

## **TURNING SHAME TO GOLD: MEN FEELING SHAME, MEN HEALING SHAME.**

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### **PART I: FEELING SHAME.**

At the gym, I sign my name to the entry roster. The desk attendant unexpectedly compliments my handwriting. I recoil with a dismissive joke, and quickly change the subject. A business friend offers me the opportunity to participate in an important project and earn a fair amount of money. I delay my response until the opportunity vanishes. A man I'm fond of speaks to me in a warm, openhearted way. I cannot look him in the eye, and squirm uncomfortably before what he is offering. I have come to recognize that Shame dominates my feelings in these situations and that similar feelings of Shame have been central to much of my experience both as a boy and as a man.

Most of the men I meet in the course of my work have also been subjected to this kind of Shame. In the simple logic of things, there must in fact be some men somewhere who haven't been. So far, I haven't met any. Not only does the experience approach the universal, but I am pushed toward the conclusion that Shame functions as the normal master definer and master-control of men's feelings in our society. In a word, Men's Soul Work, or any work with men, will have to confront Shame as a major obstacle to accomplishing positive results. Overcoming Shame is essential to healing men's hearts---that is, opening men to a rich, internally truthful relationship with the whole of themselves, and thus with other men, with women, with animals, and with the earth itself.

Any hope of healing male Shame must begin with understanding how it is inflicted, how it originates. It seems obvious we must understand Shame's methods in order to ultimately heal its effects. But I am not convinced such understanding exists today. I have read a good deal of the available popular and professional work on Shame. Most of that literature is quite instructive when it explores Shame's symptoms and how Shame is experienced in everyday life. Yet, I have not encountered a convincing explanation of how Shame is actually generated.

So, how can we approach this feeling that so resolutely defends itself, that is, so deftly resists access to itself? How is Shame created? How precisely does it operate? What are its symptoms and consequences? How does it define men? How can we heal it?

### **GENERATING SHAME**

As a starting point, I must say I believe no person is born into the world in a shamed state. Whatever differences of personality or endowment appear among newborn babies, every boy and girl child is born into the world equipped and ready to be itself. Babies are born whole

and vital. Basically then, Shame must be taught, learned.

I am convinced that Shame is generated from the shaming behaviors, visited upon us--consciously or unconsciously--as we grow from infancy through childhood to adulthood. However invisibly they do it, shamed caregivers pass on their Shame to the next generation. In a word, Shame begets Shame. And, its "educational impact" is especially powerful during our early years. It is during childhood that we encode into our own unconscious the feelings and emotional patterns we are made to believe have meaning and are useful for the world we are entering. And as children, we learn swiftly and well.

On a recent plane flight I watched a radiant, blond-crowned girl, not quite two years old. Her father raised her high so she could explore the overhead light switches and fresh air tubes. She was in her glory. Then, she enthusiastically lunged for the button that would summon the flight attendant. Her father spoke not a word of reproach. He did not slap her hand or physically punish her in any way. But his own sudden and unexpressed feeling--whatever it was--impelled him to very swiftly grab her hand, unmistakably blocking her from hitting that button.

Instantly, glory turned to grief. Darkness occluded radiance. The girl's smile dissolved into a frown and a wail. She propelled herself from her father's now hurtful arms into the clearly more consoling ones of her mother in the neighboring seat. There, her crying continued. However, for all his previous care, the father now simply broke out his newspaper. With embarrassment averted and his own needs satisfied, he obviously felt no further concern or responsibility for dealing with the situation his child was experiencing.

In my seat across the aisle, I was meditating on writing of this article. However sad I felt for the little girl, I knew I'd been presented with a perfect example of Shame's origins. The girl's tears were certainly born out of her feeling that she had suddenly and inexplicably done something very wrong. How had happy play so suddenly and mysteriously become worthy of reproach? Confused, she had no certain idea. But, the swiftness of daddy's gesture conveyed all the clarity required --- the certainty that she had done wrong. However little the girl understood what had happened intellectually, she was in no danger whatever of missing the point emotionally.

Almost instantaneously, memories of an incident I'd experienced when I was about the same age as the little girl flowered into my mind. My parents had left me with friends of theirs I didn't know well. Their family was large and many people taller than I filled the kitchen with talk and pre-dinner hurly-burly. I felt alone, shy, and afraid. So I clung to the foot of a radiator far to

one side of the room. I must have shaken it because a vase on top of it fell over. The vase didn't fall to the ground or break. But Belle, one of the family daughters, rushed over and restored the vase to upright. At the same time, she roughly pulled me away from the radiator while speaking harsh words, now unremembered. I can however still remember my feelings of forlorn devastation. I'd clearly done something very, very wrong. I wished the floor would open up to swallow me forever. But, so long as good order was restored atop the radiator, whatever I was feeling obviously mattered not at all.

During subsequent years, my family lost contact with that family. But thirty years later, Belle entered a wedding reception I was attending. At the sound of her voice behind me, I immediately spoke her name and turned. She was astounded that I recognized her at all much less remembered her name. But my two-year-old's feelings, instantly present with the same devastating force as thirty years before, left me not a second's doubt about who she was.

Once learned as a child, shaming of this kind persists seamlessly into adulthood. At a European site, a group of older tourists was visiting a famous ancient temple located on a steep mountainside. After walking through three areas of the temple, a rather heavy set, middle aged woman sat down to rest rather than climb to the top of the very high hill that is the temple's final area. Returning later to the tour bus, a man of similar age and girth entered exclaiming loudly about how absolutely wonderful that fourth part was. As he passed, he smoothly turned to the woman, with whom he had previously had no interaction whatever, and loudly proclaimed, "Oh, but you can enjoy the pictures." The woman's feelings of shame about her weight and her age were fairly obvious from her expression. But then, to an experienced eye, so were the man's!

These incidents are fair examples of the first major way Shame is inflicted, and how the cycle of Shame perpetuates itself. In these cases, I am subjected to what might best be called overt, aggressive Shame. As an infant I have been born into the world gifted with the healthy ability to grow into the full potential of my life. Everything I feel and do operates in the service of realizing the goal of learning how to live reasonably well. All I need is supportive guidance into adulthood. Instead, Shame is inflicted on me. Shame is inflicted whenever I feel my caregivers and/or my culture reject, oppose, or set at naught who I am, what I want, or how I want it. And when this is done repeatedly, it finally registers as radical disapproval. The final result is that I enter my adult life impaired by Shame...and simply continue both to live it and to pass it on because that is what I know best.

