

## ENVY - A NUANCED AND DANGEROUS SIN

Readings and a Sermon by Robert M. Thorson, July 1, 2007

### READINGS

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*Thomas Hardy*, A PRIVATE MAN ON PUBLIC MEN, from Selected Poems, p. 252, in Solomon Schimmel - The Seven Deadly Sins - Oxford, 1997, p. 64.

When my contemporaries were driving  
Their coach through Life with strain and striving,  
And raking riches into heaps,  
And ably pleading in the Courts  
With smart rejoinders and retorts,

Or where the Senate nightly keeps  
Its vigils, till their fames were fanned  
By rumor's tongue throughout the land,

I lived in quiet, screened, unknown,  
Pondering upon some stick or stone,  
Or news of some rare book or bird  
Latterly bought, or seen, or heard,

Not wishing ever to set eyes on  
The surging crowd beyond the horizon,  
Tasting years of moderate gladness  
Mellowed by sundry days of sadness,

Shut from the noise of the world without  
Hearing but dimly its rush and rout,  
Unenvying those amid its roar,

Little endowed, not wanting more

*Solomon Schimmel* - *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Oxford, 1997), p. 4-5

The relaxed moral and ethical standards of our society... its unbridled **egotism** and exaggerated claims to individual **freedom**... are reinforced by many proponents of modern secular psychology.

But since psychology **professes** to make us happier -- and our sins and our vices do not -- psychology should be teaching us how to **regulate** rather than **indulge** our desires. Why doesn't it emphasize what was commonly accepted by our ancestors... that we must **recognize** and **overcome** our vices?

For one thing it considers the notions of sin, vice, and virtue to be **relics** of antiquated theological and philosophical traditions, which it has superceded. Modern psychology's **disdain** for the teaching of the great moral traditions is an example of intellectual hubris. The diatribes against traditional religion and morality that one encounters in psychological circles reflect a **superficial understanding** of sin, vice, and virtue and other concepts in the moral vocabulary of the past. The deadly sins **are not** arbitrary, irrational restrictions on human behavior, imposed by a remote deity indifferent to human needs. On the contrary, most sins or vices -- **and the seven deadly ones in particular** -- concern the core of what we are, and what we can become, and most importantly, of what we should aspire to be.

## **SERMON**

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My wife Kristine and I have been raising kids for 26 years. One of our most difficult parenting challenges was to help each of our four children to learn the difference between **needing** something and **wanting** something, especially when sibling rivalry was involved.

Only while preparing this sermon did I realize that most of this parenting struggle was about envy, the most insidious, malevolent, and chronic of the seven deadly sins.

I use the word sin in its original sense, from the Latin, "to be without." Sin is thus the absence of something, in this case, the absence of grace, a religious word for what I call "peace of mind." I do not believe that grace is God-given. I believe it is earned by hard spiritual work. Much of my "peace of mind" is about my intentional eclipse of envy.

Let's go back to the child not knowing the difference between needing and wanting. It's fair to say that the child needs a backpack when school begins in autumn. But

do they need the same one that Jessica or Jason just bought? No. They just think they do because of envy...which I define as a false need based on external perception.

For an experiment, think of something you want but can't have. The bad part of that thought is envy.

More properly, envy is the emotional pain we feel when we want something because someone else has it, and that want is unrequited by actual possession. In biblical terminology, this kind of wanting is called coveting, especially as it applies to material possessions. It's one thing to want bread for lunch. It's quite another to want the neighbor's bread and not be able to have it.

Envy is the next step past coveting, when the desires are not only un-met, but when they turn towards malevolent frustration.

Jealousy -- a more complex word but less complex emotion-- is about the display of envy or the display of suspicion. Envy is deeper, more insidious, more chronic, more destructive, harder to perceive and thus more nuanced, perhaps the root of most sins. Angus Wilson writes: "With some it is said to begin in the cradle. The milk they suck turns sour on them as they think of the richer draught on which the infant earl is feeding up at the hall."

Envy is planted like a seed at the first glimpse of recognizing the achievement or status of another. From that seed will grow the weed of envy...unless, that is...you yank it out by looking inward to what you really need, rather than outward to what someone else has.

Envy is a thus form of relativity. What matters is not the actual measure of what you have, but the measure RELATIVE to another person. Envy is ALWAYS triggered by comparison not to some absolute standard, but to some relative one.

