

Week 6 - More on Shame as we struggle with Autonomy

Autonomy is attained when the child is lovingly guided, taught, and protected in meeting its own needs at the appropriate age and individual capacity for the task. This seldom happens. Mostly the needs of the child are over-met, under-met, inconsistently met, or met with anger or anxiety or both, or, the needs are dismissed altogether. At best it is a hit and miss experience for parent and child.

Let's look at the needs of a toddler:

Affirmation:

A young child needs affirmation. Affirmation is very different from praise. Praise is given from a highly demanding, anxious parent who wants the child to perform well and early, so as to gratify their own need to feel success in parenting. Underlying this parent's need for success is a deep anxiety about not being able to parent correctly, feelings of inadequacy and shame, insecurity and worthlessness. The child learns to perform, "good, right and perfect," to alleviate the parent's anxiety and meet their needs. This transaction happens, of course, in complete unawareness. The child attempts to be "good, right and perfect," to meet the parents need to be seen as "good, right and perfect." In other words, out of shame, the parents demand "good, right and perfect," and out of shame, the child performs as needed by the parent.

People often say, well how do you encourage a child then? What they mean is, "How do I control/manipulate/get the outcome I want, from the child." All children naturally and innately desire growth and mastery. They need a parent who out of *the child's need*, recognizes how to guide and teach the mastery needed. This would be loving, not shaming. In other words, it is not possible for a parent to use the "right words." This is just more of the first paradigm of shame. The words are secondary to the *awareness* of their own shame and needs, the real needs of the child and the willingness to put their needs to the side, to meet the REAL need of the child.

The flip side of praise and reward - or the carrot to control, is the judgment and punishment - the stick to control. A child that is praised all the time is afraid of the judgment if they do not live up to expectations. A child that is judged, works hard to get the praise and so the control of socialization is in place. *In both cases the child learns that they only have value if they meet the external needs of others.*

A secure parent, sees the need of the child and is patient with the learning, offering only guidance as really needed - without praise or reward. This is actual affirmation of the innate capacity of their child.

- How were you praised and elevated for meeting your parents needs for success and so value, through your successes?
- How did this create anxiety in you?
- Can you see how you got to value yourself only for accomplishments, instead of knowing your intrinsic value?
- How were you judged and punished if you did not meet your parents needs for success and value?
- Consider the shame you feel if you fail at a task.
- Did you conform or rebel?
- How are you going to work with the issue now, of knowing you have intrinsic value and yet still feeling shame around how you speak, behave, act, achieve?
- How did praise and reward, instead of affirmation of your intrinsic value, result in a life lived for others instead of yourself?

- How is this linked to a level of anxiety (fear) and depression (shame)?
- Can you identify the split in your psyche? You are happy and proud if you are successful in your defenses of achievement, caretaking etc. and are you miserable if others disapprove and can you then not feel any sense of intrinsic value?

Sub-categories of a child needing to be affirmed for their innate and intrinsic value are:

Dependency Needs:

A child must be allowed to be dependent on the parent until it is clear that the child is developmentally able to meet their own need. Not sooner and not later. For instance, if the expectation is for a 2 year old to read and write, it will fail with resultant shame from the disappointment, anger and so called encouragement and teaching of the parent. However, if a 6 year old is not expected to learn to read and write there will be shame as all his peers out-perform him. If a child is molly-coddled and everything is done for them past the age-appropriate time, they learn to be dependent, entitled, self-important to cover up a deep sense of shame and worthlessness.

At the social level, consider for a moment the way women have been infantilized and made to feel delicate, weak, inferior, dependent and needy. How many of you had mothers or grandmothers who could not balance a check book or drive? Consider the gender inequality in dependency needs being overly met for women and under met for men. Consider the inner unaware bargain inherent in this situation. The woman gets to be inferior and needing to be “looked after,” to make the man feel big and strong and powerful. The cost to both is that the woman never learns self-efficacy and can never feel whole and competent and the man lives with constant anxiety of not being the successful provider and protector.

If, on the other hand, you were expected to do things you could not yet do, the result can only be shame and all the accompanying feelings of inadequacy and stupidity. I remember an example, as a 7 or 8 year old, of my father telling me to get a tool from the shed and bringing the wrong thing and the resultant scorn and annoyance at my ignorance. Or the shame of trying to bake something in comparison to a mother who baked perfectly and feeling completely stupid that you made some mistake in the ingredients or instructions. You all have many examples of irritated parenting, instead of loving, step by step instruction and help until a task was mastered. And you all have examples of things being taken out of your hands as you tried to do something and your impatient parent did not have time, got irritated, shouted or worse.

- Now as you consider re-parenting yourself, identify the feelings you felt in certain situations:
- What meaning did you make of the situation and feeling?
- Were you getting age-appropriate instruction or not?
- Were you encouraged to be dependent or independent?
- Was there a gender difference in our family?

