



AFTER a few early-morning walks in the dark with Daisy the dog, a torch and my wellington boots, I'd had time to wonder if I'd decided to stop buying things because I felt guilty.

Guilty about what, though? Being a moderately successful person with enough money to live in a nice house, have enough to eat, stay warm in winter, wear nice clothes, drive new cars and go on long-haul holidays?

To a lot of people feeling guilty about these sorts of things doesn't make any sense. It's true it's a total waste of time, but I know I feel guilty.

I think it must be a very English, Anglo-Saxon and patently middle-class reaction which can afflict anyone from that subset who came of age before the Thatcher era. From what I can gather, people who were either at school during the Thatcher years or simply too young to even know who she was are not likewise afflicted.

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There is a sector of the generations younger than me who seem to truly enjoy spending money on things they don't actually need. They wear and drive things that proclaim loudly to the world, 'I can spend a lot of money when I go out in the evening or drive along the road' and they seem to feel happy about it.

When I have enough money to do something mildly extravagant, I hesitate long and hard and if I do splash out I invariably feel guilty.

The first time I bought a brand-new car from a proper car showroom I was 43 years old. The car in question was a Volkswagen Golf VR6, dark green with leather seats, sparkly alloy wheels and low-profile tyres. Oh yes, ladies and gentleman, it was a seriously hot hatch.

As I lay in bed the first night I owned it, I writhed in regret. Seriously, I could not sleep. Up to that point I had only ever owned battered second-hand cars that cost very little money. This car cost quite a lot of money and I didn't casually purchase it as I wandered past the showroom one day. I had been dreaming about owning one for ages. I had read the reviews in the motoring pages of newspapers, I had watched the same model drive past in the street and strained my ears to hear the powerful Euro V6 throb coming from the twin tail pipes. I was hooked. I was the perfect consumer, being in the right place at the right time with a chequebook in my pocket.

However, my reaction on actually buying the car was exactly the opposite of the one the adverts and brochures had led me to expect. The advertising image of the confident man driving the powerful car had initially had the desired effect on me, but the experience of knowing this complex piece of

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machinery was sitting outside my house made me nothing but anxious. It was so new, so squeaky clean, and if I actually drove this amazing machine, it was going to get damaged, scratched, chipped, scraped and dirty. The roads around the rural area we live in are pitted and potholed, the lanes are very narrow, cars come the other way and there's not enough room to pass. The shock absorbers, so new and perfect, were going to get hammered. The sparkly magnesium alloy wheels would get chipped by the steep mud and gravel verges. The pristine interior was going to be ruined by the kids. It was a total nightmare.

I thrashed around, wondering if I could take it back to the dealer and trade it in for a pile-of-rubbish car that was already ten years old and pre-trashed. I knew this was stupid, but owning my new car made me anxious.

The next day, when I stared at it out of the kitchen window, my anxiety turned to guilt. There I was worrying about the well-being of a bloody car when there were millions of people in the world who didn't have enough to eat, had no electricity to cook or see by, had no medical facilities if they or their children became ill.

Not only that, but if they had the chance they would probably love to own something as smart as my car, and yet here I was, the new owner, and I felt like an idiot. I couldn't adjust my mindset to Thatcherite 'I deserve it, because I'm worth it' mode. Did I think I deserved to own an expensive car more than them? Simple answer: no.

And let me remind you, we are talking a Volkswagen here, not a Rolls-Royce or an Aston Martin. A bloody Golf with a bit of an up-market engine. I almost want to go back to the me

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of eight years ago just to say, 'Give yourself a break, you self-pitying pillock.'

But the guilt got worse. By now I felt guilty about feeling guilty. I was writhing in middle-class angst at being successful and having enough money to buy the damn thing. I also knew that the millions of people who couldn't afford it wouldn't necessarily be brimming with sympathy for the poor suffering liberal who could.

Here's a theory I've just come up with, based on nothing other than 52 years of life experience.

