Let's Hear It for Shame

The Shame Game

I was giving the keynote presentation at a Pacific education conference when something I said drew a gasp from the audience. I had just said that a second grade teacher of mine had scolded me for habitually writing the number 7 backwards. She called me up to the board and had me fill half the blackboard with 7's written the right way while my classmates snickered.

"Was I ashamed that day?" I asked rhetorically. "Sure," I admitted, "but the shame didn't kill my self-confidence or traumatize me."

I wanted to make the point that "shaming" has become a dirty word in our day. But it is also a useful tool–one that worked with me seventy years ago. Even more, it is a tool that is especially effective in the Pacific. What really seemed to shock the listeners, though, was my encouragement to use this tool without apology, as generations of Pacific educators have done.

The educators seemed horrified by this advice. Shaming kids? Doing so in front of other kids? How could a teacher be so callous toward the feelings of young children!

Meanwhile, I was astonished at the hypersensitivity to the use of shame that had evidently developed over the years in the Pacific as in America. Did these island teachers know that a few decades earlier their parents were proudly recounting their experiences under Japanese teachers: kneeling in the corner with arms outstretched, having a pencil painfully entwined in their fingers, being slapped on the head or back. The island parents I knew back then expressed their earnest hope that American teachers would have the guts to use similar methods to discipline the younger generation.

I did my best as a Jesuit scholastic at Xavier High School in Chuuk to carry out their wishes. Sometimes it was a drumbeat on the shoulders of an unruly student, but it might also be a sarcastic comment as I flipped a poorly done assignment to the floor. Even today students still remind me of the "25-cent or 50-cent stamps" on the back they received on their back when I lapped them during our afternoon physical fitness. Do I detect a certain pride in their voice as we reminisce about such things?

But all that was long ago.

These days shame has clearly come into disrepute. Social media, while advertising the horror of shame, has helped make us acutely conscious of all its various manifestations: body shaming, food shaming, weight shaming, ethnic shaming and whatever other type there might be. The original purpose, however well-intentioned, is disregarded if the effect is to bring a blush to the face of the victim.

Parents have been known to charge into the principal's office to denounce a teacher's shaming of their child, even if its purpose was to keep their child in line or to drive him to success in his classwork. Or they may react to the benching of their child in a basketball game as a shaming

device, thus suggesting that the feelings of their child should come before the good of the team.

Have young people become so acutely sensitive these days that it would be impossible for them to endure what their elders would have tolerated without a murmur?

Once Upon a Time

Not so long ago shame was seen in a very different light; it was regarded as a legitimate form of social control. Shame was the punishment for not conforming to the community standards. Men would have been ashamed to violate the dress codes of the day–like the one that required men to wear hats whenever they went outdoors.

Shame would have also come upon families that had seen one of their children run away from home, or families with any whiff of suspicion regarding improper sexual relations within its members. It would have clung to the parents of a youth who had been brought home by a policeman for misdeeds, even if the young man was released at the doorstep of his house.

Shame was the inevitable consequence of misbehavior in school–whether the punishment was a belt whip to the open hand, an order to clean the classroom after school, or a recital of the student's failures in front of everyone. No scolding or punishment was ever a private matter in those days. A smirking group was always on hand to witness everything. But that was the point, after all: to use shame to rachet up the admonition for reform and to stifle the temptation to disregard it.

What I remember from my early childhood in Buffalo wasn't so very different at bottom from the type of social control that kept Pacific Islanders in line, I suppose. Shame was the device used to maintain public order and good behavior. Long before policemen patrolled the streets and prison cells became overcrowded, people were kept in line by fear that they would lose their reputation.

Much the same was true in the islands. Formerly a young man who got into a fight with someone in his village, or who attempted to steal a neighbor's car or damaged the property of another, would have been reported to the magistrate rather than arrested by the police and hauled away to face criminal charges. The guilty young man, along with his parents, would have been summoned, along with his parents, to account for his deeds in front of the mayor and those he had harmed. The youth would have been required to face the consequences of his actions and his family obliged to make restitution.

