

**Did I Really Do That?**  
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I have a picture tucked away somewhere of a very young man in a wildly patterned blue knit dress shirt, a maroon sports jacket, and a wide, cream-colored tie. I can't look at it without cringing. Once I get through claiming that can't possibly be me—I mean really, for one thing, that guy has a lot of dark red hair—I look at that picture of my 1974 idea of high fashion and I think: Did I really do that?

That's not the sort of thing I'm talking about today. Nor am I talking about the accidental kind of wrongdoing that's in our story.

Most of us have something in our lives far more difficult to accept than a terrible set of clothes, or a time when we were mistakenly sure we were right. Haven't most of us, sometime in our lives, done or said or condoned something that goes against our inward sense of *who we are*, or of who we think we *ought* to be?

The memories come in flashes—maybe it's a snarl of a voice, a glimpse of cash in a rarely-opened drawer. . . perhaps the tightness of an objection caught in our throat, or the stomach-dropping sight of something we thought was secret on a screen we know is monitored. Sometimes, it's harder to look: Flashing police lights, crushed metal, and a half-finished text message. A moment of fear and fire and outraged reaction in a long-ago jungle, or a desert halfway around the world. The shocked and hurt face of a child.

This week on the sadly debased stage of Presidential politics, the chosen candidate of a major American political party has led us into a moment of horrified remembrance. Extraordinary numbers of women are remembering awful things that happened to them or to women they know and love. Many of us who identify as male have flashed back to moments when some alpha boy, or man, said something grotesque about women. We remember feeling paralyzed, soiled by association, silenced by fear of being rejected or targeted by “the guys.” We may remember walking away in shame; we may remember awkwardly going along; some of us may even remember being the Lord of the Louts in a very different time of our lives.

Most of us can look into our past and find pictures of our own, some modest, some harrowing. We look at them reluctantly and think: Did I really do that?

Communities of all sizes have these moments, too, these memories we would rather not have. I think of a southern UU congregation proud of its civil rights work in the 1960s that found in its archives a letter proving it had begun life long ago as a whites-only congregation. I think of the systematic dismantling of the Freedmen's Colony on Roanoke Island and the forced deportation of most of its residents after the abandonment of Reconstruction.

I think of nations at war, of ethnic cleansing; I think of Crusaders, of vigilantes, of pilgrims and pioneers and police, looking at human beings and seeing only animals and obstacles and

threats. I think of terrorists plotting a kidnapping in Nigeria, an attack in Baghdad, a massacre in Orlando, a bombing of Somali immigrants in Kansas. Choose your era; choose your people; there is always something.

Did we really do that? Was that really us?

We know what we want the answer to be: No. That wasn't me, it wasn't us. We spin a story: They were threatening our national interest. She made me so mad. It was for their own good. That was just "locker room talk." We explain: I wasn't myself, I didn't mean it that way. It seemed like the right thing to do. We flinch. We turn away. It was long ago. It wasn't really that bad. No use crying over spilt milk. It's over. Let's move on.

But it's not over, and we can't move on. Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of South Africa at the end of the Apartheid era, says: "the past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, has an embarrassing and persistent way of returning and haunting us unless it has in fact been dealt with adequately. Unless we look the beast in the eye we find it has an uncanny habit of returning to hold us hostage." (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 28)

On the far side of denial, we can also find ourselves trapped in a chronic state of shame and self-blame about events in our past that we won't accept. As Buddhist teacher Tara Brach writes, self-blame and self-mistrust create what she calls "the trance of unworthiness," a state in which an inner voice constantly tells us that we are inadequate, unacceptable, unworthy of love.

Whether we try denial or self-blame, our inability to come to terms with our own past behavior can lead to more harm. We might attack or blame others for doing what we ourselves once did, with the intensity of the attack driven by our own feelings of hypocrisy. We might stand by in silence as new harm is done, feeling that we have no right to speak. We might turn attention away from people being victimized now by pulling the focus of attention to our own story, our own past transgressions, our own feelings either of shame or of moral superiority because we no longer do such terrible things.

None of these strategies helps. As Desmond Tutu warns, until we have come to terms with this haunting bit of our past, we cannot let it go. Until we have accepted our own part in the shameful event and our own feelings about it, we cannot fully make amends, we cannot keep our own past from causing further harm, and we cannot successfully work against the forces that cause others to do the same now as we did then.

This is the wisdom of the Jewish Day of Atonement: Every year, Jews are called to honestly name the ways in which they have done harm, to seek forgiveness, to make amends where they can, to make changes that will prevent more harm in the future. It's an extraordinarily healthy and healing practice.

