal. In Freud's vision, our psychological lives are biphasic. Before and beneath the life we know and remember is another, earlier life of childhood sexuality, now shrouded in infantile amnesia. That life was both wondrous and terrifying, bodycentered and full of polymorphously perverse sexuality and phantasmagoric aggression. For each small child, that earlier life culminates in reenacting the role of Sophocles's Oedipus. Our sexual ambitions lead us to alternately desire and plot the murder of our parents. Each of us becomes implicated in the most psychologically horrifying of crimes—incest and parricide.

And each of us becomes a social, responsible being through fear of punishment and retaliation and the assumption of guilt for those forbidden impulses: The external objects of our desire and hatred are replaced by internal objects of conscience and surveillance, and the darkness of repression falls across our earlier life.

For Freud, guilt is the linchpin of our ascent from the bestial to the civilized. An absence of oedipal guilt results in sociopathy, the most socially dangerous form of character pathology. An abundance of oedipal guilt results in neurosis, in which the sufferer unconsciously arranges elaborate symptoms that provide for both expression of and punishment for infantile sexual wishes. An overabundance of oedipal guilt results in the sorry state Freud called the “negative therapeutic reaction.” The neurotic comes to psychoanalysis for relief but cannot allow himself to benefit from it. As the oedipal criminal he unconsciously takes himself to be, he regards himself undeserving of help; his crimes are unpardonable.

Klein added a powerful new dimension to Freud's account of guilt. For Klein, guilt appears not, as Freud thought, at age five or six, in the culmination of the oedipal stage, but much earlier, in the infant's preoedipal relationship to the breast. Klein's vision of the infant's mental state is darker and more troubled than Freud's and is dominated by intense, rageful murderousness and psychotic anxieties. But the infant also loves the breast and its transformative milk. Thus, Klein's infant is rent between abject longings and profound, loving gratitude for the transcendent goodness of the available, satisfying breast and rageful, hateful destructiveness toward the merciless malevolence of the unavailable, unsatisfying breast. Because these two experiences are so discordant, the infant's early weeks are spent in a psychological organization Klein termed the “paranoid-schizoid position,” in which there are, in fact, two breasts—one good and one bad, a breast that is the object of one's love and a breast that is the object of one's hatred.

Gradually, Klein believed, the two breasts, and the two divergent experiences of mothering they represent, become one. In this enormously difficult and unstable psychological achievement, which Klein termed the “depressive position,” the infant loves and hates the very same object. When this (“whole”) object is satisfying, its good milk suffuses the infant with love and safety, inside and out, and the deepest love and gratitude are evoked in the child; when this (“whole”) object is unsatisfying, when
the infant is left at the mercy of his own hunger, or is fed milk that feels disruptive rather than soothing, the infant is overtaken by the most global and unforgiving of rages. In his

- 722 -

fantasy, which is the only reality he knows, he destroys the (“whole”) object that has failed him, and suddenly finds himself bereft; in his uncontrollable, vengeful retaliation, he destroys the very source of love and goodness in his world. He has orphaned himself and rendered his world desolate.

One of Klein's greatest achievements was her account of the emergence, in the midst of this self-generated, apocalyptic devastation, of what she called an urge for “reparation.” The infant realizes that the object he hatefully destroys is also the object he deeply loves; he is gripped by the most profound regret and guilt. In his fantasy, which is the only reality he knows, he desperately repairs the (“whole”) object that he hates but also loves—the both satisfying and frustrating object that he must episodically destroy and rebuild. In Klein's vision, the shifting balance between the child's guilt-driven, loving reparation and his hateful destructiveness is the key factor that determines the child's and later the adult's emotional life. If the hate is too strong and the trust in one's reparative capacities too weak, relatedness to whole objects cannot be sustained, and there is a retreat back into the split world of the paranoid-schizoid. Now there are two objects, once again, all good and all bad, with love and hate safely segregated from each other. But in the paranoid-schizoid world, which in today's diagnostic lingo is called the world of the “borderline” patient, the fuller humanity both of the self and of the other cannot be contained. For Freud, oedipal guilt is the gateway from later childhood into human civilization; for Klein, preoedipal guilt is the central developmental achievement of infancy that makes human love possible.

