

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Small Group Ministry Session
Shame, Scorn and UUs
Diggitt McLaughlin, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY, August, 2009

Chalice lighting

Introduction: Tonight we will talk about shame and scorn and the UU way. The concept comes from this year's Berry Street Lecture, an annual sermon or lecture given by a minister chosen by the UUA. The 2009 winner was Christine Robinson, the UU minister in Albuquerque, and our readings come from her. Let's have the readings — they are primarily about shame — and then check our covenant and have check in.

Readings (Included at the end.)

Covenant

Check in

Questions

*Do Robinson's definitions and discussion of shame and scorn ring true to you?
Have you been shamed in the way she discusses?*

Robinson goes on to describe scorn as it happens to UUs. She describes the experience, even of children, of perceiving that "everyone else" seems to have access to some kind of truth that is escaping us. We might be angry or resentful, we might resist being told what and who we are.

Has this happened to you? What have you done yourself when you feel this difference between yourself and the people around you? What could you share with someone new to FUSW?

Moment of silence

Checking out: did anything in your thinking shift or change today?

Close

"Strange and Foolish Walls", A. Powell Davies, *Singing the Living Tradition*, #662

Resource: Christine Robinson's Berry Street Lecture can be found at <http://www.uuabq.org/Sermons/06-14-09-Imagineering-Faith.pdf>

SGM session prepared by Diggitt McLaughlin for the First Unitarian Society of Westchester.

Readings for SGM Session: *Shame Scorn and UU*

1) When I feel shame, what I am feeling is that something is wrong with me. Not merely that I've done something wrong; that's guilt, and, unpleasant as it is, it's nothing compared to shame. Shame is a negative feeling not about what we've done, but about who we are most deeply as a person. Shame is about things over which we have no control—thoughts, feelings, characteristics. Shame is much deeper than guilt; indeed, shame goes directly to our deepest heart.

2) Most people will go to great lengths to avoid being shamed. Most parents work hard at directing their children without shaming them; we say, "That was not a good decision," rather than, "You idiot!" We want our children to be motivated to change by a twinge of guilt for having done something poorly, not motivated by the shame of feeling stupid. We understand, because we've experienced it, that while it is possible to defend oneself against being shamed, the defense itself hardens our hearts.

3) When a sturdy person hears some variation of, "There's something wrong with you," they can say, aloud or to themselves, "There is not!" but they pay a price, and they pay it in the deepest place of their being, which is also the place from which spirituality springs. "Words of hate leave footprints in the heart," said Kafka, and they do it because hate, as opposed to dislike or disagreement, evokes shame.

4) Footprints fade in time, especially in soft soil. But if there are too many and they come too fast, they can compact the ground so that it can never heal on its own. Then we have a hardened, bitter heart that is often hateful in its turn; a shamed person knows how to shame others.

5) We saw this dynamic at its worst in politics during the past twenty years. It started and often only existed, not between politicians or neighbors, but in the media, where pundits like Rush Limbaugh began to deal with political positions they didn't agree with, not by argument or disagreement, but by shame. (The kind of rhetoric used to engender shame in another person is called scorn.) Rush Limbaugh and his ilk were not the first to do this, but they raised it to a high art, treating political liberals, not as in error or as having a different vision of society, but as despicable human beings.

6) He used words, tone, and innuendo and drew a fascinated audience and made a lot of money. Political liberals bore the brunt of this attack, and some even learned to give out as good as they got. Neighbors and children and politicians started talking to and about each other this way; the footprints got deeper and deeper, the ground of all of our hearts got harder and harder, and nobody seemed to quite realize the terrible price of those footprints until government seemed to grind to a halt.