

A Lifetime of Blame

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Presented to Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
October 30, 2016

As a child, I blamed others when bad things happened.

- As a child, you had to learn to crawl before you could walk. With time, you learned self-responsibility.

As a teen, I blamed others because of the belief that I had to be perfect in order to be loved.

- Ironically, you will always be perfectly imperfect. With experience, you learned that acceptance and love comes from the human connections that you make with other imperfect human beings.

As a young adult, I blamed others as a way of avoiding my feelings of failure.

- Failure is overrated. The goal in life needs to be that of trying new things, making different mistakes and learning from these so-called failures.

As an older adult, I blamed others when I felt threatened by people who I saw as different from me.

- Is your safety in life determined by your separations from others or by the lives that you touch with love?

As an adult, in the twilight of my life, I yearn to give up blaming others.

- Then you must first stop blaming yourself and others for your imperfections, learn from your mistakes, and realize that you are worth-loving-you.

Silent Reflection/Meditation

Song

Offering

Scott Mabe – “Blame: The Devil Made Me Do It”

There was a comedian in the 1970's - Flip Wilson - who did an impersonation of a woman who used the phrase, “the devil made me do it” as an excuse for any misbehavior. They were all minor infractions: eating what she shouldn't, buying a dress when she didn't need

it, etc. It became a humorous rationalization for doing something against our better judgment.

Perhaps the origin of the idea that "the devil made me do it" began with the story of the Garden of Eden. The story goes that God created this Garden of Eden, the perfect dream home for the first man and woman. Then God told Adam and Eve that they could eat of any fruit in the Garden except for the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And, of course, that's what they found irresistible. Call it curiosity or whatever — they just couldn't help themselves. So when God asks them what they had done, they do what humans tend to do. They blamed the other guy; they passed the buck. Adam said that Eve made him do it; Eve says the devil made her do it. And so psychological projection was born!

In her book, "The Devil Made Me Do It: Crime and Punishment in Early New England," Juliet Mofford outlines an overwhelming variety of sins that were punishable, including sleeping during church services. This infraction was punished by a man, referred to as a tythingman, who walked among the congregation during services, carrying a pole that was fitted with a fox tail on one end and a hard ball on the other. Women who were caught sleeping were awakened by a gentle brush to their

sensitive face from the fox tail while men received a harsh rap on their heads from the hard end of the pole.

Therefore, if you sense that the devil is tempting you or others this morning, please do your best to help your neighbor stay awake during this service!

How children learn to blame

According to therapist and author, James Lehman, “You often hear kids say, “I’m sorry, *but...*” and follow their apology with an excuse. “I’m sorry, but you were looking at me.” “I’m sorry, but you wouldn’t let me play my video games.” “I’m sorry I kicked a hole in the wall, but you told me I couldn’t go outside.” So, what your child is actually saying is, “I’m sorry, but it was *your* fault.” Or another way of saying that is, “I’m sorry, but it wasn’t my responsibility.”

Lehman says that if a child is in the habit of making excuses and not owning his mistakes, he’s not learning how to take responsibility—which also means he won’t be able to change the thinking that led to the inappropriate behavior in the first place.

The truth is, children start to develop their excuse-making habits as soon as parents begin asking them this question: “Why did you do that?” And the child’s goal is really clear: they don’t want to get blamed for something, they don’t want a consequence, and they don’t want to face their parents’ disapproval.

But, we parents have to take some responsibility too.

Why do we ask our child “Did you eat the cookie” when we are fully aware that they did?

Why don’t we just say, I know you took the cookie and you were aware that we have a rule against eating cookies before dinner.

Instead we encourage our child’s response: What cookie? I didn’t take it. The gerbil ate the cookie. The cookie monster crawled out of the TV and ate it.

Even more useless is the parental question of “why did you take the cookie?”

Have you ever wondered why parents use WHY questions? Taking a cookie is not a deep psychological issue.

And the only accurate answer to this question is “I wanted the cookie because the last one tasted good and I was hoping you wouldn’t notice that I had taken

another one” which is a response that sounds good, but requires a maturity that is beyond the ability of most children (and many adults).

Lehman goes on to say that children shouldn’t be allowed to blame other people, places or things for not meeting expectations or completing tasks. In reality, when a child blames someone else, he’s saying “It’s not my responsibility because I’m a victim of that person, or thing.” For instance, in the classic, “My dog ate my homework,” what the child is really saying is “I’m a victim of the dog, so I shouldn’t be held to the same standard as the other kids.”

