Exploring the Hidden Feelings that Stop Us Being All that God Made Us to Be

Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:25 (NLT)

... (The woman) took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, **and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness**. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.

When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees.
Then the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'

He replied, 'I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.'

Genesis 3:6-10 (NLT)

The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

Genesis 3:21

'THE ROOTS OF THE WORD SHAME ARE THOUGHT TO DERIVE FROM AN OLDER WORD MEANING "TO COVER".'

WIKIPEDIA

Stories told in this article are true stories. They are either my own stories, or they have been altered to protect the identity of the person involved, and so may be an amalgamation of more than one story.

Introduction

SHAME

Those who study shame believe that we begin to experience shame before we can speak.

I have suffered from shame for 56 years, but could only name it as shame for the last 20 years.

The verses in the preface suggest that shame is one of the earliest feelings experienced in the Bible.

As I watch the faces of my pre-school grandchildren, I sometimes see what I think is shame cloud their faces.

Working one-to-one with many people I encounter shame in others regularly, I watch it rise up in them, until they are covered with shame. Then I watch them bury it with the protective techniques they have developed.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE

These are my credentials (or lack of them!) for writing about shame.

Whilst I have done no systematic research into shame, I write as someone who has journeyed with my own shame – with God and with others. I am not an academic theologian but over the years I have begun to understand and name the shame that I and others experience in body, mind and spirit.

I have read about it; I have noticed it in the Bible; I have opened up my shame experiences to God and his word, and worked with him at learning to live well with shame.

I have a Spiritual Director who I trust to see the shame in my life.

Latterly, whilst doing a post-graduate Pastoral Counselling course, I had two years of therapy which largely focused on shame, and I engaged with others in 'group development', where my input was often around my shame.

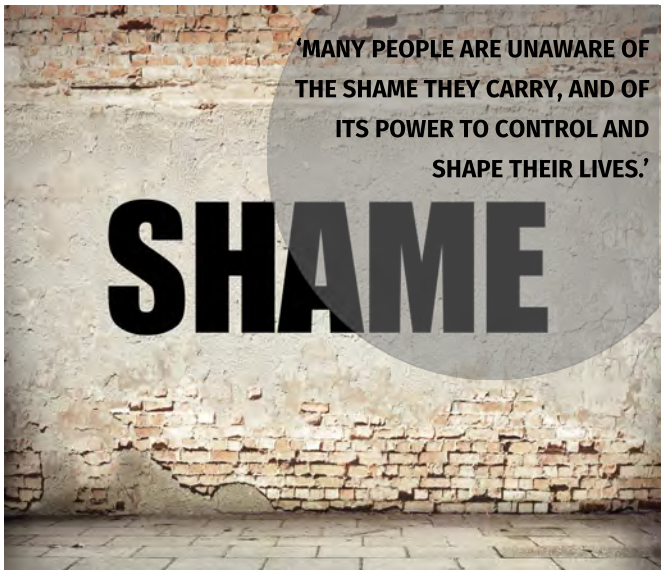
I have worked as a Spiritual Director for over 20 years and now also as a counsellor.

I do pastoral work on the CPAS Arrow Leadership Programme.

I lead individually guided retreats.

I am part of a large family.

And in all these contexts I observe the power of shame at work in peoples' lives.



As I do this work I find that many people are unaware of the shame they carry, and of its power to control and shape their lives, unaware of its ability to stop them being the people God planned for them to be.

It seems to me important that the Church learns a greater awareness and understanding of the effect and activity of shame, and how it works within the Church, particularly in those who lead the Church.

I believe that God can begin to heal shame and help us live well with the discomfort of shame; that he can set people free to come out of hiding.

This Arrow article is an introduction to what shame is and how it works, but also how God can begin to do the work of healing the shame within us.

As I've written it, discussed it and received feedback from others, there are perhaps now more questions arising in me than there were before I started.

