



Shame has no relationship outside itself...

IT becomes an identity rather than a feeling

Some say the difference between guilt and shame is that guilty people fear punishment and shamed people fear abandonment. I like this. To the point, clear. But, it only sums it up, it doesn't explain the experiences and, more importantly, it doesn't help us understand such experiences within the context of a relationship (aka: attachment, of course!).

Guilt is a feeling. It is often so strong that it is like a driving force within the self to want to repair a wrong that was done. This force makes us want to amend, fix things, pay the price, so to speak, so that we can get this awful feeling "off our mind" and "out of our soul." We want relief! But why do we want these things... because it is about a relationship. We want to repair the hurt we caused. And, we need to obtain absolution from the hurt person. We want to "make it up" and we'll do that twice over to relieve ourselves of this awful feeling that is often equal to the pain we caused the hurt person. After all, it is only fair for the wrong doer to suffer in the same amount as the wronged, right? So, in essence, guilt is about a relationship. It can't exist without someone... some person... another... on the receiving end. So, my conclusion, the feeling of guilt can only be felt within the context of a relationship, otherwise it does not exist.

So, what of shame? Doesn't it go hand-in-hand with guilt? It is different, absolutely and completely different. It is a driving force that flagellates the mind and the soul. It has a mantra; "you are bad; you are inadequate." It has tendrils that reach inward to grasp tiny doubts and fears, only to grow and inflict internal pain.

Shame begins as a kernel of doubt about "me." There is a developmental stage identified by E. Erickson (a long ago developmental psychologist) as "autonomy vs. shame." This stage of psycho-social development coexists with increased muscular coordination and mobility, and so a child becomes more capable of satisfying some of their own needs. If caregivers encourage self-sufficient behavior, a child develops a sense of being able to handle problems on their own (autonomy). Conversely, if caregivers demand too much too soon, refuse to let children perform tasks of which they are capable, or ridicule early attempts at self-sufficiency, children may instead develop shame. The shame can begin as "I can't do this, I am not capable." Shame grows if it continues to be fed and grasps onto beliefs that the parts that make one whole are defective.

The food of shame comes from others at an early age and grows through doubt. In the case of abuse, neglect... "Haven't I been told this by those that have hurt me, abandoned me?" "I am not only unwanted but I am unworthy of being wanted." This face of shame becomes toxic and perceives one as even being a failure at being wanted. The insidious and pervasive nature of shame leaves its victim feeling small, weak and impotent.

If one feels small and weak they must then find protection. They must create a defense so that

smallness can never be detected or uncovered by anyone. To be “found out” would serve only one purpose - to be rejected through humiliation! Shame broadens its grip by creating fear... fear that “if others really know me they would be disgusted and filled with hatred.” John Bradshaw, a leading counselor in self-help, writes, “A shame based person will guard against exposing his inner self to others, but more significantly, he will guard against exposing himself to himself.” Ah, so this is why shamed persons cannot be caught in mistakes of any kind. To “admit” a mistake would “prove” their “badness.” And, so, defenses develop in shame’s wake.

Fury becomes a common defense of the shamed person. The slightest perceived affront will spark that flame. It keeps others away. It changes the focus. It changes the complexion of things. Shame has no relationship outside itself... it becomes an identity rather than a feeling. Shame then lives alone and it creates loneliness in souls who then become lonely souls. It has only one relationship and that is with itself.

IT leaves others lonely too.