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Volume 3 – 2011

**I-Thou-We Shame:
A Liberating Pastoral, Psychosocial Analysis of Shame**

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Introduction

The biblical witness teaches “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free...”² If freedom is available through Christ, why are so many Christians living lives burdened with shame from past mistakes? Shame is experienced by most at some point in life. Though the experience of shame is often characterized by isolation and experienced as deeply personal, shame is as much of

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² Romans 8:1-2, NRSV.

an interpersonal and social phenomenon as it is an individual one. In fact shame can be communal and experienced similarly by collective bodies of individual selves at once. Our lives, even our interior ones, are a web-like intermingling of history, society, family and personality. As a pastoral theologian and psychotherapist, understanding how each of these dimensions influence experiences of shame provides important insight and hopeful direction for those individuals and communities of individuals who seek divine forgiveness and freedom from the shame of past mistakes.

I. Defining Shame

What is shame? Shame can be characterized as a confluence of ambivalent, ineffable self and other estranging emotions. Individual experiences of shame are often as difficult to cope with as they are to articulate. Likewise, definitions of shame within literature across disciplines are poorly and diversely articulated.³ Shame is an experience and a concept over which it is difficult to achieve a sense of mastery. This difficulty only contributes to its silently destructive and insidious nature. To be sure, the obscurity of shame is in no way a reflection of its potency nor its prevalence. One can find shame in every house, burning in an ashtray, hanging framed upon a wall, covering a bed, even if it goes undetected by others.⁴ Inconspicuousness makes experiences of shame are no less palpable; shame is real.

The concept of guilt is often easier to grasp than shame. Even though the two are often collapsed together, they are not the same. One reason shame and guilt are spoken of interchangeably is because they very often accompany one another emotionally. However, while guilt suggests “I’ve done something bad,” shame insists “I am bad.” For this reason, it is easier to *do* something with guilt (e.g. confession, retribution, or atonement) in efforts to resolve it. Doing something with shame, however, is a bit more complicated. Those ravaged by shame often feel captured by its relentless grip. Shame is often experienced as freedom inhibiting because it creates a sense of unworthiness of being freed within those who are in its grasp.

³ Stephen Pattison. *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 43.

⁴ Salman Rushdie. *Shame: A Novel*. (New York, N.Y.: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).

Not least among shame's deleterious features is that it is often hidden, not only from others, but also from oneself. Shame can be masked, both consciously and unconsciously, by a variety of other feelings, names and behaviors. For instance, shame hides in anger, blame, denial, workaholism, perfectionism, drinking, and any of many other compulsions. In fact, shame often operates at the foundation of diagnostic categories described within the DSM-IV-TR including Major Depression Disorders, Narcissist Personality Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorders.⁵

II. Locating Shame

In a quest to understand what shame is, it is helpful to also understand *where* shame is located. Though much of shame's treachery comes from its tendency to cause one to feel isolated, such a feeling often belies shame's far more expansive habitat. In the novel entitled *Native Son*, the author, Richard Wright, illustrates well a broader location of shame.

Max sat opposite Bigger and Bigger's eyes met his and fell. Bigger felt that he was sitting and holding his life helplessly in his hands, waiting for Max to tell him what to do with it; and it made him hate himself. An organic wish to cease to be, to stop living, seized him. Either he was too weak, or the world was too strong; he did not know which. Over and over he had tried to create a world to live in, and over and over he had failed. Now, once again, he was waiting for someone to tell him something; once more he was poised on the verge of action and commitment. Was he letting himself in for more hate and fear? What could Max do for him now? Even if Max tried hard and honestly, were there not thousands of white hands to stop Max? Why not tell him to go home? His lips trembled to speak, to tell Max to leave; but no words came. He felt that even in speaking in that way he would be indicating how hopeless he felt, thereby disrobing his soul to more shame.⁶

Wright's narrative describes the inner torment of a black man named Bigger who struggles to make sense of the emotions he feels in relation to his white counterpart, Max. In the story, Bigger feels hopelessness and desperation that stem from his social realities as a black man. His emotions may be characterized as an awareness of a lack of social and interpersonal power as he sits before his more

⁵ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Revised 4th Ed. (Washington, DC, 2000).