- I've realised that what excites me is the possibility of helping Christian leaders discover and understand how shame is at work in their lives and ministries, particularly the links between shame and achievement, shame and success and shame and under-performing.
- I'd like to develop more thoughts about how we hide ourselves in God, once we become aware of shame.
- It would be interesting to look at repentance and sorrow, and how that is different to shame, but also how the former can bring healing to the latter.
- And what about fear, anxiety and worry, are they linked with shame?
- I'd love to explore how shame relates to personality using, for example, the Enneagram.

But for now these will have to wait. Here are my reflections on shame so far.

Stories

Her Story

The middle-aged couple stood on the narrow, dusty road, surrounded by cases and bags. The Greek men in the taverna opposite watched them idly.

The couple waited for some time in the hot sun, and then, after a brief conversation, the husband left, going back the way they'd come.

'You wait for taxi?' called one of the men to the woman. 'Yes' she answered.

Some minutes later the husband returned and then went over to speak to the men, explaining that their taxi hadn't arrived. One of the men made a phone call and promised that a taxi would come soon.

Again the middle aged couple waited, and sure enough, ten minutes, later the taxi came, and they climbed in.

Not a very dramatic story you might think, but as I am the woman, let me tell you the inside story.

We had come to the end of a few days on Rhodes, and were waiting for a taxi to take us to the airport. The owner of the house had told us that a taxi would come. The road was narrow with no pavement, and motor bikes and cars passed close to our luggage.

'We can't stand here on the road' I said to my husband, 'But that's where they said to wait' he replied.

Within me shame was growing. The negative voices of those who are 'watching' me, 'observing' me were starting to speak.

'Why do they need so much luggage?'
'Get out of our way!'
'Xeni – foreigners – go back home!'
'Look what she's wearing! – Greek women always dress smartly'
'So stupid – don't you know what you're doing!'
'Why are they just standing there?'

It was even worse when my husband abandoned me to go and phone the owner, leaving me to face the voices on my own.

And then the men spoke to me.

'Don't speak to me... don't notice me... I'll have to speak Greek... you'll think I'm pathetic'

Hot shame ran up and down my body like a river of fire, my chest tightened so that breathing became difficult.

So I don't breathe, don't move, don't look at anyone... I freeze... maybe then no one will see me.

His Story

'He tries!'

Just two words, said behind my back, but deliberately within earshot – a throw away comment intended to humiliate. These words became indelibly printed on my memory, and would set me on a journey of striving and driven-ness. As a 15 year-old teenager I was walking past a small group of army cadets, painfully conscious of the three stripes on my shoulder that indicated my promotion above them. A teacher had seen something in me that made them think I could be a leader, much to my surprise, and I knew that the boys who were teasing me were really thinking 'Who on earth do you think you are?'

The words were said in a stage whisper, as a deliberately unfinished sentence. The implication being that I would indeed try, but that there was no way I was going to succeed.

My precarious ego lurched from its momentarily elevated state. It was, of course, true. I was bound to disappoint, and my newly given status would, yet again, make me unacceptable to the 'in-crowd'.

I would try, and like everything else I'd tried, I wouldn't be good enough at leading. I'd only recently been transferred from another school, where bullying had caused me to become isolated, lonely, and chronically depressed. My life seemed to be a story of not being wanted, even from early childhood, where, as the fourth (unplanned) child of

missionary parents whose missionary society only provided for up to three children, I had created all sorts of financial problems for them. And yet, in that moment, even as my neck turned a bright shade of red, and I walked away pretending I hadn't heard, a part of me resolved to prove them wrong.

I desperately wanted my parents to be proud of me, in some way. I also wanted so much to be ordinary, to be acceptable to the group of people who seemed to have such a strong sense of camaraderie. And as I started to throw myself into developing the gifts that I knew God had given me, my illusory sense of self, my ego, rose out of its battered, isolated hole, and became an unstoppable task-master that drove me to succeed, to strive to be enough.

'I PROVED THOSE BOYS WRONG. I TRIED AND I SUCCEEDED. WHAT I PERHAPS DIDN'T SEE WAS THAT IN MY ATTEMPT TO BECOME ACCEPTABLE, I HAD CREATED HABITS THAT WOULD BECOME VERY HARD TO BREAK IN ADULTHOOD.'

