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Guilt and Shame

It may be one of the more toxic emotions we can experience. It can cripple our lives and rob us of joy, hanging like a pall over all that we are and do. And for people of faith, unfortunately it may be all too common.

What it is, is shame.

Shame is the painful emotional content wrapped around a negative evaluation of ourselves as human beings. Unlike guilt, which centers around our actions—what we've done or failed to do and our resolve to do better—the focus of shame is on who we are as persons. It's more about our worth, our fundamental self-evaluation. For shame-based persons, that self-evaluation will always be negative.

The whole purpose of shame, it would seem, is to make us feel bad about ourselves. "You can't do anything right," shame says to us. "It's your own fault. What must others think of you? If you were smarter, or kinder, or thinner, or prettier, or more talented, or more thoughtful, then maybe you could feel better about yourself. But you're none of these things. You're not a good person who has made mistakes; you're a bad person, and your mistakes prove it. Aren't you ashamed of yourself!"

It's a terribly toxic message.

We might think that the experience of shame would motivate us to do better. And indeed, that may have been the motivation of those who have attempted to shame us in the past; they may have thought that if we felt badly enough about ourselves, we would be driven to do better. Studies have found, however, that it doesn't really work that way. Guilt

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might be a motivator for good, but not shame; shame does little more than cripple us and stunt our growth. For those whose self-concept is shame-based, they are the bad trees from which no good fruit could ever come (Lk 6:43).

Where did this shame come from? Maybe it came from well-intentioned parents who believed they were doing us good. Or maybe we heard those messages from a one-sided proclamation of the Good News, a focus on one part of Paul's message ("Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Rom 7:24) that neglected the rest of the story ("There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" Rom 8:1).

Wherever it came from, the result is an existence stunted and demeaned, a life without much hope of joy. For the true tragedy of the shame-based life is that it leaves little or no room for grace.

When you hear those familiar shame refrains—"You can't do anything right, you'll never measure up, aren't you ashamed of yourself"—try a little creative substitution. As a balance to that toxic self-talk, substitute a more positive and hopeful word of grace—"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." You may not believe it at first, but maybe in time the message will get through.

IS IT GUILT OR SHAME?

John Arey, D.Min.



Robert, the third of four children, was born into a family with strict rules and high expectations. Not gifted athletically like his older brother, he excelled academically. But his achievement in the classroom did not appear to gain him the same degree of acceptance, either in the community or in his own family that Robert wanted and it clearly pained him. His father seemed to favor Jeff and it deeply hurt Robert. It seemed to him that no matter what he did to gain his father's approval that it was simply never enough. Now, some fifteen years after his high school graduation, he found himself still struggling with his self-image. Jeff had gone on to play football on a scholarship in college where he played minimally and was now working for the largest car dealership in his hometown.

He was still well-known and remembered by many for his accomplishments on the gridiron. Robert had been the recipient of a full academic scholarship graduating with high honors from the college he attended and had gone on to become a skilled cardio-thoracic surgeon. While his days were spent making a critical and at times life-saving difference in the lives of his patients, his interior world of self-esteem was unconvinced of his worth and value. He felt incredible guilt, that he had not yet done something of worth or value in his father's eyes to warrant the praise that he so desperately desired. What was Robert's struggle?

Was it guilt or shame that Robert struggled with on an almost daily basis? At first glance, one might be inclined to respond Robert was consumed with guilt. However, guilt is associated to what we do. There are sins of omission and sins of commission. We feel guilt when we fail to do what we believe that we ought to do – thus we have committed the sin of omission. Or, we feel guilt when we do something we ought not to do – we have committed the sin of commission. Should we feel guilt for an other reason than one of those two, that feeling of guilt could be considered neurotic guilt. Looking at Robert through this particular lens would result in the question: Did Robert fail to do something that he ought to have done, or did he do something that he should not have done? The obvious answer would appear to be “no” to both sides of this question. Taking his talent of intellect, using it to the best of his abilities, and dedicating his life to improving the health and life of others would constitute neither a sin of omission nor of commission. If that were indeed the case, then what was the source of Robert’s internal struggle?