Shame was a prime ingredient in resolving such matters in those days. It was also a compelling reason for parents to make sure that their wayward son did not repeat such behavior in the future.

Spouse abuse in the islands offers another example of the contrast between then and now. When households were larger and made up of more than just parents and children, a man would have thought long and hard before screaming at his wife, much less punching her. For one thing, her blood relatives probably lived not too far away. But in any case, at the regular family gatherings bruises and black eyes would have become an instant topic of conversation. At first the woman's

relatives might have counseled patience with her spouse, but their readiness to let the incident pass wouldn't have gone on forever. At some point, they would have intervened on her behalf.

The forms of this intervention might differ with the culture. In some places, her brother might have had a one-on-one talk, or possibly something more than just a talk, with her offending spouse. If the problem continued, her family might have brought her back to stay with them until her husband learned how to behave properly toward her.

Whatever happened wouldn't have entailed a quick 911 call leading to a restraint order or perhaps even criminal charges and an arrest. It would have been a process more drawn out, but always under the watchful eye of the woman's own flesh and blood. Needless to say, throughout the whole process shame would have been a strong motive for behavioral change.

Blaming Shame

In the eyes of many today, the use of shame to punish misbehavior has itself become shameful. Part of this current reaction might be attributed to the enormous outreach of social media. Back in pre-Internet days, the scolding of a student who had misbehaved was heard by others in the class, rarely by the entire school. Classmates of the student were expected to learn something from this example, but word of what had gone on was certainly not intended to reach the other side of country via a posting on YouTube.

Back in the late Middle Ages, of course, the worst offenses were punished by putting the offender in a wooden stockade to be the butt of scorn in the entire village. But that shaming device, used only in select circumstances, went out of fashion centuries ago.

Today, with the rise of Internet, we have developed the equivalent of putting a person in stocks for the whole world to see. Worse still, the reason for embarrassing the victim may be silly or vengeful–not any offense given to the community, but merely the whim of an ex-boyfriend or the retaliation of a jilted lover.

But apart from the enormous outreach that shame can have, there are other stronger objections to its use today. We now seem to have become as fastidious about the use of shame as we have to possible infection by germs. Parents in our age hover over their children in their intent to protect them from every type of danger. According to press reports, many parents are so determined to protect their children from bacterial infection that they deny them the freedom to play in the dirt as we elders did when we were young. Perhaps parents have come to regard shaming as the psychological equivalent of bodily infection: a slight injury to the pride that can lead to seriously damaged self-esteem.

Then, too, today we are more alert to the patterns of abuse that develop over the course of time. Spouse abuse, for instance, often begins with silent dismissal but soon evolves into what could be called verbal abuse. This, in turn, may escalate into physical mistreatment: slaps, punches, or even more violent treatment. A modest dose of shame commonly marks the start of this downward spiral.

In the eyes of many today, shaming is seen as the seemingly insignificant act that transmits a disease or marks the beginning of a pattern that can lead to the destruction of a human being. Of course, the shaming act may not lead to such an end at all. But why take the chance, many of us feel. “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger” may have become a popular adage in our day, but it probably offers small comfort to most modern parents, who fear the worst for their children.

Our tendency to demonize shaming in all its various shapes and forms raises an important question. In our zeal to rid our social world of shame, are we possibly jettisoning one of the most important social tools at our disposal? If so, then we will be invariably be compelled to rely on other, stronger weapons that may be more damaging to all parties in the long run.

In Place of Shame

If we really believe that shame must not be used to control unacceptable behavior, then what *can* we use? Well, we can always resort to far worse kinds of punishment to do the job. Over the past forty or fifty years we have done just that as the criminal justice system has expanded enormously. This happened just as shame was judged to be a less effective, or maybe a less acceptable tool of social control.