⁶ Richard Wright. *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1940), 345.

privileged white man; this causes Bigger to feel shame. Through the character Bigger, a black man negotiating life in a racist society, Right provides illustrative accounts, such as this one, throughout his novel of the intermingling of shame and social context.

As one can see, shame is not only an entrance to the self, it also provides an entree to many other important features of the individual in relation to society.⁷ For this reason, freedom from the shame from past mistakes requires that individuals and communities attend to both the inner-self and their outer context. In other words, *whose* mistakes contributes to our shame? To be sure, individuals and communities bare the shame of their own past mistakes as well as those mistakes committed by others. Mistakes committed by others can be seemingly diffuse and broadly systemic at times making them difficult to locate. Even mistakes which occurred generations ago can still have an impact on persons today. When it comes to the intergenerational transmission of shame, the past is never dead; it is not even past.⁸

Shame does not manifest itself in only one way, nor is it located in only one place. Shame is at once a spiritual, personal, interpersonal, as well as a larger socio-political phenomenon. In order to address shame in our lives, in our churches, and in our communities, it is important that we approach it with all of these loci in mind. To do so, a multi-dimensional pastoral analysis is necessary. Such an analysis involves a spiritual, psychological, and socio-historical analysis of experiences of shame. Once this is done, one can develop an appropriate pastoral response to shame. To best illustrate this approach, I will utilize a case study involving a woman who represents a composite of multiple clients I have worked with therapeutically who suffer from shame based identities. For the sake of organization, I have utilized corresponding headings that delineate each component of my analysis.

III. Case Study

Mary was a single 36 year old African American woman elementary school teacher who came to see me to address issues surrounding childhood sexual abuse. Mary said that she was

⁷ Stephen Pattison. *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

⁸ William Faulkner. *Requiem for a Nun*. (New York: Garland Pub, 1951).

beginning to remember on a somatic level being abused as a child. This frightened and disgusted her. She felt pain in her chest and in the pit of her stomach during these times. To deal with the discomfort, she often ate, worked, or did something to distract herself from being disturbed by what she was feeling. Mary also shared recurrent dreams involving sexual violation that caused her to feel unsafe and dirty. Mary spoke about emotional pain connected to developing “early.” She said that she already had large breasts and was curvy when she was entering the sixth grade. As a result, Mary says that she hated her body and despised even more the negative attention she would get from boys and men who were much older than she. Mary had a long history of Dysthymia (chronic, low-grade depression) that extended over the last ten years of her life. She had difficulty attributing this to any particular event or precipitating cause. According to Mary, feelings of sadness and worthlessness were just a part of life.

IV. Spiritual Analysis

There are several spiritual issues regarding shame embedded within this case. The one that emerges most strongly for me is the theological issue of sin and shame. Mary was a victim of childhood sexual abuse. Her genogram revealed patterns of similar violence throughout her family history. Mary's abuse strikes me as one of the most heinous as it occurred before she could defend or protect herself. Violence and abuse against women and children is a sinful injustice that Mary and her family are all too familiar with and a cause of much of the shame she experiences today.

Within the biblical witness, the story of the man who was blind since birth echoes concerns regarding Mary's suffering. Jesus asked the poignant question to his disciples, “who sinned, this man or his parents?”⁹ Jesus' mention of parents used here, invokes considerations about the origins of sin and suffering. Where do we locate the origin of sin when it is intergenerational? Mary was the recipient of suffering by no choice of her own and nor by reason of any sinful act that had been transmitted inter-generationally. Though the men in her family must be held accountable for their sins as individuals, these

⁹ Romans 6:18 NRSV.

men were also shaped by historic, institutional, and socially violent sins committed towards them at the hands of others.

Where to locate the origin of sin matters theologically as it informs one of where to look to stop such patterns. However, locating sin is only one aspect involved in addressing Mary's freedom from shame. Mary's freedom is not entirely dependent on others. According to some doctrines of salvation, freedom is found through salvation from *our* sins, but Mary's suffering is a result of the sins of others. For this reason, a theology of salvation from the impact of other's sins may also be spiritually healing for Mary.

