

**I**N RECENT YEARS, SOME RESPECTED representatives of psychology and psychotherapy have questioned the reason(s) for so much recidivism among clients. Helen Block Lewis, in *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*, and Carl Goldberg, in *Understanding Shame*, have formulated and substantiated an hypothesis that much of this is due to the fact that, during the therapeutic process, these clients had not dealt with the experience of shame. Their research also revealed that often the therapist had not dealt with this issue relative to him- or herself. In these cases, the therapist would "by-pass" the shame verbalized by the client and return it to him or her, thus thwarting the healing process.

Some theologians – among them, Donald Capps, James Fowler, and Lewis Smedes – have begun to apply this finding to Christian ministry. If shame is so crippling and, at the same time, such a complex issue to confront, how often does well-intended ministry enhance rather than heal it? Viewing the Jesus of the Gospels as one who desires to heal people of their shame might reveal ways in which we as Christian ministers can do the same. The stooped woman in Luke (chapter 13), the leper in Mark (chapter 1), and the adulteress in John (chapter 8) offer excellent narratives for focusing such contemplation.

In this article, I will explore the experience of shame and review some of the literature offered by the psychological and theological communities which has significant implications for the ministry of spiritual direction. We will look at causes of shame, how we defend ourselves against it, several stories in which

we have been shamed, in my own life, two particular instances that have particular significance for spiritual direction, and finally, ways of addressing shame issues in order to significantly improve our self and God. The point is that there are many other related issues so that there can be no simple answer. It might be helpful to begin this discussion

## Shame:

### *A Primary Root of Resistance to Movement in Direction*

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shame plays a key role, and ways that we heal from shame. In my work, two pertinent implications have emerged that have particular significance for spiritual directors. The first is the importance of addressing shame issues in order for significant movement to occur in one's journey toward self and God. The other is the need for spiritual directors to confront their own shame issues so that they can minister more constructively to others. It might be helpful to begin this discussion by defining shame.

### Defining Shame

First of all, shame is not guilt. Guilt is a disturbing emotion activated when one becomes aware that s/he has behaved in a manner to bring harm to another or to breach some important standard or norm of morality. Guilt is associated specifically with an action – something one has said or done. Shame, on the other hand, refers to the feeling one has about one's very self. This is a self-alienating emotion which leads a person to believe that there is some fundamental flaw – however difficult to define – that renders him or her unworthy. In his book, *Shame and Grace*, Lewis Smedes (pp. 6-7) offers a few sentences that can be of help in identifying and clarifying the presence of this emotion:

- "I sometimes feel as if I am a fake."
- "I feel that if people who admire me really knew me, they might have contempt for me."
- "I seldom feel as if I'm up to what is expected of me."
- "I feel inferior to the really good people that I know."
- "I feel that God must be disgusted with me."
- "I feel as if I just cannot measure up to what I ought to be."

Shame has a profound effect on one's intra- and interpersonal life. It has the power to induce feelings of inadequacy about oneself, inferiority relative to others, and a sense of deficiency relative to a relationship with God. Until a person is able to address his or her feelings of shame, it can be a formidable hindrance to human spiritual growth. We often expend a great deal of energy trying to hide this reality from others, not to mention from ourselves. This effort becomes compounded when undertaken in the name of virtue, spirituality, or religion. One way this might happen is when an individual operates out of an image of God (e.g. taskmaster, judge) that denigrates God's true affection and value for him or her.

### From a Theological Perspective

The myth of Adam and Eve's departure from the Garden of Eden described in Chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis serves as an attempt to both identify and explain the reality of shame described above. This biblical tradition originated somewhere around the 9th century B.C. and is not meant to be historical. It was a way of attempting to explain how the human condition evolved and developed. The loss of a paradisal, unitary reality is not unique to the Genesis creation story. Most cultural traditions enjoy a similar account as a way to explain how people were experiencing

their humanness (Fowler, 1996, p. 133). This motif is an attempt to depict one of the most difficult tensions with which human beings have to cope. Such tension arises from the experience of spontaneously belonging to the environment while also enjoying the ability to reflect consciously on this relationship. This creates a sense of separation, and a distancing process begins that often causes pain and conflict.

Another way of looking at this is that Adam and Eve are no longer "one." They become conscious that they are two separate persons with two different identities. a state that some authors call "objective self-awareness" (Broucek, Shame and the Self, pp. 1-9).

According to Broucek, in this new consciousness they experience a certain nakedness before each other and God. Having fallen from an idyllic

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situation, they become aware of the startling realization that they are frail, exposed, and limited. These feelings, which constitute an experience of shame, motivate them to find a remedy for their human nakedness - in this case, a fig leaf. Gershen Kaufman, in *Shame: The Power of Caring*, sees this fig leaf as symbolic of the defense mechanisms that humans use in an attempt to disavow the experience of shame and cope with life.

