

Healing Shame

Understanding How Shame Binds Us and How to Begin to Free Ourselves

Robert D. Caldwell, M.Div.

Shame is the inner experience of being "not wanted." It is feeling worthless, rejected, cast-out. Guilt is believing that one has done something bad; shame is believing that one is bad. Shame is believing that one is not loved because one is not lovable. Shame always carries with it the sense that there is nothing one can do to purge its burdensome and toxic presence. Shame cannot be remedied, it must be somehow endured, absorbed, gilded, minimized or denied. Shame is so painful, so debilitating that persons develop a thousand coping strategies, conscious and unconscious, numbing and destructive, to avoid its tortures. Shame is the worst possible thing that can happen, because shame, in its profoundest meaning, conveys that one is not fit to live in one's own community.

In this quite imperfect world where we were all nurtured by parents who were themselves, in some sense, shame-bound, we have learned to feel shame--some more than others. There are four kinds of families which are most adept at spawning shame-dominated progeny--abusive, neglecting, controlling, and enmeshing families. To understand something of how shame is created in these family contexts is to begin to be aware of the origins and dynamic of one's own shame, and to begin to take steps toward its undoing.

THE SHAME MAKERS

The Neglecting Family

John came home every afternoon to a mother who was depressed. She languished in bed and stirred only to get something for herself or to complain about her sufferings. John moved on tiptoe, waited on her hand-and-foot, making himself his mother's mother. Martin was told by his parents that they deeply loved him. He excelled in studies, athletics and music, but almost never did his mother or father attend his performances, not even when he was the speaker at the Honor Society banquet. Janet was brought-up by a succession of servants and nannies who assumed almost all of her care. Mother and father were distant beings who always seemed to be more involved in something of "momentous importance" and only stopped-by for what they assured her was "quality" time.

In these households each person had infrequent clues that he or she was valued or even existed. There are few experiences that are more upsetting than attempting to communicate, and then receiving little or no response. We would rather fight than be neglected. Passion, risk, hurt are preferable to neglect--benign or malicious. We are born for contact; we grow and thrive on it. In the neglecting household, this is lost, and we experience neglect as something wrong with us--after all, if "they" don't care to involve themselves with us, it "must be" our fault. The child, having no perspective that would help him see that it is his world that is dysfunctional, not himself, experiences being treated as a non-person as though he has no right-to-exist.

The Controlling Family

This is the family which is ruled by decree. It is the authoritarian, or the rigid, or the meddlesome family. The controlling family is one wherein any threat of deviation from the "way-it's-supposed-to-be" is rapidly squashed. This is the family of "piano lessons, whatever," of "you'll do every vestige of your homework before you can talk to your friends," of "don't speak unless you are spoken to." This is the family that is portrayed with clarity and passion in *Dead Poet's Society*: the blindly ambitious father "knew" what was "best" for his son, imposed his paternal vision, never seeing his son's true interests, resulting in catastrophic consequences for his son's sense of worth and for his will to live. This is example of how the shame engendered by the parent's domineering control can cause the child to believe he has no "self" worth preserving: as it becomes impossible to live according to his own desires, and as he cannot give his parent what he wants, he has no choice but to kill himself.

The controlling family carries deep shame. It's "solution" is to make the exterior "perfect", thus, hopefully obscuring and forgetting about the rot within. The parents in this family cannot tolerate any variation on their crystallized ideas and styles, hence they give little credence to the self-aware wishes of the individual to mobilize for self-fulfillment.

The Enmeshed Family

This is the family with fuzzy, haphazard, or permeable boundaries. It is the symbiotic family where it is never clear where one person begins and the other ends. It is the family where one borrows clothes from another without permission, for there is the running assumption that what belongs to one belongs to all, and that "If I want it", then my child, or parent or sibling would want to give it to me.

In the enmeshed family everyone shares the other's life-system, like siamese twins. One learns not to look within one's self for awareness of what one is about, but to the other members of the family. The child who is happy when his mother is happy and

sad when mother is depressed is enmeshed. The child who is made privy to all the struggles of the parents and invited into them, often made responsible for them and asked to comfort or give advice to his parents is in the enmeshed family. The child who is relied upon as being "father's little helper" or "mama's strong little man" to the point where he begins to define himself as essential to his parents for their happiness is in the enmeshed family.

