

The Anatomy of Shame

by Nicholas de Castella

I recently counselled a middle aged couple, John and Maree. Maree was criticising and invalidating John for not being able to share his feelings with her. She told him that he was inadequate as a partner and that he was hopelessly out of touch with his feelings, just like her farther.

In response John felt ashamed and blank. With a little assistance from me, John shared how he felt about his relationship with Maree.

Maree responded by throwing her arms up in the air with a loud "Hooray, Thank God!". I cringed and John stared back sheepishly.

The irony in this situation was that Maree wanted so much for John to share his feelings with her but the way she expressed it led John to feel ashamed. When he did share his feelings her response was still shaming leading to a further shut down in John.

Shame can be a bit crazy making.

The search for the cause of much unexplained unhappiness often lead us to examine our experiences of being shamed. Emotional wounding from being shamed early in life often goes unrecognised. Jim, a 34 year old carpenter who is struggling to find satisfaction and happiness said to me: "I had a good childhood. I had caring parents. I wasn't abused. I was punished a couple of times, but nothing really bad, so I don't really have anything to complain about. I don't feel happy but I suppose I should be thankful."

During much of the shaming that happens to us we are unaware that we are being abused. It is relatively easy to realise the physical abuses suffered, but when it comes to realising how we have been abused by shame it takes a bit more understanding to see it and its effects.

Shame is an emotion.

It is the sadness (energy of loss) in which we feel that we are wrong, bad, flawed or invalid. A common reaction to feeling shame is to tighten our bodies, leaving us feeling numb, blank and unable to respond. This is a collapse of being into virtually non-emotional existence. Our right to 'be' is invalidated - challenging our right to: have an experience, to have an opinion, to have a feeling, to have an existence.

Many religions create shame by teaching us that we are flawed. In my Catholic education I was taught to see human personality as essentially flawed - that humanity fell from grace into original sin when Adam and Eve ate the apple from the tree of knowledge.

Shame is created by invalidation.

We feel invalidated when we have been diminished or not respected, when our truth has not been honoured. As children we may have been told that we are wrong, bad, naughty, or not good enough. We may have been treated as insignificant by not being listened to or by not having our opinions and feelings taken seriously, respected and validated.

For example: If a child who is feeling lonely and can't get attention has a tantrum, a common response by parents is to ignore, punish or make fun of them by laughing at him / her. You may hear the parent dismiss their feelings by saying: "You only want attention". The point here is not whether the child should be given more attention. The point here is that the child is feeling angry and needs to have his / her feelings respected by being taken seriously, acknowledged and responded to with compassion.

Shaming often comes from a lack of compassion, from a closed heart, lacking empathy. The person doing the shaming may be angry eg: "Who do you think you are?", or they can come from someone out of touch with their own feelings eg: "You shouldn't feel like that" or they can come from someone who is carrying a lot of shame themselves and is subconsciously passing it on eg: "No, not you! Surely you're not upset! You just have to be stronger!".

Common Ways of Shaming

• Shaming words:

stupid, silly,	idiot,	bad,	wrong,
pervert, ugly,	evil,	dumb,	imbecile

• Shaming phrases:

"How dare you!",	"Who do you think you are!",
"You're so thick",	"Grow up",
"You should know...!",	"When will you get it?"
"How many times do I have to tell you!"	

• Shaming energy:

Sometimes the energy that is expressed is shaming even though the actual words and phrases may not be shaming. Sarcasm is a example of this.

• Shaming experiences:

Your mother is not sensitive to the particular dress codes of the school and sends you to school with a coat from another school, pants that don't fit properly, or cloths that are out of sync with what the other students are wearing and your class mates make fun and laugh at you.

As a young child you wet the bed and your parents punish you and publicly humiliate you by chastising you in front of the rest of your family, or even worse, in front of your friends.

Labelling can be shaming.

When we put a label on somebody like "he's selfish" we are generalising and defining his being as 'selfish'. The act of generalising somebody by giving them a label creates a loss of their sense of being an individual. They will often feel unseen, not understood and written off.