Obvious, aggressive shaming of this sort occurs because our caregivers' own original need, want, quality, or ability was previously shamed in their turn. Thus whenever my present

conduct is implicitly perceived as manifesting the same need, want, quality, or ability that was shamed in them, their fear concerning it is aroused (however unconsciously). Mobilized by such fear, their own Shame reacts to reject who or what I am. The emotion of fear then, is the source and active trigger of shaming behavior. And such fear acts in one of two general ways. Either the shaming person fears that you possess some gift he or she is not allowed to possess. Or, he fears that you will not obtain for him in his place the gift that he himself is not allowed to have. From either motive, he or she rejects or abandons you, your need, your talents, what is in you. As the complementary consequence, a shamed person has generally learned to feel Shame in two major ways. First, caregivers model it. Shame is "learned," modeled in their behavior. Second, they inflict it and make it into the reality of our own real, personal experience. From this kind of "double instruction," it becomes our own behavior.\*

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\* Since I am writing this article with the hope of reaching a wide audience, it will remain on a descriptive level. I will not directly address the underlying etiological theory. To be briefly candid on that score, what I suggest about the origins of Shame throughout this article clearly rests on the conviction that it is a psychic phenomenon that remains unconscious...at least initially. It does not however assume Shame originates out of any internal system of preordained drives, resulting fantasies, or any ironclad relation to sexual wishes. On the contrary, Shame originates between persons from real experiences of conflicting "wants"...some, but by no means all, of them indeed sexual...that are experienced as multiple blows against "a sense of self" and give rise to real reactions. Of course, these reactions vary infinitely according to the "born personality" of the individual reacting, and many other circumstances, but a basic dynamic of assault is invariably operative. I hope to address these questions at greater length in a partner article.

In the above examples, it is clear the father's personal aptitude for uninhibited play and any pleasure in it have long since been subordinated to fear of social embarrassment. His daughter must therefore be stopped from pushing that button. And her resultant distress is clearly less important than his feeling. Belle's fear of disorder and her consequent anxious need for control have buried any sensitivity for herself. How could she possibly feel anything for a "disorderly" two-year old? The middle-aged tourist's fear of his own obesity and advancing years leads him to demean the woman who had manifested care for those very things in herself.

As a general rule in everyday life, we are usually aware only of the outer surface of other

people's behavior. They simply stop our hand. They simply restore a vase and gruffly pull us away. They simply make an offhand humorous remark. This is particularly true when the people are close or familiar and their patterns of inflicting Shame have long since been accepted as normal. We take their behavior for granted and at face value while remaining oblivious to its underlying emotional impact. Consequently, the fear-based attacks that create Shame operate much like hostile torpedoes invisibly launched beneath the surface of a deceptively placid sea. The assault delivered is not ordinarily available for scrutiny. Yet, beneath the apparently normal surface of everyday behavior, Shame's basic dynamic---more or less continual emotional battle launched by fear and clashing needs, and waged in total darkness---operates to lethal effect. Because of what I so urgently (fearfully) need, what you need or feel does not matter and must be disregarded, buried, pushed aside, or co-opted by me. Ultimately, what you are, whatever you need, simply cannot "exist" here.

Fundamentally, the experience of Shame is therefore a repeated form of rejection...rejection expressed, rejection received. It originates in the Shame and consequent fear-based needs of the persons who initiate "the attack." And it is experienced as an assault against one or more vital aspects of my self, even if, or perhaps especially when, I remain unaware of it.

Repeated confrontations with rigid ice bergs or rock-solid cliffs might serve as a useful image to characterize the daily experience of Shame and its consequences. I am born with the potential for sailing the entire sea of my life. As I grow older however, the walls of massive, not-quite-visible emotional icebergs continually block my emotional entrance into certain areas of that sea. Slowly but surely I learn to fear even the thought of striking against those dangerous and painful limitations. No matter how diminished and contorted they are, I more and more sail only in the areas that I perceive as "safe," without pain. Later, as an adult, the threatening prohibitions are actually removed. I am in fact free to roam life's entire sea. But emotionally, I can no longer even imagine such freedom. No matter how reduced or distorted, I continue to sail only within the areas--only according to the emotional patterns--into which I was constrained during my early years.

Once Shame's essential origin in a form of violence is clear, it must be emphasized that its assaults may be quite attractively, subtly, or indirectly packaged. Shame may be inflicted under the appearances of quite mild behavior. It may even be experienced as neutral, kind, or supportive. This version of Shame might best be called passive or covert Shame.

Bill grew up under a rain of his mother's physical, verbal, and emotional blows. His father

stood back from all this--a cheerful, neutral figure who, to all appearances, took no part in the abuse of his son. Because Bill habitually focused on his mother's violence, he always regarded his father as at least not harmful to him. Only recently has Bill begun to realize how his "neutral" father never supported or protected him against the abuse he routinely received from his mother. Into the bargain, he now realizes his father never spoke to him, touched him, went anywhere together with him, or made any time for him at all. In fact, Bill is gradually realizing his "neutral" father provided almost nothing of the support he needed as a young boy beyond basic food and shelter and was actually quite hostile toward him.

All through high school, Jason's father, who never completed the fifth grade, enthusiastically stressed how much he wanted his son to earn a college degree. In due course, Jason fulfilled this dream by earning a Ph.D. from a prestigious eastern university. Jason fully expected his father to be proud of his achievement. Instead, he has recently become aware of his father's frequent, contemptuous remarks about "overpaid men with degrees" in his business who "don't know what they're doing." It has been extremely difficult for Jason to understand why his father might fear and demean his education after so often exhorting him to pursue it. At the last, Jason has even begun to wonder whose desires he actually fulfilled by earning his advanced degree.

Martin attended a little league baseball game during a visit to his brother's family. At the field, young fathers, mostly in their middle thirties, stood on the sidelines continually "shouting their support" for their eight-year-old sons' performances. Looking at the young boys, Martin could sense only each boy's fear of not living up to his father's expectations. He wonders how the boys could possibly preserve any sense of their own desire beneath the fierce load of "support" they were receiving.