I spent hours practising to become the best guitarist in the school. Vomiting became a normative part of sprint training, to push the lactic envelope to its absolute limit in order to ensure that I became the fastest boy in the school. I made sure I was always in the right place at the right time in the eyes of his house master, so that I was made house captain.

I proved those boys wrong. I tried, and succeeded. What I perhaps didn't see was that in my attempt to become acceptable, I had created habits that would become very hard to break in adulthood – the striving for acceptability gave me an ability to read people and be winsome, but I was always haunted by those words, and doubted if I should really belong anywhere. My fear was that I was not really enough, in and of myself, and that it was only by magnifying my true self to create a larger ego, that I would truly be acceptable.

It took over 20 years to begin to understand that I was enough. The habits and patterns developed to avoid shame are hard to break, though, and remain drivers, if unchecked. The Father's affirmation of Jesus at his baptism is a key Bible passage for me – beloved and pleasing before achieving.

Brene Brown talks about empathy as the antidote to shame, and I find this to be true. Those who know us, understand us and accept us are crucial in regaining perspective, and that's why authentic community is so powerful. Eckhart Tolle's book, A New Earth helped me to see how I had created an ego that was a false exaggeration of my self, the good and the bad bits, in my striving to avoid the shame of perceived unacceptability. Marshall Rosenberg's classic book Nonviolent Communication helped me to grow in self compassion, accepting myself as enough, and being compassionate when I fail to meet my sometimes ridiculous expectations!

Your Story?

- I wonder if you suffer with shame. And if you do, what story would you tell here?
- What were your feelings then, and what are they now as you recall the events?
- If you aren't aware of incidents that shamed you, it may be worth asking yourself those questions as you read this paper, and in the days afterwards.
- Ask God about it too.

Because we can bury shame deep within us, and learn ways to keep it buried, we may be unaware of its presence and activity in us. Yontef (2003) calls these the 'automatic manoeuvres' by which we avoid the intolerable pain of shame.

What Shame Is... and What It Isn't.

> 'Shame is experienced as a feeling of being fundamentally unacceptable, unworthy or defective, which leads to a desperate urge to hide or disappear.'
>
> Joyce and Sills 2010

Some shame is healthy and necessary as it helps us to stay safe and live within our human boundaries.

> When my children were young I encouraged them in the freedom of stripping off and playing naked in the Pennine rivers where we lived. But before they went to school they had to learn healthy shame, required by culture and stage of development. Healthy shame which would protect them physically, mentally and emotionally.

But much shame is unhealthy, interrupting us from living freely with God, with others and with ourselves. Shame can

also become toxic, making life a burden and stopping us from engaging in positive interaction with ourselves, others or God.

The consensus of expert opinion is that shame begins very early in life, before we can speak (Yontef 1996; Kaufman 1985; Joyce and Sills 2010). Gerhardt (2004) in her book about how babies' brains develop describes how an overdose of cortisol, caused by shame, will adversely affect the development of a baby's brain.

It doesn't take much to cause a shame reaction.

> When my children were at primary school we had to cross a very busy road to get there. One day my daughter stopped in the road to pick up something she had dropped. I yelled very loudly at her to come. And we went on to school.
>
> I know about it because years later she told me how badly it had affected her. Going straight into school after a shaming incident meant that we had no time to restore the relationship. She lived the whole day with the shameful feelings.

It's often the repetition of such small incidents that over the years result in unhealthy shame forming.

What is called 'toxic shame' is often rooted in childhood abuse and trauma where key attachments are disrupted or even non-existent.

Naming Shame

Becoming aware of our own shame reaction can be difficult. As Joyce and Sills say (above) 'it leads to a desperate urge to hide or disappear', just like Adam and Eve did. Having lived with shame almost all our lives we become very skilled at hiding it – even from ourselves.

