

FEATURE

Innocence Regained

BY KEN AND RÉNEE KIZER

Innocence is a state of being born from love and in love.

Innocence is believing everything is possible and can be accomplished. It is living thoughts and actions of faith. It is a willingness to assume the best, rather than fearing the worst (and holding on to that fear). It is the ability to believe we might be able to take care of ourselves and to stay in integrity, regardless the number of missed opportunities. Innocence maintains an attitude of love, awe, and gratitude. Innocence is also the ability to forgive mistakes. Just because someone does a wrong or bad thing, that doesn't necessarily mean he or she is bad or deserves punishment.

As infants, we are wide-open and all-accepting sponges of love. However, this openness means we can also adopt less positive attitudes, simply because they are a part of our world. As we grow, many positive and negative attitudes slip from consciousness as they become habits. These habits, beliefs, and patterns can also be difficult to consciously access, since the experiences associated with them happened so early in life. Consequently, as adults, we can be quite surprised when an important love relationship stirs up old negative beliefs. It can also be disheartening when we have negative experiences that mimic what happened in childhood, especially if those beliefs don't match our current self-image.

The loss of innocence in childhood is important, because the realization of its loss can initiate a series of steps vital for healthy emotional development. The sense of loss causes reevaluation of the experience of innocence, which is often viewed more as naiveté and relegated to childhood, rather than seen as powerful self-acceptance and strong self-worth.

The investigation can also reveal one or more layers of judgment and guilt, which are blocking happiness. Guilt is an emotion that demands punishment, whether we take it out on ourselves, or enroll others to help us. However, guilt is really a distortion of a very positive and important impulse- the desire to take responsibility for our own well-being and to live according to our own moral code. Implicit in guilt is the assumption that we haven't taken, or are helpless to take, appropriate responsibility, or we have violated our own or society's ethics.

The cumulative effect of these negative thoughts and feelings is often a significant degree of anger. Anger can be defined as feeling like we're being forced to be or do something we didn't agree to, and feeling that we have no say in the matter. This belief of being forced and out of control, however, is the result of abdicating personal responsibility, and can be a way to justify the anger.

There are steps we can take to resolve the guilt and anger. There are steps we can take to return to innocence and increase our happiness in love relationships. The first is to tell the absolute truth about what actually happens. Often, we will exaggerate or deny our contribution to uncomfortable situations: accept things as they actually are, not what we fantasize they are.

Mark was painfully aware of the difficulties he experienced with Loretta, in spite of the passion they shared. Among other things, he was challenged with the realization that he had prayed for this kind

of relationship- someone who could meet him at his level, share his excitement, and wanted to build a life together.

He had trouble, though- often feeling attacked when she would point out inconsistencies in his behavior, in spite of the fact he had asked for her feedback. Even when he knew she was right, he would get angry. As he started to explore the causes for his anger, he gradually became aware of the ways he judged his own performance, ways that were actually unfair to him.

He also became aware that these patterns of guilt were ancient, and stemmed in large part from his relationships with his parents. In his formative years, he came to feel wrong for his inability to fix his mother's dissatisfaction with her marriage. This "defeat" gnawed at him his whole life.

Second, focus on the goal and assume the best, not the ways we could fail. This seems obvious, but many times, we won't even dream the dream for fear we can't have it. We often assume the worst, rather than focus on what we really want.

Principles on the Pathway Back to Innocence in Relationships

● Awareness

Investigate the patterns and see what actually goes on: are the difficult parts a new experience? Have they happened before? What was your response then? Are the good parts okay? Is it easy to maintain them?

● Acceptance

Accept your role in co-creating the experiences you had, without judgment. Accept your results; accept yourself, as you are. Accept that you are generally trying the best you can, and so are others. Accept others as they are, without trying to change them.

● Truth

Tell the truth about who you are and what you want, not in anger or confrontation, but in certainty and safety.

● Confidence

Assume the best: assume you can have what you want, and others can have what they want, too.

● Forgiveness

Forgive your sins, past, present, and future. Forgive others for their mistakes.

● Love

"Be" love (accept love) and "do" love (give love) in equal measure. Both are required for a whole, healthy experience.



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Mark started to see how Loretta's comments would trigger this ancient guilt, which was an assumption that if anything was wrong in his important relationships, he was responsible. However, not only was he responsible, he was wrong for his inability to correct the problem.

Third, forgive the mistakes, but don't forget them. It's not wise to repeat them. Love is a risk, and it's possible things won't work out. But that doesn't mean we don't deserve love, and that we even did anything wrong. Sometimes, things just don't work, and it's not necessarily anyone's fault. At any point things feel overwhelming, reach out for help. This is not a failure- everyone who's mastered anything important received guidance somewhere along the way.