Envy cannot be eliminated by working harder because success or its perception is always multidimensional. By definition, the richest person in the world cannot also be the happiest, nor the most beautiful, nor the most anything else. The top of anything is not the top of everything.

Consider Paris Hilton, the hotel heiress, the archetype spoiled brat of a selfish rich girl who getting out of jail for something. I'm no expert on Paris Hilton. I don't like her or dislike her because I don't even know her or care to know her. I don't watch TV. I don't read articles about her. But as an Op-Ed newspaper columnist for a metropolitan daily, I have no choice but to scan the newspapers daily. Day after day, she's stuck near the front page. Why? Because we as a broader society -- not us UUs, of course -- envy Paris's unearned wealth, freedom and celebrity. Why do we want her to crash and burn? Envy. Why do we enjoy it when she is unhappy, when she is thrown into the slammer, when she cries, and when she's denied the chance to go home to her mommy? Envy. Envy. Envy.

By far its the deadliest of the seven so-called deadly sins, which are lust, gluttony, sloth, greed, pride, and wrath. Envy requires comparison. To understand it well requires comparison to the other sins as well.

My expertise on sin comes from two sources. First, I am a sinner. Second, and like you, I follow my own mind on spiritual affairs, which is a founding principles of Unitarian Universalism. Third, as a natural scientist, I favor an evolutionary theory of envy.

Humans are animals. Our self-consciousness and awareness is largely an artifact of our large brains, which are, in turn, artifacts of social organization. Most of us know that ants and bees are intensely social, with designated soldiers, queens, workers, and janitors. In such groups, the hive, or the colony...is the main the focus of selection. Many mammals are intensely social as well, especially naked mole rats, gophers, and wolves. Any adaptation, however random, that makes the hive or colony more successful is statistically more likely to be carried into the breeding future.

Us primates are among the most social of all animals. Our large brains evolved to deal with the complexities of group life, especially communication and the development of political alliances at the band or tribal level. Cunning, combined with language, probably contributed more making us smart than anything else. Every UU Church is thus a compromise between our intellectual needs individuals, and our social needs at the tribal level.

There are four basic rules of natural selection.

Rule 1 - Get food. All living things need fuel. That fuel is called food.

Rule 2 - Avoid becoming food. Your body is valuable as food for others.

Rule 3 - Make a zygote. This is the fusion of sperm and egg. To make a human zygote requires that male and female be together at the same time and in the same place.

Rule 4 - Make sure the zygote survives to repeat rules one through three. In the human case, this is about parenting.

Anything that helps with any of these rules - for example better teeth for chewing, faster legs for escaping, a more sexy look, or more effective management of a brood -- will be statistically retained. This is not about right or wrong. There's no morality involved, and therefore no sin. This is just the way it is.

Thus, **three** of the seven deadly sins are not sins at all. They are too primitive...too animal-like in their expression...and operate at the scale of individuals. In order they are lust, gluttony, and sloth.

**Lust** is a biological urge for sex, which is a much more complex and dangerous way reproducing than what bacteria do, which is to un-zip their single cells and re-grow each half. With humans, sex isn't for fun. Rather, fun is for sex, the incentive we have for coupling two big-brained animals together, even at the cost of males killing each other during rutting struggles. Everything more complicated than a bacteria must have sex. Even praying mantises "do it." It's just not much fun, especially for the male who, after coitus, offers his body as food to help propagate the species.

**Gluttony** is a biological urge to maximize food intake, especially rich foods. The large snake called the Anaconda does not sin when he swallows a pig in one gulp. Rather, he is engorging himself so that he can last longer until the next meal presents himself.

**Sloth** is a highly evolved way of conserving energy. The sloth is not a sinner when he does nothing. Nor is the bear

in hibernation. Rather, they are keeping their metabolic needs down while also avoiding being noticed.

The lion does not sin, even when he is gluttonous, slothful, and lustful. Nor did the early Hominid or the lone wilderness trapper. These primitive impulses present within all of us. Jimmy Carter lusted in his heart. I appreciate his honesty. My family celebrates gluttony on Thanksgiving, and does so without remorse. Teenagers do not sin when they sleep until two in the afternoon.

