

Bound by Shame

By Dr. Glenn Francis, Psy.D.

Brody is my psychotherapy client—and a psychotherapist himself. In one particular session, he shares with me what happens when he goes into a room full of people; the distress of it for him, the sheer physiological activation of his nervous system, the sweating, his whole body being on high alert. And as he tells me more about what occurs to him under these circumstances, I listen, with care and attention.

Only recently has he been able to identify and acknowledge that this difficult experience is shame: There has been so much shame about shame in his life that to even mention this taboo territory as he shares this with me brings about a twinge of distress in his lower chest. To find out loud and clear that shame is universal has been very humanizing for Brody. Realizing *everybody experiences shame* is reparative of his being outcast—because it feels as if he alone seems to feel shame; and no one else even mentions it.

Shame is universal, one of the basic array of affects we are born with. Shame is our built-in biological regulator informing us that our moving toward something we find interesting or exciting has run into an obstacle. Shame, in its healthy forms, keeps us safe, informing us when we've overstepped boundaries and run the risk of hurting others. Shame is the breaking of the interpersonal bridge—and shame then warns us later that we may be approaching that crucial point of rupture again, and we need to take care.

Examples abound in early life, particularly in the taboo zones, such as sexuality. Young children are naturally sexual, but have to learn to regulate and control these interesting and exciting experiences. The moment when a child stimulating their own genitals is told not to do that is exactly the moment at which shame announces there's an obstacle to the lovely excitement of it and shuts it down. We have shame around sex because sex is one of the most profoundly interesting and exciting things we can do, and like shame, sex is universal for us—and societal conditioning must find a way to regulate it.

Later in life, both the sexuality and the shame will disappear into the taboo darkness. Sexuality is disallowed, on the surface of our daily life anyway, but shame, the earliest regulator of sexuality vanishes even more deeply into the dark.

Internalized Shaming

And where does the early, innocent, loving curiosity of the child disappear to? What happens to the unselfconscious interest of the child in everybody around them? The natural affect of shame, a primordial biological signal announcing obstacles to excitement and interest gradually becomes the power wielded by our conceptual mind. (For more on this, see my article "[Wrongness](#).”) The

power of shame as an instrument of external conditioning—essential to finding out the rules by which the world plays—gradually becomes internalized.

And for some people—Brody amongst them—this internalization can produce some rather hellish experiences. At some point in his life he realized that *There is something wrong with me* had become a kind of theme song, playing sub-vocally in the background of his consciousness. This sentence represented layer upon layer of the freezing and paralyzing effect of shame gathered in the dark of himself until such time as he turned, with loving and informed support, toward the experience and started to be freshly, newly, interested in it *because it is not how he was born*.

Something happened to bring about this shame-saturation in Brody, and likewise, something healing can happen to change it. But this healing could only happen once he became conscious that *There is something wrong with me* was a condensed expression, a summation of layer upon layer of believed-in shame experiences laid down, close to invisibility in his inner world.

Curiously enough, many of his experiences of shame distress happened as he underwent psychotherapy training, the ongoing shaping and honing of skill and receptivity that may go on the whole lifetime of the professional therapist. But he marveled—perhaps marveling at shame’s remarkable ability to hide itself—that he had been in so many of these gatherings of gifted and profoundly empathic clinicians, of brilliant theoreticians and synthesizers, yet until very recently only rarely had someone noticed that what he struggled with, in these groups of peers is shame. That what he’s struggled with socially all of his life is shame. And most poignantly, that this difficulty is also a doorway to the deepest essence of himself, and the full living of it.

Seeing and Being Seen

I’ll go on telling the story of Brody’s therapy session, as he continued to share it with me. As our therapeutic relationship deepened, it gradually became apparent to him that I was connected with him in a way that was genuine and empathic. In response to my care, something in his own heart began, quietly and shyly, to open; a gentle tide of safety wove back and forth between Brody and myself. He knew intuitively that I was a trustworthy companion with whom he could embark on this ride into the depths of himself, and because of this intuition he began to tell me about some of his inner experiences of being in a room full of people.

He talked about wanting to see—and wanting to be seen. But I began to perceive from the distress that came up for him that *being seen* was problematic for him. In a moment of inspired intuition, I joined him within his experience and asked, “*What do the people seeing you see?*”

I asked Brody if he might turn toward his experience within himself—with him knowing that I would accompany him, that I would be there with him, in this most fearsome and difficult of places. Because he knew already, in his inner half-shadows, what it was like to feel people

looking at him—but he felt too alone, too unbearably alone to be able to safely let the suffering of that experience in and become conscious about it.

Unbearable aloneness is the quintessential territory of shame. Shame is the deepest and most powerful regulator of our lives as social beings. The weapon shame ultimately wields is the risk of feeling separated from the rest of our kind, from the shared social aspect of us which ensures our survival. And, at the far end of the spectrum of possibility, this sharing of relating invites a blossoming of love that is profound and unconditional.