To this end, Jacquelyn Grant's work *White Woman's Christ, Black Women's Jesus* speaks extensively to such a theology of salvations as she explores what images of salvation are most liberating to black women's suffering and why. Because the church teaches that God's incarnation is represented in the male figure Jesus it lends itself toward a Christological interpretation that is constructed through the narrow lens of patriarchy. Many white feminists have done well to debunk patriarchal notions of Christ by highlighting that Jesus Christ was a model of mutuality in that he displayed more equitable relationships.¹⁰ Though this interpretation helps to overturn sexist attitudes around Christ and salvation, Grant argues that this is still not sufficient for the salvation of black women.

For black women who suffer from shame, Jesus was "all things," but especially co-sufferer who empowers them in situations of oppression.¹¹ Christian black women dealing with shame have traditionally identified with Jesus. Jesus was made to suffer undeservingly and his suffering culminated in what was considered most shameful form of death in Greco-Roman times; crucifixion. Likewise, black women have long suffered from such horrific and shame inducing acts including rape, public beatings, and their babies being sold during institutionalized slavery.¹² Though Cone argues that the condition of all black people today reflects the cross of Jesus, Grant nuances her understanding of the crucifixion for black women

¹⁰ Jacquelyn Grant. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1989), 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

by placing focus on the triumph in the life of Jesus that involved resisting and overcoming other's attempts at causing him shame.¹³

A contextually appropriate theological posture to the spiritual dimensions to Mary's shame first deems sin as diffuse and shared by both individuals and systems. In addition, a doctrine of freedom from shame through salvation for Mary is best understood as the emphasizing the salvific, shame freeing presence of a God who has suffers and resists shameful events with us and whose life is seen as triumphant in spite of this. While a contextually appropriate theology of sin and freedom from shame is one important aspect of Mary's shame, understanding Mary's psychology is another.

V. Psychological Dimensions

Psychologically, Mary is suffering with shame induced from the trauma of the abuse she experienced as a child. There are multiple psychological ripple effects of the shame from this trauma including poor boundaries, compulsive eating habits, and chronic depressive feelings. When Mary first came to see me, she could not remember clearly the abuse that occurred. Rather, she could only say that she knew something bad had happened and that she has not felt safe, good about herself, or continuously happy for a very long time. Mary's repressed memories eventually began to bubble up in frightening dreams and in somatic representations of abuse such as pain in her uterine area and tightening in her chest.

Shame may be understood as a psychological phenomenon which often results in the repression of memories that are too painfully shaming to recognize. The term repression is understood as the wish to stay the same while changing and it can result in a patient's efforts to avoid self-knowledge. Mary would ask me, "who will I be if I acknowledge this happened?" Her question suggests a fear that if she allowed herself to acknowledge her trauma she would no longer be an acceptable, good person; shame would overtake her. A relational psychoanalysis approach to Mary's experiences seems to best explain and address the effects of her trauma induced shame reaction.

A relational psychoanalytical approach to Mary's symptomatology claims that what she is experiencing is normal. In

¹³ Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune. *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 191.

other words, the harmful effect of trauma is not multiplicity, or her feeling of having multiple parts of herself, but it is when one drives a wedge or wall between these multiple states, making them inaccessible to simultaneous consciousness.¹⁴ Conflict in the multiple self-other organizations emerges out of a need to internalize irreconcilable identifications with ones which cannot be integrated into the more overarching organizational schemas and become split-off, unintegrated units.¹⁵ This may also be described as dissociation. Dissociation is when trauma temporarily erases the existence of the part of the self on which the trauma was inflicted.

Mary had been unable to allow herself to move into self states that reminded her of the trauma because they were too shame inducing; she could not maintain a sense of an acceptable self while acknowledging these events occurred. Mary had become split off from these memories and aspects of her. One of Mary's largest fears before she could address her history of trauma was whether she would still be an intact and recognizable self if she acknowledged her experiences.

According to a relational-psychoanalysis approach, enactment is the effort for cure on the part of the patient by attempting to be known in the space with the therapist in a way that is different from the old self-patterning. The re-integrating of self-states involves the pain of mourning of the death of certain parts of the self and the process of enactment. Healing is possible when a version of the situation that led to the original need for dissociation is replayed through the relationship with the therapist in a way that allows the threat of potential trauma to be healed as it is reprocessed.¹⁶ This is what I attempted to accomplish in my work with Mary.