Labelling tends to be a very superficial and non compassionate way of relating to each other. The labelling process tends to put people into boxes and does not really address the underlying cause for the behaviour that we have labelled. I suggest that it is possible to feel under the label that we have given to someone by asking ourselves what emotion would that person possibly be feeling that would urge them to behave in that way?

For example my experiences of working with people who have become violent are that it often explodes out of someone who is frightened of their own anger (often having been abused with anger themselves) and so has suppressed it to the point where they cannot control it (their anger) when it finally bursts out. Often violence comes out of the frustration of not being able to express in words the feelings that a person is having. The person who becomes violent is in deep pain and torment and is expressing their pain hurtfully to others because they do not know how else to express it.

Swearing and derogatory phrases tend to be shaming labels. Some other shaming labels that we put on ourselves and others are:
Arrogant, controlling, righteous, stupid, aloof, silly.

We can express our feelings and not shame the other person by referring to factual concrete specific data and using actual examples to illustrate the point that we are making.

For example: Rather than calling someone "a selfish son of a bitch" we could express what we are feeling by saying; "I feel very angry because last

Tuesday when you parked your car in the middle of the driveway, I could not get my car out. I asked you last Thursday at dinner not to park your car in the drive. When you parked your car in the drive again my needs were not being considered and respected."

Shame is often about being exposed in public as flawed.

A common aspect of shame is that it often involves being exposed as inferior, deficient or flawed in public. Hence one of the most common fears is that of speaking in public.

As children common places to experience this public shaming are in the family and in the class room. The punishment of getting a child to sit in the corner in front of the class is an attempt to diminish the child's free spirit by making them feel ashamed of themselves. Being the recipient of a teachers sarcasm that causes the class to laugh at a particular students difficulty is another way of punishing the student using shame.

The fact that we are humiliated in front of other people leads us to becoming highly self conscious or embarrassed easily. I will explore more about our shyness and desire to hide later in this article.

Shame and hiding

Because the wounding is about being exposed as being bad or wrong the usual response to those of us who carry a lot of shame is to hide. So we conceal it, push it into our subconscious where it festers and grows. Before too long we have created a monster in the closet. The monster is fed by our fear of being 'found out', adding energy to the shame pool. These feelings can become so uncomfortable that in order for us to continue to function in everyday life we need to split off from the feelings. In the splitting off process we lose our sense of aliveness and our sense of connection to our essential being.

One of the ways to release the charge on a particular incident that we feel ashamed of is to find a safe, honouring, non-judgemental space where we can bring what we are hiding out. A space where we will be honoured: seen, heard, felt and allowed to explore how we are feeling about it.

Secrets aren't free.

You pay a price for keeping secrets and the price is shame and loneliness. Secrets perpetuate shame. Secrets are about hiding information. What you hide you hold inside. When you are holding things inside that you are afraid will be seen by others, you need to close yourself down a little, to tighten your

grip on yourself, make yourself smaller. The feeling of being reduced in size or diminished is shame.

In order for you to keep a secret you have to separate and distance yourself from the people you are holding the secret from. The feeling of being separate and distant from other people is loneliness.

The only reason why you keep a secret from somebody is that you are protecting your own ass. You are afraid of the consequences of what it would do to the other person, to your relationship with them and then ultimately to you. What you probably most fear is the loss of the relationship and yet by withholding you already have lost the relationship.

So often I have seen parents trying to protect their children by not telling them the truth. I had a client that was a single mother with a 10 year old daughter. Though she was a dedicated and caring mother she found that she could not go on supporting the two of them. So she decided that she would send the daughter to live with the father in the country. She did not want to tell the child the truth about the situation because she was afraid of hurting the child. Instead she told the daughter that it would be good for her to go and live in the country on Daddy's farm.