Shame-Bound Separation

The power of shame is the way it makes us feel separate from others. After we've experienced it a few times the merest murmur—of the threat, the *possibility* of it—is enough to make us dance protectively away from the danger with every ounce of energy we have. Once this installation of protections has become habitual and encrusted, and the accumulated layers of the freezing and paralyzing effect of shame have vanished into unconscious darkness, a shame-bound character is the result.

Brody tells me how shameful that sounds to him, as he shares it with me: *'I feel like a shame-bound character.'* Someone uncomfortable around others, someone habitually given to being alone. Someone who finds themselves repeatedly tucking the light of their life under the rug—all because of the risk of shame. And naturally, sadness garlands the shame.

But as he drops down into his heart, and pauses there a while longer, gathered in by the possibility that there is something else in the genesis of this, something of the nature of love, of wisdom, of the light trying to make its way in through the crack in everything, what happens next in the session makes complete sense.

He was able to be with his experience as he responded to my question, as he paused there, not-alone, trembling into new consciousness because he's always wanted to answer this question; *What do the people seeing me see?* But the shadow of the whip of shame had kept him feeling too alone to do so.

They see my shame, he said to me, his voice resonating with emotion.

He could *feel* the shame, a painful nimbus or miasma centered around his head. And for the first time in his conscious life, there was a glimmer of separation between himself, his essence—and the experience of shame. And then there was the marvel of becoming conscious, of essence clarifying itself.

The Gift of Shame

The gift here is of conscious essence becoming clarified, for a moment unhooked from the shame-bound identity which had so long agonized and mystified him. The more obvious levels

of identity—New Jersey-accented, male, vegetarian, prefers scotch to wine, and well past 60—can all readily be seen as distinctly different from essence. But the deeper levels of essence only became apparent to him by diving into the depths where essence has always been unconsciously bound—in this case, by shame.

What is this essence? I ask. He says he can best reply to this question by talking about the times when *he sees* others, and how that is for him. He tells me that the goodness of that seeing reaches its highest peak when he's functioning as a psychotherapist, seeing the other, his client or patient, from a space that feels very much like pure presence.

And, he hastens to add as he shares this with me, this presence includes all the things that happen in his body and mind—the images, energies, thoughts, sensations, and intuitions that pass through him while he's in the role of therapist. All of these are seamlessly noticed by presence, just as presence relaxedly takes in the seen sense of the person he's sitting with.

Universal Presence

You can notice the very same presence for yourself by turning your attention inward, and staying close to your experience (and away from being run by and believing your thoughts and beliefs about your experience). Isn't the seeing, the noticing of these words on screen or page effortlessly served by what we ordinarily call awareness, or consciousness—and isn't that also the essence of what we are? When words and descriptions fall away for a moment, doesn't this essence remain utterly unaltered, completely relaxed, and absolutely free?

Brody says he doesn't talk about this essence very often, especially not to other psychotherapists. He's perfectly clear it's everybody's birthright, but he feels vulnerable talking about it, which means it is potentially the territory of shame. In this particular psychotherapy session, sensing my sincere engagement with him, and feeling my intuitive resonance with what he's shared with me about presence, Brody named his own sense of vulnerability—and then pressed on to talk more with me about the experience of just being presence as a psychotherapist.

A flood of feeling begins to well up in him: how important this has always been to him, how much deep connection happens within himself and with others when this presence, this essence, fully opens and is allowed. He has a sense this is our original ground of being, of love; the ground of being he was born from, born as, and born into.

Resource Present

At this point in the session my eyes, and Brody's eyes are soft and moist; he's done marvelous work in sharing with me the backdrop of resource from which he could turn to the question I asked him earlier, of what people see when he comes into a room.

And it is from this backdrop of resource in presence, in essence, he says that he suddenly and for the first time became conscious of how shame is woven in with his essence, when he replied to

me, *What they see is my shame*. His identity as shame-bound underwent a tectonic alteration; essence, and shame, momentarily separated from each other in an unforgettable instant of liberation.

Oftentimes, psychotherapy is viewed as reparative of dysfunction, or even illness. And there is indeed suffering and distress in the dark places to where this session went. But interwoven in that dark place is a particular kind of light, a light that is so difficult to notice that it has to dance in great intimacy with dreadful uncomfortableness before attention will go there, and liberate the light.

The kind of attention that can go there is accessible to everyone, because it is that same light we all share. Shame seems to sequester this light, for some of us, and the loving, open-hearted, curious attention that is the gift of good psychotherapy goes right up to that ancient enclosure, knocks gently on the door, and asks *May I come in there with you?* The interpersonal bridge is restored and there is the cellular sense of being accompanied, with deep care and curiosity. Then essence, the light of presence can tell the story—and celebrate the dark journey it took to find the light.

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Dr. Glenn Francis is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with a practice in San Rafael, California. He says “All of us have experienced shame, but some of us have had the treasure of ourselves buried beneath it. My great privilege is being a true other supporting those on the journey of unearthing their own treasure.” You can find out more about him at <http://drglennfrancis.com>