The Left (not a commonly used term any more) do shame, the Right (equally redundant) do guilt. Roman Catholics specialize in shame, Protestants adore guilt. Buddhists don't do either, while Muslims and Jews do both. Ooh, and while I'm on the topic, PC users do shame, while Mac users do guilt. That has to be so, because I am a Mac user (this is being written on a 24-inch iMac with 2 gigabytes of memory and a couple of terabytes of external storage) and I feel guilty about owning it, although I did buy it well before my year of not buying anything. Just to clarify that point, otherwise you might try to shame me.

PC users claim they don't think about what sort of computer they've bought, they just got the cheapest. But they know they are wrong and, when they see a Mac, they know they should have bought one of those. They are in the majority (93 per cent of computers on earth run Windows), which then makes them feel worse, because they haven't tried to be different, or they are too scared or ill informed to opt for an alternative. They hang their heads in shame as they endlessly wait for the clunking software it came with to

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reboot after it's been infected for the umpteenth time by some spamming 14-year-old hacker in Montenegro.

So guilt is not the same as shame. If you do something you feel guilty about in private, it makes no difference if no one else knows you are doing it; you can still feel guilty. Guilt comes from your internal voice, so the feeling of guilt comes from a process of self-criticism. You have a certain ideal of yourself and you fail to measure up to it. What you are striving to do when you deal with guilt is join together those two parts of yourself, the one that does something that makes you feel bad and the one that judges you.

When I think about it I get a little scared, because I am not normally aware of two 'me's living in my head. I have had a few mates who certainly did live with two 'me's inside them and they were very ill and spent a long time looking at a padded wall and dribbling. But when I do stop and think about it, when I haven't been shopping or looking at a magazine which tells me there is going to be an ultra-thin laptop coming out, I can understand that there is someone else, another voice, trying to push me to a more decent decision in all things. The voice that knows it is pointless to shout at the children when they leave the door open, the light on, the toilet unflushed, the single sock under the bed, the shoes not put away, the tap running, the wet towel on the floor ...

This is the voice that suggests the way we shop and the amount of rubbish we produce are wrong, driving cars with big engines is wrong, buying cheap clothes from the other side of the world is wrong. That voice, the gentle voice of reason and personal honesty, the caring voice which really

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doesn't sound anything like Jeremy Clarkson. That's the voice which makes the cheap, loud, brash bully in me stop in my tracks and feel guilty.

Now, from reading the relevant literature and laughing at various comedians, there seem to be two groups who truly understand and live with guilt and shame in a creative way. I'm talking Catholics and Jews. When I thought about this years ago, talked about it with my friends and even tried to write a stage play about it, I realized that most of my friends and lovers were either Catholics or Jews, although never both as far as I recall.

It's not like I hung around Catholic discos or Jewish restaurants in the hope of meeting them. It's simply the circles I mixed in, the places I worked and lived, the people I have been attracted to. Always Catholics and Jews. Oh yes, and homosexuals. Loads of them. But then most of the homosexuals I know are also either Catholic or Jewish, so let's stick with those primary groupings for a start.

I think it's important to point out that, as far as I know, there is no Jewish blood in my family and none of my relatives are or have been Catholic, so none of this attraction makes sense in any inherited genetic way.

What I do know is that Jews and Catholics are good at living with guilt and I am rubbish at it. I'm not very good at shame either and they are also good at that. They can criticize other people, i.e. shame them, sometimes with justification, and not feel any guilt about doing so. I live in a very fragile glass house – I'm talking metaphorically here, as I actually live in a wooden house, but the glass-house thing has always worked for me – I never throw stones. I fondle the odd

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metaphorical pebble, but I don't dare throw it.

Jews and Catholics seem to chuck rocks around without hesitation. They, too, live in glass houses, most of their windows are smashed or cracked and they don't seem to give a hoot. I have always felt they are having a whale of a time and it's not fair.

I have tried very hard to shrug off guilt, with little success. I just feel guilty about things regardless of what anyone else thinks or says.

A particular guilt-ridden event has stayed sharply in my memory for many years, from the period when my young and specifically male guilt reached a zenith of discomfort.