The psychological dimensions of Mary's trauma induced shame are well illuminated by a relational psychoanalysis theory of dissociation, repression, and Mary's need for reenactment as a road to

¹⁴ Jody Messler-Davies and Mary Gail Frawley. "Dissociative Processes and Transference-Countertransference, Paradigms in the Psychoanalytic Oriented Treatment of Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives* Vol. 2, Issue 1 (1992): 5-36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Philip Bromberg. "Shadow and Substance: A Relational Perspective on Clinical Process." *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, Vol 10(2) Spring (1993): 147-168.

healing. This process, though largely involving emotional work on the part the individual, is not simply an individualistic process rather it is also a social one. I will now explore Mary's socio-historical context.

VI. Socio-Historical Analysis

Philip Cushman recommends hermeneutics as a meaningful construct for psychotherapy as it enables the pastoral therapist to think critically about the individual's total circumstances inclusive of socio-political, historical and economic factors.¹⁷ By valuing the social world and by acknowledging the interweaving of the individual and the society, psychotherapy can demonstrate morality that would challenge the dominant moral understandings and political arrangements of our era.¹⁸ It is with this moral imperative in mind that I seek to examine Mary's broader socio-historical and cultural landscape to better understand her shame.

Mary has several levels of oppression for consideration that have an impact on her experience of shame which include her race, gender, and class. Historically speaking, black women have been the victims of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their slave owners and treated as property. Such experiences contribute to a legacy of shame with which Mary must contend. Black women have also been abused at the hands of black men. Today, African American women still suffer deadly violence from family members at rates distinctly higher than other racial groups in the United States. Approximately 40% of black women report coercive contact of a sexual nature by age 18.¹⁹

Though there are also strengths to the African American family, a history of oppression has also taken its toll on black families. Violence is perpetuated in black families by the subjugation of someone less powerful, thus the target is black women and children.²⁰ As such, black women's liberation from shame inducing trauma and violence must mean the liberation of the black family and the social structures affecting black families.²¹

¹⁷ Philip Cushman. *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy*. Boston, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub, 1995), 290.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁹ *Africana Voices Against Violence*, Tufts University, Statistics, 2002.

²⁰ Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune. *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 193.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

Loyalty and devotion are enormous barriers to overcome in African American communities. There is already so much negative shameful information about African American families in society that a need to protect one another keeps us quiet. It is a painful, unsettling task to call attention to violence and abuse in the African American community.²² As such, silence is a powerful contributor to shame to the black community. As culturally threatening as it appears silence must be broken. In spite of these communal dynamics that work to silence Mary, she is taking the initial steps of breaking that silence.

For John Patton, pastoral care is the person-to-person response that grows out of participation in a caring community and which seeks to enable persons to give and receive care in community.²³ When we consider Mary's community, not only must we grapple with the fact that it is her community that abused her but that isolation from her community may be harmfully contributing to the effects of her shame. To properly address the role of community in Mary's shame it is important to understand both the dangers as well as the resources therein.

The black community and namely the black church has been for many black women a place of freedom. It is the capacity of the black church to employ the essence of black struggle for wholeness and the enduring presence of black women in the church who embody the struggle within and outside the church that makes the black church a potential shame liberating agent for African American women.²⁴ I believe that Mary can draw on this powerful communal legacy to garner strength and to support her on her journey. The nature of Mary's journey and the story of the black church are similar in this regard. Like Mary, the black church community is creative and resilient, but this is impossible to helpfully draw upon when we live in silence and fear.²⁵

The socio-historical aspects of Mary's surround are all salient aspects having an impact on her experience of shame. Now that I have

²² Ibid., 187.

²³ John Patton. *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 24.

²⁴ Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune. *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 193.

²⁵ Ibid., 196.

attempted to speak to the milieu of spiritual, psychological, and socio-historical aspects of Mary's case, my analysis will now be used to inform a pastoral response to her shame.

