

Healing Our Shame

delivered by Rev. Michelle Collins on July 13, 2014

Let me take you back to perhaps an awkward feeling moment. You feel a jolt and your heart beat increases. You may have a coppery taste in your mouth, and adrenaline rushes in particular to your cheeks as they begin to redden. You're embarrassed and blushing about something.

Blushing and embarrassment are rather uniquely human reactions. Charles Darwin called them "the most peculiar and most human of all expressions."¹ There's even a fear of blushing – erythrophobia, literally the fear of redness. And there's a spectrum of how likely we are to blush – I've always found myself on the more-likely-to-blush side of the spectrum. I think the worst part of it is when I am embarrassed to be blushing, being embarrassed to be embarrassed! Despite my reminders to myself that blushing is involuntary and I really can't change anything about it, it doesn't stop my feelings of shame about it.

Shame is a primal feeling – uniquely human and surprisingly pervasive. Some have even called it "the master emotion." Shame gets confused with guilt a good deal though, but they are definitely different feelings. The first time that I really started to grapple with the difference between them was in a sexual ethics course during my first year in seminary. I hadn't intended on taking the course– I was signed up for one about using play and theater as part of worship for all ages. Our professor didn't show though, and the professor in the neighboring classroom had stuck her head in our door and offered that if any of us wanted to come talk about sex instead, we could join them. Maybe she was kidding though, because she was kind of surprised when I took her up on it!

In the ensuing class discussions, we were using the words guilt and shame somewhat interchangeably, and this bothered our professor who wanted to make sure we understood the difference between them. Guilt, she said, is about something you did, and forgiveness is what heals it. Shame is different – shame is about who you are. What heals shame is grace.

As shame researcher Brené Brown distinguishes them, "We feel guilt when we hold up something we've done or failed to do against the kind of person we want to be. It's an uncomfortable feeling, but one that's helpful. When we apologize for something we've done, make amends to others, or change a behavior that we don't feel good about, guilt is most often the motivator. Guilt is just as powerful as shame, but its effect is often positive while shame often is destructive."²

Shame cuts far deeper than guilt because it's about our own value judgments about who we are and about our own worth and worthiness or lack thereof.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blushing>

² Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, page 41.

In my training as a chaplain, we learned about a number of different spiritual assessment models. It seemed that everyone had their own favorite model, and oddly, they could be dramatically different too! I ended up finding all of them fascinating in some way or another, and all of them useful for some things. One of these was a simple three part model affectionately known as SAM. (SAM, an incredibly creative acronym, stood for Spiritual Assessment Model.) It named three core spiritual need areas and its premise was that while we may have core needs in each of the three areas, at any one time we were primarily focusing on one of them in our lives and challenges. These three areas were reconciliation, meaning & direction, and self-worth. Someone with a reconciliation core need will be focusing their energy on their relationships and on conflicts that may exist. Someone focusing on meaning and direction will be working on just that – questioning and determining their meaning and direction in life especially with regards to any events or changes currently at hand. The last, self-worth, was about questioning or struggling with valuation of self and questions of one's own worth. Reconciliation, meaning & direction, and self-worth.

Not only did we have to think about these areas with regards to the patients we were working with, but we also had to assess ourselves. My chaplaincy supervisor had done mediation and reconciliation training herself, so she tended to see the rest of us through that lens. Thus even though I didn't agree, she declared that I had conflict and reconciliation issues and proceeded to put that into my documents that went to the UUA!

Guilt and shame fall into different core spiritual need areas. Guilt, being connected with something we've done or haven't done, is really fundamentally about relationships even though it's located within ourselves. Guilt is connected with the reconciliation core spiritual need. Not shame though. Brené Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."³ Shame is about feelings of worthiness and self-worth – all by itself a separate core spiritual need.

And it's not one that's necessarily easy to talk about. Even as I've mentioned to others that I was working on this topic for an upcoming sermon, if they did want to talk more about it, the tone and volume of their voice changed as they did.

Brené Brown ran into a whole handful of cultural norms and fears around talking about shame when her first book came out. She had been invited to speak at a women's networking lunch, her first audience that wasn't therapists or researchers. Just normal people. She arrived at the country club where it was taking place and introduced herself to the woman in charge. Here's how she described what happened:

³ Brown, page 39.

After sizing me up for what seemed like an eternity, she greeted me with a stack of short pronouncements. “Hello. You don’t look like a researcher. I’m going to introduce you. I need your bio.” That was the beginning of the end.

She read it for 30 seconds, gasped, and snapped, “This says you’re a shame researcher. Is that true?” All of the sudden I was 10 years old and in the principal’s office. “Yes, ma’am. I’m a shame researcher.”

“Do. You. Study. Anything. Else?” she shot back like bullets.

“Yes, I also study fear and vulnerability.”

She shraped, which is like a combo of a shriek and a gasp. “I was told you collected research on how to be more joyful and how to have more connection and meaning in our lives.”

I tried to explain: “I don’t really study how-to be joyful and have more meaning. I study the things that get in the way of joy and meaning and connection.” At which she turned and stomped away.

Oh, the irony of a shame researcher standing in a puddle of I’m-not-good-enough.

When she returned, she made three pronouncements that made Brown’s talk impossible.

