



Sacred alchemy





How to turn the Seven Deadly Sins into seven divine blessings.

BY DIANA RICO

IT'S 2002, AND I'M IN THE TINY dressing room of the midtown Los Angeles studio where I've been taking salsa lessons. I'm all wound up, ready to perform in public for the first time. Earlier this year I was struck by the exhibitionist desire to dance in front of an audience. For some people this is normal. I, an introvert with lifelong stage fright, am not one of those people ... or so I thought. When my regular salsa teacher announced he was offering a six-month performance class that would lead to a group recital at the studio's annual Christmas party, I'd shocked myself by signing up.

Now, with a hundred hours of rehearsal under my belt, I'm gathered with the seven other women and eight men who make up

our troupe. We look hot in our all-black salsa outfits, but we're nervous: How will we remember all the steps to our intricate seven-minute routine? We go out to await our cue on the sidelines of the main dance room. And then I see *him*—my ex-boyfriend, whom I'd met at this very studio—holding hands with a mousy blonde who's clearly smitten.

Oh, goddess! A searing flash of envy shoots up into my heart. Well, *I'm* performing and he's not. As we march single file onto the dance floor to the applause of friends and family, I gather up my pride, shoot the happy couple one last jealous look and determine that dancing perfectly is the best revenge. My mind suddenly as focused as a laser, I execute my part with a sense of artistry and verve I've never before experienced. I feel

like a Latina Ginger Rogers! The performance goes by in a flash while people cheer us on. As we take our bows, I can't stop smiling. The whole routine is so sharp in my mind, I want to do it again.

Years later, I discover that the presence of the ex and his girlfriend might have provided a critical boost for my performance. According to recent scientific studies, envy can enhance memory and focus, and pride is thought to heighten artistic creativity. Who knew?

Growing up Roman Catholic, I'd learned that envy and pride, along with anger, lust, gluttony, greed and sloth, were two of the Seven Deadly Sins—you know, the bad, bad tendencies that will send your immortal soul straight to Hell, not just for a while but for



all eternity. But there I was, reaping a brain-chemistry advantage from two of the Deadlies. Was it possible that hidden within the poisonous bowels of the Seven Deadly Sins are benefits a Catholic girl never dreamed of?

In the fourth century, a Greek monk named Evagrius, who lived in an early Christian ascetic community in the Egyptian desert, drew up a list of eight evil impulses that separate one from God: gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia (or spiritual lethargy), vainglory and pride. Two centuries later, Pope Gregory the Great modified the list to something closer to the one we now know. Since medieval times—when the influential theologian St. Thomas Aquinas wrote extensively on the sins, and the Catholic Church promoted knowledge of them through popular imagery—the Deadlies have been a rich source of artistic inspiration. They’ve been written about by Chaucer and Dante, painted by Brueghel and Bosch, made into musical theater by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, featured in movies with Brad Pitt and Dudley Moore and sung about by the Welsh band Magenta and the Danish rapper L.O.C. They’ve even morphed into supervillains in Japanese manga and anime.

But when I was growing up, the Deadlies were used to scare us into being good. In catechism classes, at the tender age of 7, I had to draw pictures of my soul (imagine a squashed balloon with stick limbs) with various types of sin on it. I was taught to depict venial sin—a lesser kind of sin, like thinking something mean about my brother—as spots on the white balloon of my soul, sort of like chicken pox. To represent the Deadly Sins, however, I covered the balloon with the blackest black I could press out of my pencil. And we all knew where that soul was headed: to eternal damnation.

I remember, in my late 20s, sitting in the office of my Jewish therapist and telling her this story of drawing the sins. It had never occurred to me that there was anything untoward about teaching children such lessons. But the look on her face as she struggled to

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LOUIS SAVARY, CO-AUTHOR OF
*DREAMS AND SPIRITUAL
GROWTH: A JUDEO-CHRISTIAN
APPROACH TO DREAMWORK*

keep her expression neutral—it was clear she was thinking, *Child abuse!*—forever changed my view of the Seven Deadlies.