Christian theology has described this condition as original sin, but sin only in an analogous sense - a state of being (shame) in contrast to acts for which one is responsible (guilt). In this context, "original shame" might be a more constructive term. Although not using the word "shame," Karl Rahner supports this other way of interpreting the human condition when he writes:

*What is permanent and valid about the dogma of original sin and its existential meaning could certainly be expressed without this word (sin)...In preaching and in catechesis, therefore, we should not begin immediately with this word, which then has to be modified with a great deal of effort afterward. We should rather acquire enough theology so that starting with experience and with a description of the existential human situation, we can talk about the matter itself without using the word. Only at the end would we have to indicate that this very actual reality of one's own life and one's own situation is called original sin in ecclesiastical language.*

— *The Content of Faith*, p. 528

**It might prove more constructive to view Jesus as coming to save humankind from original shame rather than original sin.**

James Fowler, a prominent contemporary theologian, offers us a provocative way of looking at shame. In the infant's first nine months in the womb, s/he lives the unitary existence that Adam and Eve lived before the fall. The fetus is "at one" with all reality and experiences itself at the center. Birth brings about a separation although, through the first year of life, the child continues to experience reality as unitary because, in most situations, the mother (and other primary care givers) continually satisfy his or her demands. Only gradually does the child become aware of the startling truth that he or she is not the center of the universe and begin to gain objec-

tive self-awareness or self consciousness. Herein lies the origin of feeling inadequate and the necessity of a coverup – the etiology of shame (Fowler, 1996, pp. 132-139).

### From a Psychological Perspective

To compare the theological perspective to the psychological perspective is to discover that the similarities are impressive. Because psychology and theology possess a similar understanding of shame, there is rich potential for bridge-building and dialogue between the professions of therapist and spiritual director. Let us first look at a psychologist's definition, this one by Carl Goldberg:

Shame...derives from a sense of betrayal – the shocking or startling realization that we are frail, vulnerable and finite beings, no different than the vulnerable people around us. The function of shame, as a self process, is to confront us with the impact of our tenuous existence as human beings.

— *Understanding Shame*, p. 57

Certainly the Genesis myth reveals this state and Karl Rahner points to the same thing when he talks about "starting with experience and with a description of the existential human situation." Shame is basic to the human condition and thus part and parcel of living. Many life situations enhance its potential for paralysis. A simple example: a parent who refuses to allow a child to be his/her spontaneous self. In the face of this form of parental disapproval or criticism (even when it is well-intentioned), the child gradually gets the message that there is something wrong with him/herself and that in order to gain acceptance and love, he or she had better conform. The child becomes less free, more anxious, and behavioral paralysis begins to take hold. Examples of this are plentiful and unique to each individual's history.

In contemporary culture, Twelve-Step programs for all types of dysfunctionality are proliferating. These programs appear to be addressing the same reality of shame we discover in the Book of Genesis. Since shame can keep many people from entering a twelve-step program, the opening gambit invites participants to confront shame directly by admitting in a public statement their helplessness and need to hand over their life to God or their Higher Power. A person's clear ownership of dysfunction and the communal acceptance it receives brings relief from the paralysis of shame, a condition Andrew Morrison describes as "the feeling of

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self-castigation which arises when we are convinced that there is something about ourselves that is wrong, inferior, flawed, weak, or dirty" (*The Culture of Shame*, p. 13). The desire for healing that many seek through Twelve-Step programs is similar to the desire that urges many authentic Christians to seek a deeper relationship with God. Often institutional religion does not acknowledge this need for healing and actually can foster rather than mitigate the reality of shame. One example of this is the frequency with which some leaders of worship compose prayers and exhortations that emphasize condemnation more than acceptance. In

many ways the Twelve-Step movement might well be serving the role of prophet to organizational Christianity.

### The Causes of Shame

Shame's roots are as varied as its manifestations. Family systems theory has raised the level of consciousness about the variables within one's family of origin (e.g. "Don't say anything; family problems stay in the family") that enhance the crippling power of shame. In addition genetic variables such as height, intelligence, innate abilities, and physical appearance can induce experiences of shame. The power of these variables to do so is, in part, culturally determined: e.g., height may be valued in one culture and spurned in another; athletic prowess in one and intellectual ability in another. The way a person is introduced to human sexuality and the experiences he or she has in terms of it are also critical. Finally the biological variables of race and gender, and the socio-economic ones of class, educational opportunities, and profession have the potential to augment or lessen a person's level of shame. Unfortunately proposed cures (e.g. streaming in education, some forms of welfare) can result in compounding rather than assuaging the "dis-ease."