Children tend to take on family difficulties as their fault. Without further information the daughter is likely to have felt ashamed because 'Mummy was sending me away because she doesn't want me and there must have been something wrong with me for my Mum not to want me'. Fortunately after discussing this issue with the mother she decided to tell the daughter more about her own difficulties in making ends meet. She also shared that she felt sad about not being able to be with her daughter. The daughter then knew that there was nothing wrong with her. They now see each other regularly and have a closer relationship for the open, truthful communication.

Inevitably the keeping of secrets hurts the people that you are trying to protect. At some level we are all connected, we know what's going on. Consciously or subconsciously the people you are keeping the so called 'secrets' from know! They sense it in you - a subtle inflection here, a slight hesitation there, a speeding up of the conversation or a switching of the topic. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are fooling anyone else! Get your secrets out in the open. Stop hiding.

Shame spirals - get us stuck.

When we have been shamed we often go into what is known as 'shame spirals'. When we are in a shame spiral we feel frozen and blank. Can you recall a time when someone has made a joke about you that 'hits you in the ego'- that somehow triggers a sense in you that you are not OK as you are - you feel ashamed, go blank, and become unable to respond. We brace ourselves to create a state of virtual non-emotional existence, where we don't feel very much at all.

This bracing occurs because the emotion of shame involves the invalidation of our being. The feeling is that our right to 'be' is being denied. There is a feeling that we don't have the right to: take up space, have needs, have opinions, have feelings, have an existence.

Shame can be used to control you. When you have been shamed and go into a shame spiral it is very difficult to respond, especially if you don't recognise that you have been shamed. This makes shaming a powerful controller of other people because it often triggers in them a sense that they have "no right" to respond. I have seen shame as a major reason why people who have been unfairly treated do not feel angry and stand up for themselves. The 'shamer' has triggered the sense in the other person that they are wrong and that their experience is invalid and therefore they have 'No right' to be angry. You cannot be angry when you think you have no right. In fact they often think that they must deserve the unfair treatment (to be punished) because they believe that they are bad or guilty.

Our shame can bring more shaming on us.

Once we have been hurt by shame we fear it happening again. As a result of being exposed and ridiculed in the past we put our attention outside of ourselves so as to be able to monitor how we believe that we are appearing to others and their responses to us. We think thoughts like 'Do I look OK?', 'How are they looking at me?', 'What are they thinking of me?'. This results in a loss of our connection with what is actually going on inside of us. Sometimes this loss of centeredness leads us to making mistakes that cause people to laugh at us or think that we are stupid, hence we bring more shame on us.

I remember feeling shame when I was at school in 5th Grade. I was not a very confident reader and I already had a lot of shame about showing myself in public. Every Friday we would have to read to the rest of the class. I would feel so afraid and ashamed of being labelled 'a slow learner' that when it would come to my turn to read I would be tense and shaking. Inevitably I would stumble and fumble my way through a torturous paragraph making

mistakes. When I would misread a word and my class mates would giggle, I'd cringe, shrink and feel even more ashamed.

I recently heard a story about a woman who went to see her daughters' gynaecologist for a check up. During the examination the doctor would occasionally say "Aren't we festive". Later the woman asked her daughter if she knew what the doctor was talking about. The daughter was surprised and asked her Mum if she had done anything different before going to see the doctor. The woman replied that the only thing she had done was to use some of the daughters spray on perfume that was on the dresser. The daughter replied that it was not perfume but glitter!

The woman's shame about her sexuality led her to be so disconnected that she didn't notice the difference between perfume and glitter and consequently brought more shame upon herself.

Sometimes out of shame we use words to avoid actually describing what happens so as to allude to what we mean. For example we say: "Did you do 'it'?", instead of "Did you have intercourse?", "How about a cuddle?", instead of "I'm feeling really sexual and I'd like to have intercourse with you." This subtle avoidance of naming our sexuality tends to increase the feelings of embarrassment and shame upon it. The shame around our sexuality in our culture is massive. Most people I know have at least one story where the lack of open discussion about our sexuality has led to an embarrassing and shameful experience.

Shame can be passed on.