These days, numerous experts are rethinking the sins. “Thomas Aquinas defined each of the Seven Deadlies as an excessive use of a healthy human activity,” says theologian Louis Savary, coauthor (with his psychotherapist wife Patricia H. Berne) of the classic *Dreams and Spiritual Growth: A Judeo-Christian Approach to Dreamwork* and other books marrying spirituality and psychology. “The implication was that there was some positive or healthy quality behind each of these excesses. The sin was precisely in the excessive use of a healthy energy, not in the healthy energy itself.”

In *Seven Spiritual Energies*, their new

book-in-progress, the Florida-based couple outline what they see as the healthy “root energy” of each sin. Thus, beneath my envy was the capacity to identify something valuable that I wanted or needed (in my case, a romantic relationship), and my pride was perhaps overblown self-esteem. At the root of the Deadly Sin of anger (as I discovered when I explored the subject in an article for *Ode’s* June 2011 issue, “Prelude to Courage”) is the desire to maintain strong boundaries and protect one’s rights. Similarly, behind lust is the drive for communion with another; the healthy energy beneath gluttony is the urge to nourish oneself; greed is a distortion of the positive impetus to provide for oneself; and sloth is an excess of the otherwise healthy impulse for relaxation and refreshment of body and soul.

I’m always looking for redemption, so I’m fully prepared to buy this argument. It turns out that a handful of recent scientific studies lend credence to Savary and Berne’s theory. Let’s take that envy to which I fell prey.



#Envy

In a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers Sarah E. Hill and Danielle J. DelPriore of Texas Christian University and Phillip W. Vaughan of the University of Texas at Austin asked student subjects to write about times they’d envied people they knew. Then the students, along with a control group not asked to recall envious feelings, read interviews with fellow students unknown to them (and who were actually the researchers’ inventions) and answered questions about the interviews. The subjects who had just described their past envy spent more time studying the interviews and were better at remembering details about them.

To see whether new envy had the same effect as remembered envy, the researchers showed a different group of students fake newspaper interviews and photographs of, again, supposed fellow students—some of

whom were clearly wealthy, hot and/or well connected. As the real students looked at the profiles, the researchers measured how long they studied each one and asked them about their emotions. The subjects spent more time on the “advantaged peers” toward whom they said they felt envy and afterward were better able to recollect facts about these “high-envy targets.” The researchers concluded that envy can “evoke a functionally coordinated cascade of cognitive processes”; in other words, it sharpens the mind’s focus and memory capabilities.

That might explain why my memory suddenly became razor sharp as I started to dance in front of my ex and his partner. In fact, some believe that envy can motivate people to excel, as they strive to achieve what their envy target has. It’s a painful emotion to feel, made worse when we obsess (as the study showed our brains are wont to do). But maybe, armed with this knowledge, we can notice when we’re envious and use it as an opportunity to identify what we want and devise goals to get it.



#Pride

My dancing may also have been helped by the surge of pride I felt in what I was about to do. In *Personality and Individual Differences*, a study led by psychologist Paul Silvia of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro suggests that pride and creativity may go hand in hand.

Silvia’s team conducted an experiment with 1,304 undergraduates from two universities. All completed a survey that measured their personality traits (using a scale called HEXACO) and their self-reported levels of creative activity. One of the dimensions measured on the HEXACO index is honesty-humility, which in low levels indicates a person who tends “to feel a strong sense of self-importance,” according to the scale’s authors. The students who scored low on honesty-humility had the higher creativity scores, a finding that is “consistent with past work on arrogance,” the researchers wrote.

Of all the Deadlies, in fact, pride is the one that has been most cleansed of its original taint. Aquinas counted it as the foremost

of the Deadlies because spiritual arrogance led one to turn away from surrender to the will of God. But “there has been a gradual shift in perspectives on pride, so that it can now be seen as a healthy sense of self-worth, rather than excessive,” writes Alan Ashley, a London-based organizational consultant and coach, on his blog *The Buddhist Coach*. Healthy pride, for example, helped three-time world heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali overcome huge challenges again and again.

