

Maryann

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Nathan

Welcome to every driver's worst nightmare and welcome to why do I feel with me Nathan filer? This episode is all about the emotion that we call guilt.

I find it curious that guilt has two related, but distinct meanings. It describes an emotion, but it also describes a fact, the fact of having committed an offence or a crime, we can be guilty without necessarily feeling any guilt, but we can also feel guilt, without being guilty. 01.02

Maryann

My story begins in 1977 when I was a 22 year old graduate student living in our little rural town in Ohio and I was, uh, driving from the nearby city of Cincinnati, back to my student apartment on a beautiful spring day. It was June. The schools had recently let out for the summer. It was just gorgeous outside. And I was looking forward to getting home and jumping into a swimming pool and just enjoying the start of summer.

And when I was about 15 minutes away from home, uh, I saw out of the corner of my eye, uh, figure running into the road. I slammed on my brakes. I tried to swerve, but I was not able to avoid the collision and I hit a young child. Uh, he flew up into the air and I have that image indelibly imprinted in my brain, but I've lost a few minutes after that. I know that I pulled over and ran across the road, but I don't remember doing any of that. And the next thing I knew I was hiding behind a bush kind of screaming. I was just in, in a complete panic. I was so scared. 02.56

Nathan

This is Maryann Jacobi Gray her story of guilt, both it's cruelty, but also it's potentially transformative power feels so important we're going to spend the whole episode with her. 03.13

Maryann

I was so scared and I was so upset, but I kind of returned to myself. And I immediately, at that point was able to see that the child was being attended to so, and, uh, knot of people from the little neighbourhood, uh, came out and were, um, watching and trying to help. It turned out. I hit this child in front of his house and I watched as his mother ran out screaming the child's name, which was Brian and trying to run to him while neighbours held her back. I took the police about, I think, a half hour to come because it was a fairly remote area. And I waited until the child had been, um, put into the back of a police car because I was faster than waiting for an ambulance and taken away. And then I came forward and said, you know, it was me, it was me. I did this. 04.26

Nathan

Who did you? Um, I mean, I'm just so to try to put myself in your position, I can actually feel myself welling up a little bit. Who did you, um, who, who, who did you say that? Who did you say that to? 04.39

Maryann

The police officer, um, who was then able to, uh, begin an investigation? So, um, there were several officers on the scene. Of course they had me wait in the back of a police car for a while. I was alone for a while. There was a young, I think intern, but a young officer in the front seat who did not talk to me, nobody talked to me and eventually after what I, what felt like a few hours one of the officers returned to the car and told me that the boy had died. And of course I'd been sitting

in the car, even though I'm not very religious praying with everything, with all the fervour I had to let this child live and let him be okay. Uh, but I knew it was bad. So I was, um, I was devastated. 05.43

And I, I just remember kind of bending over and trying crying, but trying really hard to stop crying because I was the perpetrator. I had done this. I had killed this child, uh, after a few hours, a neighbour, uh, one, uh, this made a huge difference. I think in my life really. A neighbour came out of one of the houses and convinced the police to let me wait in her home instead of in the back of a police car.

So I was able to go in and drink some water and use the bathroom. And her kindness to me had such an impact. I tear up about that today, more than anything else because it made such a difference that she didn't hate me, she didn't want revenge, she understood that the child had run and in front of my car., um, and she was just incredibly nice. She also let me use her phone when, when the police were done with their investigation, they said to me, okay, you know, we're done. Can you drive home now? I was like, no, no, there's no way I could drive home. And so she let me use her telephone. That was pre-cell phone era, of course, to call. um actually a called a professor and he came and picked me up and stayed with me for a few hours. 07.26

Nathan

It was well, 1977 before cell phones. So it's sort of thinking across today that would be a pretty reasonable chance that someone would be on their phone or doing something like that. Well, while striving, but as, as you've, as you've described it to me, um, there was no, no fault on your part and no one was suggesting there was any fault on your part. Is that right? 07.50

Maryann

I wasn't speeding. I was just following the traffic. I wasn't, um, playing with the radio or fumbling in my handbag or really I was just driving. I just he, he really, the police call this a dart out and the child darted out and I just wasn't able to avoid hitting him. 08.21

Nathan

What happened next?

Maryann

Um, I, I, I had to call my parents, which was, uh, frightening and sad, and I was already, just so guilty. The car, I was only 22, the car was my father's car that he was letting me use. Um, and I knew that they would be so upset and devastated, you know, worried about me, but of course, grieving for the family that just lost their child. So I, I made that horrible phone call. And, um, stayed with a friend that night. I don't remember much about that and went home the next day and was kind of alone in my apartment. 09.21

Nathan

Maryann was in the process of moving, leaving her current university and going to a new one in Cincinnati to complete a master's degree.

