



CHANGING MINDS, SAVING LIVES – PSYCHOANALYTIC INSIGHTS

Welcome to Pamela Nathan’s psychoanalytic series, taking simple gems from the psychoanalytic dreamtime that may become tools for living...

SHAME



By Pamela Nathan

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On my way from the airport into Alice Springs recently I heard Aboriginal female radio announcers from Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) talking about their jobs. They were saying how happy they were in their jobs now and congratulating each other on their courage to get jobs.

They each spoke to their profound sense of SHAME that had crippled them and prevented them from thinking they could or would apply for such jobs. I thought about the deadly power of shame and, in turn,

the creative possibilities if shame had no power.

I feel strongly about the way shame affects so many of us. It can be such a destructive feeling.

Here are some of the feelings and experiences of shame that have been shared with me over the years.

Shame can erupt with volcanic force. When we feel shame, it burns us. We feel stripped naked. We shrink into ourselves and agitation wracks our body.

It feels like a life and death experience. We nearly “die of shame”. We never forget our shameful experiences and we feel mortally wounded. Our memories sear through the layers of the past and our shame catapults our disgrace into the present.

I’ve been there. I think we have all been there!

Shame flourishes on the unspeakable, the hidden, secreted away in the deep, dark recesses of the mind. Shame can sleep, stealthily stalk, or scuttle like the dirty cockroach in plague proportions. Shame is a straightjacket that imprisons our soul in disgust.

Shame fuels rejection and hate. It can murder the soul. Shame annihilates. It can get real bad. The edict of the soul then declares we are so BAD we should not exist. Brutalised relationships prevail. Disappear! Dissolve! Suicide! Shame can make us writhe and twist and turn like the arching roots of the impenetrable mangrove trees. Torment, failure, unworthiness, inferiority, invisibility can reign supreme.

Shame can be dangerous!

When we try to silence shame, it can lead us to drink, fight, even to domestic violence! Kill! Suicide! Become bullet proof! Lose empathy!

Shame, racial discrimination and genocide go hand in hand. For example, shame poisonously saturated the German mind. Jewish people were shamed, condemned and murdered in epidemic and proportions - deemed to be criminal, unclean and evil. I believe that shame has led to a failure to recognise Aboriginal people in the constitution.

So, what can we do about shame?

Shame need not be allowed supremacy.

There is a simple way to stop shame, to starve it. We need to share our shame with someone we trust. When we talk with others about our shame, and bring it into the light, the shame starts to shrink, and fade away.

First, we need to recognise and think about shame and the other who may also be shamed or shaming. We need to see goodness, not badness, and beauty, not ugliness. Second, we need to believe in ourselves and feel good-enough about ourselves.

Shame, shame, go away!

What happens when we feel no shame?

We can be free, we can be whole, we can be at peace, we can move, we can stand tall, we can be, we can be seen, we can say ‘I am’, and we can live, love and dream!

It is the right of everybody to exist, to be visible, to be valued, to feel pride and to live with no shame!

For more information about how CASSE can provide support for individuals and communities to think together about how to develop secure relations and psychological wellbeing for today and the future, contact us:

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References: Brene Browns *Ted Talk* on Shame & R. Wille (2014). The shame of existing: An extreme form of shame in *IPA*, vol.9,no.4