Those who have been heavily shamed tend to be shaming themselves. I have seen people in groups be shamed by someone who is carrying a lot of shame themselves. Sometimes there will be a lot of name calling and ridicule.

In Australia a common mate-ship between males involves shaming and counter shaming as a way of expressing affection: "How are you going, you old bastard?", "Not bad, you loser".

We can feel ashamed without being shamed.

Sometimes when someone is telling us their truth it can trigger our shame, even though they have not been shaming. What is happening here is that the feedback we are getting is triggering our belief that we are wrong, bad or not enough. It is touching the **pool** of sadness that has been created (and stored up) from having been treated as if the belief was true in the past.

For example: Mary tells James that she doesn't want to be sexual as often as he does. This could trigger James' own shame around being a sexual being. He could get in touch with a belief that 'his sexuality is bad'. He could feel ashamed for feeling sexual as often as he does. She has not said that he is bad or wrong for being as sexually active as he is but he could have this judgment on himself.

Conversely : Mary may feel ashamed of her body and her sexuality. When she engages with James physically or sexually she may feel ashamed even though James may not have been shaming to her. He may have been enjoying touching and exploring her body, she could start to enjoy feeling his caressing and attention and then this could trigger her shame about her sexuality. In this case the experience could touch a belief in her that women who enjoy sex are immoral, 'sluts' or 'loose'.

In both these cases it is important to be conscious of what is happening and to let ourselves feel the shame that is coming up and allow ourselves to grieve the shame we have been carrying without becoming hostile at the other person. I recommend that if you find yourself feeling ashamed that the first thing you do is to say "I feel ashamed". Then you can sit with the feeling and see whether you have actually been shamed in the moment or if the experience you are having is touching your shame pool.

Shame and Stupidity and Lack of Presence.

In working with people who have been shamed about being silly or stupid, and have become very shy about showing themselves, I have noticed that what has become a shaming event for them often happened out of lack of presence of consciousness. Instead of realising this they shame themselves by saying something like: "I was a stupid idiot for doing that".

The avoidance of living in the here and now most commonly is a way of escaping from unresolvable inner pain. This is done by separating consciousness from the uncomfortable reality of having emotions that we are afraid to feel and express. Commonly avoided emotions are: peace, sadness, fear, anger, and joy.

This loss of presence very often results in the making of mistakes: The dress maker that has been cutting material for 15 years is upset about her child's schooling and cuts her finger off: The child afraid of reading in public who has to read out loud in front of the rest of the class and splits off from his fear then has trouble staying present enough to read. Invariably he stumbles and

fumbles along arousing laughter and ridicule from the fellow students and increasing his shame and belief that he is stupid.

Shame and Judgement.

Though shame manifests as an emotion it is also directly related to the belief deep in our psyche that we are wrong. The whole right / wrong paradigm comes about because we judge.

I am referring to judgment as the intellectual generalisation and categorisation of experiences into a bi-polar reality: the act of judgement that we put onto our experiences: the judgement that what we think, say, do, and how we feel, look, talk, walk, sing... is good or bad, right or wrong and positive or negative. My Christian education taught me to divide my reality including my thoughts, actions, emotions and body into the good / right / holy and the bad / wrong / evil.

It is important to realise that the division and categorisation of experiences into opposing polarities is not about describing what actually exists, but involves an intellectual imposition upon reality.

For example: Imagine that outside the temperature is 40 degrees Celsius, there are no clouds, its humid, and there is a warm wind blowing. Imagine that you are a truck driver, driving in the city stuck in a traffic jam, the air conditioning has broken down and your truck looks as if its about to overheat, you'd probably think; 'this is a bad day'. Now imagine the same weather but this time you are on holidays sitting on the beach under an umbrella sipping on a cool drink, going for the occasional dips in the clear blue ocean, you'd probably think 'this is a good day!'.

Notice that the weather for both situations is the same and yet the judgements we'd likely make about the day are the opposite. The fact is that it is not a good day or a bad day, its just a day and it is our intellectual imposition (or judgement) that we put upon it that makes it good or bad.