Shame, the other possibility still remains. Shame is an emotion that persons feel in response to an internal thought process that holds the belief that there is something wrong with them. In brief, guilt is connected to our “doing” while shame is connected to our “being.” I feel guilty for things I do that I should not do or for failing to do things that I ought to do. Shame is connected to my being, to who I am, and is the feeling I have when I believe that there is something wrong with me, that somehow I simply do not measure up. This was Robert’s struggle. While he had not truly *done* anything wrong, within his family system because he was not the gifted athlete that Jeff was, he believed there was something wrong with him. And no matter what Robert *did*, it did not seem to be good enough to gain approval from the place Robert looked to receive it – his father.

Shame is directly connected to our sense of self-worth and our self-esteem. It appears to be a very powerful emotion, able it would seem, to trump even our greatest achievements or accomplishments. While I may *know* that I have done well, if I do not *feel* good about what I have done, it may be due in large measure to my own inner or core belief that there is something wrong with me. There may be times when the shame persons feel is connected to things that they have done – past transgressions for which they have not forgiven themselves. Their own judgment of themselves is harsh with little or no grace. Robert seemed unable or perhaps unwilling to accept that his gifts and graces lay in a different direction from Jeff and in so doing he failed to accept and love himself.

Guilt seems easily dealt with through confession, pardon, and acceptance. Confession of our wrongdoing, acknowledgement of our sin being forgiven or pardoned, and then acceptance of that fact allows persons to let go of past transgressions and move on with their lives. Shame seems to be more difficult to address. It starts in a sense, with where the guilt process ends – with acceptance. It begins with acceptance of ourselves as basically good, and it then moves on to an acknowledgement that while not perfect, we are created in the image of God, and as a very special part of creation, we are of great worth and value, even at those times when we do not “feel” worthy or deserving. It involves accepting that we are both loveable and loved. And I believe that it involves accepting that partly on faith as well as partly on the knowledge that our worth and value do not derive from anything that we can ever do, but has as its source our very being. “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31 RSV)

Living in a culture that places great worth and value on achievement and accomplishment, the message that persons are of great worth and value is sometimes drowned out by the culture. Success is often measured by the accumulation of “things” be they money, possessions, degrees, even friends. However, when we are no longer able to “do” and to accomplish or accumulate things, we still “are” and our being will still have worth and value. The challenge of living in a society or culture that rewards doing is to not lose sight of our worth and value as “beings” created in the image of One who loves us and loved us even to the point of sacrifice. And in that type of love there is neither guilt nor shame. “For God so loved the world that He gave....”

THE ENNEAGRAM’S NINE MASKS OF SHAME

Mark Larson, D.Min.



Almost twenty years ago I was introduced to a helpful theory of personality called the Enneagram. The Enneagram or “nine points” in Greek, is a theoretical tool that proposes nine basic personality types. I am fascinated by its detailed descriptions of our different personalities and subtypes. It also describes with amazing precision a path downward toward dis-ease (emotional sickness and stress) and growth upward toward integration (emotional health and maturity) for each type.

More than any other single theory it has helped me to understand myself and relate better with others. I don’t often talk about the Enneagram with clients unless it fits what they are needing. However I do assess privately each client I see in terms of the Enneagram, as I try to understand each person’s unique story and potential path of dis-ease and integration.

For an introduction to one “school” of the Enneagram you might read: **Personality Types: Using the Enneagram For Self-Discovery** by Don Richard Riso with Russ Hudson. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1996. Or go online to: www.enneagraminstitute.com.

How does this relate to our topic of shame? The Enneagram can help us be sensitive to how our different temperaments experience shame. My article will extend our staff’s discussion of shame by speculating briefly how each of the nine types might describe their experience shame and their efforts to deny or defend against it. These are the nine masks of shame. Each mask is a different manifestation of the experience consistent with its personality type. My article is based on Riso and Hudsons’ writings so I commend to you their materials for more study.

Do you see yourself or others in these descriptions? How each of us can find healing for shame, according to our different personality types can be the topic of a future journal article.

One: The “Reformer” can be principled, orderly, perfectionistic and self-righteous, depending on their level of growth. Ones fear losing control of their anger and instinctual energy and impulses. This is the shame they deny so they direct their energy toward causes that align themselves with their inner ideal.

Two: The “Helper” can be caring, generous, possessive and manipulative, depending on their level of growth. Twos fear others will not like them or think of them as good. This is the shame they deny so they attempt to convince others to like them and think of them as good, by focusing on their positive feelings for others and by performing acts of service.

