

Principle # 3 - Shame is not your enemy, shame is your guide: The correct relationship to shame.

“Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.” Brene’ Brown

Most of us, throughout our lives have spent an inordinate amount of time avoiding shame, getting rid of shame, denying that shame exists. We are terrified of our shame. But the truth is that shame is an integral and fundamental aspect of our humanity. In theory, we often try to define shame as different from guilt. Literature often defines guilt as simply an understanding of wrongdoing, without making it mean something about you. While shame is defined as a feeling of wrongdoing that is attached to a MEANING or a BELIEF SYSTEM about you. So, when shame is felt, the immediate meaning we make of it is that we are wrong....and bad. But in truth, we have virtually no experience of simple guilt, and that wrongdoing is nearly always attached to a meaning we make of it. So let’s just name our shame, and get to work on figuring out how to relate to it. The truth is, no matter how hard we try, it is not going away. In fact, we need it as our guide.

Let me tell you a story about a shame experience my middle son Nathan had during his kindergarten year. Following his day at school, our ritual upon arriving home was to have a snack as we unpacked what was in his backpack. His backpack was always a picture of what had happened in the day. So I expected to find the pictures he had drawn, worksheets he had completed, any food that was left in his lunchbox, etc. But on this day, there was something else. In his backpack, there was a Beanie Baby Leopard, still with the tag on. At that time, Beanie Babies were all the rage. All of the kids were collecting them. We, too, had a collection. But we did not have the Leopard. So I asked Nathan where the Leopard had come from. He, as he played with it, repeatedly throwing it up in the air, and catching it, began by telling me that he had found the leopard on the floor in his classroom. I was immediately suspicious, so continued to ask him questions, to which he eagerly gave answers with wide eyes and an ever growing anxiety in his voice. Finally, as I continued to question, he stopped talking, and lay his head on the table and began to cry. I gently and firmly asked again, where did the Leopard come from. As he cried, he went on to tell me that a little girl from his class had brought it to “show and tell” and that she had been playing with it during free play and had left it on the floor. He was mad at her for bragging about her new Leopard. After a few more tears, and some holding I asked Nathan what he thought we should do. He was scared to say what we should do. He tried to say maybe he could just bring it back tomorrow, and put it back on the floor. But I kept on asking what did his heart say we should do, and tentatively, he said we should bring it back. We called the school, talked to the teacher, got in the car, and brought the Leopard back to his classroom.

As I thought about writing this story for all of you, I talked with Nathan about it. We did some sweet reminiscing about how hard that day was. He said he remembers everything about that day. We laughed a bit about the sweetness of it. He ended the conversation by saying it was a really great learning experience. Can you see, that as a 5 year old, Nathan tried using many defenses to the shame he was feeling? He justified, he rationalized, he denied, how the Leopard got in his backpack. These defenses he used, tell us he was feeling shame, not guilt. He covered up the shame through his defenses. He needed my loving limit to manage that shame. I didn’t yell, scream, punish. I didn’t join his shame by telling him he was a bad boy or that he was very wrong. I also didn’t join his shame and add my own justifications, and rationalizations. I just questioned, I held, I loved, and eased him closer and closer to leaning into his shame, so that the shame could be the guide for him. Once he put his head on the table in shame, that was his guide. He needed that shame to tell him what he should do next.

I want you to notice, this experience was a bonding experience for Nathan and I. And more importantly, it was an internal bonding experience for Nathan that he remembers today. From my loving limit, that didn’t punish, didn’t berate, didn’t join in his embarrassment and shame he learned a lot about trust in a limit. I was the container for it as the parent, but the limit came in him, when he was able to say all by himself that we should

bring it back to school. Notice then, how Nathan continues to have a correct relationship to the shame he felt that day. He is able to name that this very simple experience of shame taught him about himself and taught him that he on that day had the capacity to feel shame, and use the shame, for a loving correction.

This is a small and simple story of how to relate to shame as a guide. In this course, we hope for each one of you to find a cleaner, more loving relationship to your shame, that allows shame to lead you to a loving internal correction.

As you ponder this story, can you identify a time in the past week in which you felt shame for an error? Walk yourself through this exercise.....

Can you isolate the feeling of shame?

Can you name the defenses you used in the situation?

Can you be the loving parent that holds a loving limit, easing yourself to leaning into your shame without punishment and berating?

Can you hold the trusting space that allows you to feel the shame and investigate the guidance you need toward making a correction?