Nicknamed “The Greatest” for his repeated declaration “I am the greatest!” throughout his career, Ali was diagnosed with degenerative Parkinson’s disease in 1984. Twelve years later, despite motor problems caused by the disease, he accepted an invitation to light the torch for the Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta. As he walked out onto the scaffolding, the eyes of the world upon him, to take the torch from swimmer Janet Evans, he was overcome with tremors. “Just at that moment, I heard a rumble in the stadium that became a pounding roar and then turned into deafening applause,” Ali later told National Public Radio. “I was reminded of my 1960 Olympic experience in Rome, when I won the gold medal. Those 36 years between Rome and Atlanta flashed before me, and I realized that I had come full circle. Nothing in life has defeated me. I am still ‘The Greatest.’”

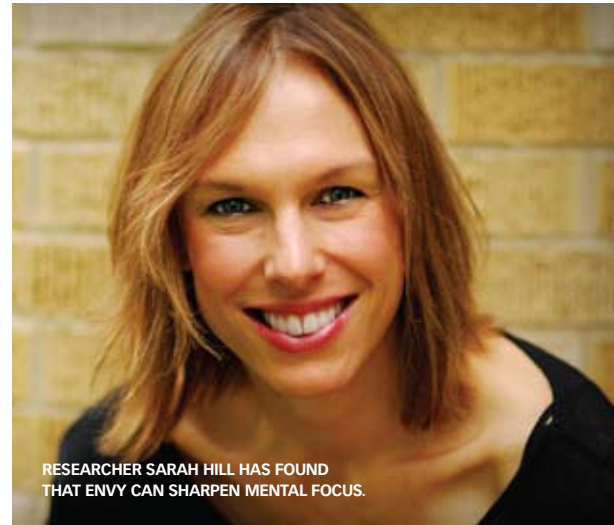
In my case, my pride in overcoming my fear of performance, as well as in the tough half-year of work I’d done with my dance team, pushed me to the highest level of achievement I could reach.



#Lust

What about the other sins? Can there possibly be anything redeeming about lust, an excessive sexual appetite? Surprisingly, a recent study led by psychologist Jens Förster from the University of Amsterdam, found that lust can enhance analytic thinking.

In the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Förster’s research team described how they asked 60 university students to imagine either a long walk with their loved



RESEARCHER SARAH HILL HAS FOUND THAT ENVY CAN SHARPEN MENTAL FOCUS.

partner or casual sex with someone they were attracted to but not in love with. They were then asked to solve a series of logical and creative problems. The subjects who’d thought about love performed best on the creative insights, but the group thinking about sex scored highest on the logic questions.

In a second test, the same researchers “primed” their subjects by flashing words related either to love or sex before their eyes. Once more, those with lust on the mind did best on the logic questions. “People process information in two fundamentally different ways: They focus on the forest, or they focus on the trees,” the researchers wrote. “Whereas global processing leads to creative thought, local processing facilitates analytic thinking.” Romance triggers desires for a long-term future, stimulating global mental processing. Lust, on the other hand, is oriented toward short-term goals and thus boosts logical functions, such as the ability to devise “specific strategies of seduction,” according to the study.

Does that mean we should stimulate our analytic powers by engaging in lustful fantasies right before we sit down to figure out a budget or do our taxes? Maybe. But lust may actually serve an even deeper purpose. Properly channeled, lustful fantasies can help us to heal from childhood wounds, according to psychotherapist Stanley Siegel,

author of *Your Brain on Sex: How Smarter Sex Can Change Your Life*.

According to Siegel, sexual fantasizing is a coping mechanism the mind uses to help us gain mastery over unresolved conflicts or needs from childhood. These tender wounds get eroticized and encoded in our fantasies by the time we're out of adolescence. "Whether it's a wish to be dominated, or to be tenderly made love to, our sexual fantasies convert painful, confusing or unresolved feelings from the past into manageable and pleasurable ones in the present," Siegel writes in his *Psychology Today* blog Intelligent Lust. "We use them to transform helplessness into power, loneliness into emotional attachment, inadequacy into competence, weakness into strength." If we honor the power of our lust and explore our fantasies in a safe, loving environment, Siegel suggests, great healing can occur.