Let me suggest two ways to try to name it in yourself:

1. Notice your reactions:
- After an uncomfortable experience ask yourself 'What happened in me – body, mind and emotions?'
- Look for things like: shallow breathing, tightness in your chest/shoulders, constriction in your throat, shrinking (for example stooping to make yourself small), feeling frozen and unable to move, blushing, body heat, wanting to hide.

2. What name would you give your reaction?

Embarrassment, guilt and humiliation all carry similar feelings to shame, (Brown 2012 p.71), but let me suggest how they are different:

EMBARRASSMENT

This is what we feel when we enter an unfamiliar situation or make a social faux pas. If we react normally to embarrassment, we will be able to laugh at it with others afterwards. But if we sink into shame we'll keep it hidden.

> On holiday in France I found that none of the toilet doors had working locks. On most occasions I solved the problem by keeping my foot near the door. But on the train the door was too far away.
>
> As I sat on the toilet, the door swung wide open, and a woman started to enter until she saw me sitting there!
>
> Hot embarrassment flooded over me, closely followed by shame.
>
> When I got back to my seat I realised that shame wanted me to keep quiet about the incident, not to tell David, my husband, about it – 'HIDE' shame told me, 'don't let anyone know.'

But this was really a funny social situation, shame was not an appropriate reaction, and in fact telling David about it alleviated the shame reaction.

The embarrassment I felt was an appropriate reaction, it is embarrassing if a stranger walks in when on the toilet. But reacting with shame is inappropriate, I am not a defective person who needs to be hidden away because of it.

GUILT

True guilt is what we feel when we've done something wrong or bad.

The ability to feel guilt is a recognised developmental stage in children. For example Erikson (see Wheeler and McConville 2002) suggests guilt forms between ages three to six years, whilst shame precedes it ages one to three years. The ability to empathise and understand another's point of view is key to feeling guilt.

The appropriate reaction to true guilt is to say 'I'm sorry', and if necessary to make amends, however true guilt will often awaken shame.

False guilt is what we feel when we have transgressed against our own internal code of conduct, and feel we have done something wrong or bad. This can also awaken shame.

If we sink into shame, we'll either over-apologise and attack ourselves: 'I'm so, so sorry, I can't imagine how I could do that. I've never done anything like that before. I'm so stupid...'

Secondly we might attack the other person: 'Look what you've made me do! If you hadn't... I wouldn't have...'

Another possible reaction would be to freeze or withdraw.

It's interesting how hard I find it to think of an example of doing something wrong, owning up to it and saying 'I'm sorry'! Just the thought of it triggers an uncomfortable desire to cover things up and so prove to the world that I'm not a defective person.

HUMILIATION

This happens when we are put down or belittled by someone else, it will be incident or comment that seems unjustified.

The appropriate reaction is either verbally or internally to stand up for ourselves. But if we sink into shame we'll agree with the humiliating remarks, often swallowing them whole without evaluating them.

As a young teenager a school friend told me I looked like a sheep, because of the way my fringe grew.

I took her humiliating remark as pejorative, shame kicked in and agreeing with her internally I told myself I was ugly and odd.

The appropriate reaction might have been: 'I love sheep, they're beautiful creatures, thanks for the compliment of noticing me.'

Knowing what shame is, how it feels and how we respond to it, is the first step in learning to live well with shame.

KNOWING WHAT SHAME IS, HOW IT FEELS AND HOW WE RESPOND TO IT, IS THE FIRST STEP IN LEARNING TO LIVE WELL WITH SHAME.

Male and Female Shame

Men and women experience shame in the same way, but the triggers are different.

In Brown's research (2012) she discovered that shame is evoked for men when they show weakness. This can be the weakness of showing fear; being emotionally vulnerable; not succeeding sexually, financially, or in sporting prowess. They can be shamed by their perceived failure as a father or as a husband.

Gentleness in men can be another source of shame. Men are 'meant' to be aggressive. And this is compounded when women, who say they long for men to be more emotionally literate, in fact have an unwritten rule that their men stay strong.

A few years back I was very keen for my husband to 'grow' spiritually and emotionally. 'Why is it always me that seems to have the problems?' I raged as we had yet another discussion about my issues.

