

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Shame vs Guilt

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Opening words and lighting of the chalice.

“[She] had heard it said that there was only one emotion which, in recollection, was capable of resurrecting the full immediacy and power of the original—one emotion that time could never fade, and that would drag you back any number of years into the pure, undiluted feeling, as if you were living it anew. It wasn’t love... and it wasn’t hate, or anger, or happiness, or even grief. Memories of those were but echoes of the true feeling.

It was shame. Shame never faded.”

— Laini Taylor, *Dreams of Gods & Monsters*

Check in

Reading: Brene Brown “Man in the Arena” TED talk excerpt

There's a great quote that saved me this past year by Theodore Roosevelt. A lot of people refer to it as the "Man in the Arena" quote. And it goes like this: "It is not the critic who counts. It is not the man who sits and points out how the doer of deeds could have done things better and how he falls and stumbles. The credit goes to the man in the arena whose face is marred with dust and blood and sweat. But when he's in the arena, at best, he wins, and at worst, he loses, but when he fails, when he loses, he does so daring greatly."

And that's what this conference, to me, is about. Life is about daring greatly, about being in the arena. When you walk up to that arena and you put your hand on the door, and you think, "I'm going in and I'm going to try this," shame is the gremlin who says, "Uh, uh. You're not good enough. You never finished that MBA. Your wife left you. I know your dad really wasn't in Luxembourg, he was in Sing Sing. I know those things that happened to you growing up. I know you don't think that you're pretty, smart, talented or powerful enough. I know your dad never paid attention, even when you made CFO." Shame is that thing.

And if we can quiet it down and walk in and say, "I'm going to do this," we look up and the critic that we see pointing and laughing, 99 percent of the time is who? Us. Shame drives two big tapes — "never good enough" — and, if you can talk it out of that one, "who do you think you are?" The thing to understand about shame is, it's not guilt. Shame is a focus on self, guilt is a focus on behavior. Shame is "I am bad." Guilt is "I did something bad." How many of you, if you did something that was hurtful to me, would be willing to say, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake?" How many of you would be willing to say that? Guilt: I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Shame: I'm sorry. I am a mistake.

There's a huge difference between shame and guilt. And here's what you need to know. Shame is highly, highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, eating disorders. And here's what you even need to know more. Guilt, inversely correlated with those things. The ability to hold something we've done or failed to do up against who we want to be is incredibly adaptive. It's uncomfortable, but it's adaptive.

The other thing you need to know about shame is it's absolutely organized by gender. If shame washes over me and washes over Chris, it's going to feel the same. Everyone sitting in here knows the warm wash of shame. We're pretty sure that the only people who don't experience shame are people who have no capacity for connection or empathy. Which means, yes, I have a little shame; no, I'm a sociopath. So I would opt for, yes, you have a little shame. Shame feels the same for men and women, but it's organized by gender.

For women, the best example I can give you is Enjoli, the commercial. "I can put the wash on the line, pack the lunches, hand out the kisses and be at work at five to nine. I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in the pan and never let you forget you're a man." For women, shame is, do it all, do it perfectly and never let them see you sweat. I don't know how much perfume that commercial sold, but I guarantee you, it moved a lot of antidepressants and anti-anxiety meds. Shame, for women, is this web of unobtainable, conflicting, competing expectations about who we're supposed to be. And it's a straight-jacket.

For men, shame is not a bunch of competing, conflicting expectations. Shame is one, do not be perceived as what? Weak. I did not interview men for the first four years of my study. It wasn't until a man looked at me after a book signing, and said, "I love what say about shame, and I'm curious why you didn't mention men." And I said, "I don't study men." And he said, "That's convenient."

I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because you say to reach out, tell our story, be vulnerable. But you see those books you just signed for my wife and my three daughters?" I said, "Yeah." "They'd rather me die on top of my white horse than watch me fall down. When we reach out and be vulnerable, we get the shit beat out of us. And don't tell me it's from the guys and the coaches and the dads. Because the women in my life are harder on me than anyone else."