The fundamentally aggressive nature of Shame can never be forgotten. But, it must always be remembered that quiet, "unassertive" withdrawal, self-serving support, or "kindly" invasiveness, may assault and abandon just as aggressively as overtly abusive language or behavior...perhaps even more so. A passively shamed person experiences Shame either through abandonment, neglect, lack of support, withholding of recognition, or through emotional co-option and subtle subversion. So silence may be as shaming as shouting. "Kindness" may be more deadly than cruelty. And because of the apparently neutral or positively-toned camouflage under which passive Shame operates, it may in fact be both the more difficult to detect and ultimately the more damaging. It will nonetheless have exactly the same ultimate effect as its more overt cousin. Either way, my needs are not worthy of respect. I am not

allowed to belong to myself.

### SOME OF SHAME'S PLUMAGE

At this point, understanding Shame's origin in either aggressive or passive rejection allows us to pass in review several of its most important characteristics. Realizing them is crucial for any efforts at healing Shame to be successful. The first is that the act of shaming must not be confused with the tone or manner of an interaction between people...or indeed with any one method of inflicting it. Gruff, derisive, or brutal words that imply rejection or contempt, physical or sexual abuse, are easy to spot as shaming. But, a sweet, kind, or humorous tone may actually inflict Shame in a far more destructive way...witness how what small children really feel is routinely invalidated by all sorts of "kindly distractions." Simply having the subject repeatedly changed or avoided whenever one speaks may inflict devastating Shame. The point here is that a lifetime of "polite," well-spoken interaction may be as devastatingly shaming as any pattern of overt rudeness. The only true measure of Shame is its actual impact upon feelings. If I feel shamed, a profound loss of something really mine, or that ought to be mine, then my Shame is real.

Speaking concretely, men who had an obviously abusive father accompanied by a kindly, long-suffering mother are often at an incapacitating loss to grasp the nature of their present Shame. Wounds from such a father are usually obvious. But, just what did their kindly, long-suffering mother cost them? On the other hand, men who have had an obviously abusive mother may find it fairly easy to become aware of the profound needs or qualities their mother shamed. But these men are equally likely to have a very difficult time realizing the harmful effects of their distant, silent fathers.

As a child, Burt's mother was a kind and understanding refuge in the face of his father's drunken and physically abusive rages. After one of his father's episodes, she would cuddle and console him while they shared long hours of intimate feeling. Today, his father's abuse is clear to Burt. But, it is nearly impossible for him to see that his mother's affectionate intimacy was almost entirely in the service of her own fear-filled needs and in very little of his. He was being used for her consolation, which essentially operated as an abandonment of Burt's real feelings in the situation. Today, he cannot understand why his own needs and goals feel so shamed and inaccessible to him. Among the major things he cannot understand is why his intense need to have a woman in his life is accompanied by his equally intense "fear of commitment" to her. As is the case with so many men who have been used/abused by their mothers in this way, he cannot grasp how any intimacy now would once again place him in the familiar emotional

danger.

Confusing Shame with tone or manner can lead to seriously mistaken efforts in the healing process. An international organization which presents weekend workshops for men begins with an invasion of the men's suitcases and frequent seizure of personal property; all consciously modeled on a new recruit's humiliating and depersonalizing entry into boot camp. As in boot camp, the personal items seized are even referred to as 'contraband.' It has been pointed out to the organization's leadership that this is profoundly shaming...certainly for the majority of men attending. Since the men who offer this workshop are genuinely good-willed, they have responded to this criticism by attempts to somewhat soften the tone of the process. Unfortunately, a change in manner does not in the least modify the humiliating Shame inflicted--the gruff invasion of personal space, of the right to privacy, of the sense of one's own possessions, of one's bodily safety. Whatever the tone of voice, the violation itself remains.

The second important characteristic of Shame that must be understood is the fact that it is essentially an emotional experience. This is to say it is a learned pattern of deep feeling, habitual energy, shaped by the repeated blows from hostile feelings that work beneath the surface of everyday interactions.

With tears welling in his eyes, John tells of playing with his young nephews at his brother's house. For some reason, in the next room his brother flies into an explosive rage. John and his two nephews are not the direct objects of the rage. They have no "logical" connection to it. But the nearby explosion means that, their play abruptly terminated, all three must flee upstairs together in terror. When John sits to collect himself at an upstairs desk, his two-year-old nephew approaches, his body heaving with inexpressible tears. At two, his nephew can not comprehend nor express what has occurred. But, his overwhelmingly intense feelings fill his little body beyond its capacity. Afterward, John perceives he will not be able to heal his own terrified reaction until he realizes and understands the powerful feelings that were triggered by what happened.

Since most shamed feelings remain unconscious, Shame usually produces a disassociation from feeling. A shamed person is often not aware of any feelings, much less the feeling of Shame. Consequently, intuition, imagination, meditation, thinking or cognitive information may all indeed assist in understanding and healing Shame. But, unless such measures are accompanied by a growing awareness of what is really felt, Shame will never truly be experienced or healed. As an indispensable preparation therefore, a man must learn both how to feel and how to identify and make sense of his emotions in order to feel his Shame and

deal with it. Perhaps in therapy, he must necessarily become aware of his feelings and aware of the Shame in his feelings before new affective experiences may enter. No deep healing can occur without that.

As a third characteristic, it is most important to remember that whether aggressive or passive, whether abusive or sugarcoated, Shame's repeated attacks almost always focus against quite specific targets. What a person specifically fears he or she did not get and is not allowed to have, he cannot bear my having. Somehow, he will shut me down...either by frustrating my desire, or by demanding I surrender my desire and live out his in very specific ways that serve his needs but not mine. So, if his intelligence has been shamed, a display of my intelligence will arouse his shaming fear. Either he'll find ways to discount my intelligence, or he will invalidate it by driving me to be super-intelligent for his purposes. If his or her sense of agency has been attacked, any manifestation of my power will provoke his hostility. Or, he may somehow seduce me into being powerful for him, in his stead. If his or her sexuality has been shamed, he will somehow denigrate mine...or stimulate mine to excess for his purposes. If his or her neediness as a child, his need to be seen, his need to be validated, supported, or heard were all ignored, he will abandon my needs, leaving me unseen, invalidated, unsupported, and unheard. Or he will seduce all those needs into support for his. If his or her joy and laughter.... and so on, and on, and on, through the entire spectrum of individual human needs, qualities, and styles in a continuous series of assaults against specific parts of what we are born with.