**S**piritual directors need to listen for the presence of these variables in the lives and stories of their directees. Because shame is crippling and has so many ways of expressing itself (remember the many statements that were listed in the beginning of this article), directors need to look frequently through the lens of shame, asking themselves, is this directee feeling or responding out of a place of shame? Gently helping a directee name these places for him- or herself can begin the healing process.

### One Person's Story

The vignette below is about a woman from India as described by Margaret Duncan in her article, "It is with Shame" (*Women's Prayer Services*). The purpose in sharing this is to illustrate some of the causes of shame as well as its cumulative effects. The woman described reminds me of the bent over woman who in Luke's Gospel approached Jesus for healing.

I am forty or somewhere near, I'm told. What I have learned is through my ears alone. My eyes see only trees, the sky, my children, the food, my meager wage. In this way I am like all others. What is seen by them is seen by me, for all but one enormous thing: the words that people write and read. These to me are but a bitter misery of mystery. When letters I must send they are written by one child, 10, my son. God knows if he writes it as I say, or some nonsense of his own. My head was never schooled, only my hands, my back. My feet were trained to do the bidding of those who walk a higher path than me. Deprived I was born, starved I will die knowing nothing of any world but this, bounded by my unclean ignorance. At the end of each stretch of thirty days I take my pay and swear to it with one dirty print of my right hand thumb. Why this thumb is so different from any other will forever be my puzzle. It is with shame I press that paper while people behind me laugh, for they take pen to hand and proudly sign a name for all to

read. Who can read a thumb? I vowed that never would my children live half a life and almost sooner than they walked I pushed them to a school. There is no time now at my old age to learn to read what others tell, and content and passive I must remain to see my sons rise somewhere near the sun. I hope their skills will be reward enough, and when they walk their mighty road they will take with them their mother in their hearts.

### Defending Ourselves: Building Walls to Hide Our Shame

The vast majority (if not all) people suffer from the reality of shame to some extent. This phenomenon may not only thwart us from accepting and loving ourselves but also become troubling in the area of interpersonal relationships. To the degree that shame controls us and falsely colors our perceptions, we will experience isolation and desolation. Also, shame limits our freedom to participate in a dynamic which allows a community (be it family, church, or work place) to function in a manner that is healthy and effective. The potential defense mechanisms we use to cover shame are many. In his work on shame, Donald Nathanson suggests four major strategies for dealing with shame which he calls the "compass of shame." These are withdrawal, attacking self, attacking others, and avoidance (*Shame and Pride*, pp. 303-377), behavioral patterns with which all those in the ministry of spiritual direction are familiar.

Another way of exploring the dynamic of shame is through the Enneagram, which offers an even more detailed compass. Reported to be an ancient Sufi tool, the Enneagram represents nine basic personality types. Each individual feels more at home with one of the nine types than the others. Each type has a particular defense between the outer world and the basic feeling of being flawed and vulnerable. When we feel acutely threatened, we seek ways to protect against such threats in order to

maintain our inner security. Each type has a unique avoidance which is identified with shame. A significant life crisis could well occasion an encounter

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with this avoidance and expose the behaviours we develop as our defense. When we confront these behaviours, we encounter the ways we experience and conceal shame. Named and confronted, shame loses its power and we discover the true energy and freedom that becomes available when we live out of our true self. This is certainly an authentic way to describe a basic paradigm of the spiritual journey.

**A**n example might be helpful. Alan has been feeling very vulnerable at work. He has been afraid that he will be demoted because the entire structure of his company was changed recently. He will be reporting to a new boss, a woman that he has heard is a stickler for detail and who has just come through an intense product training program (this has served to make Alan feel even more insecure). Rather than confront his vulnerability, he begins to accumulate as much information as he can about his new boss. He talks to people who know her and begins to observe her as discretely as he can. He is surprised that his feelings of uneasiness do not lessen and, when asked by his spiritual director, he admits that he has not even thought about bringing the situation to his prayer. He just keeps on gathering information and has

built a rudimentary database to keep track of developments. Alan is keeping busy, seeking safety and defending himself through his fact-finding mission.

**R**eal movement in our journey toward wholeness, holiness or the self does not occur until we meet our defense and the sinful behaviours we adopt to maintain it. Much of the resistance experienced in the spiritual direction process is an attempt to avoid encounters with the faces of shame. But each person has to own the way he or she avoids what is really underneath the behavior. It is often in this process of owning that one encounters the living God and God's presence in areas of one's personal history and life where one never thought God could or would be. Also verbalizing and sharing an encounter with an empathetic other is critical to the process of spiritual direction and foundational to the director-directee relationship.