Judging things as positive is as destructive to our wholeness as is making them negative because both are ways of seeing the world as essentially fragmented - splitting our experiences and awareness into bi-polar opposites. This division of our world causes a fracturing of everything and prevents us from experiencing the fundamental unity of all things. For me, spiritual experiences are those rare moments when I experience a sense of oneness. Be it within myself, with the universe, or with other people. When I feel this deep connection I call it LOVE.

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One of the major goals in healing is the reunification of our being, the making whole of what has been fragmented. We are not going to feel whole and complete if we continue to separate and divide up our reality.

Judgement causes the loss of our experience of our essential being.

Judgement splits experience into separate and unreal aspects. In imposing judgements onto reality we lose touch with the experience of the nature of life which is that it just 'IS'. Life is an experience constantly in flux, transformation and change.

The more we judge and resist the natural flow of life, the more we lose touch with the experience of essence. The greater the loss of our experience of essence, the greater the pain and suffering we feel.

Through judging we lose the experience of our essential being, an experience beyond judgements and impossible to describe using the intellect. The experience of our essential being occurs for most of us only occasionally in our lives. For example: during moments when we sense a beauty and unity beyond description. Some may call this a 'spiritual experience'. If you are trying to think about this you will not understand what I am talking about. We can talk around it but we can not communicate the feeling using words. If you want to understand I suggest you read between the lines, breathe, open up, reflect, and feel.

The question is; 'Can we stand outside judgment?'. Can we allow ourselves to be with an experience without putting it into a pigeon hole of good / bad? Can we accept that violence, abuse, divorce, abortion, apartheid, racism, guilt, pain, suffering, fear, anger, and sadness.. are not bad. That virginity, fidelity, honesty, respect, marriage, innocence, pleasure, peace, joy, and love are not good?

The alternative to judging is to let ourselves to have feeling responses rather than abstracting them with judgements - to take it personally, to empathise with it, to allow ourselves to experience the pain and pleasure involved in the experience. Being willing to open our hearts and feel the sadness, the struggle to be human, the struggle to find and express ourselves, the struggle to live in love... Can we give others the permission to do the same by suspending our own judgments of them and their actions and support them on the journey through their experiences?

Deshaming Yourself.

In response to shaming we feel small, invalid and wrong (without rights) as a result of being shamed in the past. We often invalidate ourselves, get stuck and don't stand up and express our truth. Here are a few tips that may help you along the road to deshaming yourself.

1. Grieve your shame.

Shame is an emotion of sadness due to the belief that we are bad, wrong or without the right to exist and be respected. As an emotion, shame is an energy. The energy of shame will not just go away by trying to convince yourself that there is nothing wrong with you through the unrelenting commitment to positive affirmations or other mind altering techniques. The energy of shame is now bound in your being and you need to become intimately acquainted with it. When you embrace the totality of yourself you will find peace and allow the energy that is stuck in your being to move through. As the energy moves through you it opens up what has been blocked, locked and separate allowing for a deep feeling of oneness, wholeness and love to occur.

If you continue to deny, repress and try to avoid feeling your shame (and for that matter, all your repressed emotions) you will continue to suffer. This suffering is not punishment. It is a gift waiting to be unwrapped. In fact it is you that is waiting to be unwrapped. The things that are causing you to suffer at the moment are opportunities to unwrap feelings and beliefs that keep you from essential communion with all things and living in the experience of essential truth, your God nature.

You have a pool of sadness that relates to the times in your life that you have felt ashamed and you need to release the hold that you have got on that energy if you want to feel free, fully alive whole and happy. When you feel ashamed and haven't been shamed in the current situation, recognise it as an emotional pool that is being triggered for a healing release and instead of becoming hostile, blaming and aggressive, surrender to the energy that wants to move. You have been hurt in the past by being shamed and it is perfectly natural for you to cry about it now.