Shame therefore begins in connection with single, concrete targets: For example, a desire to grow into a mature, independent adult; becoming an artist; caring about money; curiosity about prehistoric African fauna; love for rock music; reading difficulties; questions about relations with women; wanting to be noticed; not knowing how to dance. Shame may easily be attached to sensuality and sexuality, with related issues about having or not having enough ability to win a good partner. And, so long as Shame remains unhealed, it will of course continue to be felt in connection with such individual aspects of myself. Shame experienced in connection with these individual targets might best be called The First Level of Shame.

It is crucial to be aware of Shame's entry into feelings through such individual "gateways" because it usually does not remain at the First Level. Repeated rejection or abandonment of specific, individual qualities very soon expands beyond them. Continuous repetition reinforces Shame causing it to deepen. It then graduates beyond the individual areas where it was initially inflicted and expands into a deeper, more complex feeling, very much a Two Level experience.

Second Level Shame is experienced in a global way, quite independent of the specific places where I first encountered it. Now, I feel ashamed of my entire self. And I feel ashamed of myself at any and at all times. Shame can attach itself to every aspect of my being. A feeling of profound wrongness cannot be avoided. It now proceeds to flow even onto those parts of myself which were not originally attacked. This Second Level of Shame has appropriately been labeled Chronic Shame. Once it has attained this depth, it acts as the dominant ingredient of a man's personality. Chronic Shame condemns his very being, and all his feelings and activities.

The heart of Chronic Shame is that it controls all that a man feels and doesn't feel. Most importantly, it controls how he feels about what he feels. However unconsciously, it lurks in judgement over all his energies. It indicts or undermines nearly everything he thinks, says, or does. Turned outward, it fears and condemns everyone and everything else in the world. He therefore acts out its negations in his activities and relationships. Turned inward, it can easily be confused with depression. In every way, whether he does, or does not do, he feels wrong. In its more intense stages, he may feel Chronic Shame as a nearly intolerable "weight" pressing down on every aspect of how he lives.

In a nearby bookstore, I watch Chronic Shame being born. A nine-year-old boy pleads intensely with his father for a G. I. Joe comic book full of machine guns and rat-a-tat-tat. The father is clearly an advocate of peace and non-violence. Though heavily breathing his fear and resistance, he can not refuse his son outright because of his "gentle" convictions. After all, a clear "no" would be a kind of violence. Instead, he repeats with increasing insistence that his son will not like that book, won't enjoy it, doesn't really want it...all in direct contradiction of everything his son says, obliterating even the fact that he wants the book. After a considerable time, the son realizes his passionate pleas are in vain. From his intensity, his reddened face and the near tears in his downcast eyes, it is abundantly evident this situation has happened many times before. Obviously frustrated and angry, he has once again not gotten what he wants and is not even allowed to want it. I am left to wonder how this chronically shamed boy will perpetuate the enormous violence being taught him every day by his "peace-loving" parent...about ten years from now, and in my neighborhood.

A direct consequence of Chronic Shame---especially if the shaming begins in early childhood, as is the case with the boy in the bookstore, and is usually the case with most of us—is that we grow ever more wary of our parents and early caregivers. Sooner or later, the bond of trust, connection, or love for them will feel seriously impaired, if not irreparably broken. However, in the emotional logic of a child, he must believe the all-knowing and powerful parents

would certainly love him if he were worth loving, because that is what parents do. Since he feels his parents don't love him, it must be his fault. He must not be lovable. Such a child ingests a constant sense of guilt, unworthiness, wrongness. He comes to believe his own "badness" will manifest itself in every action or interaction. He is "a fuck-up" and life must become a continuous act of unconditional surrender.

However, in response to not feeling loved and as an attempt to defend himself, the child may also feel he or she can't love the parents...or at least cannot trust them or depend on them. Gradually the child will expand such mistrust to most other people and to the world in general. Survival will depend entirely on the child's solo efforts since everyone else will Shame him. The child's behavior may become assertive, arrogant, dictatorial, insensitive. He might then even be labeled or label himself as "having a problem with authority" since it will certainly act against his best interests whenever "authority" rears its ugly head. He is "a criminal monster" and life must become a continuous act of total war.

Either way, any sense of relatedness will be deeply impaired, or even entirely lost. Other people will be perceived as dominating and destructive, always hurtful. Or, they will be perceived as the enemy to be perpetually avoided or fought.

To even begin dealing with Shame, especially when it endures into adulthood such aggressive mistrust must therefore be accepted, at least initially, as a man's accurate and entirely justified reaction to actual experience. This runs contrary to all the "good advice" urging unqualified forgiveness for parents who "did the best they could." It also renders understanding "what descended from the ancestors" into a shaming and intellectualizing cop out. After all, a man's immediate caregivers were the initiators of rejection and may legitimately be suspected of having lacked connection with the child in the first place. What feelings should a child live by if not learning to handle those generated in him by his actual experience? However painful it is therefore, the indispensable starting point for any genuine attempt to heal Shame must be the acknowledgement and acceptance of one's own darkest feelings.

However, the concomitant aspect of mistrust for my caregivers is a lack of trust, connection, or affection for myself. This turns inward against my own desires. A man may then go through life feeling an incomprehensible rage over all his "bad" qualities. He may experience a continual anger against his unforgivable self. Or, he may end up permanently "floating" in a sort of amorphous internal world, a "fog" where nothing is clear, certain, or reliable---especially not anything in his own damned and unworthy feelings.

As he experiences the world around him, no person or thing will feel either trustworthy or definite. With no clear sense of his own right to understand or exist in the world, he feels like a "fog," and "lives in a fog." He may not have enough coherent energy at his disposal to make any sort of effort on his behalf. No one has ever been "in his corner." It now feels impossible for him ever to be in his own. There is no support for him. He has no rights. He never has the right to say "I" or "my" with any confidence or clarity whatever.

This is also to say that a shamed person reacts to the assaults visited upon him by increasingly inhibiting, weakening, or invalidating the aspects of himself that are unacceptable. From one point of view, he reacts "depressively" to protect himself from further insult. From another, he has learned to feel "depressively" toward his own qualities. Either way, he displays who or what he is less and less, and finally perhaps not at all. In a pattern precisely modeled on how he was originally assaulted, he uses much or all of his energy in an internal assault against himself to inhibit or kill his own energies. Controlled by Shame, he systematically erases his own needs or desires from his life. To a greater or lesser degree, he keeps whatever he needs, wants, or feels out of play. In effect, Shame always shouts or whispers, "Be careful." " Stop!" " Don't!"

