

A Shame-Free Church

*A sermon by Reverend Nathan C. Walker
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on Pride Sunday, June 6, 2010*

We are aware of the vulnerability today's topic, shame. It can be a painful feeling. Shame can become a pervasive mood and cripple a person's self-worth, especially when used in the context of religious organizations. We are mindful of the vulnerability of this subject and am grateful to be in your presence as we co-create a holding ground for insight and healing. We do so by offering three reflections.

The first reflection is designed to help us understand the nature of shame. The second reflection will help us identify the sources of shame. And we'll close by proposing practices to release shame in ourselves and in our community. We will do this by using little vignettes to illustrate how different people relate to their shame all while drawing upon the insights of scholars Ronald and Patricia Potter-Efron in their book entitled *Letting Go of Shame: Understanding How Shame Affects Your Life*. Our hope is that this service will help us reflect upon how shame may affect our relationship with others as well as with ourselves. Here's our first vignette:

She said to her self, "I thought the church was supposed to help people [feel better about themselves]. But somehow all I remember are the endless messages that I was bad and would go to hell. The punishments and humiliations of the religious school I went to convinced me that if so many others thought I'd turn out bad, then I probably was bad. I still have trouble with that. Some days I feel worse than guilty – like I don't really belong on this earth. I feel unclean deep inside myself."

What is shame? Let us take some time to understand what it is and how it manifests. Shame is a state of mind, a state of being rooted in the belief that one is somehow less than. Shame is more than just an emotional or mental affect, it comes with "a set of physical responses, such as looking down or blushing." For those of us who have been shamed by religions we can find ourselves approaching a house of worship with trepidation. When we engage in a spiritual practice, such as prayer, sometimes we close our bodies, bring our chin to our chest and begin a cycle of hiding and withdrawing. This leads us into an avalanche of thoughts of failure and lead us into spiritual despair. Shame is kind of spiritual despair in that shame "involves a failure of the total being. The person who is shamed believes that she should not exist. Shame can be the source of a spiritual crisis because shame is a "painful belief in one's basic defectiveness as a human being." Isn't it refreshing to be a part of a religious tradition that seeks to preserve the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

It is refreshing, specially given the fact that so many religions teach children from the time they are born that they are not worthy, that they are born of sin. Religions with such a theology legitimate themselves by taping into people's shame and teach them to believe that they need religion to be free from that shame. It can become an abusive cycle: You're bad and you need me to be good but my role is to tell you that you are bad. Now give me money.

For centuries Universalists have sought to free themselves from the cycle of shame by articulating a theology of love. God is too good to shame. God is too good to damn. In this way, Universalists say that you are not born of sin, you are born of love and upon death you return to love. This is what it means to express a theology of universal salvation – a shame-free theology that is designed to preserve the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Unfortunately, many people are

raised in shaming environments that lead people to suffer greatly, regardless of the circumstances. Take for instance this story.

“A middle-aged man has a secure job with a small firm... he consistently gets positive work reviews from his supervisor. He knows that he is well-regarded by his peers. One day his boss criticizes this man for a small mistake: for not submitting a report on time. His employer simply calls the problem to this man’s attention without attacking him. Still, the man feels utterly defeated. He “knows” something is basically wrong with him. He believes he has been exposed as a fraud. He is certain that others will recognize that he should not even be allowed to work there anymore. He is not perfect, so he must be worthless. He spends hours remembering every mistake he has ever made at this and previous jobs that only make him feel worse. He retreats to his office, closes the door, and hides there the rest of the day. He knows he will never be good enough.”

Deeply shamed persons suffer greatly and will often accept the invitation to feel shame. The man in this vignette has developed a self-esteem based on pleasing people, on being perfect. If ever he is given feedback, even if it’s shared in a constructive manner, he retreats into a state of self-loathing. He begins to conflate shame with guilt. “Shame concerns a person’s failure of being, while guilt points to a failure of doing.” The reason why this simple exchange at work led him into such despair is because he holds an unconscious belief that something is basically wrong with him as a human being. Rather than simply admitting his guilt about not following through with submitting that report, and correcting that action, he began to take it personally and see it as a failure of his own being.

“Of course, a person could experience both shame and guilt at the same time. For example, the spouse who breaks his vow to be faithful may be full of remorse. He might say to himself that he has done something very bad – an admission of guilt. He might also believe he is weak, defective, or disgusting and that there must be something inherently wrong with him – all indicators of shame.”