The first step toward freedom is to answer the question "Did I really do that?" by saying, Yes. I really did. That was me, not some demon or power beyond my control. It was me. I cannot change that. This is hard for us, especially in our culture, where blame and shame seem to be the

everyday currency of relationship. We may feel sure that if we accept that we really did something that shouldn't have happened, we'll drown in our own sense of guilt.

So the second step is to offer ourselves compassion as we consider the painful past. This begins with taking the time to sit with our own feelings about the event, simply paying attention to what happens in our own body and mind as we name the truth. As we notice whatever comes up, we offer ourselves, our memories, and our feelings a simple tenderness and care. It's all right to feel what I'm feeling right now, we can tell ourselves. And it is *all right* to cry over spilt milk. What happened, happened, and we cannot change it, but what we did was what we could do then. Now, we are free to do something differently—to make amends, to change our own lives, to make changes in the world.

I've seen that happen. At the first gathering of the District Anti-Racism Transformation Team for what's now called the Southeast District of the UUA, we were asked why we wanted to work against racism. Most of us told stories about all the work we had done before—what people experienced in anti-racism work call “credentialing,” as we subtly try to prove that we're doing the work because we ourselves are already beyond all that old racist baggage.

Then one woman, Judy, said in effect: While y'all were doing all that, I was handing out flyers for George Wallace in grocery-store parking lots. Her journey had taken her from overt racism to becoming a tireless anti-racism activist. Judy's one of my heroes because her blunt, no-excuses honesty about her past set her free from shame and gave her a clear path to heal herself and others. That intense lesson in the powerful practice of truth has stayed with me ever since.

Near the close of the 20th century, there was a demonstration of the power of this practice on an immense scale. In the first years after the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the first truly democratically elected government in that nation's history created a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with crimes and atrocities committed in the last years of White domination. The Commission was grounded on the belief that the past must be acknowledged before it can be healed. Individuals could receive amnesty for crimes they had committed, provided they testified before the Commission in detail about what they had done and to whom. Victims of those crimes and their families also testified, describing in detail what had happened to them or to their loved ones. For months, an unbearable litany of horrors was unfolded, and held in honesty and compassion.

The result was extraordinary. Instead of dissolving into a bloodbath, or subjecting White South Africans to the same persecutions they had inflicted on Black and other non-White South Africans, both of which were widely expected in the world, the re-constituted country began its new life peacefully and with the foundations for healing in place.

This isn't a happily-ever-after fairy tale. The Republic of South Africa has a legacy of brutal oppression, which still causes harm and will take generations to heal. But after the Truth and Reconciliation process no one can pretend, and no one has to pretend that nothing bad ever happened. And because they don't have to pretend there's no pain, the long work of healing can go forward. Perhaps we could try a process of our own like that, here in the United States of America. There are a few things about our history we have a hard time accepting.

We do not have to live in denial or in shame over our transgressions. As individuals or as a nation, we can be free of those chains. This isn't just a self-help technique for personal growth; it is a fundamental teaching of our faith: Human beings, all human beings, have the capacity to learn, to choose, and to change.

We are not the unredeemable sum of our past; the divine light of human worth and dignity burns within every one of us. If we hold fast to our commitment to truth and to compassion, we can heal the wounds that afflict our hearts and divide the human family. We can each grow into the fullness of our life's possibilities. We can make a world of love, peace, and justice.

I want to leave you with a story that many of you may have heard before. There was a man named John Newton, a British sailor in the slave trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Newton was notorious as a disobedient, unreliable, foul-mouthed troublemaker. On one of his voyages a terrible storm nearly sank the slave ship, and Newton began to reexamine his life. Soon he left the slave trade and became an Anglican priest. He and the poet William Cowper wrote many hymns together.

When he retired from the ministry in the 1780s, John Newton became an outspoken advocate for abolishing the slave trade, and joined with abolitionist crusader William Wilberforce to press for the passage in 1807 of the law ending the trade throughout the British Empire.

Newton's ministry and his anti-slavery work were made more powerful by his open admission that he had once been caught up in the very same evils he was now working against. He called the power that set him free Grace, and he understood Grace as a gift from God. We do not have to share his understanding of those words to share in the joy of knowing that our lives are not defined by our most wretched mistakes, choices, and actions. For each of us and all of us, life can be something more, something loving, something beautiful. Now let's rise in body or spirit and join in singing John Newton's most famous hymn: "Amazing Grace."