

GUILTY

When I was a little boy I walked to Sunday school every week with my younger sister Robyn. This was in Hornsby, a northern suburb of Sydney. Leaving our home we walked up a hill to where our street joined the Pacific Highway at a big intersection. From the intersection we walked down a long hill, up over another hill and then along a straight stretch to arrive at the Presbyterian Church. At the bottom of the long hill we would meet our friend Alexander, 4 years old, who had to cross the highway to join us. On this particular day either Alexander was late, or we were early. When we saw he wasn't waiting for us we continued on up the next hill. In an attempt to catch up Alexander tried to cross the highway on his own, probably something his parents had instructed him never to do. He was killed when his head was struck by the passenger handle of a passing car. My sister thinks she heard a noise and turned around, but she didn't see anything.

A few days later mum sent my sister and me to present a bunch of flowers and a sympathy note to Alexander's parents. My sister remembers being made to go although we both protested. Alexander was an only child. His mother cried and hugged us and gave us a drink. We both felt very awkward; my sister describes it as 'pretty traumatic'.

All through my childhood I suffered from a sense of guilt. I knew this before I did any landmark education programs. But I could never work out why I felt that way. The best I could think of was that my mother used guilt as her way of disciplining me. Guilt is internal but shame is social: when my mother was disciplining me I would feel ashamed. She didn't believe in physical punishment but shame worked very well: "why can't you be a good boy?"

As I grew older this feeling of guilt became so pervasive that it would attach itself to anything. Sometimes I would even confess to things I didn't do: once when I was a patrol leader in the scouts I confessed to dropping a tent on a rival patrol during the night, even though I was innocent. I was demoted as a result.

The history of the violent and often genocidal dispossession of Australia from the Aboriginal owners had been completely missing from my high school education. When I learned about it as a young adult I became guilty about that too.

There was a big clue. Whenever someone I knew died I would feel weird talking about it, and I would feel confused because I felt weird. It was as if I believed that the death was somehow my fault. People would sense I was feeling weird and it would make them wonder what was going on. The social taboo against talking about death added to the confusion.

One of the greatest contributions of landmark education is it uncovers things we don't know that we don't know. In the context of landmark programs this most often takes place in the interactions between coaches and participants. When my landmark coach told me I "occurred" for her as a "walking apology", it was like a Eureka! moment. When she asked what I remembered most about my childhood I instantly replied "guilty". When she asked me to explore the origin of this feeling I realised I had decided as a little boy that I was to blame for Alexander's death. This was the source of my weird feeling.

I sent a draft of above text to my eldest sister. Prior to this I hadn't known she was Alexander's Sunday school teacher. She wrote as follows:

“I vividly remember Alexander's death not only because he was one of my Sunday school pupils and a difficult one at that, but also because it was my first funeral. Alexander was a normal, active, exuberant four year old, hard to handle by a 15 year old! Plus I wasn't very confident about my teaching and my beliefs. What I thought happened is that he was running late as you say and missed the other children he normally walked with and who lived in the street before that fatal intersection. I did not realise that he walked with you and Robyn. I've always remembered the parents and how devastated they were. Alexander was a late child and an only one. I attended the funeral service but not the burial (or cremation). The church was packed and I have a vivid recollection of this small white coffin. I have a memory of visiting the parents some time after and—like you—feeling very uncomfortable. I also have a sense of guilt, wondering whether I should have taken more responsibility for ensuring the children's safety to and from the church but in those days car accidents were almost unheard of.”

A key distinction in landmark education is to distinguish the facts from the story. The facts never change but the story we make up about the facts is very malleable. In my case the *fact* was “Alexander died” and the *story* was “I'm guilty”. But the story had been made up by me as a little boy, with a little boy's understanding of the world. Grasping that the story was ridiculous made it easy for me to give it up. Giving it up meant that I no longer had a ready-to-go guilty response waiting in the wings for any set of circumstances that might trigger it!

Distinguishing and dropping my “guilty” story has been a wonderful gift. I am no longer constrained by guilt or by inappropriately taking the blame or by seeing failure when it isn't there. It genuinely feels as if a veil has been lifted from between me and other people. It has made my relationships much richer. It has given me delight and love.

I've stopped feeling weird around funerals.

I've stopped apologising for myself.

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