



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Beyond Shameful”

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Centering Thoughts

I never wonder to see men wicked, but I often wonder to see them not ashamed. Jonathan Swift

The positive dimension to shame is that it activates a search for repair.

Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller

Shame should be reserved for the things we do, not for the circumstances life puts on us.

Ann Patchett

*If we share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding,
shame can't survive.* Brené Brown

Sermon

When I think about guilt or shame together with religion, my thoughts go right to the Bible. One of the first stories in the Hebrew Bible tells about Adam and Eve and how they ate a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God had instructed them not to do.

Upon eating the fruit, one translation of Genesis 3:7 reads: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.” Another translation says: “At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness.”

The story continues with God looking and calling out for Adam and Eve. God asks why they’re hiding and if they ate from the forbidden tree. Adam admits he disobeyed, but places the blame on Eve. Eve blames her disobedience on the serpent. God then punishes all three, but Adam and Eve are sent out of the garden.

I think it’s fair to interpret Adam and Eve’s shame *not* as a comment about their nudity. Nudity wasn’t evil or bad because an earlier verse indicated their nakedness was not shameful. Instead, I think their shame refers to their disobedience. They are naked because they have nothing with which to hide the truth that they broke God’s rule.

Can you see yourself in Adam or Eve’s place? Have you ever broken a rule or vow you didn’t want discovered? We frequently try to hide our true selves behind masks; we even use

clothing to disguise who we are. And if our transgression is found out, we likely blame others. Most of us don't want to admit we make mistakes or aren't as good as we hope to be.

Brené Brown and similar experts describe shame as a feeling best expressed as “I am bad,” whereas guilt is feeling “I did something bad.” Adam and Eve might have felt guilty over eating the forbidden fruit, but translators choose the word shame. Those who count these things say the Bible uses shame well over one hundred times but never the word guilt. Biblicists have a very poor view of human nature. They find us bad, fallen, sinful creatures in need of saving.

However, a recent study found Westerners generally have little sense of shame or personal unworthiness. Researchers asked people to rank the frequency with which they felt a variety of emotions. Shame barely made the list, while guilt frequently appeared. In contrast, people from Eastern cultures ranked shame as a frequent feeling, but not guilt. The expression ‘saving face’ reflects the oriental's greater concern with shame. [*Is Shame Necessary?: New Uses for an Old Tool*, by Jennifer Jacquet, page 28-32]

One reason researchers gave for Westerners feeling more guilt than shame was our greater individualism. American culture values independence and self-reliance over uniformity and our greater cultural diversity makes breaking a single societal norm, and therefore shame, less likely. Shame needs transgressions to be seen by others—be it God or society. If Adam and Eve knew God would never discover the truth about what they had done, they might not have hidden their symbolic nakedness.

But God did learn what Adam and Eve had done and sent the pair out of the garden. Threats to send out, excommunicate, or shun transgressors are classic forms of religious shaming that discourages breaking the group's normative rules.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's Puritan New England story, *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, a proven adulterous, wears a bold scarlet letter A embroidered on her clothing. Hester's shaming warns others in the community to behave or be similarly shamed and humiliated. By wearing the scarlet letter at all times, the community is reminded that they must never forgive Hester and must always consider her bad. For Hester, this branding prevents her from atoning for her past behavior. She remains a fallen woman forever.

Our Puritan ancestors may use shame, but it's often said we UUs don't. It's true, we don't threaten anyone with excommunication for not showing up on Sunday morning or for not tithing or pledging generously. And we can't claim God will close the pearly gates of Heaven to you if we're not sure whether God, gates, or Heaven exist. But that doesn't mean shame, guilt, and even shunning are not at work in our congregations.

Personally, I have lots of green guilt and shame. If I throw away something that could be recycled, I feel guilty. If I forget to bring my own bag into a store, I hope none of you see me because if you did, I'd feel ashamed. I'd feel that you'd seen the naked truth that I wasn't good enough. In fact, I'm in a moral quandary right now about whether to repair my washing machine for nearly the cost of a new one. If I buy a new machine, my 5-year-old machine likely would go to the land fill. It seems too young to be buried. But if I decide to buy a new one, should I buy a

more expensive high-efficiency, electronic-control model like the one I have that broke, or an old water-guzzling agitator model that's more reliable? I may feel ashamed if you discover I bought the less green model. So I'm stuck, unable to make the best ethical environmental choice.

I think green guilt motivated me to buy a hybrid car. If you drive a hybrid, do you feel righteous driving past gas-guzzlers or parking in a preferred parking spot at the public library? Has our self-righteousness been bought like indulgences from pre-Reformation priests that relieved one of sin? Might our righteousness imply that those who can't afford green products should feel ashamed or guilty? Do we treat them as if they're wearing a scarlet letter?

Earlier we talked about homelessness. I think people often act as if those with no place to live are failures and that their circumstances are something they should be ashamed of. But perhaps it is the fortunate who have homes and comfortable lives who should be ashamed of the fact that many employers don't pay living wages and that there are few low-cost housing options. Or that there isn't enough support for people with mental health or substance abuse issues.

If we feel shame or guilt over such things, then perhaps it will motivate us to act in positive ways. Martin Luther King Jr., said that nonviolent resistance like the Montgomery bus boycott were "not ends themselves; [but] merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent." Shaming became an effective tool that changed the norm of who gets to sit where on the bus. Shame over seeing police brutalize marchers on the bridge in Selma helped us change broader issues of racism. [*Is Shame Necessary?* by Jennifer Jacquet, p79]

Shame and guilt can serve positive ends, but if there is no chance for forgiveness, atonement, or restitution, it serves no purpose. Since we believe we can change, we act to right the shame of slavery and racism. And we continue to fight the larger, systemic causes of environmental destruction because one plastic bag at a time, one hybrid car at a time just isn't enough.

Our Unitarian Universalist First Principle affirms our inherent worth. Every person no matter what they have done, what language they speak, or whom they love, should be treated with respect. Our Universalist ancestors made it clear that God and love will save us all. Our Unitarian ancestors made it clear we are capable of being better than we are.

No matter what we do or how bad we may think we may be, there is hope for each us. Believe in yourself. Believe in humanity. Believe that we are worthy of second, third and fourth chances to get living right.

And if you can help me decide what washing machine to buy, please let me know—I could use your help! May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Reflect on times when you felt embarrassed, ashamed or guilty. What contributes to those feelings and what do you do to change or overcome those feelings?
2. How significantly do other people's opinions about you matter to you? In what ways might that influence your behavior?
3. Might public shaming be an effective tool to change current or systemic cultural norms?