Enmeshment greatly handicaps one's sense of individual identity, and consequently the sense of individual effectiveness and responsibility. If one is not "separate", how can one make a real decision about her place in the family, and, by extension, in the world. Also, enmeshment is very hard to see if one is in it, for the net becomes a part of the self. One shares in the family shame, the family's inability to be strong in the world, the family's inferiority feelings, simply because one belongs to the family, not specifically because of anything one has done. The enmeshed family has made the choice to attempt to cope with its frailty and shame by fusing with one another in an effort to find strength in numbers, and in emotion-based reciprocal justifications, blame-makings and affirmations. Unfortunately, this results in the loss of a sense of personal power. Shame shared is still shame.

The Abusive Family

This is the aggressive, the attacking family. It can be emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive. It can be implicitly or explicitly abusive. This is the family in which shame goes deepest, for the abused person feels deeply she is a damaged "self" and that her injury has made her unfit to share in this life with others. This is the family which may abuse the child when she is very small, thus establishing a sense of worthlessness in her which, in her adult life, she can give no cognitive content to. She simply feels worthless and that there is no recourse but to re-experience it whenever she experiences a failing, a dismissal, or an aggressive act.

The **emotionally abusive family** uses ridicule, punishment, putdowns. This is the family where the old and strong intimidate the young and weak. Repeatedly, from her mother, Sarah heard this bedtime story: "You were the ugliest baby the Stork had, so, out of the charity of our hearts and feeling so sorry for you, knowing no one else would take you, we brought you home. You should be forever grateful." In a strange city Rachel had this to cope with: "I can't stand you. Get out of this hotel room right now." And at 12:00 p.m. in a strange city, the teen-age girl is locked out of her parent's room for the night.

The **physically abusive family** spanks, hits and uses emotional intimidation in threatening further spanking and hitting. It may also withhold meals or send the child to do a physically punishing tasks. Alfred's jaw was broken by his burly father when

he said to him in a moment of teen-age bravado, "Dad, I've got a right to stay out late like the other kids." Thomas was made to carry bricks from one side of the yard and back again for a whole afternoon to demonstrate his acknowledgement that his parent was in charge of him. Janice, an eleven year-old, was beaten till welts rose on her buttocks because her "religious" mother could not stand the sound of her daughter blurting out a four-letter-word. Children do not separate their "self" from their body, and the physically abusive family is experienced as attacking and devaluing the core of one's being. We are a violent culture, and the majority of persons in America have felt the shame--for we cannot feel of "worth" to another when we suffer his painful and debasing intrusions in our bodies--of physical abuse at some time in their lives.

The **sexually abusive family** goes deepest into the psyche of the person to evoke shame. (Though sexual abuse is usually carried out by a single person in the family, almost always there is complicity by the other parent or siblings, consciously or unconsciously, to evade the reality of the behavior.) According to some accounts, at least one in three women and one in seven men have been sexually abused. The sexually abusive family invades the body of the child, this center of one's being: one's sexual self. Sexual abuse takes many forms, from the overt to the subtle. It may be the father making "cute" remarks about his daughter's developing breasts, or the mother bathing her son when he is eight years old. It may be enemas given on a routine basis or sexually explicit "educational material" put in the child's hands before she is ready for it. It may be an older brother repeatedly fondling his sister and threatening her with recriminations should she "tell." And, of course, it may be direct acts when the child is exploited for the sexual pleasure of the adult through genital stimulation and/or intercourse. The child-victim is mortified, loses the sense of her own self, creates a terrified secret with the offending parent, is fearfully anxious that it will happen again. (Indeed, it often does; one researcher reported that once sexual abuse has started with a given child it is repeated on the average of 83 times.) Often the child feels--because she is so young, she has little or no cognitive understanding of "why"--that she is worth nothing to her family, and hence to herself. She experiences the molestation as a violation of her feelings, freedom and the discrete reality of her body. She experiences it as though something is flawed about her. And she becomes, in her own eyes, the object of scorn and guilt. The scaring, the shame-making is acute.

THE BURDENS OF SHAME

Shame-bound persons, believing themselves to be seriously flawed, without worth, and hardly belonging in the world inevitably have the consequences of their shame-consciousness show up very negatively in many areas of their life:

At the core of the shame-bound person is a **failure of self-esteem**. As one feels dishonored and without belonging, then feeling good about oneself, feeling confident

in one's abilities is inevitably lost. With one's boundaries mushy and one's sense of oneself as "flawed," one hardly has a self at all, let alone one to feel high regard for. "Shaming" a person makes him as low as he can go. For a person who has been shamed has no way out, his is the feeling of there being nothing he can do to set things right. Something vague, but decisive, has shrunk his soul.