#### MALE GENDER ROLES AS EXPRESSIONS OF SHAME

At this point, it is not difficult to conclude that Chronic Shame is...if not the absolutely fundamental...at least the major defining ingredient in what is regarded as typical male gender behavior. A full demonstration of this fact would clearly take us beyond the scope of this article. But, we may take a moment to explore some of the more obvious wounds Chronic Shame imposes by definition on men in our culture.

It seems obvious that the pattern of Shame we have been describing has subjected men's inborn capacity for kindness, gentleness, tenderness, and vulnerability to constant attack. Implicit expectations from both mother and father that a boy child should act "like a little man" shame his early needs for holding, cuddling, reassurance, and support, shame his fear and uncertainty. Shaming his consequent tears--"big boys don't cry"—further attacks his emotions and his sensitivity. And the school playground will complete the task of shaming whatever remnant of these qualities survives from "care" at home.

Then in adolescence, he is "obviously" required to be physically tough, competitive, casually indifferent to his appearance, and stoic in the face of pain...nowhere more devastatingly than on the sports field. Unless explicitly connected to the hunt for sex, any awareness of or appreciation for, his male body (and with it, "excessive" care for his health,

clothing, or appearance) will normally remain shamed for his entire lifetime. In adulthood, similar expectations that he be unfailingly strong, practical, and productive so he can "keep his job and make the grade" routinely stifle emotional sensitivity, creative fantasy, and vulnerability. None of these qualities serves any useful purpose in a corporate hierarchy, a coal mine, or a battlefield. In a word, self-denying cruelty has become the heart of his experience, the road to "being a man." And this has been an important pattern, most probably for centuries. After all, for a long time society has demanded workers and soldiers. For them tenderness or feeling is a liability.

It is therefore legitimate to suspect that Shame is in fact the major definer in society of "typical" masculinity. What passes for "being a man" is the direct consequence of Shame. A "football player" dad routinely shames his violin-playing son. A "lawyer" dad routinely shames his mechanic son. An unexpressive, "manly" father shames his expressive, affectionate son. Unsupported and shamed himself, a father simply cannot "be there" to validate whoever his son is. Differences are threatening, frightening. So his son's manhood remains cruelly unvalidated. And this does not even begin to address mother's very substantial participation in the process of supporting "true manliness" in her sons. As a consequence, men are separated from one another. Other men are, after all, only a source of danger.

All this prepares men for submission to a lifetime of corporate, industrial, or military "stoicism"...and an early death. After all, if law, medicine, and finance are "dominated" by men, so are coal mining, steel milling, logging, and heavy duty construction. Consequently, ninety percent of all work related deaths occur among men. But granted no permission whatever for asserting their genuine selves, most men willingly take refuge in their assigned roles. Thoroughly conditioned Do-ers, and never Be-ers, they unquestioningly sacrifice body and soul to the demands for work, for providing support for their loved ones, and for military service that are imposed upon them throughout their lifetimes. The oppression visited on coal miners or industrial workers is obvious. Far less obviously, even those supposed master dominators, the "privileged" CEO's of corporations, must entirely surrender themselves in thought, word, and deed to the business system's all-devouring requirements. These are the men whose "families do not know who they are," who are "never home." So defined are they by the corporate system that they frequently die soon after receiving "the congratulatory gold watch." And in any case, they generally die seven years earlier than woman of advancing age.

Rather than shaping men to exercise "domination" or "masculine privilege" then, traditional male upbringing hollows men out, impoverishes them, so as to render them into

unfeeling automatons without needs, virtual robots without rights. And to add insult to injury, expected to surrender their utterly fictitious "dominance" in the workplace, men nowadays are nonetheless still required to observe "the other half of the bargain" by caring for and catering to all the traditionally female needs in the home.

Of course, with almost every major need rejected, the very last characteristic men or women will tolerate in "a real man" is "neediness," any impulse to protest or change, any impulse to abandon male stoicism and redefine male roles. That too is shamed. "Stop whining, and act like a man!" Nowadays, doctrinaire feminist mothers, fathers, and schoolteachers may even contribute to this "privileged" situation by shaming a boy for even being male. And, for several decades, much of the enormous self-sacrifice and contribution to human society men have made during the past 9,000 years has been subjected to similar devaluation.

Shamed to the core, it is unfortunately also entirely logical that most men will steadfastly refuse to acknowledge the present state of affairs. When questions are raised, most men truculently deny any problem exists at all. These are in fact the men who vociferously demand that anyone questioning the system should stop whining and act like a man. The basic wound therefore perpetuates itself because it denies itself. Raising any question aimed at realizing who a man genuinely is necessarily obliges him to violate what he's been socialized to believe he is: someone who must never be concerned about who he really is! There is no way out of this vicious double bind. Thus there is very little sympathy for men or for the needs of men...even from men. To feel it would be "unmanly." It should therefore be clear that it is so difficult to establish a "movement" sympathetic to men precisely because it is so desperately needed. It also comes as no surprise that numbers of men energetically join extreme feminists in some of the most vicious of the ill-founded attacks on men, knowingly including themselves into the condemnation.

Against the prevailing vogue of the past several decades, it is in fact possible to formulate the dire consequences of male "training" in a manner that is sympathetic to men. By the time most boys have grown into men, Shame has essentially stripped away substantial parts, if not all, of the endowment they are born with. They have been "hollowed out," impoverished... basically shamed for being. So when a boy lives up to the demands of "being a man," he must effectively ignore or reject almost all that he truly is. He must treat himself cruelly. His qualities and his needs must remain permanently unseen, unsupported, unfulfilled...kept hidden even from himself. Above all, he must never want anything for himself. In the final analysis, it should be clear that most men have been hurt so deeply by this experience that they cannot

subsequently reveal themselves, be vulnerable or "available," in relationships with other men or with women. When their very being is under the constant threat of devastating hurt, can it possibly come as a surprise that most--if not all--boys, become distant, fearful, angry men? Yet today, even this urge toward minimal self-protection is hurtfully/shamingly labeled as "fear of commitment."

