

# thisHumanCondition

## Daniel Speraw

### # 2

## The Anatomy of Guilt

*From the viewpoint of a thirty-two year-old man:*

I answered the door to a draft of cold air and stifled a moan. He was dark, ugly and far too big. Guilt moved to come in, but I blocked him.

“What is it this time?” I asked, hearing the fear in my voice.

He just stood there, staring at me.

The nervous silence stretched, until I blurted, “It is my assistant, isn’t it. I yelled at her, and now I am supposed to feel guilty. Well, I have no more room.”

In a vaguely threatening voice, Guilt asked, “No room?”

I panicked and stuttered, “I, I am overloaded. There is just, well, no more room!”

He gave up trying to come in and leaned against the door frame, pretending he did not care.

“So you are hanging on to the old guilt,” he said. “Why?”

“Hanging on?” I asked.

He looked irritated and said, “Guilt is just a feeling that says, ‘You missed the target.’ When you yelled at your assistant, you missed your target of treating people considerately.”

“Yes, yes,” I said impatiently. “What did you mean by ‘hanging on’?”

He shook his head and sighed. “After you make yourself feel badly enough, for long enough, you have paid for missing the target.” He looked at me like I was an idiot and added, “Once you have paid, you are supposed to let it go.”

My eyes dropped to the floor. Silence surrounded us. Finally, I whispered what had never been spoken: “After all this time, I still feel awful about hurting my sister-- before she died.”

I looked up, and with tears in my eyes, pleaded, “How much time is enough?”

Guilt shrugged and said, “How should I know? My job is to help you with the next load, although I have to say, you have never needed much help.”

Suddenly, I felt angry and yelled, “Well I have too much now! I just cannot take any more!”

Guilt leaned over me with his towering bulk. I cringed.

His voice rumbled, “Like it or not, you already feel guilty about yelling at your assistant.”

Slowly, I eased back.

He straightened, and, with a sarcastic edge to his voice said, “Besides, you are the one in control. You can change your behavior and hit the target, or, you can change the target.”

As I began a question, he shook his head at me, as if I were stupid, and asked, “How do you feel when you overeat?”

I scrambled to switch topics, and said, “Bad. I feel guilty.”

“But you are not overweight.”

“My mom told us that eating too much is hard on the digestive system.”

Guilt laughed and said, “So your mom set the target. When you overeat, is it really too much?”

Thoughtfully, I said, “No, probably not; but wait. Do you mean that I can reset the target and make it okay to eat more?” With some excitement, I added, “Or I can decide not to have a target at all!”

Guilt turned to leave.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Deciding targets is about stopping new guilt. How do I get rid of the old?”

He stopped, looked back, and with unexpected kindness said, “You can, of course, forgive yourself for being hard on your sister. You were children; you were doing the best you could at the time; and, she died from a heart operation, not from anything you did.”

As I turned back into the warmth of the room, tears flooded my eyes. Softly, I asked, “Forgive myself?”

## # 32

### I Just Can't

*From the viewpoint of a twenty-three year-old woman*

I love being with my friends, but they want to go skydiving, and I will hate missing all of the laughing and camaraderie.

Yes, I could ride along, sit alone when they go up, and feel left out when they come back; and, of course, they will be talking about it for weeks and referring to it for years.

The truth is I am a scardy cat. There was a way-too-steep path at the side of our house. When I was young, I would not go down it, and my older sisters called me that, a scardy cat. They were right too; in fact, I do not to try new things, even when they are not scary.

But do my friends listen? Before this talk of skydiving, one of them asked me to take a charcoal-art class together. I told him *No*, that my art ability stopped somewhere around kindergarten.

He, of course, pushed, and I kept saying, *No*. I hate art. Every time I have tried, the result was stupid, and I felt embarrassed.

Anyway, so there I was in class, trying to do what the teacher said. The charcoal was messy, and my picture looked nothing like what we were supposed to be doing. I did not want anyone to see it, and then the teacher was looking over my shoulder.