The shame-bound person may become either an **offender or a victim**, or, as is most likely, one who vacillates from one mode to the other. If his experiences cause him to access his shame, he may take out his hurt and rage on others weaker than himself in his present community of family and friends. For another person whose defense is less aggressive, if she is re-shamed, she may fall into her accustomed role of victim, as she is naturally adept in this guise, having been an actual victim in her original family. Having learned to make a "virtue" of necessity, she has mastered playing the victim for what consolation rewards there are--some sympathy, some self-righteousness. For the offender there is some momentary sense of revenge and power, for the victim, a brief touch with martyrdom--and beyond these meager compensations, the despair of impotence and participation in the continuing of the cycle of shame. The shame of the parents becomes the shame of the children, and so on...

The shame-bound person has **difficulty with intimate relationships**.

Feeling so bad about herself, she does not wish another to know her, expecting for sure that he will see what a shameful creature she is. So she puts up a false front, she pretends and postures and does all the things she believes others will be impressed by, but she can never do that which is the essence of intimacy, reveal herself to another in open risk taking.

Depression often possesses the shame-bound person. Depression is the stuck place between anger and grief. The person who feels no sense of self-worth will not know how to get angry, for that would be too much aggression for him who was brought up with such a fragmented sense of being entitled to respect. On the other hand, the shame-possessed person cannot grieve, for it was much too disappointing and painful to dare to believe that he could be genuinely important to another, or vice versa. Depression is marked by alienation and no real opportunity to bring things back together. At the center of depression is the sense of loss, and the shame-bound person carries the greatest loss of all, the loss of a valued self. The loss is made more difficult to emerge from as one recognizes that he is only partially aware of the dimension of his loss, having been deprived of the experience of and the model for respectful caring and nurturing.

The shame-bound person is **controlling, rigid, and perfectionistic**.

She has had to compensate for having not felt a sense of love. Her experience of "love" is the opposite of the highly touted, idealized concept of "unconditional love". Shame comes from all "love" being conditional. Which, of course means that the love is never complete, never a comment on the person as she is, but as she pleases her parents by satisfying their expectations and demands. So she attempts to put life in "perfect" order to compensate for the chaos in the relationships of her heart. Not feeling the warmth of love, she needs desperately to control the world and is not able to tolerate deviation. In a loveless world, "doing things right" brings the only rewards she can attain. She lives very carefully, for a slip can cause her to lose her fragile hold on things.

The shame-bound person **clings to his image**, after all it is the most positive thing he has going for him. He believes that within he has no real self, that he is not loved, or respected, or needed, so he must make himself loveable, appear respectable, and create the illusion of being indispensable to others. He works hard at it. He lives by his false-self, often bouncing between an over- and under-inflated presentation of himself. He does not strive for self-fulfillment, only for self-image fulfillment.

The shame bound person is **numb and/or spaced-out**. Life is so painful as-it-is that she takes the way of self hypnosis, or enters a self-induced trance-state in order to make her experience bearable. She lives anesthetized, and feeling as little pain as possible. Of course, neither can she feel passion or pleasure.

HEALING SHAME

Shame is, indeed, pervasive and profound. It doesn't fix easily, for it is a condition of our psyche and our soul. But with courage, attention and plain hard work healing is possible. Here are some thoughts for healing your shame:

Let yourself learn, through and through, that your shame is not your fault. Most of your shame-inducing experiences happened to you early in your life--when you were small and the world of parents and other caretakers loomed very large. Your fundamental feelings of insignificance, the "shame" that goes far back in your mind and soul, appeared long before you had any "choices" in the matter. Shame was your natural organismic response to the burdens and demands that were being visited on you by your family. Believing that making you ashamed would motivate you to behave as they wished (The demands of a dysfunctional shame-bound family are irrational and inconsistent, for the family only knows it is unhappy and does not know what would make things better. The child becomes the scapegoat for the family's incompetency in solving its problems-in-living.), your parents intended you to feel shame about yourself for your "bad" behavior. Sometimes, they even rationalized that shaming you was "for your own good." However, what actually happened was that

they only succeeded in making you feel **bad about being yourself**, for you did not possess what they were demanding as you had neither the power nor the talent to change yourself in order to enter into their good graces. But, being children, you could not grasp that your parents were the dysfunctional persons in the family; you knew of no one's failures but those attributed to you by the grown-ups. Your only "guidance" was that which helped you feel awful--shame--about yourself for failing to produce....I repeat, it was not your fault.