Unfortunately, children who successfully learn to avoid self-responsibility often grow into adults who continue this pattern of blaming others for their mistakes. And as we come to realize, blaming others simply means that we will fail to learn the lesson that we need to learn and continue to make the same mistakes over and over again.

Playing the Blame Game

Dr. Elliot D. Cohen, editor of the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, wrote, an article in the July 2012

issue of Psychology Today, called “Playing the Blame Game.”

Dr. Cohen asserts that one of the most destructive human behaviors is playing the blame game. The blame game consists of blaming another person for something and persisting in blaming them instead of trying to make changes that improve the situation.

For example, someone arrives late to the family holiday dinner and is given the cold shoulder, dirty looks, or even reprimanded before the other guests. A motorist goes down the wrong way in a parking lot and receives the middle finger from another motorist. A student fails an exam and subsequently becomes belligerent toward the teacher and makes nasty comments to other students about the teacher. A teacher consistently gets poor student evaluations and blames the students for being incompetent and too stupid to evaluate him. A man abuses his wife and blames the victim for not “understanding” him.

There are three beliefs that encourage blaming:

Belief 1: Someone Else Must Always Be to Blame

Clearly the first step of the blame game, as outlined by Dr. Cohen, is based on the belief that someone else must always be to blame. This belief is often irrational because in many cases a negative situation is not really the fault of anyone in particular. For example, traffic accidents can be “true accidents”; people sometimes don’t get along or like each other because of personality conflicts; sometimes people come in contact with a virus and catch it without it being the fault of anyone. People can suffer heart attacks or get cancer without it being the fault of someone else. When people play the blame game, they often engage in further irrational thinking in order to justify blaming others. For example, “It’s my wife's fault I caught that nasty bug because she made me stay up late watching that dumb video movie she rented.”

Belief 2: People Who Are Blamed Should Naturally Lose Our Respect

The second step of the blame game is the belief that the blamed deserve to lose our respect. This belief is also irrational because it confuses the deed with the doer. Here it is not simply “what you did was wrong.” Rather, it implies that you are less of a person for your failures and

therefore less worthy of respect. You are stigmatized, looked down on, and become less worthy of respect.

If someone does something wrong, this doesn't mean that the person himself is bad or deserves less respect as a person. If this were the case, then we would all lose our respectability because we all exercise indiscretion and make some poor choices in the course of our lives. We should not damn the doer just because we are inclined to damn the deed.

An incident of blaming:

“This parking is for veterans, lady,” the anonymous note read. “Learn to read and have some respect.”

There was just one problem: Dr. Hayes who used the reserved parking space, was a veteran who served as a physician in the United States Navy for eight years. It seems that because she was dressed in casual clothing, the author of the attached note decided that there was no way she could be a veteran and decided to tell her as much.

On Facebook, she responded to the anonymous writer of the critical note

“I know I parked in one of the Veteran Parking spaces today, it was hot and the parking lot was full, so I just did it. It was the first time, and I won’t do it again.” I’m sorry that your view of the world can’t conceive of the fact that there are female veterans.”

Belief 3: Treating them with Disrespect

The third step in the blame game is disrespect – the use of the silent treatment, personal attacks, and the use of force are all classic ways to alienate people and to shut down the avenue for meaningful communication. The blame game does not aim at constructive resolution of disagreements; instead it aims at some vague and unrealistic goal of making sure that people get what they deserve. This game plan get us nowhere in building relationships and solving problems.

And, what is really flawed is our unrealistic demand for perfection. While people are not perfect they can learn from their mistakes—but only if they admit them and change their behavior in the future. Unfortunately, the blame game is only about casting blame. It is never about me in any significant way; it is rather the other guy who is always to blame.

How to Stop Playing the Blame Game

Do you look for someone else to blame when things appear to have gone wrong? Do you tend to look down on the person you have marked out as the culprit? Do you treat (speak or act toward) this person in a disrespectful manner and think yourself justified? Dr. Cohen suggests that freedom from the blame game involves giving up your claim that someone always has to be blamed and made to pay. Everyday life isn't a court of law and you aren't the judge and jury. You can assess your own actions or those of others; but it does not mean that you have the right to judge and berate others.

Remember that all of us, with our warts and weaknesses, our strengths and failures, are perfectly imperfect human beings that need understanding, not blame and judgement.

To help me to reduce my own tendency to blame, I find it helpful to remind myself that there are people all around me with burdens in life that are more heavy and painful than I can imagine.

Of course it is important to distinguish between blaming and responding to someone who consistently threatens our safety. Confronting and/or withdrawing from

someone who is hurtful to you provides you with the opportunity to fix the problem rather than fix the blame.

Discussion

Closing Circle