Maryann

So I was in the process of saying goodbye to my friends at the university and in the process of making new friends in the city. But, um, that meant that at the time of this accident, I was pretty much without friends. I could count on many friends I could count on, it's not true there wasn't anybody, but my support system was thin. My father flew from New York, uh, where he lived to, um, Ohio the very next day. And he dealt with a whole slew of logistical issues; my car had to get to a body shop; he had to talk to the insurance agent; he, uh, retained a lawyer and had me meet

with a lawyer; he also made a condolence call, uh, to the family of the child, which, you know, I think back on that, and I can't imagine how painful that must have been for all of them, but he did it. So he was really helpful, but he was not helpful in terms of the emotional impact. It just wasn't something he knew how to do or was comfortable with. So he left after a day and all the logistics were taken care of for which I'm eternally grateful. But the emotional side of this, the psychological consequences were mine to deal with essentially alone. 11.14

Nathan

And can you describe what those, what those emotions. Well, what, what, what were your predominant feelings at that time that you were sitting there with on your own?

Maryann

So looking back, I know I have very severe trauma symptoms. I couldn't concentrate on anything. I had intrusive images, some flashbacks, um, I wasn't sleeping well. I was emotionally, you know, full of. Grief and fear and my guilt was overwhelming, which today we would, uh, consider not so much trauma related as what we call moral injury. Because even though I didn't break the law or I wasn't negligent or reckless in my driving behaviour, I was the agent of an eight year old boy's death. Um, a child who was exuberant and enjoying the spring and just had a momentary lapse of attention. And I was the one who killed him and it didn't matter to me that it wasn't my fault. I still did it. So I thought about that, all the time, a few days after the accident, I was just alone. Most of this time, I, I call it, I had something that I call today an auditory hallucination, and I heard a voice like a Old Testament, God, from some cheesy movie or something, say you have taken a child from his mother and your punishment is that you can never have children now. And that just, I don't know what I was doing, but it stopped me in my tracks. I never did have children, which is probably the single most significant effect of the crash on my life. Because prior to that, it wouldn't have. I wouldn't have dreamed of not having children, it was just who I was. 13.45

Nathan

I wonder if we could go, go back, go back a step. So your father came and he, and he offered that kind of really practical support and what dad dads need to do. We need some practical support from our dads. Sometimes don't meet, especially at a time, like, especially at a time like that I'm sure. Um, but, but didn't offer you or didn't know how to offer you. Um, the, the, the emotional support that you needed and you were moving, you were physically moving and you were moving between friendship groups. So you perhaps had fewer people around you than you ordinarily would, but I'm interested in what the people who were around you were saying. I'm just sort of thinking, you know, if I were your friend that at that time, um, maybe I would be trying to really press upon you as best I could that, but it, but it wasn't your fault. It wasn't, it wasn't, you know, you know, this is a terrible thing that happened, but, but, but it wasn't your fault. We were you hearing that from people? 14.48

Maryann

Yes. Yes. That's a really good question Nathan I was hearing that from everybody. In addition, uh, the adults around me; professors; parents; relatives; um, a therapist that I consulted a few times, all said to me, look, this is a terrible tragedy, of course, you're sad, of course you're upset, but it wasn't your fault. You have your whole life ahead of you so you need to just move on. You need to leave this behind and move on. And that sounded like good advice to me. I, I did have plans. I did have things I wanted to do with my life. I didn't want to get derailed. So I tried to move on and to some degree it probably looked like I was doing a good job with that, but I wasn't, I was consumed with, uh, both the trauma and the moral component of what happened. It was in my head, I would say, you know, 75% of my waking hours and a good part of my sleeping hours as well. Um, but I only talked about it, you know, very, very little. And so, um, people would ask me how I'm doing. I would say, oh, you know, I've, I've, I'm sad, but I'm doing a lot better. And I

understand it was just one of those things. Um, but what I wasn't telling anybody was like, I would hallucinate people in the road when I tried to drive and I slam on my brakes and traffic. So obviously that was really dangerous. So I sold my car and I think I said, oh, you know, I live in the city now. I don't really need a car. It's not very ecological, but I had a whole list of reasons and I would be in a room with a bunch of people at a gathering or just my housemates. I was sharing a house with other people and there'd be some conversation and I would be sitting there, you know, nodding and smiling, but inside I would be remembering, you know, I had a whole like photo album in my head of horrible images from the moment of impact to blood on the road, to me in the police car, hearing that the child died. Uh, uh, uh, just a whole photo album and I would be flipping through that photo album, um, and not really present for the conversation or for other people. Um, I also dated men that were mean to me and I had not done that before. 18.02

