

The Fundamental Issue of Shame

Underlying all the characteristics of having an external frame of reference is the fundamental ground of human physical life, shame. It is explained, described and outlined in the book of Genesis.... which is beyond the scope of this teaching, but if you are interested in understanding the myth more, I am free for consultation.

Suffice to say here that from the moment of physical incarnation you are in the realm of duality and now you are not only divine, but also limited by the physical condition. Any connection to awareness of relationship to the Divine is veiled from the young organism. Like any animal, it does not know itself as an expression and incarnation of divinity. Limitations and constrictions are experienced as “less than.” This fundamental sense of “less than,” is the experience of shame within us and can be evoked by any slight external reminder of our limitation as a human, rather than as an all-knowing spirit being. The slightest hint at criticism, or someone else seeing a mistake, or being confronted on some unawareness, or fearing that someone might see our human failings, is enough to plunge us into the deepest death experience of shame - which is , “I am dead to my truest nature and damned to this small and limited existence in the hell of believing myself to be worthless.” Truly people are more afraid of this experience than death itself, which is why we say, “I just died of shame.” It is why we maintain our defenses against our shame as if fighting for our lives.

It is the experience of feeling worthless, unlovable, unacceptable, not good enough, devalued, stupid, wrong, bad.... and this condition makes us very vulnerable to not being accepted by the external world of other beings. Shame is not just the guilt of making a mistake but seeing one’s identity as fundamentally flawed, wrong and bad. It is not about behavior, or “doing” something wrong, or failing at something. It is the meaning that is construed as a result of this, and the meaning is that **our very existence and identity is worthless**, wrong, bad, flawed, unlovable and unacceptable. It is not until we wake up to our essential nature and can bring our divinity into relationship with this condition that we can experience any relief.

The pervasiveness of meaning we attach to what we say and do, or, do not say and do is rooted in unawareness and a basic misunderstanding that a mistake means we are a mistake and that anything that goes “wrong,” in our world, like not being able to master something in the world, or an angry parent, a critical teacher, an accident... means that “I caused it and that means I am bad.” It is the universal primary narcissism of a small child. I am the center and cause of all the wrongs and ills in the world and this means I am powerfully bad, wrong and flawed. The pervasive experience of this is experienced as depression. Shame is our worst fear and so if I am constantly afraid of feeling shame, then I am filled with anticipatory anxiety.

Of course, this condition is helped along by others blaming, attacking, abusing and insisting that it is true - it is our fault and we did cause the problem - whatever that might be, because they themselves do not want to feel the same shame at the core of their being and can easily place it on another to avoid feeling it themselves. This is most effective defense against our own shame. The world is full of people trapped in shame trying to blame others for their experience of suffering and never realizing that it is only when they bring their own loving self-acceptance, and capacity to tell the truth to themselves, that any external relationship with another is even possible. The internal lack of loving relationship to our own suffering translates into a lack of loving relationship externally as well. Most relationships therefore are plagued by anxiety and blame.

Examine the two columns for a very elementary, but helpful distinction between having guilt when we recognize how we have fallen short in some way and knowing that we are in process of learning, and shame which immediately annihilates us and stops all process and reflects no inner relationship to self.

GUILT

Feeling resulting from “wrong” behavior

eg. I made a mistake

I failed at this task

REALISTIC / TRUTH

Based on an objective value system of “right” and “wrong” behavior

Result of good parenting - respectful, mutual, non-controlling realistic expectations. Parents do not need from parents

Results in:

- a lack of defensiveness
- ability to change behavior
- able to apologize
- is able to forgive self and forgive others
- good self esteem, confidence sense of efficacy, integrity
- realistic perception of self as human - good and learning...
- has a sense of hope, trust in self and others
- an understanding of mutuality and equality (win/win)
- belief in the fundamental goodness of humanity

SHAME

Sense of worthlessness, diminishment as a human being

“I am a mistake”

“I am a failure”

UNREALISTIC / LIE

Based on a personalized value system of *self* as bad, defective unworthy, inadequate

Result of parental abuse, control, blaming, high expectations and demands for perfection. Children must meet parental needs

Results in:

- extreme defensiveness, rage, blame, projection, rationalization
- defends bad behavior
- cannot apologize
- cannot forgive self or others - is critical, punitive and judgmental of self and others
- very poor self-esteem and fear of failure as well as feelings of grandiosity and self-righteousness
- unrealistic perception of self as either better than or worse than
- feels hopeless, distrustful, fears criticism, failure, abandonment rejection and punishment
- operates out of a win/lose mentality
- belief in the fundamental badness of humanity

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SELF ACCEPTANCE

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

Deuteronomy 5: 6-21

Self-acceptance is the capacity a person has for relating to their own human self in a loving, compassionate, tolerant and forgiving way. Love is understood to also include setting limits to behaviors and beliefs that are self-limiting and self-harming - such as "I am bad and deserve punishment and rejection." The person is aware of and accepts both their human foibles, temptations, limitations, painful feelings and mistakes as well as their strengths, talents and gifts without either feelings of arrogant pride, self-entitlement and self-importance to defensively cover over debilitating shame, a sense of deprivation and believing self to have no importance. It is the capacity to accept all aspects of what is seen and within without judgment and rejection.