Face shame, experience it, incorporate it. As you are your memories, your history, your joys and your talents, you also are your experience of shame. There is no escaping any part of yourself, your shame experiences are in your neurons and your body cells. What you can learn is not to deny or finesse them, but to face them, own them, and incorporate them into yourself. After all, they are only painful memories, not imperious demons. They cannot hurt you again as they did before--though you may believe they can--for you are not vulnerable as you were when you were small. Some things have changed and one of them is the perspective and position you have as adults to confront and not be done-in by the shaming experiences the world offers you.

There is nothing shameful about shame. You have every right to yours. You earned it by surviving in the midst of shaming people. There is a great community of the shamed waiting to dare to trust others enough to be open and vulnerable. Sharing your shame with them will be a way of forming a strong and rejuvenating ties with others. Your sense of shame can be your channel of empathy and pathos to the hearts of others, and...it will help you laugh with the Woody Allen's, Roger Dangerfield's and Whoopie Goldberg's of the world as they help you own the universality of your shame and both cry and lighten-up a bit about it. There is no more powerful bond than that of shared shame transformed into a bond of understanding and mutual support for one another's healing.

Replace shame with mature guilt. Guilt has often received bad press, and well it should--if, and only if, you are talking about neurotic guilt--guilt that self-flagellates and changes nothing. If you are talking about mature guilt, then guilt is one of the great inventions of nature. For mature guilt lets you know what is unacceptable, and offers you opportunity to do something about it. Shame, on the other hand comes to you as a feeling so deep and so incapable of your getting a grasp on it that it seems there is nothing you can do. To illustrate: John feels shame that he is not the sort of person who can ever excel at his work. Whatever happens, a demotion, a "blowing-out" by his boss, he senses that this is because he is "basically inadequate," so he hangs his head and lowers his eyes and dampens his energy. Finding the "smarts" and the courage to re-evaluate himself as "guilty" of inertia and poor training, he begins to create and achieve goals that are possible for him. So if he sets certain standards, and

then if he doesn't achieve them, he can rightly feel guilty that he is failing and can increase his efforts to succeed, or redefine his goals. He has moved into consciousness that his worth can be defined by realistic possibilities, not by the un-focused and "hidden" demands of shame-making expectations.

Make new parents. You must learn from experience that you are not unworthy of belonging to the human community and that in order to heal your shame you must create a healthy family for yourself. Think of an occasion when you have stood against those who would make you feel bad about yourself. Think of how you counted on the thought of a friend, or lover, or teacher whose opinion you could depend on to back you in your struggle. It made a difference. It made the crucial difference is keeping you going and anchoring the experience as a positive for you.

You must create a new family. Perhaps this sounds strange, but you are already doing it--clubs, churches, professional societies are efforts; lovers, friends, marriages are efforts; even cliques, cults, and gangs are efforts. The success or failure of your journey to heal your shame will be crucially influenced by your ability to surround yourself with those who think you are lovable, who support you, who back you up in the way you lead your life, who can convey to you that they are for you even when they don't like your behavior--and toward whom you can healthily reciprocate.

So the work of healing your shame is as profound as are the potentials of your soul. It reaches down into the heart of your concept of yourself and of your belief in the possibilities of life, alone, and in the company of others. It causes you to re-examine in your own mind and heart an idea expressed in the "sentimental" motto of Father Flanagan of *Boys Town*: "There is no such thing as a bad boy." Can you make yourself a claimant of this "truth?" If you can, then you are on your way to discovering the freedom of surrendering your self-definition of having been a "bad", shame-deserving person. Perhaps you have been mistaken, insensitive, unethical, self-critical, scared, negligent, stupid, masochistic, depressed--behaviors and states of mind you can do something about. But never have you been "bad," never not belonging; always, you have been just an ordinary struggling person and, now with an expanding awareness, joining with others to make your inner and outer life work better, striving to extract from the day its possible satisfactions and nursing a lively curiosity about what's next.



From: <http://www.psychsight.com/ar-shame.html>

Robert Caldwell, M. Div.,