#Sloth

I'm staring at my naked toes. They're propped up at the end of my friend Derek's Victorian clawfoot tub and exceedingly wrinkled from the longest, laziest bath I've ever taken. These toes are filling my type A psyche with guilt. Here I am, house-sitting for my friend in London while he's away shooting a TV show in Greece. Instead of engaging in my customary sightseeing greed, rushing between the Tube and the museums and the Bloomsbury bookstores and the West End for theater tickets, I am doing ... nothing—for two hours, at least. And while I absolutely view this sloth as sinful (I really should be making more productive use of this precious time in my favorite city), I simply can't make myself get out of this delicious tub.

Years later, I'm astonished to find a similar story in Roger Housden's book *Seven Sins for a Life Worth Living* (his sinful bathing event took place one morning in Paris, when he really should have been taking in the Place Vendôme). I call the British-born Housden, who now lives in the California Bay Area, to ask him about this slothful behavior, which he recommends. "Really I was just following the call of my own body in its enjoyment

of simply lying there," he says.

If there is a Hell, I shall surely be meeting Housden there. Best known for *Ten Poems to Change Your Life* and the popular series of *Ten Poems* books it begat, the author explains that the Christian dynamic—indeed, any fundamentalist religion—functions on the dualistic notion that we live in the world of fallen flesh and that the rewards will come only after we die. "I'm suggesting that we don't know that, and this is the only world we can know right now," says Housden, who sees pleasure as a vital path into a fully embodied, joyful existence in the present moment.



#Gluttony & Greed

Writer Elizabeth Gilbert famously spent one-third of her memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* indulging in pleasure—specifically, the Deadly Sin of gluttony—in Italy after being shattered by a traumatic divorce. In her international bestseller, she described her first meal in Rome in the tender detail one might lavish on a new lover, starting with "just some homemade pasta (spaghetti alla carbonara) with a side order of sautéed spinach and garlic"; moving on to a single artichoke because "the Romans are awfully proud of their artichokes"; then digging into "fried zucchini blossoms with a soft dab of cheese in the middle (prepared so delicately that the blossoms probably didn't even notice they weren't on the vine anymore)"; followed by veal, a bottle of house red, warm bread with olive oil and salt and tiramisu.

Back in her new apartment that night, instead of dissolving into tears as she had for months, "I actually felt OK," she wrote. "I felt the early symptoms of contentment." This meal (like the many other meals she describes) wasn't gluttony for the sake of numbing her emotions; rather, it was an exquisitely mindful appreciation of the pleasures that something as simple and necessary as food has to offer. Indulging in this Deadly Sin was, in fact, a way of deeply nurturing and healing something broken in her soul.

But Housden warns that we can't simply say that there's an upside to each sin and pretend they're really all great. "I think it's vastly simplistic and disingenuous. The sins are not positive," he says. "Ultimately food, knowledge, experiences, when in excess, are simply to fill this hole inside ourselves. There are really universal understandings that when we do these things to excess, essentially we harm ourselves."

Psychotherapist Patricia H. Berne, Savary's coauthor and wife, agrees. In her therapy practice she sees the presence of any of the Deadly Sins as a warning sign that an energy is being misused. "When people don't know how to access and use these healthy energies appropriately," she says, "they tend to block them or misdirect them and experience themselves as frustrated, stuck and helpless, thus unable to move forward constructively with their lives."

In fact, the sins offer a useful avenue into inquiry. "What's different in Hinduism and Buddhism is these are seen as energies," Housden explains, "and the excess or lack of are not seen as sins, they're seen as conditions. The value is in having a curiosity about what is happening in oneself." So when I'm jamming my schedule with social activities out of a kind of greed for experience, for example, it might behoove me to consider why I am avoiding sitting still and being alone.

An honest plunge into the darkness of the Deadly Sins within ourselves—what Carl Jung called "the Shadow" and what medical intuitive and bestselling author Caroline Myss calls "the dark passions"—can actually be a route into spiritual breakthrough.