2. Stop shaming yourself and others. As children we each have our own experiences involving being shamed. Many people that I see in therapy have taken on the role of shaming themselves since the original shaming person is no longer around. People berate themselves as stupid, silly, dumb, no good, hopeless etc. instead of sitting with the experience and feeling the emotions under it and being empathetic with themselves. They have been trained to shame and now they are doing it to themselves. You are OK the way you are. Sometimes you are going to make mistakes and its OK, you are just as

precious. Your lovability (my word) is not dependent on what you do or how you do it, but on your degree of openness and willingness to reveal yourself to others.

Shaming other people shuts them down and distances us from them. If you want to stop your own shaming remember: We can express our feelings and not shame the other person by using actual examples and referring to concrete specific data - dates, places, actual words said, your actual (dare I say vulnerable) feelings, thoughts and assumptions.

3. Connect with your essence. Your essence is and always will be beyond judgement and indeed description. The chances are pretty high that you are no longer intimate with your experience of your essential self. So you need to start to 'nurture your nature' by establishing connection with essence regularly.

We are so engrossed in judging and criticising and invalidating ourselves that it is often difficult for us to perceive of our personality as totally OK. It is easier for us to experience the nature of our essential self if we don't focus on our personality. Note that we are our personality and that there is no separation between our personality and the I am, they are both awareness manifesting but the 'I am' is focused less contextually.

To experience the difference between your personality and your essential being speak your name out loud. Repeat it over and over again and watch the images that come to you of yourself. Then say out loud "I am". Repeat it over and over again and see if you can feel the difference. For me the 'I am' is broader, fuller, freer...

Now see if you can say your name, watch and feel the sensations that arise without needing to categorise them as good or bad. Just breathe into the experience and allow it to unfold in its own way.

4. Find a group of people who will not judge you. What we need is to develop groups of people who are able to listen to us without jumping into a judgemental place. This means being able to listen and feel what the other person is sharing and understand what their experience has been without needing to draw any conclusion or trying to make sense of it. It involves being able to not take sides and to not get into judging the other person (their actions, or experiences) as good, bad, right, wrong, but letting their story and

their experience 'in' to our hearts. Then we can feel them and be with them, so that we can allow them the space to express what they need to express

5. Come out of hiding. When we feel ashamed very often we want to pull back and retreat into our shells. We are afraid that someone will find out what we are ashamed of. This fear adds energy to the shame pool, increasing the 'charge' on the issue that we feel ashamed of. Finding a group of people that will not sit in judgment of us and coming out of hiding by expressing what it is we are ashamed of is a powerful start to de-powering the grip that the shame has on us.

Don't do anything that you are ashamed to tell everyone.

Live with integrity, be honest, face up to those difficult issues that you have been running away from. If you are holding secrets from anyone (your partner, your friend, your boss), go and tell them. If someone wants to tell you a secret do not agree to keep it and tell them that you do not want to be told anything that they want to keep secret in the future.

6. Stand up for your rights. When you come forward and stand up for your rights to be honoured and respected you begin to deshame yourself. In therapy sessions the son or daughter who stands up to the parent and expresses his or her rage and grief about being abused including something along the lines of "I deserve to be respected", deshames themselves. They are releasing the energy of anger that when withheld has been working against them, keeping them small, knotted and fragmented. They are also affirming, with conviction, their right to be respected. This process can break cycles of recurring abuse with partners in current relationships. It can also be undertaken with a current partner if the shaming is happening in this relationship. I recommend the assistance of skilled facilitators with this process.

If you are being shamed then express to the person that is shaming you that you are feeling abused and ask them to stop it. If they do not, then don't hang around in an abusive environment. Get out! You deserve to be treated with respect. Hanging in there in situations that are not respectful of our being is only going to create more hurt.

Usually shame occurs in closed hearted exchanges and usually there is a lack of vulnerability (from a fear of being hurt) on BOTH sides. You may need to get some professional assistance to complete the issue in conflict. Don't just

pull out and try to forget about it, it will emerge again in your life if you do. Also it is actually in the pulling back inside our selves that we actually create the hurt that we so easily blame the other person for.