I once knew of a hard-working sheriff and good father of small children who spent Saturday afternoons sitting motionless in an armchair while watching sports, eating a full package of bacon and slowly drinking a six pack of Budweiser. This wasn't sin. It was his way of managing the base instincts inside all of us. This was his way of acknowledging and managing his base instincts. Though not my idea of hard spiritual work, it was certainly effective for him.

It is only when humans interact in larger groups on the edge of survival that these perfectly natural impulses become sins. This was certainly true for the Bronze Age peoples of the biblical lands. Rigid rules helped propagate the clan. Gluttony becomes counterproductive when food becomes a limiting resource for the whole population. Sloth breeds resentment because none of us likes a slacker when a job needs doing. Lust becomes a problem because, left unbridled, it destabilizes society...men within the same alliance don't need another reason to fight with each other. Thus these rules against animal-like behavior were branded sins.

We now move on to the social sins of greed and pride. These are not base instincts. They are social ones. There is no such thing as greed in a world where the resource being sought is unlimited. Then it is called hoarding, which is what a squirrel does before winter. But for one human to want **more, more, and more** at the expense of another contributes to an unnecessary concentration of wealth, which breeds great resentment.

Pride is of two minds, only one of which is a sin. To be proud of your family, your team, your church, even yourself is the deserved satisfaction of having done something well, or being part of something good. Pride becomes a sin only,

when it becomes narcissistic, translating into the arrogance of hubris. This kind of pride is destabilizing because it's annoying to the group, like a pebble in your shoe

That leaves only one sin other than envy. I speak of wrath, the discharge of negative emotion. To me, wrath is not a sin at all, but the discharge of sin.

Now it is envy's turn. Envy is to human emotions what voltage is to electricity. Voltage is the "electrical tension" or potential between two points on an electrical circuit. Envy is the "emotional tension" between two people or groups of people based on unrequited desires. There is no word for the amount amount of pain that flows, no amperage of emotion.

For another example, consider the flow of water. A waterfall is a place where the local voltage is high. Gravity always pulls from below, never pushes, from above.

Envy can be thought of as a form of emotional gravity. It's always looking upward in order to pull something downward. The opposite of envy is genuine pity, which looks downward with the hope of pulling upward. As with gravity, pulling down is easier than pulling up. Thus, the pervasiveness of envy relative to pity.

The worst danger about envy today is the collective envy of underdeveloped sovereign nations for the materialist, consumptive lifestyle of the developed world. A society in isolation can be happy for thousands of years until envy presents itself. Eskimos live a life that few of us would envy, yet they are the happiest people in my experience. The American fur trade during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was about envy, about the introduction of things - whiskey, gunpowder, steel - that one can easily do without if you don't know they exist. And for Pat Farchild, I'll remark on the movie "The Gods Must be Crazy." An isolated tribe finds an empty coke bottle fallen from an airplane and worships it as a beautiful object. But had they watched someone drink coke, their joy would likely have turned to envy for having missed something all these years.

If four billion people of underdeveloped nations rose to the standard of consumption that two billion developed have, the the global environment, particularly its energy

demands and the climatic or radioactive consequences thereof, would be strained beyond hope. The only solutions are for the wealthy developed nations to find happiness in ways that do not lead to a gluttonous, consumptive, lifestyle, and for the less developed nations to not want what they got along fine without for centuries and millennia.

And now, my prescription.

The best solution to the problem of envy is to admit to yourself that life isn't fair. Life is a struggle because being alive requires the metabolic and psychic work to stay ahead of entropy, the tendency of things to fall apart. Natural selection acts on our life struggles statistically.

Second, remind yourself each day that what matters are your actual, needs and accomplishments, not how they stack up against those of someone else. Socially "No man is an island," as John Donne wrote. But spiritually, "every man **is** an island." Each day we must do what toddlers and most teenagers cannot, which is to look inward before acting outward.

Third, count your blessings. Cultivate contentedness. This takes chronic work because the weeds of envy grow every day.

Fourth, if you can't accept that life isn't fair, if you are afraid to look deeply inward and too impatient to cultivate contentedness, then rationalize what happens as fate with a lower case "f"

Finally, if nothing else works, do what billions of the devout do, accept the world as God's plan, whatever that means to you.

I have one final thing to say.  
I'm not sure what I really want out of life. But I do know one thing. I do not want what you have. I want what I need at this moment, and nothing more.

Thanks.