I was living in a student household in London in the mid-1970s and shared the small flat with three women and a blind man. We divided all the domestic tasks between us with Stalinist rigour. We talked late into the night, drinking tea and smoking cigarettes while we listened to J. J. Cale and Van Morrison on a battered stereo. We discussed Marxism, feminism and the Troops Out of Ireland movement, which was a very contentious issue at the height of the IRA London bombing campaign.

Two of the women were law students and both of them were involved in the creation of the UK's first rape crisis centre. Now, you don't need to be an expert in feminism or Marxist analysis to know what a rape crisis centre is. I heard many stories from these brave women that have stayed with me to this day.

So, as a white male heterosexual, all such dated terms now, there was plenty of potential guilt lying about. Oh yes, I had collected sack-loads of the stuff and I was only 19.

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In my small, almost-bare bedroom in this über-feminist, hyper-political environment, in my cupboard, under a box of old shoes, in the bottom corner right at the back, I can still see it now, burned into my memory even though the building has long since been demolished. Older men will know – at least 96 per cent of heterosexual males will know – what’s under that box. Hidden, hopefully, from prying feminist eyes.

Yes, it was a glossy ‘adult’ magazine featuring many pictures of young ladies in various states of nudity. If any of the women I shared the house with had found that magazine, and this is the mid-1970s remember, very different times, I would have been publicly humiliated, thrown out of the house and expelled from my circle of friends without hesitation. I would have been shamed to the limits of human endurance, because I was seen by these women as a ‘nice man’ and a ‘gentle man’ and a ‘caring non-sexist man who didn’t use the C word all the time’.

That last bit is utterly true. The C word was an utter no-no, and I understood the reasoning behind it. This was a result of feminist consciousness-raising. Men used the C word as a derogatory term of abuse. I tried using the word here and I cut it out, because even now it makes me feel very uneasy. I can tell myself it’s only a word, but it has such a violent resonance it is extraordinary. However, my peer group and I commonly used it when I was at school. It was a swearword, it was a very bad swearword, and that’s why we liked using it. But when feminist women pulled me up on it, I listened and I understood their discomfort about me using it. I can honestly say that I never used the C word from early 1975 until some time around 1997. Not once, never. Amazing, isn’t it?



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In the 1970s it was fully accepted in my circles that all men were rapists and all pornography was rape in picture form. Fair enough, I could see the point. Not only could I see it, I agreed with it wholeheartedly, but I still had a girlie mag hidden in my cupboard, and the guilt – I cannot tell you the fear and dread I experienced.

An event occurred during this period which racked up the guilt and overhanging shame to quite an absurd degree. During the hot summer of 1975 there was an international feminist conference in London. Women from all over the world gathered to talk – I don't know what about, obviously, as I wasn't there; men weren't allowed to attend. But while all these women from overseas were in London they needed to stay somewhere. Twenty-two women from the Lotta Continua (the Struggle Continues) movement in Italy stayed with us. Twenty-two young Italian women in a small four-bedroomed flat. Eight of them stayed in my room, dossing on the floor.

It's hard to imagine now, even for me, but that's what happened. They unrolled their sleeping bags on the floor while I cleared my stuff into one corner. None of them spoke English and I didn't speak Italian. I didn't even dare smile at them and I'll tell you why.

Unreconstructed men might already be having some sort of *Playboy*-style fantasy about eight young Italian women staying in their bedroom when they were 19 years old. However, before these women arrived I had discovered that quite a few of them had recently been arrested in Rome while they were demonstrating outside a police station. They were demonstrating because a 14-year-old girl had been raped by a

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family member and went to the police station to report it, where she was promptly raped again by three police officers in a cell. For fairly obvious reasons, these young women were not a bag of laughs or up for some kinky international hanky-panky with a scrawny long-haired Brit.

