

# Amazing Shame

By Susan Peabody

I had a dream about shame a few weeks ago. In this dream I was desperately looking for a place to take a shower. I looked everywhere, but I couldn't find anything suitable. Finally, I woke up disappointed and feeling a little dirty, so I took a nice warm bath.

That same day, at church, the minister stood up in front of the congregation and practically bellowed, "Have you ever been really dirty and desperate for a shower? . . . And when you find one, doesn't it feel great to be clean again after being so dirty." "Well, yes," I said to myself, "as a matter of fact, just last night. . . ."

The minister went on to talk about the experience of Christ washing away our sins—one of the basic tenets of Christianity. I, of course, had heard this before and began ruminating on the idea of sin and redemption. This led quickly to thoughts about shame, which is bound to sin by virtue of cause and effect.

Within the Christian context, the relationship between sin and shame can be very confusing. On one hand, we are told that Christ died for our sins; therefore, we should relinquish our shame. But then, we are shamed into becoming virtuous people from the moment we know Christ. So which is it? Are we to be ashamed or not?

Before I could sort this out, the congregation started singing "Amazing Grace." As I listened to the second stanza, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fear relieved," suddenly it all made sense. Substitute the word "shame" for the word "fear" and you have: "Twas grace that taught my heart to shame and grace my shame relieved." Shame, it seems is not all bad. Without shame, I cannot see my sin, and with Christ I am relieved of shame's burden.

This makes even more sense if you understand the difference between "healthy" shame and "toxic" shame. John Bradshaw, who once studied to be a Jesuit priest, points this out in his book "Healing the Shame that Binds You." He elaborates on the difference between the kind of shame that is corrosive and destructive (shame that leads to depression, anxiety, and apathy) and the kind of shame that engenders modesty, humility, morality, and self-control.

Christ himself made good use of this pairing of healthy and toxic shame. He shamed the stone throwers by telling them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7 RSV). Then he relieved the adulteress of her shame by saying, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn [shame] you" (vs. 10). But then Christ offered the woman healthy shame as an incentive to live a virtuous life when he added at the end of his eloquent speech, "Go and do not sin again" (vs. 11).

Of course, my favorite story is about the Samaritan woman at the well. Here Christ used healthy shame to awaken a woman to her sin while at the same time offering her the living water that will wash it away. First he told her the good news: "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14 RSV). Then he told her why this is good news: "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband" (vss. 17-19). Of course, the woman leaped at the chance to get rid of her shame and pleaded with him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst." (vs. 15).

The challenge for us, armed with this new understanding of healthy shame and toxic shame, is to separate the wheat from the chaff. When does shame help us and when is it a hindrance? Here are some of my own ideas.

The past: Agonizing over the past leads to toxic shame. Christ died on the cross for our sins. To cling unnecessarily to our past transgressions requires energy better spent trying to help others. However, an acute awareness of our shortcomings is healthy shame. We must never forget how easy it is to sin.

Our bodies: Shame about how we look is toxic. We must always see ourselves through God's eyes. He made us, after all. At the same time, a little shame about what we put into our bodies is healthy. Nutrition is good; addiction is bad. Too much sugar now and then is not the end of the world.

Our potential: Shame about what we can't do is toxic. If I am not a genius, so be it. If I can't climb Mount Everest that's okay. If I am disabled in any way, there is no point in me beating up on myself. However, a little healthy shame about what we can do keeps us humble.

Money: Shame about being poor is toxic. Shame about being financially comfortable makes it easier to share with others.

Original sin: This can be toxic or healthy shame. It is toxic if it becomes an excuse to give up on ourselves. It can be healthy if it is understood as something we all share—the propensity to sin.

Family: The sins of our "fathers"—past and present—can be palpable. However, feeling guilty for what our mothers and fathers did is toxic shame. Learning from their mistakes is healthy shame.

Sex: Healthy shame about sex is important. Nothing can be more destructive than aberrant sexual behavior. However, sex is nothing to be ashamed of in the context of a healthy marriage.

Education: Feeling bad about a lack of formal education is toxic shame. Feeling a little healthy shame, however, may inspire us to search for knowledge and wisdom in a context within which we feel comfortable.

Jobs: Some of us have what the world likes to describe as "menial" jobs. Toxic shame makes us feel bad about this. Healthy shame encourages us to look for something more stimulating. The trick is to love what we do—and ourselves for doing it—while aspiring to find work that will help us realize

our full potential. For example, I may be "just" a secretary, but I find time to write poetry, which is my soul work.

How we treat others: Being less than cordial at times is part of the human condition. Toxic shame never lets us forgive ourselves. Healthy shame reminds us to do it less often.

Perfectionism: Toxic shame makes us feel terrible because we are not perfect. Healthy shame reminds us that we can do better. Paul knew a lot about this. Always remember, only God is perfect and we all live in the shadow of that perfection. We are, you might say, perfectly imperfect.

So here we have it—the shame that can destroy our spirit and the shame that can keep us on the right path. May we all come to terms with them both through our faith in Jesus Christ.