- 1) You’re not going to talk about the things that get in the way. You’re going to talk about the how-to part.
- 2) Do not mention the word shame; people will be eating.
- 3) People want to be comfortable and joyful. That’s all. Keep it joyful and comfortable.⁴

You know, I can relate a lot to this woman. She didn’t mean to sabotage the talk. She was just operating out of cultural norms about the “right” things to talk about. She wanted to be comfortable and for other folks to be comfortable, too. But if we want to be able to get to places of healing, of love, of worthiness, we have to talk about the things that get in the way.

At its most basic, worthiness doesn’t have a lot of prerequisites and preconditions. But then again, many of us are awfully good at creating prerequisites:

- I’ll be worthy when I lose 20 pounds.
- I’ll be worthy if I can get pregnant.
- I’ll be worthy if I can get or stay sober or clean.
- I’ll be worthy if everyone thinks I’m a good parent.
- I’ll be worthy if I can hold my marriage together.
- I’ll be worthy when I make partner or get that promotion.
- I’ll be worthy when I can do it all and look like I’m not even trying.⁵

⁴ Brown, pages 33-34.

⁵ Brown, page 24.

We are desperate for feelings of worthiness! But we're also really good at creating roadblocks for ourselves.

When my sexual ethics professor talked about the idea of shame and worthiness, she said that the way to get there was through grace, specifically God's grace. Well, since she was a Methodist minister herself and teaching at a Christian seminary, she had a particular meaning in mind when she said this, grace being the unconditional acceptance that God has of each person, no matter what. Yes, there's more than that. Grace is one of the more theologically complex subjects out there. But at its core, grace represents God's unconditional acceptance. Well, since my own theology doesn't quite match up with that, it left me wanting a little more.

What I wanted to find was a UU version of not just grace, but the grace that can heal shame, a UU version of what my professor was talking about. I wanted to find UU ways of being resilient through shame and UU versions of that unconditional acceptance.

One place to start is with our seven principles, the aspirations that we as an association of congregations agree to walk together with. The first of those is one that I hadn't read before with this context in mind. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Often this is a foundation for social justice work and for moral values, but maybe it could also be a foundation for personal healing and personal affirmation. Not only do we seek to affirm the inherent worth of other people, but maybe we can find ways to affirm our own inherent worth.

I think what gets me most strongly is that this is one of the aspirations that our congregations are built on. What I want to propose is the UU version of grace that can heal our shame is that it is our loving communities, operating at their best. Encompassing all our theological diversity is our congregation – and this loving community has power.

Now I'm not just saying this because I'm a romantic idealist and think that our communities are the solutions to everything – although you do hear me saying stuff like that a good bit – but this is what I hear from folks as they talk about their first experiences in a UU community. That they weren't sure they'd be accepted because of some part of them or something that had just happened to them, but they were. Folks who share stories of unraveling in our newcomers class and in one of many small groups, and find acceptance of themselves and their stories. Our ideals of radical welcoming and radical acceptance are types of grace. I think this is most poignant in our welcoming and acceptance of LGBT folks. Just look at the number of same sex marriages that I've performed since it became legal, people who sought us out because they knew our church was welcoming. And we're known for this – especially the T part of LGBT. When I was on a visit as a hospital chaplain, a woman asked what my denomination was. (I got that question a lot, and answering their question often didn't really clarify the matter either!) She got it though, and proceeded to tell me that I was safe to talk to and told me about her son's journey through gender transitioning and her own confusion and support of him. We're known for this welcoming acceptance!

But it's definitely more than just being welcoming. It's more than what Philemon and Baucis experienced in the story of the Miraculous Pitcher.⁶ They were embarrassed and ashamed when they were afraid of not being able to live up to their guests' demands because of their poverty. But rather than letting the pitcher run out, Zeus and Hermes fixed it and made the pitcher always have enough. But we have to be able to talk about and struggle with the things that hold us back. Just magically making them go away or ignoring them like in Brené Brown's experience just proves the power of the magic or the fear of discomfort. We have to be able to struggle with them while having our own struggle and worth affirmed.

Brown names four things shared by people with strong shame resilience:

- They understand shame and recognize what messages and expectations trigger shame for them.
- They practice critical awareness by reality-checking the messages and expectations that tell us that being imperfect means being inadequate.
- They reach out and share their stories with people they trust.
- They speak shame – they actually use the word – they talk about how they're feeling and ask for what they need.⁷

This is how we can find healing and resilience through shame – not by denying its existence and not allowing it to fester and grow. Grace is relationships that are founded on assuming that everyone has worth and is worthy of love and acceptance; grace is a place where we can have someone that we can share our story with and not be afraid of judgment.

Sharing our stories has power, it has real power. But I'm not saying for us to be willing to share our story with everyone. That would be ridiculous! Hearing someone's story is a privilege and sharing it can take an incredible amount of vulnerability. All we can hope to do as the grace of our loving community is to create a place that feels safe enough that someone might find someone else to share their story with. If each of us has one or two people in our lives that we can really share our shame stories with, one or two people that we know will love and accept us no matter what our struggles are – if each of us did, we'd be super lucky. That being and that sharing – that's grace. And maybe finding that space, and finding the courage to enter into it – that can help us heal and remember our own worthiness. May we all be so blessed to find that. Amen.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baucis_and_Philemon

⁷ Brown, 40.