Nathan

I wonder, um, I wonder, what are some of those people who were asking you, how you were doing? Um, I w I wonder what they might've expected from you in, in, in some ways I'm thinking of it, um, you know, As, as I said, if I were your friend, I might, I might say, um, Maryann, this clearly wasn't your fault. And say the things that that people were saying to you and that you were hearing. Um, but, but I wonder whether all say I would, in some way, expect you to feel guilty. It's such, it's such a big thing, isn't it? So like to, to, to have been involved in something like that. So, so, you know, if you, if you were able to immediately take that well-meaning advice from your friends and, and go, oh, no, you're quite right. It wasn't my fault. I'll put that behind me then. Um, high people maybe would have felt about that and whether some of that guilt was w w was the guilt that you felt you had to feel. 19.02

Maryann

That's another great question. There is, um, We do expect people, who inadvertently harm other people to feel badly. And if they don't, we, many of us, including me are somewhat judgmental about that. I can't imagine someone doing what I did and not feeling guilty. I was the perpetrator in this situation. And I did not want to turn myself into a victim, let people grieve for the boy and let people save their empathy and compassion for his family. And I did not feel deserving of any of that. 19.54

Nathan

Were you in touch with his family at all? During this time?

Maryann

The lawyer that my father retained for me thought I should go to the funeral. And I refused. That was like the one thing where I just was like, no, I'm not following your advice. It felt performative to me, it didn't feel authentic. And it felt highly intrusive that this was the opportunity for family and friends to grieve. And to have me walking in there to share the grief just felt totally wrong. So as a compromise, I agreed to, uh, pay a condolence call to the family and about, I don't know, two or three weeks after, after the crash, I had to wait for the body shop to fix my car.

Um, the very first time I drove, I drove to that house to, to that. Place. And I assume the lawyer where the insurance agent or somebody told the family I was coming and Brian's mother and brother were out. I'm sure that was arranged. Um, but the father. Was home and he was unbelievably nice to me. No, he looked, he's probably the saddest looking man I've ever seen in my life maybe to this day, but he came out and he greeted me and he led me around. He didn't take me into the house. He took me to their back patio and invited me to sit. And, you know, I just expressed my sorrow and how sorry I was and he accepted that. And then we made, I don't remember what we talked about, but we tried to make small talk for, you know, three or four minutes. And then he walked me back to my car and I left. And it was, you know, I look back on

that and I say, I can't believe I did that alone. I can't believe I did that without support. Uh, but I did. And I'm fortunate that he was such a kind and good man. 22.34

Nathan

Time marched on in that way that it does at least for the living. Marianne moved once again, this time to complete a doctoral degree at the university of California, Irvine, which is near the beach.

Maryann

And I was just, uh, thrilled to leave Cincinnati and it felt like a new start. It was almost exactly two years after the accident. So I moved to California. I had to buy a car. I had to drive again. That was terrifying. But I was able to throw myself into my graduate work, which I loved and, uh, succeed on that level. 23.22

But I did not talk about what had happened. Nobody knew. I decided I didn't want to be the girl who had killed a child. And I had a strong sense that I needed to deal with my feelings on my own.

Nathan

So it'd become a, it, it had become a secret, almost

Maryann

It, it was a secret. It was entirely a secret. And I thought, well, I must be a dangerous, bad, maybe even evil person. And I hurt other people. So I have to be very, very, very careful all the time to never hurt anybody ever again. Physically or emotionally I might add

Nathan

These secrets. This internalising of her pain, it was taking its toll on Maryann's mental health. She was frightened and anxious most of the time, but remarkably, she pressed on completing her PhD. She got a job at a big think tank. She met a nice guy. She got married. 24.34

Maryann

He didn't want children either. I never told him what happened. And I never talked with him about what happened ever until 2003, when there was a terrible car crash, um, in Santa Monica, when an elderly man, uh, in his eighties, plowed his car into a farmer's market, a crowded farmer's market. And really just mowed down people. It was gruesome, um, about 10 people were killed and I think over 50 injured, some of them very, very seriously. And it, it was an international story. It was so horrific. 25.26

Clip

A horrific accident today, vendors were setting up for the farmer's market or in that hospital, after a car crashed into the farmer's market and injured his car slammed into a farmer's market in Santa Monica. Weller panicked and miss took the car's accelerator for a brake pedal. Yeah, 240 feet before he came to the barricade of the farmer's market. Uh, that's a long way. 25.50

Maryann

And I, I knew people in Santa Monica. I had worked in Santa Monica. I wasn't living there at the time, but it was part of my life in Los Angeles. Uh, I've shopped in that farmer's market. So. Along with everybody else. I was glued to the TV, just watching this. And one of the things that struck me and really hurt me was hearing people, screaming that the old man was a murderer that he had killed people intentionally, and that, uh, he should be arrested for murder where it seemed to me based on both my observations and my experience that he, he did not intend to kill anybody.

