



Religion Reporter

Putting things in their place

I woke up Monday morning feeling guilty.

This week, I wanted to have this column written before Monday dawned.

It didn't happen.

In some ways, the guilt I felt was a good thing. It made me want to stop procrastinating and just start writing. Immediately.

But, in other ways, I felt a little ridiculous. Writing this column in advance has, as some of my friends have put it, become "a thing" for me. And when that happens — whether it's writing a column or baking gingerbread muffins at 4 a.m. — I'm *compelled* to do it. Immediately.

Don't get me wrong, I *want* to do these things. I love doing them, actually. But I also know that if I don't do it in a timely fashion, I'll feel guilty.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, best-selling author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," writes considerably about these "things," and more specifically, about the motivations and implications of our guilt. For most of us, the roots of it lie in our understanding of God and in our persistent hope to please the divine. In his latest book, "How Good Do We Have to Be?", Kushner explores this topic extensively.

Sometimes, he writes, we feel guilty for good reason — for example, if we have done something to hurt someone else. But then, he says, there are the times when we feel guilty and really shouldn't.

"There are some things we would not feel guilty about if we were totally rational people, but since we are not, we are open to guilt feelings," he writes.

"If we have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility for making things come out right, if we have an exaggerated sense of our power to make things turn out right by doing everything ourselves, we will make ourselves feel guilty for everything from bad weather to other people's misbehavior."

Hmmm.

The solution to this is not to feel guilty for feeling guilty, Kushner says, but to consider that perhaps God knows and understands that we are going to fall short of doing and being all that we might. God recognizes this, he says, and loves us anyway.

"God may be disappointed in some of the things we do; He is never disappointed in who we are, fallible people struggling with the implications of knowing Good and Evil," he says. Kushner bases such theology not on his own wishful thinking or feel-good pop psychology, but on his reading of the Bible. Abraham, Moses, David — beloved and flawed human beings — he says, not mythical models of perfection.

It's hard to comprehend such love and grace, even when you've heard about it and experienced it all your life. It's easier, in many respects, to feel responsible — and often, guilty — for the blemishes in your immediate sphere. If you just work hard enough and love strong enough, you tell yourself, you can get just that much closer to perfect.

Wrong, Kushner says. He adds that it's awfully ridiculous for people to run around feeling guilty for not being perfect when they can't be. And maybe, perhaps, it's goofy to feel guilty for not having something done days early.

I know. But I still feel better now.

It's just one of those things.

Kristen Campbell is the religion reporter for the Mobile Register.