Self-Acceptance may be recognized by:

- an openness to ask for more information and admit to not knowing things without embarrassment or apology
- an expressed awareness and acceptance of who one is "warts and all." The person can describe their human failings and strengths, opinions and beliefs, openly, self-confidently and candidly with some humor, perspective and emotional detachment, without being grandiose or self-deprecating
- a realistic perception about others - neither over-idealizing nor devaluing - a lack of criticism of others and a lack of overly admiring or worshipping others
- expressions of a basic belief in one's goodness and lovability despite not being "perfect"
- expressions indicating an acceptance of others and belief in their intrinsic worth despite their failings and mistakes
- the ability to accept recognition, affirmation and support without embarrassment
- a balanced attitude and way of life in caring for self and others
- expressions indicating that they are able to trust their feelings and intuition
- God external and god within is understood as unconditionally loving and accepting

Self-Acceptance enables one to:

- take good care of oneself by not becoming overextended, setting good limits, setting aside time for the things they enjoy ... maintain balance in their lives
- not feel shame and inadequacy or act defensively when one does not know how to respond or respond in a way that is not helpful
- be present, compassionate, loving to self and have some humor about themselves even when making mistakes
- express caring and compassion to others and help them feel loved even when they may be doing something potentially destructive to themselves or others
- express opinions about behavior and set limits with behavior in a non-judgmental, non-critical way
- be present to others without resentment or anxiety caused by resentment and stress over not caring for their own needs

SHAME

And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

Genesis 2: 16, 17

Shame is an extremely painful, internal emotional state that reflects a person's belief in their basic badness and unworthiness. It is often well defended against and not easily recognized or named for what it is because awareness of the feeling is so painful.

People who feel a lot of shame in many areas of their lives will reveal this by:

- expressing feeling “guilty” or “BAD,” often eg. “I felt so bad”
- apologizing often and/or inappropriately
- appearing either anxious, self-conscious, ill at ease (nervous mannerisms, avoids eye contact) or arrogant, cocky and self-important
- expressing thoughts and opinions about self that indicate an internal belief system of not being good enough, unworthy, undeserving, a failure, inadequate, stupid, unlovable, defective, etc. This can be recognized by a person frequently expressing judgment of self or self-doubt, saying “I should have...,” “That was so dumb of me...,” “If only I had...,” “I’ll never forgive myself,” “I don’t know if I can do this ...”
- having rigid, judgmental and forceful opinions about others leading them to being critical, judgmental and moralistic about others - using extreme words like “always,” “never,” “every time,” eg. “She *never* follows through on *anything*,” “He is such an idiot.”
- idealizing others - “He is *absolutely wonderful* - his homilies are *always incredible*.”
- not being able to own mistakes, failures and limitations
- not being able to hear criticism or suggestions, admit to not knowing something, without defensiveness like blaming, denying, minimizing, justifying..
- expressing the belief that mistakes in behavior reflects intrinsic badness in a person
- seeing God as judgmental, punitive and shaming - e.g. “God sent this to test you,” “I don’t know why God allows suffering.”
- **any of the characteristics covered in the list at the beginning - perfectionism, caretaking, control, dichotomized thinking, etc.**

Shame often leads to one to:

- being judgmental and critical of others leading to advice giving, fixing and controlling others
- expressing opinions in an uncaring and judgmental way
- judging self and others as inadequate, unlovable, a failure, bad, worthless
- being self-critical and hard on oneself when they perceive a mistake or failure on their part
- having difficulty sharing their fears, failures, concerns in therapy or with others
- having unrealistic expectations of themselves or others
- not accepting feedback about their goodness, lovability - unable to accept grace, acceptance and love

A hurtful act is the transference to others of the degradation that we bear in ourselves. ~Simone Weil

Exercise:

See if you can allow yourself to be aware of the feeling of shame that precedes every judgment, every bit of irritation and anger, every time you blame or attack and see if you can bring loving acceptance and limit to the condition. Keep a record of the pervasiveness of the emotion.

What color would you give the emotion?

What description or image would you give to the emotion?

What would your life look like if shame was a very small part of your Truest Self?