He probably should not have been driving obviously, but that this was really, uh, you know, a terrible tragedy, but not one that he intended and the hatred being directed his way, uh, on the one hand is completely understandable. And on the other hand really hurt me cause I, I identified with him in some ways. So I impulsively. Wrote a short piece, maybe 600 words. I was in a writing workshop at the time. And the workshop leader said, oh, you know, send this to NPR, to our national public radio. And I did again impulsively and they called me and they wanted to run it. 27.41

Clip

Like most people I'm horrified and saddened by the devastating car accident. My heart goes out to those who lost family members and friends, but unlike most people. My deepest sympathies lie with the driver 25 years ago. I hit and killed an eight year old boy named Brian who ran in front of my car in the moments after my car accident, as a crowd of onlookers gathered, I was scared of being attacked or killed myself. 28.10

When I read that some of the shoppers at the Santa Monica farmer's market screamed murderer at the elderly driver, the raw terror of those moments came back to me. And so I forgive the gentlemen who lost control of his car at the farmer's market. It was after all an accident. This is NPR national public radio. 28.33

Nathan

Okay. You disclosed this, this thing happened to him and you, and for the first time in, I mean, what seems like many, many years from, you know, when decades may be, um, you talked about the fact that you'd been in. This position. So something about this accident that he'd been involved in and you were able to empathise with him perhaps in a way that you'd never quite been able to empathise with yourself. Um, but, but, but it brought, it brought your story out. 29.02

Maryann

That's, that's right. That's really well said. This ran on NPR. My husband wasn't thrilled, but once he realised I was doing it, he was very supportive. And then, friends, some of whom I'd known for decades, heard about this accident by listening to their radio, as they were driving home. Coworkers heard about it. You know, that I was working at the university of Southern California at the time and no nobody knew there. And so all of a sudden, it was no longer a secret and the amazing thing, and this does not happen for everybody was that I received an outpouring of support from people who knew me and were. You know, said that they thought it was brave of me to come forward. And they were glad that I did, and they were compassionate and interested, and that was so reassuring and healing. And the other thing that happened was that. People started coming out of the woodwork to say, you know, this happened to my sister or this happened to my neighbour or this happened to me even. And I had never, in all those years ever talked to anybody who had unintentionally killed someone. And all of a sudden I was starting to have conversation. And they were really powerful. It was like all of a sudden, but he gets, it, gets it in their core, in their gut in a way that, you know, a therapist can be empathic and helpful, but somebody who shares the experience, there's different kind of connection. So that set me on a new path and a much healthier one. I'm happy to say. 31.18

Nathan

You, you, you shared this experience in any were hearing from you, we're hearing from people and perhaps other people who also had felt completely alone with their experiences and, and unable to talk about them. Did you feel that was that sort of community forming or were these just sort of isolated conversations to begin with? 31.41

Maryann

Initially, they were isolated conversations. And I thought about trying to form a support group, but people are so spread out and many people who've had these, um, crashes don't drive. So especially in Los Angeles, it was impractical. So ultimately I decided to develop a website. And my hope was to provide information that was not available to me when I had my accident and also support and encouragement.

And that's what I did. And over the last, I don't know, 10 or 15 years, it's grown and grown and grown. And now we have a nonprofit corporation with a board and we have monthly meetings online and weekly writing sessions. And, uh, We're starting to do some fundraising and it's like a thing. 32.52

Nathan

Well, I've, I've looked at your website. I mean, I have it on my screen in front of me right now, when it's called accidental impacts. What w w what is, you know, extraordinary to me actually is looking elsewhere online. This does seem to be pretty much the only resource that I can see for people who have been in that situation of accidentally killing or seriously injuring someone is, is there lack? Is there a lack of help out there? 33.20

Maryann

There's a near total lack of help. There are uh, no self-help books, no, uh, support groups, no organisations, other than accidental impacts. There is no clinical protocols for therapists to follow. There's no research. Um, There's accidental impacts and that's it, which is astounding to me, given that, um, I've estimated that in the United States alone, probably 20 to 25,000 people per year, unintentionally kill someone if you, most of that is car crashes, but it also includes. Other, other ways that we harm each other. Um, and it's not an uncommon trauma, but it's entirely neglected in the literature. So that is something I'm also trying to remedy at present. 34.33