VII. A Pastoral Response to Shame

I believe that a strategic intervention for Mary would be based on a Womanist Care principle that asserts that the articulation of one's story and the finding of power in one's story are essential for healing and transformation. In letting Mary tell her story, she gives voice to her personal and cultural history, the impact of her family of origin, her responses regarding racism, classism, sexism, as well as other challenges in this world which, when kept silent, worsen her experience of shame.²⁶ If Mary could engage her narrative in a way that appropriately externalizes causes of her shame and identifies parts of her story that place her in the role of victor rather than victim, I believe that she can find freedom from her shame.

In tandem with a Womanist Care narrative approach to healing, Pamela Cooper-White offers helpful suggestions to healing from shame in her book, *The Cry of Tamar*. In her work, Cooper-White draws on the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel chapter 14 to examine the themes of rape, incest and domestic violence found within. According to Cooper-White, Tamar is possibly the only rape victim within the bible to have a voice and yet all her power to act or speak are taken away from her early in the account.²⁷ Cooper-White employs a technique called subversive memory which describes a process of retrieving lost voices of biblical women through imagination and re-creation. In this vein, Cooper-White imagines what the Tamar story would have sounded like if it were told from her point of view. I view this technique as having value for Mary as she works to retrieve her voice, re-author her story, and effectively liberate herself from her shame.

Cooper-White bases her pastoral theological approach to violence against women largely on Martin Buber's I-Thou concept. Using Buber, violence against women is described as the annihilation of

²⁶ Emelie Townes. *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 199.

²⁷ Pamela Cooper-White. *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.

connectivity and the dulling and erasure of human relationality through objectification.²⁸ Buber's I-Thou leads to a conversation about power because exploitative power and objectification go hand in hand.²⁹ The “we” becomes a safeguard of mutual care and justice because it makes room for God and the community.³⁰ Part of what can heal the shame inducing I-thou rupture in Mary's experience is the “we” experience of mutual care and justice sought through God and in community. If Mary is able to have a more active and discerning role in locating and participating in healing communities of this kind, she can address her shame most effectively.

This form of healing participation in community draws on both a power-within and power-with. Importantly, power within claims an understanding of the divine that is within each of us. It refocuses one less on their shame and more on the notion that we have an inherent goodness. As a survivor of child hood abuse, Mary has long dealt with feelings of shame around herself and her own body. Reinforcing her inherent goodness is a necessary and useful part of freedom finding. Furthermore, power-with prizes mutuality as against control over.³¹ Looking to have a power-with experience in relationship would provide a meaningful corrective to the damaging and shaming inducing ways Mary learned to be in relationship others as a result of the power-over experiences of abuse.

Using a spiritual, psychological, and socio-political analysis, I believe Mary and I were able to co-construct a new reality for her. One that freed her from her shame based identity by identifying Mary's agency, power-within, and power-with. This process was indeed divinely inspired, supported, and facilitated by the “weness” of a God who was active in and among us and her community; a divine process that addresses the all aspects of i-thou-weness of Mary's shame.

Conclusion

My commitment as a pastoral theologian and psychotherapist is reflected most in being conversant with multiple sources of insight

²⁸ Ibid., 18.

²⁹ Ibid., 18.

³⁰ Ibid., 29.

³¹ Ibid., 33.

and data that informs a person's existential plight that includes institutions, society, history, and one's global context. Each of these influences help me see the individual more clearly and more appropriately respond to their suffering. Having multiple levels of pastoral theological analysis makes room for complexity and a multiplicity of viewpoints while also displaying how much of individual experiences of shame are interwoven with the experiences of others through time and across space.

I consider this kind of thorough assessment to be what effectively guides persons in their quest to achieve freedom from the shame of past mistakes. Grappling with the structures that contribute to experiences of shame is necessary to live out a Christian commitment to justice. Appreciating the larger picture also humbles our temptation to make broad generalizations and consider a person solely responsible for their condition. Caring in this way for individuals with shame based identities seems to ward off doing more harm than good to already suffering persons.

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We have all felt shame at one time or another. Maybe we were teased for mispronouncing a common word or for how we looked in a bathing suit, or perhaps a loved one witnessed us telling a lie. Shame is the uncomfortable sensation we feel in the pit of our stomach when it seems we have no safe haven from the judging gaze of others. We feel small and bad about ourselves and wish we could vanish. Although shame is a universal emotion, how it affects mental health and behavior is not self-evident. Researchers have made good progress in addressing that question. Bad for Your Health. According to phi