If shame can’t do the job, our country decided, we will have to call on the penal system to do so–with its multiplication of criminal laws, its enlarged police force, its longer and often mandatory sentences. Why rely on subtle tools like shame when we can simply slap on the handcuffs and lock up the offender for a time? And if that doesn’t do the job, we can lengthen the prison sentence the next time.

The criminal justice system today intrudes into areas in which it formerly played a very minor role. It has crept into the neighborhood, onto the school grounds, and even into the very heart of the family. In the past, these areas didn’t seem to require much help from the police or the court system; shame was an effective enough weapon in communities where people interacted with one another almost every day.

But we’re living in a different age, some may object. For one thing, those institutions that once would have shielded the vulnerable from harm–or brought shame on the head of those who abused them–have come on hard times. The extended family and the neighborhood community, in the mainland US as in island societies, seem to have dissolved. The reasons for this have been argued repeatedly in the social science literature of our age. However we may explain their decline, these grassroots institutions seem incapable of performing today as they did so well in the past.

True enough, but let’s not give up on them entirely. Rehabilitation efforts are being made to restore at least some of their efficacy. Large family gatherings are becoming more common in the US, perhaps strengthening the links that might offer the solidarity and protection that small households seem to long for these days.

Small neighborhoods, too, seem to be reuniting in a campaign to look out for one another. Signs warning of the “Neighborhood Watch” are often posted in the part of Buffalo in which I was

raised. This offers more than just the hope of protection against property vandalism or theft. It might also relink neighbors to one another, maybe even to the point where wrong-doers can once again be tamed by shame rather than the fear of jail.

If some of the features of the old social environment are being restored, then there is reason to believe that the criminal justice system which has run wild in recent decades can be reversed. Shame can be at least as effective and is far less costly than the current default system for punishment. Is it too much to hope for a restoration of shame as a major part of social control?

Retrieving the Old Tool

Individualism seems to be the bottom line in our society today, here in the islands as well as in the US. The government increasingly sees itself as the protector of every individual–even those in the tight embrace of the family–against mistreatment of any kind. In today's society the government feels that it must do everything, including protecting children from their parents. In the past, our polity relied on small communities, including families, for a great measure of self-policing. The latter was done without handcuffs, much less jail cells, but it depended on strong doses of shame being administered as needed.

Isn't it time for us to reconsider the wisdom of this shift and take a step backwards? Self-policing might allow a few rule-breakers to slip through the net, but is this any worse than the penal system that has replaced it?

A control system rooted in shame offers advantages that the court and penal system finds it hard to match. To escape the burden of shame, a person who has scammed others will have to offer some form of apology and restitution if he or she wants to hold his head high in the community once again. Isn't this is what the penal system claims to want to do, even if there is little evidence that it accomplishes this?

If we want to provide room for more self-policing in our communities, then we will have to restore the tool they will need to do this. In other words, we will have to stop belittling shame and all that the word represents. (To say that the word has taken on negative overtones today is to understate the problem.)

Shame has a long history as an important tool in social control–indeed, probably the most effective one over the years. Even as we excoriate the cruder and more irresponsible uses of shame, let's recognize the positive contribution that shame has made.

We might want to remind ourselves that the words "You have no shame" was one of the strongest reproaches that could be made in most societies. A sense of shame was an essential compass to help navigate through life. Now and then, of course, it had to be tingled to keep a person on track.

So, let's not paint the word "shame" in dreadfully black colors. Contrary to popular wisdom today, not all shame is malicious, meritless, and a mortal blow to the psyche.

We can't spin back to restore the past and return to the "good old days," as some of us may view them. But we can certainly retrieve some of the tools that served people of those days so well with the hope that they can still be of some value for us. Shame is surely one of those tools. If we can't figure out how to make good use of it today, then we'll have to resign ourselves to building even more jail cells in our overcrowded prisons.

So, let's hear it for shame!

Francis X. Hezel, SJ

12/10/18