Nathan

Do you support people? Maryann who's um, The story is perhaps, uh, you know, even more difficult maybe for other people to understand or empathise with. If, if the accident was their fault in, in some way, I don't, I don't, I'm not talking here about obviously deliberately doing it, but the many ways that we can be, we can be negligent say when, when driving a car. 34.57

Maryann

Sure we have this epidemic of distracted driving, we have people who drive impaired with people who speed run, stop signs. Everything from kind of gross negligence, even recklessness to simply, you know, not seeing the stop sign, making a mistake that has fatal consequences. I do support, um, anybody who unintentionally kills. I do feel that, uh, part of the I hate the word healing because I, I don't think it quite captures the process. I, I prefer to talk about kind of making peace with ourselves in the world. Uh, but that's a mouthful, but part of the process is accountability, accepting responsibility for what we did albeit inadvertently. And if there needs to be. Behavioral changes or consequences, accepting that with as much grace as we can muster. And most people who do this suffer terribly, and that suffering I say is evidence of one's humanity and caring. If we didn't care what we did, there would be no despair or distress. Um, so I encourage people. Even those who've made terrible mistakes to balance accountability with compassion, and finally the most important step in my opinion. But one that takes one that cannot be rushed is doing something to make the world a better place. Investing in community, providing service. Um, could be creative expression, could be a spiritual practice or, you know, simply resolving to deepen one's compassion, kindness, giving nature. Um, there's so many things that all of us can do. And the point of this is not to make up for. Killing somebody or to even the scales, there is no way to ever make up for what we've done. It's we killed somebody. It's, there's

no compensating for that, but we can honour the memory of that person and everyone who suffered those who mourn and grieve for that person and our own suffering.

It's imperfect, but it's the only way I've ever found. Of finding some modicum of peace. In addition, in taking these steps in a very mindful and purposeful manner, we, those of us who have suffered from trauma regain a sense of agency that we can make good things happen in the world. And we. And, and the, for the moral component, an aspect of moral injury is often social isolation, withdrawal, feeling distance, and we can begin to bridge that distance and feel a greater and more authentic sense of belonging to community. And that is very healing. 38.31

Nathan

I mean, this is just the most extraordinary interview for, for me. And, um, you know, you, you just seem like, you seem like the nicest person in the world, Maryann. I wonder, you know, there is this sort of, yeah. Uh, theory, which I'm sort of a little bit aware of. I think from I'm doing my research ahead of this, um, ahead of this interview of, of sort of post-traumatic growth. So, so this idea that people who've been through, terrible trauma can, can emerge with stronger values and connections. And I suppose a better, a better person. Um, and that, that feels a bit like what you're describing there that you've described it far more eloquently than, than I am. So my question is, do, do you feel. That this horrible experience you had as a young woman, um, has, has made you, uh, has made you a better person in the end. 39.24

Maryann

I'll answer that question. I want to say one thing about post-traumatic growth, which is a really powerful, important concept and has made a difference in my own life. But when you've killed somebody, it doesn't feel right to say. Oh, well, this was a terrible tragedy, but maybe I can grow from it. It just feels a little self serving even though post-traumatic growth is in fact the goal of what I was describing. So the language is difficult. The words we use are difficult, um, but as a concept, it's important. And in fact, that is what we strive to do. I would say for many years, my own growth was frozen because I was not living an authentic life. I was bound up in guilt and shame and fear and grief and sadness, um, and faking it for most of the time. 40.36

Nathan

Do you still feel guilty and, and, and if, if, if you do, um, how, how does that guilt look now compared to how it looked before?

Maryann

Um, yes, I do still feel guilty. I do think of Brian every day and I would not want it otherwise. There was a time, when Brian's memory was kind of the punitive voice of conscience telling me how bad I am and how careless I am and how I hurt people and how I, I don't deserve happiness and I don't deserve joy. And, uh, it was, it was very harsh. Today, uh, my memory of Brian is one of, you know, sorrow for what might've been. His family was lovely. He probably would have been a wonderful man with children of his own by now, and, but it's not, his memory is no longer this punitive voice. It's the reminder of how far I've come. And what matters to me in life and to, um, not fuck around, excuse my language, to, to live my life with like, it makes a difference.

Nathan

Don't fuck around, live your life like it makes a difference. You've been listening to Why Do I Feel? With me Nathan Filer. Don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss out on future episodes. 42.37