But beneath that was fear. Although I knew he did have his own issues, I was ambivalent – 'What if he became weak as he peeled back the protective covering that kept him "strong"?'

The triggers of shame for women are different, and have more to do with appearance. There's a certain way women 'should' look and not adhering to that can cause shame. Women experience shame if they show themselves up in any way, particularly if they go against society's norms for feminine behaviour. Shame about mothering is easily

activated, particularly as women feel they should be able to keep all the plates in their lives spinning perfectly.

It's important to understand the different stimuli which trigger shame for men and women.

I have more thinking to do in this area.

But one thing I notice as I work with both men and women, is that women often connect quickly with descriptions of shame and can see it at work in their life, whilst men understand exactly what I'm describing, but see it in other people rather than themselves.

I invited an equal number of women and men to comment on the draft of this booklet, several men responded quickly with constructive comments, whilst prising response from the women was far more difficult.

Maybe it was that emotional distance from the feelings that enabled them to respond more quickly... most of the men told me 'I don't suffer from shame, but I can read it for you', and I was left with the question 'Do they not suffer from shame, or are they not allowed to?'
My fear is that when men or women live with unacknowledged shame, it can be like an unexploded bomb lying in the cellar of our lives.

Shame and the Bible

In a short article on shame we can only scrape the surface of current thinking about shame, and the same applies to shame in the Bible. The great thing about the Bible is that it doesn't try to hide shame or shameful situations.

There are many shame inducing incidents related in the Bible, and although we may not know exactly what those involved felt, it can be useful to imagine. Let me give a few examples:

- David danced before the Lord as the Ark was returned to Jerusalem, and Michal, his wife was shamed (2 Samuel 6).
- Peter, when he disowned Jesus (Mark 14), went away and wept.

- Elijah, after his contest with the prophets of Baal, fled into the wilderness. Perhaps an interesting example of shame being caused by success (1 Kings 19).
- The shame of childlessness (1 Samuel 1) where Hannah lets her shame be seen by Eli.
- Jesus in the courtyard and on the cross (Matthew 27). As Marie Therese, a sister of the Poor Clares said to me, 'In pictures we put a little cloth around him, but he was naked.' We don't know if Jesus felt shame or not, but whatever he felt it didn't stop him doing the will of the Father.
- In Matthew 27:3-10 Judas hangs himself after betraying Jesus. A terrible example of the destruction that shame can engender.

Then there's the woman who touched Jesus cloak. The shame of her condition made her want to come secretly for healing, but Jesus knew that becoming visible was vital for the healing of her shame (Mark 5: 25-34).

Conversely, as Collicutt McGrath (2009) points out, when the woman taken in adultery is dragged before him (John 8), and all eyes are on her, Jesus refuses to shame her further by looking at her, he bends down to write in the sand. But when her accusers have gone, then he looks at her, forgiving her and commissioning her to live a new life.

It's also interesting that both Paul and Peter use these verses from Isaiah in their letters (Romans 9:33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2: 6).

> As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, *and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.'*

Whilst it would be overstretching the text to suggest this refers definitely to the type of shame we are describing in this booklet, it does encourage us to believe that a relationship with Jesus will make a difference to our inner emotional experience.

This relationship is described in Psalm 34, an intimate Psalm written by David to God, which includes the words:

> Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

We began by looking at Genesis 2 and 3, where Adam and Eve's guilt at disobeying God turned into shame when they saw their nakedness. They tried to hide their nakedness by hiding themselves from God's sight. But in order to be covered by God they had to come out of hiding.

This image of being covered or clothed by God runs through the Bible. Take a look at: Galatians 3:27; Isaiah 61:10; Proverbs 18:10.

Why Does Shame Matter?

The smartly dressed, older woman froze as the leader of the prayer meeting spoke:

'Let's finish our prayer by placing a hand on the shoulder of the person next to us as we pray silently for them.'

Sitting next to her was a middle-aged man who she knew by sight, but she didn't know him.

She couldn't *possibly* touch him.

