

Shame as Adults

Inner worth determines the conditions of our lives. ~ Rod MacIver

It is not possible for normal intelligent and aware adults to misinterpret the events of life. As an adult if someone criticizes and judges, or is short and abrupt, or is unfair in their dealings with you, you know perfectly well that this is not about your worth as a human being.

Only children, with under-developed neural systems and an imperfect understanding of life will interpret chastisement, correction, conflict, judgment etc. as meaning they are bad and wrong. This is a survival mechanism. In childhood, if the external world seems threatening a child needs some modicum of control – and the only control a child usually has is to assume that there is something wrong with themselves, and that if they can change and adjust this they will be safe in the world of threatening adults. Shame is born of innocence and ignorance. It is a lie we start telling ourselves at a very young age. The worse the threat to our identity and integrity we experienced as children, the more disorganized and intense our feelings and defenses become. This is the narcissistic wounding of childhood. The perception and apprehension that what others do and say is **“all about me.”**

However, the little daily “insults,” of other humans might still be capable of evoking, triggering and reactivating the cellular and emotional memory of shame that is stored in every cell of our bodies from childhood. This triggering heralds a most happy moment of being able to see clearly what is being activated and to what it goes back, so that you can be accepting and loving of the child you were and see the truth of the childhood transactions and understandings.

This is the only mature response and the only way to freedom – introspection and gratitude.

The world will always offer one the opportunity to do this work – nothing in the external world will change. There are always people who will not meet your needs in the way you prefer. Until you do the work you will be “very sensitive” to what others do and say to you. You will be easily “wounded,” and if you do not see the truth you will suffer. You will act out, blame, attack, create alliances against the perceived threat as you did as a child, you will be mean-spirited and spiteful, you will demand “fairness” according to your definition, you will be entitled and create a situation in which others fear you and so avoid or fight with you, you will make others feel shame and hurt by your energy and actions, you will sabotage your life and relationships, you will act entitled and demanding, you will insist on always being treated as special with no regard for what might be going on in the lives of others who “insult” you, you will have no empathy either for yourself or others. You will be self-righteous and superior in your blame and perceptions. Your language will be full of “I don’t need this” (superior and judgmental), or “It’s not fair,” (as if life is fair and you deserve fairness), you will see yourself as special in needing and deserving and being entitled to being treated with kid gloves. You will obsess, worry, be perfectionistic, or grovel and take responsibility for what is not yours - or any of the other myriad ways we learnt growing up to help us feel better when we felt shame, believing that our inner worth was at risk. In these instances you will be a person living a lie, one that is destructive to yourself and others.

A mature, aware adult has done the deep inner self-reflective work and become aware of the lies they have believed about themselves and others. If they perceive a threat to their integrity and identity they quickly see through the self-imposed and other-imposed judgments, of shame and blame. They examine what they might have done to elicit a judgmental or insulting response in the first place. If there is indeed something, they quickly take responsibility, apologize and rectify their behavior before expecting an apology and responsibility from the other. They model and live self responsibility. If they did nothing they wonder about what might be going on for the other person and where their response might come from. They quickly come to a place of empathy for themselves and the other person, no matter what that person did or did not do to meet their needs. They can immediately be assertive (assert their perceptions, feelings and needs – to themselves and the other person, with empathy and mutual concern.) And if they cannot do this in the moment they have the moral courage and integrity to come back to the person that triggered their shame in

order to reconnect and reach a deeper understanding out of their desire for peace and harmony, awareness and love in the world, once they have cleared their own psyche. They are Self-responsible. They do their part.

© Lyndall Johnson Easter 2015