

Discovering How to Make Peace with Ourselves After Moral Failure

You are a good person who abides by a moral code, right? Whatever its source, this code serves as your set of principles, an ethical standard you cannot violate without damaging your soul. The code is your Ten Commandments, your Constitution, the high altar of all you hold true and good.

Then, for whatever reason, you break that code. Your wife catches you in adultery. Your employer apprehends you embezzling funds. You become angry with your father and refuse to speak to him even on his deathbed.

Whatever the wrong, however innocently you blundered into corruption, by your code you have behaved dishonorably. Consequently, you feel separated from your loved ones, and if you are a believer, separated from God.

If you are a person of faith, you make your peace with your God. All is well and good, but how then do you make peace with yourself? How do you unlock the shackles of your guilt? And how do you come to terms with those who know what you have done, some of whom now detest you?

You're breathing, and your heart is beating, but inside you're as dead as Dickens' door-nail.

Maybe you head to your local bookstore looking for self-help books. Maybe you see a therapist. Maybe you try to make amends for your transgression performing good deeds, volunteering in a soup kitchen or a nursing home. Maybe, like Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*, you just hold your head high, keep your

mouth shut, and carry on.

Whatever remedy you seek, let me recommend as part of your journey to redemption certain novels by Graham Greene, a writer whose greatest talent lay in his ability to depict the human soul in torment, an agony often caused by love at war with principles.

In his novels *Brighton Rock*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *A Burnt-Out Case*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *The End of the Affair*, Greene gives us compelling accounts of human beings caught between the tenets of their code and the desires of their hearts. In *The Power and the Glory*, for example, the hunted priest in Mexico takes desperate measures to evade his pursuers, but again and again puts his life on the line, often with foot-dragging reluctance, by hearing confessions and offering Mass, sacraments outlawed by the state. In *The End of The Affair*, Maurice Bendrix, author, atheist, and adulterer, rues the loss of his married mistress, hires a private detective to follow her when he suspects she has taken another lover, and ends his account of their affair with a prayer that some of us, even the devout, can understand: "O God, You've done enough, You've robbed me of enough, I'm too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone for ever."

The characters in these novels are men and women branded by guilt and shame, haunted by betrayal and misdirected passions, torn in two by the battle between the longings of the heart and the demands of morality. Sometimes innocently, sometimes deliberately, they lose their way and suffer the consequences.

Right now, some of you trapped in your self-created hell may be thinking: Are you kidding me? Wracked as I am by guilt and regret, why would I want to read novels dealing out the same dismal remorse and shame?

In your question lies your answer. You and I both know that

when we have built a prison for ourselves, only a few will visit our cell. Fewer still are capable of understanding the sickness in our hearts.

Here is a consolation: Graham Greene understood. For those of us with a broken conscience, these books act as mirrors of healing. Greene's stories and damaged characters will not expiate our guilt, but they offer reassurance that others have suffered as we suffer, that others have disgraced themselves and their code, and that we are not alone in our dishonor and our despair.

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