Shame began to do its work and soon she began to find it hard to breathe, she hastily got up, muttering that she needed the toilet.

But when it was all over she felt ashamed that she hadn't been able to take part, and sad that she'd missed out.

Shame stops us in so many ways.

It can stop us doing what God wants us to do, stop us from obeying his call on our lives and it can stop us from telling others about God too.

Shame stops us from seeing other people – it stops us seeing their needs and can distort what we think of them.

Shame can stop us asking for help from God and from others, because to admit need can cause a shame reaction.

Shame often means we don't see ourselves as God sees us, and so we live with a warped view of who we are.

Shame affects our bodies, and we will often unconsciously dodge situations or people who might trigger that reaction. After all, who wants to suffer suffocation, blushing, stammering, confusion and a racing heart if they can avoid it?

So shame stops us being free to experience life to its full.

Indeed, one unexpected effect of shame is highlighted by Brown (2012 p.118) who says that for those held prisoner by shame 'joy becomes something we approach with deep foreboding.' Because the experience of joy is often followed by shame.

I notice that I fear meeting up with family, because when we part, I invariably feel shame. The moment I leave the whole experience turns what had been a happy time, into a bitter, stomach churning sensation, as I relive the get-together.

Shame often means we are defensive, unable to be open to what life brings, which can lead to unhealthy relationships with family, friends and work colleagues. Often we will be unable to ask for, or receive criticism or feedback, and, as Proverbs 15:31-32 points out, we harm ourselves in the process:

If you listen to constructive criticism,
you will be at home among the wise.
If you reject discipline, you only harm yourself;
but if you listen to correction, you grow in
understanding.

Shame can be particularly powerful in those who have narcissistic personality traits, and can result in people working to disown parts of themselves, splitting off what they deem unacceptable in themselves. A dangerous and unhealthy way to live, both for themselves and those they come into contact with.

And so shame has the power to impede God's work in our lives, and our freedom to live the abundant life he offers us.

Living Well With Shame

OR HOW DOES PSALM 34:5 ACTUALLY WORK?

Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

Psalm 34:5

'There are no easy theological answers and no quick religious fixes to shame.' Pattison (2000 p.227)

The woman who touched the hem of Jesus' cloak received rapid physical healing. In some ways that was the easy bit. It may be that by calling her out from the crowd and into relationship with himself, Jesus was starting her off on the

more difficult work of healing her shame, because it is in healthy relationships that shame has a chance to heal.

Now that I have some awareness of shame and how it operates in me, I realise that its great gift is to teach me every day how helpless I am without God. Having no power to save myself from shame today, I am wholly dependent on my relationship with him to heal me, to protect me and to love me. Although I hate the feelings that shame engenders in me, I realise too how great a gift it has been in deepening my relationship with God.

So how might God help us learn to live well with shame?

I want to suggest several spiritual practices that I've used over the years. I'm not proficient at them, and some work better than others, but I offer them to you as a box of tools that you could try out for yourself.

Strengthen your Identity as a Loved Child of God

> Recently I gave a group a blank sticker, 'If you were to make a badge of what God thinks of you, I wonder what it would say?' I asked. A variety of shades of horror crossed their faces.
>
> Later I asked God, 'What do you think of me?' and what leapt into my mind was, 'You are lovely'. I was startled to realise how hard that would be to write on my sticker, although my mind and my heart accepted the words, immediately I heard them my gut rejected them. Since then I've prayed with it, asked God questions, let him speak the words to me over and over again. I've made a badge and put it on and tried to keep it there despite the discomfort of shame that I feel.

'Self-talk' is widely encouraged in counselling, but this is self-talk with a difference, because it's done in relationship with God.

It can be useful to find verses that tell you that God loves you and values you. Absorb them and use them when shame strikes, learn to hear him speak the words to you.

The verse I use repeatedly is Isaiah 43:4:

> You are precious and honoured in my sight, and... I love you.

But there are many others, find the verse or verses through which God speaks to you. Try Ephesians 1:4, Jeremiah 31: 3, John 3:16 or 1 John 3:1.