These traditional psychoanalytic accounts of guilt have a narrative power and clinical richness. They also have two features in common that have had an important bearing on the ways in which analytic clinicians have applied them in therapeutic strategies. In both accounts, the crimes for which the guilty party holds themselves accountable took place in the distant past of early childhood; equally important, the crimes never actually occurred. Consequently, the way guilt is managed in most traditional psychoanalytic accounts goes something like this: Patients come to realize that they are at odds with themselves in fundamental respects—that they sabotage their own ambitions, either through symptoms or maladaptive character traits. Such self-sabotage derives from guilt, and the guilt is traceable to various imagined crimes of infancy and childhood. Patients come to realize that, in the fantasy-driven mind of a child, they treated wishes as equivalent to acts. They wanted to commit incest and

- 723 -

parricide, but did not; yet, they punish themselves as if they had. They wanted to destroy the frustrating breast, but did not; yet, they punish themselves as if they had. So, patients in analysis come to forgive
themselves their imagined transgressions, to hold themselves less accountable. As the adults they have become, they pardon the child they were for crimes they never committed.

Loewald (1978) introduced a different spin on this standard approach. Loewald suggested that it is a mistake to view childhood guilt as deriving only from fantasies in the child's mind. Viewing the Oedipus complex in terms of generational struggle, Loewald argued that the child necessarily kills something in the parents, not just in fantasy but in actuality. The small child requires total care, and an important and precious version of the parent comes alive through the provision of that loving nurturance. But the growing child needs to renounce that care, to kill that version of the parent. No matter how happy parents are to see their children grow, they cannot easily renounce the pleasures and responsibilities that earlier developmental stages entailed. Parents always exit conflictedly, never simply gracefully, from each developmental stage. And the child, who needs to struggle toward his own emancipatory freedom, must do his part in pushing the parent off. That murder generates guilt, and bearing that guilt is an important aprt of psychological growth.

But all guilt cannot usefully be reduced to the real or imagined crimes, oedipal or preoedipal, of childhood. I learned a great deal about this from another patient, George, who, it quickly became clear, sought analytic treatment because of a deep, unrelenting sense of guilt.

Guilt as a Refuge from Guilt

George1 suffered from bad dreams. In his mid-40s, he worked as a high-level corporate executive with considerable responsibilities. He worried about making mistakes. He worried about forgetting something important. He worried about hurting people through oversight or by making the wrong decisions. He had nightmares in which he is enmeshed in business problems and discovers he has overlooked something crucial, leading to disastrous consequences. The dreams seriously disrupted his sleep, and he arrived for the first session looking as if he hadn't slept for months.

George had been raised in the South in a fundamentalist Christian subculture. Although no longer actively religious, he retained a deep commitment to some of the values by which he had been raised. He was very principled in many ways I found admirable. He was also distrustful of psychoanalysis and the culture of popular psychology. Although his wife and many of his New York City friends had been in
one sort of therapy or another, George tended to regard therapy as self-indulgent. He regarded most talk about the unconscious as a form of self-deception and bad faith. But he just could not comprehend the worries and nightmares from which he was suffering and warily came to think he would give therapy a try.

In exploring the phenomenology of these bad dreams and the sense of the world they portrayed, George began to talk about the first and most dramatic circumstance in which he found himself worrying about not attending to something important—events he regarded as the most fateful and formative in his adult life.