Internally, men gripped by the Chronic Shame which diminishes any real awareness of themselves resort to one of two general strategies. On one hand, they may "forget" they have a physical body or any feelings in it. Unaware of any "data" from those sources, they will go entirely "into their heads." They will deal with almost every aspect of life by intellectualizing. Adrift within themselves, they may become obsessed with clarity, order, and control. Everyone and everything must be subjected to their fear-based need for order. On the other hand, though preserving some sense of body and emotions, they may "forget they have a mind." Too fearfully befuddled to understand their feelings or deal with them effectively, their lives may turn into a disorganized chaos. Either way, these men will have lost major parts of themselves and their ability to understand themselves. They will neither know how to direct their lives in an effective or successful manner; nor know how to relate to others. And now, angry, and fearful of so much, they are perfectly positioned to continue inflicting the cycle of Shame on others.

Externally, in their public behavior, men enact their Shame by forging their lives into two general patterns that are quite opposed to one another in outward appearance. Following the first pattern, the majority of men enacts Shame by trying to overcome it. They strive to "justify" their right to exist. To do this, they must achieve. That is, they must race ever faster to rise above and obliterate their Shame. "If only try I harder, then surely more effort, more work, more money, more women, power, achievement, promotion, position, two cars, a bigger house, prestigious vacations...any or all of these, will somehow render me worthy of love, worthy of kindness, and of having life!" Of course, desperately seeking all these things out of a nearly complete internal void, the essential negation of any feeling for these things inside himself, means he can only "get" what he lacks for himself by "robbing" others...by competing and accumulating. Yet somehow he is never satisfied. He is never filled. Loneliness and vacant feelings persist. But, make no mistake, modern society will "reward" him for living his life in this fashion...probably with six figures...and an early death.

Following the second pattern, the minority of men enacts Shame in precisely the opposite fashion, by succumbing to it. These are the "underachievers" who fail to accomplish "what they're expected to" as men. Society does not reward this behavior at all. It condemns these

men as "losers" or "drop outs"...at best, a "failed artist." They often don't marry, or don't "shoulder their responsibilities" when they do. They are therefore suspected of not "really being men" at all. Difficult as it may appear to reconcile these two strategies, the common root of both is in fact Chronic Shame. In both, a man never perceives himself, or allows others to perceive him, as genuinely worthy of wanting anything of his own. In both, the only strategy available is either to accept or to reject the demanding performance society imposes upon him as a male.

As an obvious implication, claims that traditional male roles place men in positions of "masculine privilege" where they "dominate" society must clearly be regarded as shallow, poorly analyzed, and well nigh nonsensical. The "prestige" of a high corporate position does not mean the man occupying it is in an admirable state. Trained from infancy to surrender themselves, such men might far more accurately be described as being entirely dominated by a system of social and economic obligations imposed on them. As such, they can only have experienced the social difficulties (to employ an outrageous euphemism) of the past decades...shifting gender roles, hostile feminism, unemployment, competition from affirmative action, downsizing, altered job definitions, and all the rest...from an already confused and assaulted personal center that has long since prepared them to experience life-long Shame. Consequently, the enormous mass of Shame burdening men in modern society can only be worsening. This cannot be beneficial for men, for women, for children, or for the very earth.

These observations are in no way meant to imply women in our society are not shamed in their own right, and to a similar degree. However, I cannot directly experience women's Shame, especially as an internal experience, and therefore do not presume to speak for them on this issue. It should be clear that with appreciation for the appropriate differences, a similar case must be made for women's Shame. And perhaps this was the starting point from which the women's movement began.

As a final point, it seems logical to suspect that when Shame has reached Chronic proportions it also generates more general patterns of behavior not obviously connected to gender that are not presently recognized as linked to it. For example, a shamed person can in no way soothe himself. His fear of permitting himself any satisfaction has become the operative note in his emotional life. He even becomes "unsoothed" for wanting to be soothed. Isn't it likely that repeated attempts to medicate the "unhealable" pains of Shame explain much of the central motives for many repetition compulsions? Such feelings must be very close to the source of addictions. Isn't any specific addiction--money, sex, power, gambling, sugar, food, excitement--in some sense an attempt to heal the pain at one's center? ...one's Shame for

existing? Does addictive behavior accelerate because "the object employed for addiction progressively loses its savor and demands the use of more and more?" It is far more likely that we are compulsively driven further and further into addictive behaviors, regardless of the chosen object of addiction, because, though we repeatedly attempt to do so, Shame will simply not allow us to experience any sort of satisfaction.

Shame must also be suspected as materially contributing to Depression, if indeed it is not its entire cause. Shame's role must be investigated for at least some of the "damping down" of energy that constitutes so much of depression. And aren't "codependent" and "enabling" behaviors further instances of another person's feelings (once again) being more important than one's own? If even partially true, understanding Shame's role becomes necessary for dealing effectively with a quite broad range of psychological problems.

### DAILY SHAME

At this point, I am far from believing we have exhausted all that needs to be said about the causes and characteristics of Shame. But, what we've said thus far allows us to understand the essentials of how a man becomes shamed and then continues to express it after repeated, invisible violence has finally installed it as Chronic. We may now turn to consider some of the more important products of Shame in daily life. These too must be kept in mind as we look toward healing it.

Almost all of the literature that discusses Shame's operation describes it as fear of being exposed, fear of being seen when I don't want to be seen. And, there's no question when a man experiences Shame, he immediately feels great fear, the need to hide, flee, be covered. Depending on the intensity of his Shame, his feelings of discomfort at being seen may vary all the way from a vague, barely perceptible embarrassment to a twisting agony sufficient to make him "squirm out of his skin." As a common expression of such fear, he lowers his eyes or looks away whenever he's aware of another's gaze. And very often, shamed men consistently operate with a need to hide everything they feel or do. So fear of being seen is indeed undeniable and always present as a usual first symptom of feeling ashamed.

Yet fear of exposure by no means comprises the total experience of Shame or Chronic Shame. It does not begin to address what is expressed by such fear. Fear of being exposed to anyone's view--or indeed to one's own--happens because having been repeatedly attacked or unsupported for what he wants, a man has finally ingested the lesson. "Wrong" again and again for wanting certain specific things, he at last "always feels wrong" both for wanting any one thing and for the act of wanting itself. He must not be caught in the act of wanting anything. So he

fears being seen because he himself feels the much deeper fear of the "wrongness" that will be seen in him. As commonly expressed, "if you really got to know me, you really wouldn't like me." The crucial addition, that I really don't like myself at all, is just as commonly left unexpressed.