I started interviewing men and asking questions. And what I learned is this: You show me a woman who can actually sit with a man in real vulnerability and fear, I'll show you a woman who's done incredible work. You show me a man who can sit with a woman who's just had it, she can't do it all anymore, and his first response is not, "I unloaded the dishwasher!" But he really listens — because that's all we need — I'll show you a guy who's done a lot of work.

Shame is an epidemic in our culture. And to get out from underneath it — to find our way back to each other, we have to understand how it affects us and how it affects the way we're parenting, the way we're working, the way we're looking at each other. Very quickly, some research by Mahalik at Boston College. He asked, what do women need to do to conform to female norms? The top answers in this country: nice, thin, modest and use all available resources for appearance. When he asked about men, what do men in this country need to do to conform with male norms, the answers were: always show emotional control, work is first, pursue status and violence.

If we're going to find our way back to each other, we have to understand and know empathy, because empathy's the antidote to shame. If you put shame in a Petri dish, it needs

three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence and judgment. If you put the same amount in a Petri dish and douse it with empathy, it can't survive. The two most powerful words when we're in struggle: me too.

And so I'll leave you with this thought. If we're going to find our way back to each other, vulnerability is going to be that path. And I know it's seductive to stand outside the arena, because I think I did it my whole life, and think to myself, I'm going to go in there and kick some ass when I'm bulletproof and when I'm perfect. And that is seductive. But the truth is, that never happens. And even if you got as perfect as you could and as bulletproof as you could possibly muster when you got in there, that's not what we want to see. We want you to go in. We want to be with you and across from you. And we just want, for ourselves and the people we care about and the people we work with, to dare greatly.

Questions:

1. How does the passage show the difference between shame and guilt? Tell about a time(s) when you felt guilt versus when you felt shame and what were the different outcomes of those feelings? How do you personally know the difference between the shame and guilt? Are there any physical symptoms?
2. Brene mentions shame “gremlins” of “never good enough” and “who do you think you are?” Why do you think shame makes the switch from one to the other? Have you ever noticed yourself in a shame “spiral” between these two gremlins? What did that look like?
3. Brene Brown states that shame is different for men and women by saying that shame for women is a web of competing and conflicting expectations and for men is a box: do not be perceived as weak, do not be criticized or ridiculed. Does this feel true to you? What are some other common areas/ways we shame each other? Which areas of shame have been prevalent in your lifetime? What are the shame “tapes” for the different roles you have in your life? (coworker, parent, spouse, man, woman, etc.)
4. Consider this statement: 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.

What lengths have you gone to in order to avoid shame? Are there ways you protect your loved ones from feeling shame? Is shame avoidable or a necessary part of the human experience?

5. Brene states the antidote to shame is empathy. Share a time when you experienced shame and were met with empathy. What does shame feel like when it is washed with empathy? How can we show empathy to others when they are in shame?
6. Shaming others can arise when we are afraid of holding someone accountable or opening up to vulnerability. Can you think of a time when you shamed or blamed someone instead of holding them accountable? What happened in that situation? What about a time when you held someone accountable? What happened in that situation?

7. Shame does not just exist within ourselves, but also within our culture. Noting the current political turmoil, consider this statement: 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 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.) They raised it to a high art, treating political liberals, and not as in error or as having a different vision of society, but as despicable human beings.

In what ways does our current political system and culture foster a sense of shame?
Does it apply to both liberal and conservative sides of the spectrum?

Check-out: what did you learn today? How can we transfer this into real world application? Anything new/eye-opening/shocking? Take the time to thank each other for sharing openly and vulnerably this evening.

Closing words/extinguishing the Chalice

“Soul, if you want to learn secrets,
your heart must forget about
shame and dignity.
You are God's lover,
yet you worry
what people
are saying.”

— **Jalaluddin Rumi, The Essential Rumi**