In conjunction with this, it is critical that the spiritual director has explored his or her own shame history. At the beginning of this article I noted that Helen Block Lewis, in *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*, has substantiated the thesis that therapists must deal with their own shame in order to be free to receive that of the client and for healing to occur. This could well have some serious implications in the design of programs for the training of spiritual directors.

Let's continue with the above example. For several months, Alan would talk to his spiritual director about his new boss – what he had learned about her, what she was like, what research he had done about the transition. His director picked up his uneasiness, but each time she tried to ask Alan how he was feeling, he would deflect the question and continue to talk about his new boss and the changes in the company. Finally he experienced a breakthrough when his director asked him why it was so important that he know everything he could about the company transition and in particular, about his new boss. Alan was finally able to confront his feelings of shame and fear, to talk about his concern that he would be replaced, about his own deep insecurity that his boss would know that, underneath, he didn't know enough to make a worthwhile contribution to the firm. With the skilled companionship of his director, he was able eventually to invite God to be there with him.

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### The Salutary Side of Shame

In *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy*, Carl Schneider makes an important distinction between disgrace and discretionary shame. English is one of the few languages that only has one word for both realities. So far this article has emphasized shame in the mostly negative context of "disgrace" or unhealthy shame. Nevertheless – and this is critical – there is a positive dimension to this power called "discretionary" or healthy shame, which reminds humans of their disharmony with self, others, and God. Schneider succinctly describes the effects of both types of shame: "If discretion-shame sustains the personal and social ordering of the world, disgrace-shame is a powerful experience of the disintegration of one's world" (p. 22).

Throughout his book, Schneider shows his readers the multiple ways discretionary shame serves the role of guardian. Protecting the more intimate aspects of human living, it plays a central role in the way one relates to God and other humans. Safeguarding the behavior of individuals, it supports and strengthens the ties between individuals and their respective communities. Playing a central role in the formation of conscience, it serves to signal a need for examination and reform of a person's way of life.

Healthy shame also puts us in touch with our true identity before God. Although "frail, vulnerable, and finite," we are still loved despite our woundedness. This acknowledgment is the cost of experiencing God's love and serves as the foundational event for the spiritual journey in the Christian tradition. Whereas the false self renders shame unhealthy through repression, the true self acknowledges shame as primordial to its identity.

### Healing from Shame: Acknowledging Our True Selves

James Fowler claims that "release from a pervasive sense of 'disgrace' shame requires acknowledgement and exposure of the defect or lack to a trusted other or others, and the undertaking of substantial change in one's way of being a self" (1993). This involves acknowledging and accepting our true self as flawed, vulnerable, and limited rather than the false idealized self we have manufactured to navigate the turf of life. A critical task in this spiritual journey is to integrate these two selves and return to the true self all the energy the false idealized self spends defending itself. This integration is a conversion from narcissistic entitlement to genuine humility, from unhealthy or "disgrace" to healthy or "discretionary" shame.

**C**arl Jung stated that what was virtue in the first half of life becomes a vice in the second half (quoted by Edward Whitmont in *The Symbolic Quest*, pp. 282-283). At a certain point in our spiritual journey, we may discover that we are no longer co-operating with God as well as we once had; the defensive strategies we adopt to navigate the course of life and establish a sense of self-worth that cloak our shame have become all-consuming. Through a confrontation with our avoidance, our defense mechanisms collapse and we encounter the reality of shame. Through this process we are invited to redefine our values and priorities so that they are in harmony with our true self. Some call this process a rebirth. Jungians call it a confrontation with and integration of the shadow. Simply put, it portrays the process of coming home to our true self, grace, and God.

### Conclusion

Shame is a critical issue in spiritual direction. In order for authentic movement toward self and God to occur, its resistance and the sinful behaviours utilized to maintain this resistance must be owned and prayed. The Gospels portray a Jesus much more committed to the healing of shame rather than guilt. We can benefit from contemplating the Passion of Jesus as his choice to take on human shame and its effects. In this context, the following words from Paul's Letter to the Romans hold new meaning for us. He writes:

*For if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Faith in the heart leads to justification, confession on the lips to salvation. Scripture says 'no one who believes in him will be put to shame.'*

— Rom 10: 9-11, author emphasis

The words in this passage offer a most intricate connection between liberation from shame and the Pauline concepts of justification and salvation. They serve to ground the thoughts offered in this article in the heart of the Paschal Mystery.

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