Remember the Incarnation

Hebrews 4:15-16 tells us unequivocally that Jesus understands our weakness and our struggles, and wants us to bring them to him. Because of that, we can go to him for the restoration of relationship that we need after shame has struck. We can hide ourselves in him (Psalm 61:3), and some of the suggestions below will help us learn to do that. And we can build a healthy attachment with God, in an adult relationship of mutual trust, respect and love, albeit we the adult child and he the adult father.

Reflect on Useful Questions

Here are some of the questions I've picked up over the years which I ask myself when shame hits me:

- What am I guilty of? (Is this true guilt or the false guilt of shame?)
- Where is God in this? What is he doing?
- In the scales of eternity how much does this weigh?

Find questions that help you to stop and take a reality check in the middle of shame.

Awareness-Acceptance-Choice

Becoming aware of shame and how it operates in us is important. Yontef (2003 p.353 *my italics*) writes:

> 'shame operates as an intense but *usually unaware force* that undermines confidence and identification with self, decreases self-esteem, inhibits social interaction and increases rigidity and defensiveness.'

Keeping a spiritual journal is one way of heightening awareness of our shame. We write, asking God to show us how shame is at work in us. Then, as we look back over the last 24 hours with God, he helps us see where shame has been operating, and again we write it down, perhaps as a letter addressed to God.

As we increase in our awareness of shame we learn to accept it. We will never get rid of shame, but with God's help, we can learn to tolerate it.

Once we are able to tolerate shame, we can begin to choose how to respond in various situations. Using a journal to describe our shame, to show it to God and to hear his response can support this process.

Spend Time with God

There are many good reasons to spend time with God, but taking time to build a relationship with God is key to strengthening our ability to live well with shame. As I mentioned earlier, a healthy adult-to-adult relationship with God is a firm basis for working with shame. If our minds are filled by God, there is less room for shame to occupy.

There are a variety of ancient Christian practices which might help us keep our minds centred on God. At the end of this booklet I've suggested several books that will describe these practices more fully than I have space for.

THE EXAMEN OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Used over time, the examen builds gratitude and awareness of God's activity in us. I use a simple form as I brush my teeth each night, and ask 'For what am I most grateful today?' and then 'For what am I least grateful?' Because gratitude is a valuable antidote to shame I have majored on the first question and I write down what I'm most grateful for each day. Over years of using this exercise I find I see God's goodness in my life far more often.

PRACTISING GRATITUDE

This can be expanded in a variety of ways, such as the 'five -a-day' method: as we go to sleep, we recall five things we are grateful to God for that day and name them to him.

CHRISTIAN MINDFULNESS

This helps us learn to keep our focus on God. Take a word such as 'Jesus', or a phrase such as 'Be still and know that I am God' and use it with your breath. Try to focus your attention on God as you use the words, and when your mind wanders, as it surely will, gently bring it back to looking at God.

The unknown author of The Cloud of Unknowing describes a way of keeping our attention on God when other things try to grab our mind:

> When thoughts are 'strongly pushing in between you and God, try to look, as it were, over their shoulders, seeking something else – which is God.'

SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

Working with a Spiritual Director has helped me learn to tolerate shame. For me telling a person has been harder than telling God. As trust grows between me and a Spiritual Director, I am able to be increasingly honest about my struggle with shame. I am heard and accepted.

I AM ENOUGH

Brown (2012 p.116) suggests that learning to say and believe 'I am enough' will become a shield against shame for us. A potential difficulty with that statement is that as we've never been able to believe it in the past, unless something fundamental changes, how can we believe it now?

Yet as those who belong to Christ, we know that we are only 'complete through our union with Christ' (Colossian 2: 10 NLT). And as we work at deepening that relationship with God, hiding ourselves in him, *then* we will learn to say, and even begin to believe, 'In Christ I am enough'.

ENGAGING WITH OUR SHAME WITH GOD

This gives us the daily opportunity to deepen our trust and love relationship with him. I've often gone back to the following poem by Dave Bookless. He seems to be describing the growing realisation of shame in his life. But, for him, there is hope, because his God is there in the cracks of his life.