Three: The “Motivator” can be adaptable, ambitious, image-conscious and hostile depending on their level of growth. Threes fear their feelings of inadequacy and failure. This is the shame they deny so they are driven to perform according to what they believe a valuable, successful person is like.

Four: The “Individualist” can be intuitive, expressive, self-absorbed and depressive depending on their level of growth. Fours fear they are defective, damaged, drab or uninteresting. This is the shame they deny so they focus on emphasizing how unique and special are their particular talents, feelings and personal characteristics.

Five: The “Investigator” can be perceptive, original, detached and eccentric depending on their level of growth. Fives fear the outer world and their capacity to participate in it. This is the shame they deny so they cope by withdrawing, becoming secretive or using their minds to study and build a complex inner view of the world.

Six: The “Loyalist” can be engaging, committed, defensive and paranoid depending on their level of growth. Sixes fear their own capacity to know and have confidence. This is the shame they deny so they ricochet between looking outside themselves for structure and security, and impulsively fighting against the structure and security.

Seven: The “Enthusiast” can be enthusiastic, accomplished, uninhibited and manic depending on their level of growth. Sevens fear their inner world of pain, loss, deprivation and anxiety. This is the shame they deny so they distract their minds with exciting possibilities and options and stay in action, pursuing one experience after another.

Eight: The “Leader” can be self-confident, decisive, dominating and combative depending on their level of growth. Eights fear being overcome by others and the buildup of anger within. This is the shame they deny so they act out their need for control by asserting leadership and dominance and through forceful expressions.

Nine: The “Peacemaker” can be peaceful, reassuring, complacent and neglectful depending on their level of growth. Nines fear their own anger and instinctual aggressive energies. This is the shame they deny so they rationalize they have no anger or darker feelings and focus instead on idealizations of their relationships.

BOOK REVIEW: *SHAME AND GUILT*

by June Price Tangney, Ph.D. and Ronda L. Dearing, Ph.D.

In their 2002 book, Tangney and Dearing take a comprehensive look at the emotions of guilt and shame, drawing not only from anecdotal evidence but also from empirical research. They report some interesting findings of these two key self-conscious emotions and how they impact both self-identity and moral behavior.

In distinguishing between guilt and shame, Tangney and Dearing offer a helpful way to think about self-concept and behavior. Guilt is understood as behaviorally based; we feel guilty for certain actions, for what we do or fail to do. Persons who are guilt-prone, according to Tangney and Dearing, see themselves as fundamentally good persons who will occasionally make mistakes. They can learn from those mistakes and, motivated by their guilt, can resolve to do better next time. Shame, on the other hand, is grounded in our self-concept, in seeing ourselves as fundamentally flawed and worthless persons. Persons who are shame-based lack a positive self-image; there is nothing really good about them, they believe, and the mistakes they make are not simple mistakes but are painful evidence of their fundamentally flawed being. In short, guilt is about what we do, and shame is about who we are.

Their research findings show that these two emotions, though related, have very different implications for many aspects of human behavior. One such implication has to do with moral behavior. While guilt may prompt persons to act in ways that are morally and socially responsible, such is not the case with shame. In other words, feeling guilty may motivate us to do good or try harder, but feeling ashamed almost never does. Indeed, the more common response of shame-based persons is anger and withdrawal. Guilt can turn us outward toward others in an attempt to make amends for our misdeeds; shame turns us inwards in a futile attempt to protect or assuage our broken self.

Tangney and Dearing explore the relationships of guilt and shame to a host of factors, such as the varying levels of empathy felt by guilt-based as opposed to shame-based individuals (shame-based persons are likely to feel much less empathy), and the link between guilt and/or shame with anger, hostility, and aggression. Chapter titles include “Assessing Shame and Guilt,” “Shamed into Anger?: The Special Link between Shame and Interpersonal Hostility,” “Shame, Guilt, and Psychopathology,” “Shame and Guilt across the Lifespan,” “Sex, Romance, and Conflict: Shame and Guilt in Intimate Relationships,” and “Looking Ahead: Implications for Parents, Teachers, and Society.”

In spite of their strong reliance on empirical research, Tangney and Dearing’s book is quite readable, easily accessible for both clinicians, pastors, and laypersons. It is well worth the effort for those who want to deepen their understanding of these two related but very different emotions.

Jonathan Golden, Ph.D.