Following what he regarded as a very happy childhood and a relatively smooth and successful early adulthood, in his mid-20s George found himself married to Carol, whom he loved, and who was pregnant with their first child. Several months earlier, however, he had begun what seemed to be an innocent flirtation with Linda, a woman in his office. It had slowly developed into an affair. Initially, he had no intention of acting on their mutual attraction, but he found himself little by little getting more involved. There was something extraordinarily powerful for him about being with Linda. He was amazed that he could actually carry off the affair in a fashion that seemed to have no impact at all on his marriage. Finally, George found himself deeply, passionately, dangerously involved, and he tried to break it off, recommitting himself to his marriage. But he couldn’t stop thinking about Linda, and each time he resolved to stop seeing her, he was unable to follow through. During his trysts with Linda, he was increasingly worried that something terrible might happen to his wife, and especially to his son, while he was out of touch. This was the origin of the feeling he recognized in the dreams that now tormented him.

George had begun to realize that he did not know himself and that that lack of self-knowledge made him suffer greatly. After a final, futile effort to renounce Linda, he decided to leave his wife. This felt agonizingly difficult because he regarded it as a criminal act, but he was simply unable to stay in the marriage. He lived for several years in a self-imposed purgatory of solitude, unable to allow himself to be with either woman. Finally, Linda presented him with an ultimatum—marry her, or their relationship was over. Only because of that externally imposed threat was George able to create a new life with Linda. They married and had two daughters; he remained a very caring and responsible father to his son. In addition, his second marriage was much more passionate than his first, and it engaged him more fully and deeply. Yet, he was wracked by guilt.

George never stopped feeling that what he had done to Carol and his son was unforgivable. He had betrayed his marriage vows, which he had made in absolute good faith. He had hurt his wife profoundly and made his son’s early years complicated and difficult. And he had done all this purely out of his own selfish motives—his lust. His account of his life assumed a Biblical tone: He had fallen from grace, and his sin was a mortal one. The more deeply we explored his life, the clearer it was that his fall more than
20 years before was its central organizing event. Even though he loved Linda and his daughters, he secretly felt that his second marriage was not real. It was the consequence of a crime, a lie, a house built on sand. In dealing with Carol, he never stopped regarding her as a victim. Even though she had remarried and built a successful life for herself, even though his son appeared happy and was doing remarkably well as far as anyone could tell, George regarded his abandonment of his first family as inflicting a wound from which there was no recovery, from which the victims were still hemorrhaging.

In the legal settlement of their marriage, George therefore gave Carol more than she had asked for; in their negotiations over time spent with their son, George was constantly yielding to Carol's convenience. Carol had been an only child, whereas George had many siblings. George felt that his son should be with his mother and her parents on all major holidays, as his presence would be so sorely missed. Consequently, his son spent little time with George's extended family, a very rich and colorful brood of uncles, aunts, and cousins.

As we explored his subtle assumptions about his experience of these situations, it became apparent that George was convinced that he had no rights at all. At any moment, Carol could, and sometimes did, bring up his abandonment of them. It was like a smoking gun with which he could always be branded guilty. Perhaps if George were extraordinarily nice and generous, perhaps if he were more than conscientious, perhaps if he suffered on and on, perhaps someday Carol would forgive him. But of course she never did. And, in negotiations about where his son would be on various holidays, he continued to picture Carol's family's dinner as the scene from Dickens's A Christmas Carol after Tiny Tim's death. Seated around the table were Carol and her parents—and then there was the empty chair, the son's chair, the one he would be responsible for vacating if he himself insisted on spending time with his son. As in another Dickens tale—Mrs. Haversham's clock seemed to stop—time was frozen at the moment of the crime.

George hated what he regarded as the facile psychologizing of contemporary culture. He hated political figures who had done horrible things both to their constituents and to people closest to them, who had sought public forgiveness by disclosing their indiscretions, who had congratulated themselves on their honesty, who had asked for the voters' continued support in the next election. He believed psychology often provided people with an easy and dishonest way out. “I was traumatized as a kid—abused and abandoned. I was wronged, or confused. My unconscious made me do it.” George thought psychoanalysis dangerous, and that certainly included our work together, because he did not want to let himself off the hook in the easy way he imagined it provided. He firmly believed he was guilty of something terrible, and he did not want to purchase a self-deceiving absolution for his crime.