Intimacy Needs:

In a healthy family each person is allowed to express their own feelings and needs and are supported in learning to meet their own needs as is age appropriate. Feelings and needs are neither repressed and punished nor are they indulged and rewarded.

In a dysfunctional shame-based family system, feelings and needs are experienced as dangerous and threatening and the parents shut down feelings and needs in a myriad number of tactics. Instead of

connection there is comfort, soothing, caretaking, advice giving, lecturing, punishment, judgment, criticism of feelings and needs, but not honest and authentic connection in feelings and needs. Feelings and needs are shamed away, either through “nice,” kind ways, or harsh unkind ways. An un- healthy family is based on unaware contracts of each person meeting everyone else’s needs to feel safe and to have value. The message is given, one way or another that feelings and needs are bad and wrong and you should be afraid of them and get rid of them as quickly as possible so that everyone can be “happy.” There is no recognition that feelings and needs are a universal part of our humanity and cannot be dismissed, ignored, and they will not go away no matter what tactic is used. Denial, repression, suppression, dissociation are tactics that are learned, and encouraged. Living in your head of logic, rationalizations, justifications, blaming and judgment is what is considered safe.

In a dysfunctional family people learn to blame others for their feelings. They do not realize, and are not helped to see, that their feelings are created from the meaning of devaluing that they attribute to having their feelings. Parents in these families, model for their children blame. They accuse their children of causing their feelings when they do not do what the parent wants. The child feels shame as a result because *their very being is attacked - they are bad for causing feelings*. The distinction is not made between their being and their actions and the parent is incapable of seeing that the child did not cause their feelings, but merely triggered old wounds inside of themselves. Eg. “You are driving me crazy!” Inherent in this statement is the message that YOU (not your behavior) is powerful enough to cause insanity in me. A healthy parent would say, “When you don’t listen to what I am saying, I feel irritated. Please pay attention when I speak to you.” In this statement the behavior is addressed, and the child’s value is left in tact. The parent will do their own work around why they are triggered into irritation and why this is an old wound for them and might even share this at a later time if appropriate.

On the other hand, and at the other extreme, you may have had your feelings and needs indulged. You learned to use feelings to manipulate to get what you wanted. You may have learned to act coy and needy to get what you wanted. This can show itself in adulthood in comments like, “Oh my god, I am so sorry. I feel terrible,” when offending someone else. Now the focus becomes on how you feel instead of the on the feelings of the other person that you just offended. This is manipulation and lack of self-responsibility.

In a healthy family each person is allowed to express their own feelings and needs and are supported in learning to meet their own needs as is age appropriate. Feelings are shared. Needs are shared. Meaning is shared. Feelings and needs do not take away from the child’s intrinsic value. Children are taught through example to speak about their feelings and needs and have a loving relationship with them. Intimacy is in our shared human struggle of feeling and need and meaning. There is no intimacy if we do not speak about the relationship at any level except the intellect and behavior. In a healthy system, each person expresses their own feelings and needs and also takes responsibility for their own feelings and needs. There is no blaming of others for feelings.

Consider:

- How were you shamed for having feelings?
- How were you shamed for having needs?
- How were you shamed for showing them or speaking about them?
- What tactics have you used to suppress and deny your feelings and needs?
- How were your feelings indulged?
- Did you learn to pity yourself - how do you find yourself wallowing in self-pity and not being able to find a way out of misery?

- How do you manipulate others to meet your needs?
- Do you understand the difference between caring and caretaking?

Accountability:

In a healthy family system, a child is held accountable for their behavior. Limits are set with behaviors that are harmful in anyway. A child that has no limits, that is ignored, dismissed, indulged and not held accountable results in a highly anxious child that feels unsafe and insecure with a great deal of acting out and “testing of limits.” On the other hand, if boundaries and limits are rigid and harsh, the result is a child that is constricted with shame and fear and does not learn to think for itself, always following a rigid moralistic, rule bound way of life leading to fundamentalism of very kind. Both rigid and loose boundaries are the result of inner shame and fear and wounding in the parent and result in wounding in their own children. Boundary violations can be seen as anything the parent does that threatens the emotional, physical, intellectual, sexual, spiritual integrity and safety of child. In other words, anything that is shaming through neglect or abuse.

In a loving system, the child is held in love and respect and behaviors are guided and limited to what is appropriate and necessary for optimal growth.

Boundaries is a huge topic and so I am recommending the book, “Broken Toys, Broken Dreams,” by Terry Kellog for those of you that wish to delve more deeply into dysfunctional boundaries in families.

Journal about:

- What were the rules in my family? Did I rebel or conform?
- How were rules imposed? Was there harsh punishment, inconsistency and double messages or no rules at all?
- Were rules rigid or lax?
- How were my emotional, intellectual, physical, sexual, and spiritual boundaries violated or ignored?
- How did these rules make me feel?
- How did boundary violations make me feel and believe about myself?