With support, Mark has started learning how to not immediately go into self-blame when it looks like someone is unhappy. He's starting to see that sometimes he really did contribute nothing to Loretta's current upset, and there might not be anything he can do about it (or should do about it). It's dawned on him that sometimes she just needs to talk about what's troubling her, and she's not necessarily asking him to do anything.

For her part, Loretta is learning to not hang his name on it every time she gets upset. In her own life, her father and brothers blamed her for their problems, and took out their frustrations on her. She has begun to see how she would sometimes take out her anger on Mark for things that happened decades earlier.

Fourth, love self through the mistakes and challenges. Everyone deserves another chance to get it right.

Both Mark and Loretta are learning that the love is actually still present, regardless how much they fight. Both had feared the tension meant the end of love, which added to the sense of guilt for each. They

are learning that part of what fuels their urge to fight, besides their own old guilt, is that they both so badly want to please people who aren't even in their lives any more. And they are both learning each other's patterns of guilt, so that they are developing compassion-compassion for how painful it's been for each of them, how difficult it's been to work out the old patterns, and how much they both really want this relationship to work. Now, when they are even tempted to fight, they both can much more easily see the loving essence and loving commitment in each other, forgive the confusion, and get back to just enjoying their life together.

Choosing innocence rather than feeling guilty begins with a willingness to dial back the degree we live in that old world, not eliminating guilt entirely. Guilt is a signal that we need to regulate our behavior and learn personal responsibility. Our strength, talent, and wisdom come from the discipline gained in addressing personal issues and challenges through the years, not from forgetting or ignoring them. The good news is that the possibility of regaining innocence increases dramatically when we forgive ourselves and others for past, present, and future transgressions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Patterns of Guilt

1. It is taught and learned.

We develop guilt unconsciously, starting from the moment of conception. We are aware of everything in our environment, whether or not consciously expressed or observed, and whether or not we understand what it all means. We absorb all the attitudes and expectations of our early environment, whether they are healthy or not. Unfortunately, the end result appears to be a loss of identity in order to mimic the illusion of our early world, regardless how much it supports or interferes with our relationships.

2. It is developmental.

We cannot skip steps in becoming a whole, healthy adult. Guilt and punishment interferes with some or all of the specific stages of human development, and resolution of those patterns requires we address the earliest instances of guilt first. In other words, the oldest traumas are deepest in the core of our issues.

3. It is outer-focused.

When we are taught we cannot trust ourselves, we have to rely on the judgments of others. When the environment is punitive, rather than supportive, we willingly give up our own identity. When we believe that others control our world, we are then dependent on how others treat us to feel good. When others appear to not like us (which is an almost inevitable result of guilt), it feels much harder to sustain ourselves.

4. It is a dis-ease of lost childhood.

The old thought is that if we can just please our parents, they will love us unconditionally. So, we have to please them first, and not ourselves, to get the love and attention we want, sometimes desperately so. If getting that love means making our parents and siblings happy, their problems become our fault, and fixing them becomes our responsibility. Love becomes conditional, based on pleasing others first, which is typically impossible. We then transfer these experiences into adult relationships.

5. It has emotional boundary confusion.

Out of the desire to fix others, our boundaries become blurry, especially in identifying what really is an appropriate level of responsibility for self and others. Those under the illusion of guilt often let others have too much control of self, or (attempt to) have too much control of others.

6. It is a feeling disorder, resulting in feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, anger, emptiness, urgency, distrust, sadness, and depression.

When we lose any degree of our self, we are often not strong enough to avoid "childhood (emotional) dis-eases". In addition, even the desire to give up self to please another or others reflects at least a deep self-mistrust.

7. It distorts the possibility of loving relationships.

We can only treat others the way we treat ourselves. Coupled with that is understanding that what we actually experience in relationships (not what we think we should be experiencing) is how we treat ourselves. Therefore, it is inappropriate to blame and punish others for showing us our own guilty patterns. They didn't cause those things to happen, because we brought those expectations to the relationships(s), and we (consciously or unconsciously) invited them to participate in the first place.

8. It is chronic and progressive.

The roots of guilt invade the deepest levels of self; the expression of those guilty patterns can seep into every area of life, both internally and externally. Those patterns do not go away on its own or with age, without actively and consistently addressing the basis of the dysfunction. The experience of guilt and subsequent feelings typically gets worse with age, as more layers of life and experience are laid over the fundamental, inappropriate belief systems. Addressing the core of guilt means, to a significant degree, systematically disassembling one's ego and belief system, over a sustained period of time. There is really no quick fix; that is actually one kind of guilty behavior (thinking it should already be "fixed", for instance).

9. Innocence is the antidote to guilt.

Recovery is possible, with sufficient motivation, support, and commitment. It's almost always a gradual improvement, though, since development of the guilt attitudes was also gradual. The goal is remembering our innate state of grace and innocence by practicing gratitude and forgiveness of self and others.