I agreed with much of what George said about the irresponsibility and facile self-exoneration typical of contemporary public life. I admired his honesty and the high standards to which he held himself. But, I began to feel he had suffered enough. There was something self-indulgent in his self-mortification.
George regarded my views about his guilt as dangerous. They lured him into a self-forgiveness he experienced as a self-betrayal. Over several months, we discussed many different facets of his life, but kept returning to the problem of his guilt, his densely packed self-accusations, on which he, and then he and I, appeared to be deadlocked.

An opening occurred when I realized (and found a way to make him curious about) how punishing his guilt was. It punished not just himself, whom he regarded as deserving of all punishments, but those around him as well. I wondered how his son would feel after he grew up and realized that he had been deprived of being part of his father's extended family. In a sense, a potential source of richness for his son was sacrificed for George's efforts to appease Carol. And then there was Linda. In some deeper sense, George could never fully give himself to her as a legitimate husband. There were also his two daughters, whom he cared about a great deal but had difficulty fathering without conflict. We began to realize that his inability to accept and come to terms with his earlier “crime” involved him in continually destructive patterns with those he loved. It was as if his self-mortification for his earlier crimes erected an alter upon which his current relationships were sacrificed.

There was a magical, almost delusional dimension to George's guilt. Even though circumstances had changed, George refused to. He remained longing for a forgiveness that would undo the damages. He was unable to accept the loss of an ideal image of himself—the image he had shattered. He wanted to be made whole again. What struck us both with great surprise is the realization that George, who seemed to be the guiltiest man alive, had actually arranged his life around a refusal to truly bear his guilt. His appeasement and self-punishment were all aimed at erasing the consequences of his actions that he was simply unwilling to accept. Thus, self-inflicted or arranged punishment, though appearing to acknowledge culpability, often operates as a diversion from experiencing guilt that feels simply too difficult to bear. As Loewald (1978) put it, “punishment, whether inflicted by others or by oneself, is too much in the service of repression of the sense of guilt” (p. 391).

The Degradation of Guilt and Pathos

Guilt and self-pity appear deceptively simple because they are feelings. We tend to regard feelings as just existing—pure, unbidden, uncomplicated bursts of emotion. But feelings of guilt and self-pity really originate in complex attitudes we take toward ourselves. With both guilt and self-pity, there occurs a split in the self between a part or version of the self that assumes an attitude (accusatory in guilt and compassionate in self-pity) toward another part or version of the self. The source from which feelings of guilt and self-pity emerge is a particular kind of multifaceted relationship we have with ourselves, in which we are both subject and object. Psychoanalysts have labeled these relationships “internal object relations” and regard them as the deep structure of all our experience. This underlying relational structure, in fact, makes feelings of guilt and self-pity quite complex.
Of all the human emotions, we are, perhaps, the most ambivalent about pity. Pathos in music, art, religious iconography, and literature functions as a powerful, highly valued quality that enhances our humanity. A strong capacity for pity toward one's fellow human beings is associated with compassion and regarded as a virtue. Aristotle defined pity as “pain at...an appearing evil, destructive or painful, belonging to one who does not deserve to have it happen—the sort of evil that one might expect oneself to suffer, or some member of one's family.” In her discussion of Aristotle's concept of pity, Nussbaum (1994) stressed that he regarded the object of pity as undeserving of the evil befalling him, and this explains the complementary relationship between pity and guilt: “The (believed) goodness of the individual object of pity...reinforces the belief that the suffering is undeserved. Such undeserved sufferings appeal to our sense of injustice” (p. 87). For this very reason, undeserved suffering arouses our pity. For Shakespeare, pity is an expression of our humanity and modulates the bestial in us: “No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity” (Richard III). And Yeats (1956) located pity in the deepest recesses of love: “A pity beyond all telling/Is hid in the heart of love” (p. 40, “The Pity of Love”).