“Stop,” she said, “Stop trying to do it right, and have some fun.”

With great relish, I tore that picture to shreds, started again and stopped trying. Some of the time, I felt like a little kid.

Later, the teacher looked at my picture, and said, “No, it does not look like the one you were copying; it looks exactly like the one you created. I like it.”

Okay, so the class was somewhat fun. All right! I signed up for two other art courses, but that is not the same as jumping out of an airplane from thirteen-thousand feet.

You probably think you know where this is going. You think I let myself be pushed into it, and it ended up being fun. Well, you are wrong.

After much trepidation, I did try it, and it was not fun. It was the most amazing, exhilarating experience I have ever had.

With great satisfaction, I called my sisters. I did not mention their childhood jeers, but I did tell them what I had done – in detail.

First art, then skydiving; I wondered what else I cannot do, so I made a list:

1] I absolutely cannot remember names. Tomorrow, I might see if that store in the mall has a memory book.

2] I am terrible at trying to fix things. I even prefer it when someone else uses the Drano. What would it be like to visit the home-supply store and ask them how to fix the kitchen’s leaky faucet?

3] My thumb is so brown that plants die at my touch. There is a nursery nearby, and maybe I can—.

## # 26

### The Pain of Being Strong

*From the viewpoint of a twenty-something man:*

The play-offs were over, and when Kenny opened the door, he asked, “See you here for the big game?”

The answer died in my throat, as I looked out at the rain.

“Where did this come from?” I asked.

Kenny turned away and said, “There is an extra umbrella right here.”

I quickly countered, “No, it is okay, my car is close anyway.”

In fact, my car was two blocks away, and I was completely drenched as I slid into the seat. I began to shiver, as I waited for the engine to warm up, and I had to stop myself from turning on the cold heater.

Feeling angry, I wondered why I had refused the umbrella. Saying *No* to help was something I did way too often: last week, toward the end of the company picnic, I was feeling cold and said *No* to a sweater; later, feeling tired and even colder, I rejected a ride back to my car, saying, “No, it is just up ahead.” In fact, it was a football field away; and, yesterday, I said *No* to the offer

of a chair at a lecture/book signing. The young woman who offered the seat next to hers was pretty too.

I was finally able to turn on the heat and got home as quickly as I could. Of course, there was no place to park, and I, again, found myself running through the rain.

As I rushed through the door, my roommate looked up, and said, “Washing your clothes **while** taking a bath? What would your mother say?”

He added, “You want me to heat up the coffee?”

Hot coffee sounded good, as I found myself saying, “No thanks, not right now!”

I could not believe that I had just done it again. Why was it so hard to accept a little help?

With a rush of embarrassment, I realized the answer had something to do with looking strong or being manly. Was that true? If so, did people see me as more of a man when I rejected their help; or did they see me as I was beginning to see myself—as the village idiot?

What I did know was that acting that way **always** meant being uncomfortable.

As I finished putting on dry clothes, I decided to try saying Yes to offers of help. I thought, “How hard can it be?”

The next morning, I hit the snooze button too many times and missed breakfast. At work, the newest hire pointed to a box and said something about extra donuts. I smiled and shook my head *No* and was immediately disgusted with myself.

I wondered, “What is my problem? Isn’t life difficult enough?”

Anyway, the night of the big game arrived, and I spent a fun evening with my friends at Kenny’s. When I opened the door to leave, I yelled back at him, “What is it about your house and the rain?”

He walked up, glanced out at the downpour, and laughed. The storm was not supposed to bombard us until mid-morning.

“I still have that umbrella,” he said with a grin.

Half-way down the steps, I stopped. Rain began trickling down my neck. I took a deep breath and let it out with a groan. Forcing myself to turn around, I went back and knocked on the door.

After a moment, Kenny opened it.

He laughed and motioned me in, as he said, “The umbrella is right here.”

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Daniel Speraw’s current project is *this Human Condition*, a series of stories written from a different point of view.

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