Add to that, I had a girlie mag in my cupboard, only inches away from a sleeping Italian feminist. The stress I felt cannot be exaggerated. My heart was pounding and I didn't sleep a wink. As soon as one of them moved I tensed up, convinced she was going to open the cupboard, lift the box of shoes and start a riot.

Thankfully, this didn't happen and I eventually smuggled the offending pornography out of the house and deposited it in a litter bin on the Euston Road, still nervous that someone would see me doing it. In fact, as far as I know, none of the women I shared that flat with ever knew I had it, so we are clearly talking guilt here, not shame.

I was terrified of being humiliated, exposed and criticized as well. But that wasn't enough to stop me doing it, and if anything these fears made the wretched magazine all the more attractive.

What really got to me was that I also felt guilty about it even after I had thrown it away. There was a better man inside me trying to make himself heard, someone who understood that while I found the image of the naked female form attractive for entirely benign and biological reasons, I also knew that a complex and detrimental system of exploitation was taking place in order for me to be able to see the naked women and I didn't want to be part of that.

And that is the clue that helped me. I decided that if I didn't

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buy pornographic magazines, then in a small way I was helping to undermine the system that created them, the system that made it OK for women to be exploited by the publishing companies that produced them. It removed the guilt and shame from my life and allowed me to walk down the street, past feminists, and not leave the pungent waft of porn guilt in my wake. I can remember moments like that, when I would turn up at events and actually think to myself, 'I don't have any porn hidden anywhere, I have nothing to feel shame about, I am free.'

It makes me laugh now. And of course that feeling was only very occasional. It was normally, 'Oh, my God, I hope they don't find the massive pile of hardcore filth under the bed.'

Guilt and shame never stopped me for long, therefore, when I gave up buying things for a year. I knew from long experience that they would not be enough to help me get through.

As an interesting side note, I experienced a piquant guilt twist as I sat writing this. I live about 100 miles outside London and wrote part of the chapter on a very crowded commuter train on my way home. I was travelling first-class because it provides me with room to write on my laptop during the rush hour, a thing I normally try to avoid. (Obviously, I couldn't buy a newspaper or a magazine during this year of not shopping, and I wasn't carrying one of the previous year's unread books with me, but if you go first-class they give you a free newspaper. See the chapter on cheating, page 157.)

The fact that I can choose to travel on a first-class ticket also means I can afford a first-class ticket, which makes me feel

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mildly guilty. However, on this particular journey the train was packed, standing room only for a lot of surprisingly cheery British travellers used to such hardship. They were standing throughout the train, including in the first-class carriage. I had a big comfy seat and just stared fixedly at my keyboard and typed, hoping no one would look at me and suggest I offer them my seat. As the journey progressed and the crowd thinned, between the seats in front of me I could see a very smartly dressed woman in late middle age who was wearing a lot of make-up. I mean a lot. I don't want to judge her for wearing a lot of make-up; I might have a strong desire to explain to her that some people find that level of heavy make-up worrying or even frightening, but I would never say anything.

When the ticket inspector finally made it through the crush she berated him on the fact that she had paid a lot of money for an exclusive first-class ticket (that's how she described it), only to find herself in a carriage crowded with lanky students on ultra-cheap student rail cards who were on their way back to Oxford. The poor ticket inspector, a charming man with a strong Worcestershire accent, tried to jolly her along, saying he understood how she felt but there was nothing he could do. She shook her head as he spoke, constantly repeating that she had bought the aforementioned exclusive first-class ticket and she wasn't getting exclusive first-class service.

Now, I couldn't do that. I admit that it did occur to me that I had also paid a lot of money for my exclusive first-class ticket and I had a man sitting next to me who couldn't believe his luck. He told me he had a cheap-day super-saver return but he knew the guard would never be able to get through the

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packed carriage to check. He got off at Oxford, which is why I am free to write this now, as I have the feeling he was having a sneaky read as I was writing about guilt, something he clearly wasn't experiencing.

But I am ashamed about any privileged position I find myself in. This might be because I spent long enough with zero privileges and even less money to clearly remember what it's like to look in from the outside. Or, of course, it might be because of my mum.