

Rolheiser: On self-hatred and guilt

Recently on the popular television program, *Saturday Night Live*, a comedian made a rather colourful wisecrack in response to an answer that Nancy Pelosi had given to a journalist who had accused her of hating the President. Pelosi had stated that, as a Roman Catholic, she hates no one – and this prompted the comedian to make this quip: “As a Catholic, I know there’s always one person you hate – yourself.”

I’m not someone who’s easily upset by religious jokes. Humour is supposed to have an edge and comedians play an important archetypal role here, that of the “Court Jester” whose task it is to deflate whatever’s pompous. Religion is often fair game. Indeed, I appreciated the wit in this wisecrack. Still, something bothers me about this particular wisecrack because it plays into a certain stereotype that’s, unfortunately, very common today wherein people from all kinds of religious backgrounds (this is not specific to Roman Catholics) blame their religious upbringing for the struggles they have with self-hatred and guilt feelings.

How true is this? Is our religious upbringing the root cause of our struggles with self-hatred and guilt feelings?

Obviously our religious upbringing does play some role here, but it’s far too simplistic (and not particularly helpful) to blame all of this, or even most of it, on our religious upbringing. Psychologists and anthropologists assure us that the issue of self-hatred and free-floating guilt is infinitely more complex, especially since we see it playing out in people of every kind of religious background as well as in people who have no religious background at all. Struggles with self-hatred and guilt is not a particularly Roman Catholic phenomenon, Protestant phenomenon, Evangelical phenomenon, Jewish phenomenon, or Muslim phenomenon; it’s a universal phenomenon that makes itself felt in most every sensitive person. Moreover that struggle is not always unhealthy.

Any morally sensitive person, unlike someone who’s morally calloused, will constantly be self-assessing, often anxious as to whether she’s being selfish rather than good, and perennially worrying that some of her words and actions may have hurt others and damaged her relationship with God. To experience this kind of anxiety is precisely to be struggling with feelings of self-hatred and guilt; but, at one level, this is in fact healthy. When we’re anxiously self-assessing, there’s far less danger that we will take others, take the gift of life, or the take the goodness of God for granted. Moral sensitivity is a virtue and, like aesthetic sensitivity, it keeps you healthily fearful lest in ignorance and insensitivity you paint a moustache on the Mona Lisa.

Some of this, of course, is unhealthy. As Freud taught us, our conscience doesn’t tell us what’s right and what’s wrong, *it only tells us how we feel*

about our actions. And when we have guilt feelings about what we have just done or left undone those feelings are, no doubt, often powerfully influenced by the social and moral standards that have been put into us as children by our parents, our teachers, our culture, and our religious upbringing. Our religious and moral upbringing does leave us struggling with some false guilt.

But, that being admitted, there are deeper causes as to why we struggle with self-hatred and free-floating guilt and why we just never quite feel good enough.

If we could review our lives in a video, we would see the countless times we were in, every kind of way, told that we're not good, not adequate, not loveable, not valued, not precious. We would see the countless times *we were shamed in our enthusiasm*; and this, I submit, more than any other factor, lies at the root of our self-hatred, our free-floating feelings of guilt, and the bitterness we so frequently feel towards others.

It starts in the highchair when, as toddlers, in our blind energy, we eat too enthusiastically and are told not to eat like a pig. Likewise, as toddlers, full of food and zest, we shout and throw some food on the floor and are told to stop it, to shut up, that our natural energies aren't healthy. Then, as a preschooler, we are often further shamed in our enthusiasm.

Eventually things move on to the playground, the classroom, and into our family circles where our uniqueness and preciousness are not often sufficiently recognized or valued, where we're frequently ignored, put down, treated unfairly, bullied, made aware of our inferiorities and failures, and, in ways subtle and not-so-subtle, told that we're not good enough.

This sets us up for the rejections we absorb in adulthood, for the jealousies we feel when the lives of others look so much richer than our own, for the unexpressed bitterness we nurse because of our own inadequacies, and for the guilt we feel because of our own betrayals.

It isn't primarily because of our religious training that we hate ourselves and are haunted by a lot of free-floating guilt.

Yes, most of us Catholics do hate ourselves. Sadly, would it were otherwise, so too does everyone else.