In her most recent book, *Defy Gravity: Healing Beyond the Bounds of Reason*, Myss cites the Seven Deadly Sins as passages one must go through in order to heal body and spirit. In the throes of a healing crisis, according to Myss, I have the opportunity to own and confront each of the Deadlies within myself, dismantle its "destructive authority" in my life and let go of the illusion that anyone other than me is responsible for my sorrows. At the end of this deep cleanse, "What remains within a person is not just the capacity to love," writes Myss, "but the



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desire to love others.”

Indeed, this is the very process the great mystics have fearlessly descended into for centuries, says the mystical scholar Andrew Harvey, translator of poems by Rumi and author of *The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism* and many other books. “The Seven Deadly Sins are the seven manifestations of the demonic ego, and they are absolutely essential to recognize as part of every human shadow,” says the Chicago-based author. “If you don’t, you will be sabotaged by their unexpressed power.”

But if you do—if you take the excruciating journey into your own darkest depths, face the greed and envy and all the other sins in your soul, you can transmute them through what he calls “divine alchemy. Anger becomes the deep, sweet compassion of the saints. Greed becomes an impulse to find more and more situations to give. Pride becomes what the Sufis and Tibetans define as majesty, that majesty that you see in Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. Gluttony, the rage to eat, when it is transmuted becomes a blessed rage for deeper and deeper experience of the divine ecstasy.”



#Anger

I think about another incident with a man I’d been in love with—a different one from the dancing ex, a close friend who did not have reciprocal romantic feelings for me. Our friendship ended painfully, but I still ran into him several times a week at yoga classes. One morning I went to class and I felt so livid at him, so enraged, that I could not even meet his eyes. Immersed in my anger, I felt certain the slightest contact would shatter me to bits.

I waited for him to set down his yoga mat and marched myself to the opposite end of the room. As I unrolled my mat I decided to devote my whole practice that morning to Kali, the annihilating Hindu mother-goddess who is often depicted stepping on the slain god Shiva and wielding a bloody sword with an eye

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ROGER HOUSDEN, AUTHOR
OF *SEVEN SINS FOR A LIFE
WORTH LIVING*



THE REWARDS FOR A LIFE WELL LIVED DON'T COME AFTER WE DIE, ARGUES AUTHOR ROGER HOUSDEN; SLOTH CAN LEAD TO JOY IN THE HERE AND NOW.

embedded in it. As our teacher led us through a continual flow of asanas and vinyasas, I kept mentally begging Kali: *Cook me! Cook me!* The anger flared like an inferno inside my cells as I concentrated on moving my breath up and down the central axis of my body.

By the end, I was sweaty and spent. Lying on my back for our final relaxation pose, I felt the presence of the goddess in my chest. Surprisingly, She felt like ... love. I stood up after we were done and noticed a softening toward my former friend. I felt, miraculously, an urge toward kindness.

I walked over to where he was rolling up his mat, his head bent, avoiding me. I folded my hands in front of my chest in prayer position and, when he looked up, I bowed to him in *namaste*: the divinity in me saluting the divinity in him. His eyes warmed as he put his right hand up to his heart and bowed back to me.

Since then there have been other small moments of healing between us, and they’ve always come at the end of my allowing myself to feel fully something that in the past I would have avoided, something I might have considered a sin. Divine alchemy, indeed.

If I can achieve this in my little world, what about the bigger picture? What if many of us were to face the Deadly Sins within ourselves, be open to their lessons, and transmute them into something like holy love? “Let’s get real about what’s at stake,” says Harvey, who as the head of the Institute for Sacred Activism believes this is the crucial task of our chaotic and changing times. “It’s not just about ending the core structures of evil, it’s about ending the reign of the Seven Deadly Sins inside ourselves. Only a comprehensive transmutation of the whole of human nature can help us survive. I think this is the way for us now.” ■

DIANA RICO, who last wrote about doubt in the July/August issue, needs an extremely slothful vacation after transmuting all those sins.