A chronically shamed man fears exposure because when he wants anything he feels profoundly "wrong." Therefore he is evil, bad, off-base, strange, defective, abnormal, weird, weak, unallowable, egotistical, selfish...permutations of "wrongness" that must be understood as endless. Each shamed man invents his own word for it. Any desire to eat, sleep, have sex, enjoy success, make money, feel powerful, determine one's own goals, express or receive affection, friendship, intimacy, or almost everything else, feels profoundly "wrong." No inner permission whatever allows fulfillment of his wishes. He can ask for nothing. He may only feel guilty for wanting what is "wrong." He may even feel completely crazy, insane for wanting what he wants.

Bill is a man in his 40's, obviously in fine physical condition. His tone is wistful as he recounts the golden opportunity he had in his twenties to play professional baseball. He actually got as far as playing for a major league farm team, but did not succeed. With downcast eyes, he describes how he could never seem to get his heart into practice or play. "It always seemed as though I worked to defeat myself, much as I thought I wanted that career," he says, almost guiltily. "The fact is I always felt I was wrong to want it. Because I wanted it, it was something I shouldn't have."

At a men's retreat, the participants are asked to express what their Shame feels like. One by one, a surprising number of men rises to speak. One of them says, "my Shame feels like endlessly falling down the bottomless well of home's broken promises. It feels like having to dig out through the dirt and mud at the bottom though I have no hands, no tools, and no hope. It feels like a demand that I walk a long road though I have no feet. Like being asked to sing though I have no voice. Like being required to pray though there is no god."

Chronic Shame's incapacitating destruction of a man's sovereign authority to be himself--to stand in his own feelings, define his own truth, possess his own energy or power, confidently pursue his own needs and goals--could not have been more clearly stated. Out of its origins in rejection or abandonment, he ultimately implements Chronic Shame's impairment of his "be-ing" in two senses. It has become a crippling of his actions and a crippling of his very existence. He feels guilty for acting. He also feels guilty for being. Whether aware of it or not therefore, Chronic Shame often culminates in a feeling of threatened annihilation, obliteration, death: he

simply should not "be." So shamed feelings are often experienced as reactions to a death threat---to his personality, if not to his physical existence. And this often produces defensive rage...the rage so often characterized as "masculine." Under threat of immediate annihilation, he reacts with violent feeling...and perhaps violent action as well. Society pays a considerable price for this shamed rage...especially if a man has not been culturally raised to be verbal and therefore acts out his rage physically!

Finally and inevitably, because Shame makes all feelings "wrong" and drives him to hide them, a man is usually too ashamed to feel Shame. Thus, as Shame's crowning achievement, he commonly doesn't know he is shamed. His Shame becomes quite literally invisible. Instead, he may become conscious of a host of other deficiencies: Weakness. Profound hopelessness. Vagueness. Chronic confusion. Feeling blocked. Persistent tardiness or procrastination. Painful emptiness. Complete absence of feelings. Physical pain in the shoulders, chest, stomach, or back, especially the lower back. Constant anxiety. Nervousness. Uncontrollable anger. Constant rage. Boredom. The absence of what he needs to get the job done. Complete lack of confidence. Needy dependence. Inescapable addiction. Feelings of not being enough or being less than. An inability to sleep restfully. Feelings of deep depression. Insatiable hunger for all he lacks within himself or in the world. A sense of not existing. A feeling of vagueness. Whichever form it takes, it usually goes unrecognized as a symptom of Shame. All he knows is that his life, or some part of his life, feels blocked, hopeless. Why can't he write? Paint? Find a lover or a wife? A good job? A good place to live? Think clearly? Function effectively?

And to complete the circle, once Shame has become Chronic and installed itself as the master control of all his feelings, it becomes entirely normal to mete out Shame to others through habitually rejecting their feelings and desires. Or, it feels perfectly normal to continue in Shame by arranging to have others systematically reject his feelings and desires. Or both. Shame becomes as constant, necessary, and normal---and as invisible---as the air one breathes. And now we have returned to the starting point of the cycle with whose description we began this article.

So shaming, a man may persistently inflict his Shame on his family, friends, and acquaintances through coldness, belittling humor, eruptive anger, or dismissive behavior. He routinely discounts or invalidates who they are or what they achieve. He becomes the constantly critical father. He may become a boss nothing satisfies. He may become one of those workers brimming with "helpful criticism" and "good advice" for co-workers. Or, he may

act out Chronic Shame by becoming a workshop leader or therapist whose "helpful advice" routinely "encourages" clients to feel something other than what they truly feel. Then again, he may become the energetic social activist curing everyone else's problems. When push (literally) comes to shove, better to inflict Shame than to feel it!

At his graduation ceremony from a major eastern university, Peter, was awarded his hard-earned degree *magna cum laude*. While a surrounding group of friends congratulates him, his father silently studies the degree. Finally he mutters, "I don't know, Peter. It seems to me they're giving out an awful lot of these *magna cum laude* awards." As a witness, I could hardly imagine how Peter felt. I know I wished I could vanish into the earth.

Shamed: he may just as usually berate himself for his many faults, real and imagined, measured against a standard of unattainable perfection. For a single slight mistake, he may obsess over his defects for hours. Because of such an error, the strength may actually drain from his legs and leave him physically unable to stand. He may continuously criticize himself with lacerating severity. For years on end, he may read books, attend workshops, or consult therapists whose "good advice" consistently delivers the by-now-reassuring message that what he feels is wrong and needs correcting. Over and over, he may conceive of projects he never even begins, or whose failure to complete he infallibly brings about. Or, he may repeatedly enter personal or work relationships that confirm his negative vision of himself by systematically frustrating his own needs.

In his euphoria over finding the perfect wife, Will could not contain his happiness. As time passed, he did "everything a man was supposed to do" to make his wife happy and make his marriage a success. He even worked two jobs to provide a fine house and good education for their children. Soon however, he realized she seemed to withdraw and increasingly criticize more and more of how he behaved. He was finally thunderstruck one day when his wife simply declared "out of the blue" that she wanted a divorce. She wanted it because he did not love her the way she wanted to be loved. His feelings of love were "wrong." Will was devastated and could not leave his bed for days. To be sure, though he had paid for it and their house was jointly owned, both he and his wife assumed he was the one who would have to move out.

