

Shame, Shame, Shame. And Judgment, Too: Neurobiology and Enculturation

William Blake said the only sin was the accusation of sin. Accusation in any of its forms, is a negative judgment, and a negative judgment in any form ruptures relationship – the classical definition of sin. Being judged by someone offends us if the judgment is true and more so if it is false. When we accuse or judge another, it has the same effect on us as being judged ourselves. Any judgment we make, no matter of whom, registers in the heart as a disruption of relationship, and the heart dutifully responds on behalf of our defense, shifting neural, hormonal, and electromagnetic systems from relational to defensive.

If we examine our stream of consciousness inner chatter, that nonstop flow of thoughts in our head, we will find that it arises as naturally as breathing and centers almost exclusively on judgment, accusatory fault finding: someone or some event has offended us, threatened us, failed to meet our lofty standards or probably will in the future. This train of thought seems almost cellular in origin, beneath our volition, because using negatives to correct behavior is at the very heart of enculturation. “Thou Shalt Not,” is a wellspring of law and religion, the cement holding culture together, the source of all legal systems, prisons, and war.

By about the eighteenth month after birth, the child’s emotional-cognitive system has formed patterns of response that will determine the nature of his relationship for life, the neural foundation of all learning. Maria Montessori claimed that “a humankind abandoned at this earliest formative period becomes the worst threat to its own survival.” Allan Schore’s research shows that we all experience abandonment of a kind, which perpetuates our culture and seriously impairs our emotional relational system itself.

Use of shame as a socializing technique passes on to the child the very wound inflicted on the parent. Having been shamed, we tend to project our shame on others, looking for shameful acts in them, our judgments always tinged with anger. (Alice Miller addressed this in her classic work on child abuse, For your Own Good.) According to father of evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin himself, “Shame stress is an essential affective mediator of the socialization process. Shame elicits a greater awareness of the body than any other emotion . . . shaming conditions specifically induce stress reaction.” And this stress reaction is lifelong.

Of course, boundaries must be established for the toddler’s actions, and caregivers have always provided these from common sense and intuition. Such boundaries set by the intuitive mother are surprisingly few in number, seldom arbitrary, and give a child a sense of security, certainty, and solidity. Most of the shaming isn’t so much from parents’ concern for their child, as rationalized by all of us, but from the parents’ own enculturation and serious concern that their own social image might be tarnished by their child’s behavior. Shame breaks into the natural process of developing consciously into

one's body, and the premature awareness that results is a split between self and body, an inner rejection of body rather than an acceptance of self as the whole being nature intended. "From this will grow our rejection of the larger body of man and," according to Joseph Chilton Pearce (The Biology of Transcendence), "a rejection of the living earth demonstrated in the rape and desecration of our planet."

The induction of shame is a blatant form of the accusation of sin, and because most of us have heard this and been the recipients of such accusations from the beginning of life, we unconsciously and impulsively inflict the same on our children. Schore's quote about this shame perfectly articulates the tone of the accusation: "You are no good. Your action is bad." Shamed in this sense, we forget who we are. We actually become the protective mask we adopt to shield us from the accusing fingers pointed toward us. Cut off from our spirit, we spend the rest of our life trying to prove our innocence.

It is from our state of shame that this inner speech arises, bubbling up without cessation, full of accusation and fault-finding as it attempts to cast out of us the dark shadow of shame forced upon us from infancy. What occurs as a result of the shame mechanism is that nature's imperative to explore the world at large is overwhelmed by the greater imperative to avoid the pain of a broken relationship with the life-giving caregiver. What will be developed in the child is a capacity for deception as he tries to maintain some vestige of integrity while outwardly appearing to conform. Often our minorities seem selected for cultural stoning, scapegoat victims and captives of our lie. Living a lie to survive a lying culture, the child forgets the truth of who she really is.