Yet, pity is a tricky business. Pity is often used synonymously with compassion, but they have different connotations. Compassion points to identification—feeling with. What is happening to you has happened to me; I know how you feel; I've been there. As Aristotle noted, pity presumes that what has happened to you could happen to me, but so far it hasn't. There but for good fortune go I; but we have had different fortunes. So, pity sustains a tension between identification and differentiation, shared vulnerabilities and divergent fates.

We invariably prefer to be the pitier than the pitied. We worry that people expressing pity enjoy the secret satisfaction of superiority, perhaps even a subtle sadism. It is difficult to be the object of pity and not to feel diminished, not to feel pitiful, and we are put off by people we perceive as actively eliciting pity. There is a thin line between the evocation of pity and the manipulation of pity. As Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum, the sardonic entrepreneurial owner of Peachum's Establishment for Beggars in Brecht's (1949) The Threepenny Opera declares: “There are a few things that'll move people to pity, a few, but the trouble is, when they've been used several times, they no longer work” (p. 5).

We often believe self-pity is inherently corrupted. The problem with self-pity is that it is a private arrangement in which we are, at once,
believes in his own misery,” Peachum notes. “If you’ve got the stomach-ache and say so, it only sounds disgusting” (p. 10).

Yet, the capacity for pathos vis-à-vis oneself—the capacity to acknowledge and accept one’s suffering as real and poignant and sometimes unjustified—is extremely important and constructive. A sense of pathos represents a coming to terms with our relative helplessness in the face of many aspects of our lives. Side by side with George’s overwhelming guilt was his inability to be compassionate with himself concerning the limits of his own self-understanding in his first marriage. We came to realize that his childhood was not so uniformly wonderful as he had remembered. The range of what he could allow himself to feel and know about himself had been truncated, and the marriage vows he had made in good faith were taken in ignorance of his own passionate qualities that were later to emerge and take him by surprise. He still had many regrets. George's growing compassion for himself about his situation did not erase his guilt, but helped him to become less stuck in his inability to bear his guilt.

I once worked with a middle-aged woman who had been anorexic as a teenager and who still suffered from various somatic symptoms and hypochondriacal preoccupations. She had virtually no memories of her family life. We knew that something had gone terribly wrong, that her inability to eat expressed something about her sense of her family as unable to sustain and embrace life. But she had no idea what had happened. Several years before, in going through her parents' possessions, she had come across, with horror, a portrait painted of her when she was a child. The artist had since become famous, and the painting was quite valuable, but she could not bear to look at it and returned it to the painter. The portrait had captured something of the pain of her childhood. As an adult, the act of giving away the portrait was equivalent to the internal act of turning away from a pain she couldn't bring herself to face as a child. What she could not bear to acknowledge and think about became transformed into physical pains and incapacities. A sense of pathos toward ourselves, a kind of self-sorrow, allows us to accept this kind of psychic self-portrait.

Pathos and Self-Pity; Guilt and Guiltiness

Thus, pity and guilt appear in two forms. One version enriches us and is essential to psychological growth; the other, degraded, is a private, static arrangement we make with ourselves to close off new experience. Genuine pathos entails a compassionate acceptance of suffering caused by events and forces outside our control. Without pathos, sorrow, we delude ourselves into denying our finitude, our limitations, our mortality. But accepting the limited control we have over our own lives is difficult, and genuine pathos teeters always on the brink of what we might term “pitifulness”—victimology and self-pity. In this arrangement, the reality of ourselves as objects of forces outside our control slides over into claims we make as victims who, like Peachum's beggars, actively plot to evoke pity, in this case, from ourselves.
Similarly, genuine guilt entails an acceptance of accountability for suffering we have caused others (and ourselves). Without genuine guilt, we cannot risk loving, because the terror of our destructiveness is too great. Without genuine guilt, we cannot allow ourselves to enjoy successes and pleasure. Guilt needs to be distinguished from what we might term “guiltiness”—perpetual payments in an internal protection racket that can never end. If genuine self-pity is hard to bear because it entails an acceptance of the limited control we have over our worlds, genuine guilt is hard to bear because it entails an acceptance of the limited control we have over ourselves. We hurt those we love, and the damage of the past, like time itself, is irreversible.