Shame can be more difficult to heal than guilt, because it is about the person rather than specific actions. The shamed person heals by changing her self-concept so that she gains new self-respect and pride. Normally a slow and sometimes painful process, this involves looking deeply at our basic assumptions about our place in the universe. Where do such feelings come from?

This ends our first reflection on understanding shame. In a moment we will offer our second reflection, which is about the sources of our shame. But first, we want to hold you all in care by offering you the following musical hug.

Meditation on Breathing (#1009)
Breathe in. Breathe out.
When I breathe in I breathe in peace.
When I breathe out I breath out love.

Sources of Shame

Reflection Part II

It feels so good to come into this historic place, where generations of people have been coming to make meaning of their lives. We come today to not only understand shame and to learn ways to release shame, but also to identify some sources of our shame. We’ll explore four common sources of shame: our culture, our families of origin, our current relationships and our relationship with ourselves.

One source of our shame is our culture. Our “shame may reflect [a] cultural bias [or be a result of] discriminatory practices.” Take for instance this story: “As a young waitress working her way though school, she learned she had to put up with a lot of remarks from customers about her body and her sex life. But she graduated from a tough business school with honors and went to work determined to find

respect for her decisions and abilities. Now that she is a supervisor, sometimes she gets respect. But when she has to pull rank and make a tough decision, she knows her employees make resentful jokes about her 'being a bitch.' She wishes they could consider her as just a boss, instead of always as a 'woman boss.'"

Shame can come from the culture in which we live. We then develop feelings of isolation and feel we don't belong, feelings of marginality. It's refreshing to be in a religious community that teaches us how to release those difficult feelings.

A second source of shame can be our "families of origin. Many badly shamed persons grew up with critical and unsupportive parents." For example, "A two-year old child... finds a special place in the garden where she digs happily in the soft soil. She feels proud of her accomplishments. "Look at me," she wants to tell the world. "Look at what I can do. I am good." Then she hears her mother shout, "Just look at you!... You are dirty. Your clothes are ruined. I'm very disappointed with you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. The child feels very small. She drops her head and stares to the ground. She sees her dirty hands and clothes and begins to feel dirty inside. She thinks there must be something very bad about her, something so bad she will never really be clean. She hears her mother's disdain. She feels defective."

In this way, shame can come from our families of origin. We can feel victimized by our parents, or lack thereof, and train our minds to spend a lifetime holding resentments and anger and grudges. It's so refreshing to be in a community that teaches us how to heal those difficult feelings.

Feelings of shame can also come from our "current shaming relationships. [We may be] influenced by shaming events in [our] adulthood, such as being married to a verbally abusive person" or being in a shame-based work environment or a shame-based religion. Here's an example of a relationship that becomes a source of shame.

"A man who repeatedly tells his wife that she is so bad in bed that no man could enjoy her, diminishes her belief in her attractiveness. Once she starts to believe him, she is less likely to consider leaving or even standing up to him as an equal. The more this man can shame his wife, the more power he gains in the relationship."

Shame can come from our current relationships, leading us to not only erode our own self-worth but to lose our sense of trust in others. It's an honor to be in a religious community that helps us rebuild that trust in people as we learn to rebuild our own self-worth.

The final source of shame that we'll explore derives from our own thoughts and behaviors. Some of us can be our "own worst shamers. [We can] relentlessly attack ourselves even when others try to support [us]." This can result in thoughts such as "I'm defective, dirty, stupid, unlovable." Self-shaming thoughts can manifest through self-deprecating humor and even affect how we relate to others. Have you ever been or know someone who is highly critical of others? Often this behavior is a symbol for how they relate to themselves. Take for instance this story.

An older man spends much of his time criticizing everybody around him. His wife is stupid; his son is lazy; his daughter is foolish; his friends are crude; the world is rotten. He does not hesitate to tell others that he is smarter, more sensible, and just generally better than they. He advertises his sense of superiority. He expects to be honored. Perhaps a few people buy his image. But others recognize that this man is wearing a mask. They see through his pomposity and arrogance to the insecure and flawed person inside. They realize that this man tries to convince the world that he is better than others, when he really feels he is worse. Still, living around this man is quite difficult, since he is so contemptuous of others. Rather than honoring or worshiping him, they pull away, avoiding him and hesitating to tell him anything about themselves.