CRACKS

There are cracks in my world.
I noticed them one day and now they are everywhere
Sinister hairline cracks that start and finish out of sight
Cracks that grow and gape and laugh at my certainties.
My world has been declared unsafe.

I have tried to paper them over
Paint them out
Move the furniture to hide them
But they always return –
cracks that hang like question-marks in my mind.

And now I begin to think
why do the cracks appear?
From where do they come?
They have made my room unsafe
BUT

They have thrown it open to new horizons
Drawn back curtains
Raised long-closed shutters.
One day I looked and a crack had become a window.
Step through it said, what have you to fear?
Do you wish to stay in your crumbling room?

And then I remembered a childhood dream,
Watching the egg of some exotic bird,
Oval and perfect, spotted blue and cream
(I wished to hold that egg and keep it on a shelf)
BUT

As I watched it cracks appeared
Tiny fissures spread like zigzag ripples.
It broke in two and life struggled to its feet,
Wet and weak and blinking at the world.
Without those cracks that egg could hold
no more than rotting stagnant death.

Without its cracks my world would be
a room without a view.
Cracks may be uncomfortable, disturbing gaps
BUT

Could it be I need them?
Do you believe in cracks?
Because I keep looking for God in the room
And find he is hiding in the cracks.

©Dave Bookless, 1990. 'Cracks', God Doesn't do Waste (Dave Bookless, IVP, 2010)

For Further Exploration

Discussion Questions

1. How do you experience shame?
   Brown (2012 p.44) has three useful questions that might help you answer this:
   - What do I do when I feel emotionally exposed?
   - How do I behave when I'm feeling very uncomfortable and uncertain?
   - How willing am I to take emotional risks?

2. What do you do when shame hits you?

3. How do you respond when you experience shame in others (if you do)?

4. Think of examples in the Bible where people may have been experiencing shame. Are there useful insights about how God helps us with shame?

5. Can you experience shame without 'the other' in mind? Is a shame reaction always caused by another person, even if they aren't present at the time?

6. How much does social media, and the hyper-connectivity it engenders, exacerbate shame? Could it benefit us if we were able to use it to bring our shame out of hiding in a way that brought healing?

7. To what extent does living in a celebrity culture with its opportunity for constant negative comparison increase shame?

Suggested Reading to Accompany 'Living Well with Shame'

- Sleeping with Bread, D.Linn, M.Linn, S.Fabricant Linn, (N.J. Paulist Press 1995)
- Christian Mindfullness, S.Lambert, (Instant Apostle 2014)
- Celebration of Discipline, R.Foster, (Hodder and Stoughton 1978)

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- Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead, B.Brown, (Portfolio Pengin, 2012)
- Jesus and the Gospel Women, J.Collicut McGrath, J. (SPCK 2009)
- Why Love Matters; How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain, S.Gerhardt, S (Routledge 2004)
- Skills in Gestalt Counselling and Psychotherapy, P.Joyce and C.Sills, (Sage 2010 2nd Edn)
- The Big Ego Trip, G.Harrison, (IVP 2013)
- Shame. The Power of Caring, G.Kaufman (Schenkman 1985)
- Shame: Theory, Therapy and Theology, S.Pattison (The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge 2000)
- Nonviolent Communication. M.Rosenberg (Puddle Dancer Press 1998)
- A New Earth, E.Tolle (Penguin 2005)
- The Heart of Development, G.Wheeler and M.McConville (eds) (Gestalt Press)
- The Cloud of Unknowing, C.Wolters (Trans) (Penguin Books 1978)
- The Voice of Shame: Silence and Connection in Psychotherapy, G.Yontef in R.G Lee and G.Wheeler (eds) (Gestalt Press 2003)

SOURCES

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New Living Bible Second Edition (Tyndale House Publishers 2008)

Conversations
Dr Clive North, Consultant Psychiatrist

Website
Maslow's hierarchy of need: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs.

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