In distinguishing guilt from guiltiness and pathos from pitifulness and self-pity, I am drawing on the work of Farber (1976), an existential psychoanalytic essayist who drew fine, subtle distinctions between aspects of experience we shape through our own agency (will) and uncontrollable aspects of experience we futilely try to muscle under our domination (willfulness):

In willfulness, the life of the will becomes distended, overweening, and obtrusive at the same time that its movements become increasingly separate, sovereign, and distant from other aspects of spirit....In willfulness, then, will pursues its own tyrannical course with reckless disdain for what we usually mean by content, unless that content be the will itself [p. 50].

In genuine guilt and genuine pathos, we are not willfully trying to do anything. We observe ourselves and are moved to pity. We consider the consequences of our actions on others and are moved to guilt. There is nothing to be done with these feelings; nothing can be done. We bear them and move on, informed and enriched as we encounter our next experiences. Our multiplicitous nature allows us different self-states and points of view—sometimes at the same time, sometimes sequentially. I might feel a deep sorrow and grief about past betrayal by others, lost loves, abandonments and disappointments, but remain open to successful loves and newly emerging opportunities. I might feel a deep regret and guilt about my past betrayals of others, but remain open to second chances and new possibilities.

In self-pity and guiltiness, in contrast, we are trying to do something, and that effort fixes us in a static position. In my role as victim, I am involved in moving myself to pity; in my role as guilty perpetrator, I am involved in buying myself exoneration. Because pathos and guilt make us feel so vulnerable, we perpetually seek to bring them under the control of our fantasied omnipotence. By making static, private arrangements with ourselves around self-pity and guilt, we close ourselves off from engaging a world of other people in which the risks, as well as the potential rewards, are enormous.

Pathos and self-pity, guilt and guiltiness, are not just private feelings or states of mind. They also become modes of communicating our experiences to others. There is perhaps no better vantage point from which to distinguish between genuine pathos and guilt and their corrupted twins, self-pity and
guiltiness, than as the Other, the listener to accounts of suffering. Pathos and guilt make no claims on the listener; they convey a sense of painful growth, of vulnerabilities shared. Self-pity and guiltiness operate as subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, interpersonal coercions. The listener is nudged either into reassurance (“What you did really was not so bad,” “You are really not quite so damaged as you think you are”) or collusion (“You really do deserve blame and punishment for your sins,” “They really have done you in”). In contrast there is a dignity about pathos and guilt in their genuine forms, which is what makes “the blues” such a powerful form of expression, both moving and ennobling.

The blues is a genre of music in which has been cultivated a particularly American, deep and rich tragic sensibility. In the ironic stance so central to the blues, the singer takes himself seriously indeed, yet stops short of taking himself too seriously. As the cultural and music critic Stanley Crouch put it, “blues is fundamentally a music that fights self-pity and even holds it up to ridicule, the singer scorning all self-deceptive attempts at ducking responsibility for at least part of the bad state of affairs” (p. 108). It is the characteristic irony of the blues that allows us both to pity ourselves for our limited control over our own romantic fate without anointing ourselves as victims, and to hold ourselves accountable for our culpability in our fate without self-mortification. What is uncoerced and spontaneous in our responses to ourselves provides our deepest potential for living fully. In the words of songwriter David Bromberg, “you've got to suffer if you want to sing the blues.”

References