This man has yet to see the connection between his judgment of others and his fierce self-

shaming. I'm so honored to be in a religious tradition that teaches us to practice self-care, so that we can better care for others.

These are five sources of our shame. We can be our "own worst shamers" which can lead to creating shame in our current relationships. It can be a painful cycle of shaming and being shamed. We can experience shame in our culture and in our families of origin, and in our religious communities. Often religions, cultures and families can shame our bodies and our sexualities. We are taught to deny our bodies, to repress our sexuality, because we are taught that sex is perverse and bad. When these thoughts dominate our minds, we develop a life based on fear and shame. We learn to mistrust our bodies and therefore mistrust others. The other extreme, however, is to experience shame deficiency and throw our bodies, our sexuality into other's faces. Take for instance this story.

"A young couple, out on a date, is returning home on a crowded bus. They can't keep their hands off each other. At first, the people sitting near this pair don't say anything. Some of them even smile a bit and remember the times they were deeply in love. But the couple soon go beyond holding hands – they begin explicit sexual activity. Finally, one of the bus riders leans over to another and asks: "What's wrong with those two – have they no shame?""

There is such a thing as having too little shame. It's called shame deficiency. In this way, our service is inappropriately titled. Rather than saying, a shame-free church, we should say a shame-releasing church. There is a good kind of shame and a bad kind of shame. For example, the goal is to help the immodest person release the excessive shame that prevents them from using a good kind of shame that inspires self-awareness, modesty, privacy, and discretion. The flaunting and need for attention is often a result of a deep-seeded desire to be seen, to be heard, to be noticed. The goal is to help the highly critical person to release the excessive shame that prevents them from being able to authentically care about others and express mutual warmth and comfort. In order to do this, we must first name the origins of our shame so that we can learn to let them go.

This closes our reflection on the sources of shame. In our final reflection, on releasing shame, we will discuss how to take a journey with your church family – a community that promises to give you not hell, but hope and courage. On your journey toward releasing shame, "you will need energy, patience, and persistence. You will also need understanding and courage. Above all, you will need hope – a deep faith that nobody needs to remain forever in personal despair. People who heal their shame discover they are freer to live lives that center around self-respect, dignity and honor, as well as realistic pride." This is the wish we'll express in our third and final reflection. But first the choral anthem.

Choral Anthem Go Out ~ Music by Elizabeth Alexander words by John Murray

Releasing Shame

Reflections Part III

We promise to give you not hell, but hope and courage. We hope that you will live out this message by finding ways to courageously heal shame in yourself and in your relationships. Then come back here, your spiritual home, to teach us what you learned and help us co-create a holding ground for self-care, insight and healing.

As we've learned today, healing begins with understanding. We must understand not only the nature of shame but the origins of our shame. Once there is understanding there must be action. Let's talk about how to couple our understanding with five simple action steps we can take to heal the wounds of shame. First we must be patient and "become fully aware of our shame"; second, we must "accept a certain amount of shame as part of the human condition"; and third we must "notice our defenses against shame"; and four, we must learn to "challenge shame"; and finally, we must "set positive goals for

ourselves to help replace our shame with...drum roll please... self-worth.” Let’s start with coupling patience with understanding.

First, we must be gentle with ourselves and allow ourselves to be patient. “Shame heals slowly.” Remember, “shame is about a person’s identity as a human being. Since the wounds... are frequently deep and long lasting, it will take a little while to [truly] feel better.” This may mean finding ways to sit and watch the movie of shame rather than be the lead character in the movie of shame. Listen to this voice:

“I’m finally learning to appreciate my shame. I used to be terrified of it. Now I can sit quietly with my shame some of the time. I try to listen to what my shame tells me about myself, about how I want to live my life. The most important thing I’ve recognized is that shame is part of me. If I hate my shame, I’m hating myself.”

This person is exercising the second action step, which is to “accept a certain amount of shame as part of the human condition.” She is able to see that shame is natural and can be a signal for deeper understanding and healing. She has come to accept her shame and as a result grow in self-awareness. In doing so, she is able to achieve the third action step: to notice the defenses against shame.

