

THE
DAVIS FOUNDATION
FOR PROVIDING
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of November 30, 2005

Dear Reader,

I usually end the Letter with a question from a reader and an answer but last week I received a question that merits an issue-length response.

QUESTION:

I recently found myself in a situation where my Inner Guide told me to do something that involved taking the easy way out but it seemed wrong. I followed her advice but then felt guilty. I asked her, "Wasn't this wrong?" She explained her reasoning and I saw that she was right, and that I have an overactive conscience. But how does my Inner Guide know what is right? Does she have a conscience?

ANSWER:

No. An Inner Guide is composed of only three things: the pathway of comfort, a wish to be helpful, and a sense of its own identity. It wants you to be comfortable and will move you to do things in a way that will bring you the greatest comfort. But might not this cause you to do things that are wrong? selfish? hurtful to others?

Every stimulus causes a disequilibrium in the mind, just as a pebble dropped in water causes ripples. The mental apparatus registers every disequilibrium and matches it with the response that will best end or diminish it. If there is a *true solution*, it will be matched. Otherwise the most effective *partial solution* will be matched. Suppose you were visiting a friend's house and you spilled some water on the floor. The knowledge that the water would not damage the floor and the presence of paper towels to wipe it up would be a true solution. But suppose you spilled some juice on another guest's skirt? Your offer to pay for the cleaning bill would be a partial solution. It would decrease the disequilibrium because you would be taking action to rectify the problem, but it would not fully solve the problem because her skirt would remain stained for the time being and because you wouldn't know whether the stain would come out.

Should you feel guilty about either of these situations? According to Freudian theory accidents may represent "neurotic compromises" in which an unconscious wish (e.g. to do some damage) and a prohibition (one mustn't do that) combine to form a thought or action that represents both. Staining a skirt and offering to have it cleaned contain the wish to hurt and an attempt to undo it. Although the wish to do damage is unconscious, you may be painfully aware of the resulting guilt feelings.

But why do people have unconscious wishes to do damage? They arise in early childhood as responses to feelings of anger toward those who thwart their desires.



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These feelings of hostility toward early objects may become generalized so that an individual may later feel angry toward whole classes of people: authority figures, socio-economic groups that appear to have more than they do, or anyone who seems to deny them something they want.

As individuals develop, they learn intuitively what is “right” and “wrong” by empathizing with others. If a child hits his sister, he knows how that feels to her because he knows how it would feel to him, and he knows that it isn’t a good thing to do. When he transgresses he feels guilty.

Individuals are also taught what is “right” and “wrong” by their parents and others. Their views can become distorted by faulty teaching. A person with an “overactive conscience” would feel guilty about spilling even if it happened because someone bumped her because the indoctrination she received as a child was distorted. Perhaps she was blamed for everything, or told that everything she did was wrong.

On the other hand, there are people who seem not to have developed a conscience. They aren’t aware that they hurt others or they don’t care. They haven’t developed a capacity for empathy because their caretakers weren’t empathic with them during their development.

Your Inner Guide is dedicated to making you comfortable. Does this mean that you run roughshod over other people? No. Your Inner Guide has searched your memory for the origins of early discomforts that have led to whatever traces of selfishness or hostility you may have developed. It has accessed true solutions for those discomforts and is working to bring them into your awareness. Were you angry with one or another parent for what you experienced as neglect or abuse? Were you envious of a favored sibling? You no longer need be. As an adult you have the wherewithal to fulfill your needs and to protect yourself.

Your Inner Guide is creating the *complex stimuli* that will allow locked-in habit patterns of anger and envy to be replaced with true solutions. As these enter awareness, you will no longer need to do anything that you might feel is selfish or wrong. You will be able to take care of yourself without hurting others.

There are times when you will need to sacrifice for others. The fatigued parent who gets up in the night to soothe her baby is still taking care of herself, too, because it would be more disequilibrating for her to hear her baby’s distress than to get up. So, too, with the soldier who risks death to save a comrade or to fight for a noble cause.

Guilt is a pathological emotion. It is a sign that you feel that you have done something wrong. As your Inner Guide solves your problems you will no longer feel guilt because you will be doing everything right!

I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at info@davis-foundation.org. If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

Judith M. Davis

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