The double-sided normalcy of men's Shame nowhere more evident than in the attendees of the weekend workshop mentioned earlier. Generally the participants leave the workshop delighted by their experience. Afterwards, its leaders proudly display photographs of the men standing with smiling faces as proofs of their methods. Of course, the coercion implicit in much of the weekend remains unrecognized. The Shame both imposed and received goes entirely

unrecognized. After all, it feels like a perfectly normal male environment for the leaders imposing it...and for the men receiving it. It's a fine male experience! Both shaming and shamed.

Finally and above all, when Chronic Shame functions as his master control, a man may feel hopeless, forever frozen into an inescapable pattern. After all, the shamed cell into which he is now locked has served through many years to steel him against all the repeated assaults against his needs and wants. By rendering him unaware of possessing whatever parts of himself were being rejected, his Shame has in a sense successfully shielded both them and him. Finally unaware of Shame itself, he is certainly not now going to place himself once more in harm's way by tearing down the walls that protected him. He will refuse to re-experience the pain that caused him to erect them in the first place. In addition, he may also cling loyally to the familiar pattern in the (vain) hope "they will finally love" him for behaving as they wanted him to. Again, no way out: I won't get any love where I am. I won't get any love if I depart from where I am.

#### HEALING SHAME?

To return to our general considerations concerning Shame, the Two Level nature of Chronic Shame points directly to the great error almost universally made in attempting to heal it...whether for an individual or for society in general. Quite usually, this error is inflicted on an individual when trying to cope with "personal problems." That is because, with the best will in the world, therapists, social workers, workshop leaders, and other "helpers" routinely fall into perpetrating it when dealing with their clients. And, social reformers fall into it as a matter of course. Simply put, the error consists in trying to heal personal problems as though they were One Level difficulties, specific things a person does wrong, or just can't get right, ...as though they were isolated problems in need of simple correction. So, a therapist may provide patients with "helpful alternatives" to "cure" the sadness, anger, mistrust, or inability to express or receive affection that troubles their lives. Or a patient is exhorted to strive energetically to cure over-eating, habitual lateness, a refusal to work, sexual addiction, the inability to handle money well, a tendency to procrastinate. A social reformer assumes altering political or economic structures will automatically "solve" personal difficulties (as Progressives, Socialists, Communists, New Dealers, the Right Wing, and most recently, Feminists have).

In such cases, it must be noted the suggested "cures" may indeed contain appropriate alternatives for shamed or shaming behavior. But, the problem lies in the fact that they fatally ignore the real foundation of such behavior, the Two Level nature of Chronic Shame. "Good

advice" offered to solve a specific First Level difficulty ignores the underlying Second Level of Chronic Shame---my assurance that I am essentially "bad"---that functions as its source. "Cures" therefore profoundly reinforce the underlying global feeling of condemnation a man exercises towards himself for having any "problems" in the first place.

In reality then, striving for a cure, or being pushed toward one, will inevitably add to Shame...perhaps in a more intensified form. Affirmations are deadly in this connection. Beneath the surface of such apparently benign assistance, these "cures" once more reject what I am really feeling and reinforce Shame. The fundamental message received is once again that what I feel is "wrong." Once again, I am "off base." I must continue to condemn myself, mistrust myself, and drive myself to be different from what I am. A sense of my own energies, my own authority, confidence in myself, good feeling toward myself, acceptance of myself (any of which could function to help me genuinely heal my difficulties), remains under attack and is in fact further undermined.

The harmful increase of Chronic Shame delivered under the guise of "helpful" advice is nowhere clearer than in the weekend workshops for men offered by the men's organization mentioned earlier. The workshop leaders routinely assume they know what solution the attending men need...usually an energetic expression of anger. And, they impose their solution on most of the attendees through a form of manipulated psychodrama. Before attending, Jason supplied an answer to one particular question out of the many on his application. Because of it, during his weekend the leaders drove him to express feelings about his infant son's death, which had occurred many years earlier. Feeling deeply violated, Jason emerged from the workshop extremely upset and confused. He was in no way ready to confront these feelings. Afterwards, in private therapy, he is not able to confront his son's death until many years after the workshop. Moreover, his profound feelings of Shame were reinforced by the "solutions" he saw imposed on his fellow participants during the weekend.

The importance of understanding Shame's Two Level nature therefore cannot be overemphasized. It imposes an indispensable requirement on any and all efforts to heal Shame, whether in myself or in someone else, whether on a personal or on a social level. Any attempt to heal First Level feelings of Shame that are connected with specific difficulties must remain careful not to reinforce the Second Level feelings of Chronic Shame that are now inseparably connected. Chronic Shame's troublesome Two Level structure therefore ties a paradoxical emotional knot around the very heart of healing Shame. Energetic efforts to heal Shame may in fact deepen Shame because in the effort I once again reject or abandon what I

truly feel and make myself "wrong." I am shamed for being shamed. Here is the real dilemma posed by Shame. How can one set of feelings possibly be healed without automatically sickening the other?

#### IN A WORD

In sum, thanks to my real experience, I'm shamed. I feel unworthy, uncertain, powerless, and blocked. I am paralyzed. I trust no one, including myself. I'm profoundly afraid, though I probably won't admit that even to myself. My own shamed energy works against me to keep most of my qualities, and my Shame itself, hidden, unknown even to myself. Aware of little or none if it, my Shame therefore denies and protects its own existence. In any case, I have every reason to cling to the shamed reaction that, however unfortunately, has saved me in the face of rejection and betrayal...and that by this time in my life defines the only roles I believe I must assume to truly be a man. I will feel guilty, selfish, or egotistical about trying to do anything to change my situation. And, only by ensnaring myself in the literal dilemma of shaming myself further do I usually approach healing it at all.

How ever can we hope to untie a knot so snarled and apparently hopeless? How can any man find peace in a vicious war he unconsciously wages against himself? The solution, I believe, is symbolized in the story of Ali Baba and the Cave of Forty Thieves...in many ways a wonderful tale dramatizing how a man can heal Shame. A fairy tale...but no fiction!