At times we can deny “the parts of life that bring us shame, forcing our real problems out of our consciousness.” At times we can “withdrawal, temporarily pulling away from others with loss of interest and energy.” Other times we can exercise the defense of anger by “driving others away so that they cannot see our defects. This is most likely to occur if we believe others are deliberately trying to humiliate us.” Or we can fall into patterns of perfectionism by trying to “hold off shame by striving to never make a mistake or to do everything perfectly.” These are simply some of the defenses against shame. As we learn to name that pain, we dilute its power and therefore learn to observe shame rather than get swept up in the defenses against it. That is the simple goal: to observe without judging. Here’s an example:

I am noticing my mother’s voice in my head when looking in the mirror. “Oh, there you are, sweetheart. Well, it looks like you’ve put on a few more pounds, dear.” I’m now learning to simply hear her voice and recognize that was the voice she had in her head. I can see the origins of this voice. I can name the pain it causes but like a coat of shame. It was passed on like a hand-me-down. But it’s my choice on whether to keep wearing it.

That’s the goal. To observe that voice, to name it’s origins, to no longer blame other people for how we feel, and empower ourselves to make a choice on whether to continue to feed those thoughts. This is the simple and powerful spiritual practice of Observing Without Judging. When we observe without judging we learn to watch the shame, name the source, and to release it. No longer do we choose to wear the hand-me-down coat of shame and fall into the pattern of blaming our parents for everything. We take responsibility for our own feelings and empower ourselves to make a simple and profound choice: the choice to accept ourselves, for exactly who we are.

This is what it means to challenge shame. It takes energy to do so. It takes patience and persistence. It takes insight, understanding and courage. For example, we may have the courage to say, “That’s my depression telling me I’m no good. I can’t stop that from happening now, but I know it’s not true.” Or “Women may still be considered second rate by many, [including women], but that doesn’t mean I have to condemn myself any longer.”

Or maybe we’ll have the courage to finally say, “My partner criticizes me ten times a day. It’s time for me to choose not to live that way anymore. I’m worth more than that.” Or “I’m tired of hating myself. For one thing, I’m going to make a commitment not to call myself terrible names any more...[or to compete against myself or interrogate others. I just want to be me.]”

Or maybe we'll have the courage to say, "I [used to feel] completely isolated. I felt disconnected from my family, God, the whole world, and from myself. I had no idea why I was alive. My shame was all I had left. Finally, I went back to my roots in order to put meaning into my life. Once I found my spiritual center, my shame started to let up."

That is our wish for you today: to find your spiritual center. Lift up that one-true mirror and see yourself for the beautiful, amazing, courageous person that you are. As you take that step, know that we'll be here with you, mustering up the courage to do the same. We hope to create a community that will be patience with you, just as you are patience with us. For the ultimate goal is to learn to be patience with ourselves.

Once we are able to be patience with ourselves and "become fully aware of our shame" we are able to take that next step and "accept a certain amount of shame as part of the human condition."

In that newfound state, we gain the skills to "notice our defenses against shame" and we learn to "challenge shame" and therefore gain the power to "set positive goals for ourselves to help replace our shame with self-worth." To do this we must apply the principle of humanity, the principle of humility, the principle of autonomy and the principle of competence.

The principle of humanity is simply recognizing that "everyone belongs to the human race. There are no exceptions. There are no examinations to pass, no duties to accomplish, no possible way to be disqualified. All people are human, and no amount of shame can take that away." When we know this we are able to apply the principle of humility. "All human beings are equal – no person is better or worse than another. Differences do not make anyone better than anyone else. We can act on this principle by declining invitations to feel inferior or superior to others, and by... [practicing the principle of autonomy by accepting the fact that "each of us has the right and responsibility to decide how to live our lives." In doing so we recognize that "every person is good enough to contribute some value to the world." We each have skills, competencies, and gifts to share. We continue to develop these competencies by replacing shame with realistic goals such as, "accepting being good enough rather than being perfect."

So, when next you come home, when next you enter your spiritual home, come not with goal of being perfect, come as you are and cast the vision for who you long to be. Come into the space that has been co-created by generations of people who have been collectively taking one more step toward humanity, toward humility. Come and bring your insights, your compassion, your healing presence and know simply that here you matter, here you belong.

In this spirit, we dedicate our closing hymn to you. How Could Anyone #1053

How could anyone ever tell you
You were anything less than beautiful
How could anyone ever tell you
You were less than whole
How could anyone fail to notice
That your loving is a miracle
How deeply you're connected to my soul.