

## Melting the Shame Freeze in Disney's "FROZEN"

by Bret Lyon, PhD, SEP, BCC

Recently, Walt Disney Productions has returned to its roots, making amazing movies for children that are powerful and profound enough to be essential viewing for adults as well. While "Inside Out" examined how emotions work in the brain in a truly brilliant way, it had one major flaw: It had no character to represent Shame, which many consider the master emotion—an emotion that affects all the others. There is no such problem with Disney's "Frozen," which deals with shame in such a full and precise way that the entire movie can be seen as a parable of healing shame. "Frozen" is a parable of creating and finally melting the shame freeze.

The movie tells the intense relationship of two sisters, Elsa and Anna. Elsa has a power, which makes her different from other people. She can create cold and ice with her moods and her hands. This is an amazing power, but one she doesn't know how to control. Playing with her sister when they are both children, something goes wrong and she inadvertently wounds her sister seriously. Even though the wound is healed, her parents tell Elsa to hide her power, not use it and not let anyone know about it. She isolates herself in her room, no longer a happy, free little girl. She no longer connects with anyone, even her adoring little sister.

Faced with a power she doesn't know how to control, Elsa is held responsible for hurting her sister. She is not comforted or told it was an accident. She is not given ways to cope and keep this relationship, vital to both young girls. Just as a real child can be punished for lashing out at a sibling with angry taunts or punches—not helped to find a better way to express anger. And not helped to see that anger can be part of a much more complex relationship.

Shame is born of difference. If you are different from others in some way, and hide the difference in order to fit in, shame is born. You are no longer able to be yourself in society. Shame can cut you off even from those you love. By telling her to hide her difference, Elsa's parents shame her, even without meaning to, just as much of the shaming parents do to their children is inadvertent, even coming from a misplaced desire to help them navigate a complex social world. "Don't let anyone know. Don't let anyone see what makes you different." These words can only lead to one conclusion in the child: "There's something wrong with me. If I'm truly myself, I will harm others or they will harm me. I need to hide."

Her well-meaning father makes the very dangerous and typical mistake of confusing control with repression. He gives her gloves to cover her hands. Instead of accepting and playing with her power and perhaps growing in control through trial and error, she is learning to repress and hide it. Her father gives her the mantra "Conceal it. Don't feel it. Don't let it show." That is the recipe for shame. Shame thrives on secrecy. Now her power, which is unique and could be beautiful, is bound with shame. Instead of feeling the pleasure of being powerful and unique, Elsa only feels shame. She cannot even connect with her own sister, who is constantly reaching out to her. She gives up the most important relationship of her young life.

Elsa's power to create ice is both beautiful and dangerous. Indeed, the movie opens with men harvesting ice, speaking of it as beautiful and dangerous. This is the metaphor of the movie. Originally, Elsa uses her power to create joy and beauty, to play with and please her sister. When things go wrong, her parents interfere in exactly the wrong way—just as so many

parents do. What was beautiful becomes dangerous—and shameful. Now the ice takes on a different meaning and emotional valence.

Now, when Elsa is upset, she lashes out with ice. Her special power gets out of control. It becomes a metaphor for the emotion of anger. Anger is our most mobilizing emotion—when controlled and channeled. It gets us to overcome obstacles and get things done. Mahatma Gandhi tells us that when he was kicked off a train in South Africa for riding in the “White” section, he sat for a long time, trying to decide what to do with his anger. He ended up organizing a boycott of trains and busses that began to make a real dent in apartheid. Sue Johnson, the esteemed founder of Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples, says that if it weren’t for her anger, “I would be a hairdresser in a small town somewhere in England.”

Anger uncontrolled, however, can have dire consequences. So nature has given us an emotion designed to control anger, to lower it as soon as it starts. This emotion is shame. Shame is designed to keep us out of trouble with society. And anger is the emotion that can get us in the most trouble. Shame, according to Sylvan Tomkins, is designed to bind with other emotions to lower affect. I believe the emotion that shame is primarily designed to bind with and lower is anger.

Finally, Elsa’s secret is revealed to all. Humiliated and shunned, called a monster by people who are scared and uninformed, she goes off on her own. This is indeed a public shaming in the truest sense. Elsa feels herself misunderstood, reviled, exiled, banished from her land and her people, the most extreme form of shaming. She bolts, leaves society—and, for the first time, she is able to be powerful and free. She uses her immense power to create her own beautiful ice world. Her song “Let It Go” is a paragon of self-expression and power. It is not surprising that it has become a hit and is sung everywhere. It rocks us, wakes us up and makes us feel powerful.

However, Elsa’s freedom comes at a terrible cost. In order to be herself, she has chosen isolation. She can only be herself when she is completely alone. Now, the ice becomes a metaphor for keeping people away, for becoming “cold at heart.” Even her sister cannot reach her anymore. The ice now becomes a metaphor for shame. “I will be who I am, even if I am shunned by society. They will never accept me, I can’t fit in, so I will create my own world.” One thinks of Paul Simon’s line “I am a rock, I am an island. And a rock never cries, and an island feels no pain.” Nevertheless, this is certainly better than the hiding and cowering. She is alone, but she is free. As we all face the demands of society and the pressure to fit it, we can appreciate the joy she now feels.

Then her sister, who has pursued her, not wanting her to be lost in shame and isolation, tells her that the frozen world she has created with her power is still out there. She has frozen her city. As John Donne says, “No man is an island.” She can’t simply be alone with her power and not hurt others.

When we are in shame, we freeze inside. We cannot see others. We cannot receive from them, or see how our actions are affecting them. But we are still part of a social network and we are still connected, even though we don’t feel it. Elsa is now reminded of the effect of her special power and sinks into despair. She cannot simply choose shame and isolation, but she cannot see any alternative.

Finally, pursued and attacked for her difference, Elsa is almost killed by the most dangerous and difficult character in the movie. Hans, the youngest of 12 boys, is willing to do anything

to become someone important. He is devious and fools everyone. Hans, suffering from bullying and lack of prospects, has lost all sense of shame. There is no sense of shame or decency to keep him in line. Because he lacks any “healthy shame,” he has a very easy time fooling others about his intentions. His final assault on Elsa begins with shaming. “Your sister is dead,” he lies. “She died in my arms. It was your fault. You killed her.” His final assault, with a sword, seems out of place in the movie, since it is shame that is killing Elsa and Hans’ shaming words could finish the job.

The consequences are also severe for Anna, Elsa’s little sister. She is deprived of company, left alone and isolated in a large castle. We see her singing “Do You Want to Build a Snowman?” outside of Elsa’s locked door, year after year, getting no response except “Go away.” Anna, however, doesn’t fully internalize the emotion of shame. While, like real children, she remains confused, she never reaches the essential conclusion: “Elsa doesn’t want to play with me, and I’m all alone, because there is something wrong with me.” She touches on that conclusion, but never quite reaches it.

The consequences of this are interesting. Anna maintains her total innocence and sense of power in spite of the situation. She falls in love with the first man she meets. And she assumes she can do anything, no matter how difficult or dangerous. Rather than freezing, as Elsa has in response to her isolation and abandonment, Anna has actually developed a lack of “healthy shame,” which is an awareness and acceptance of human limitations. If toxic shame is a state of freeze, shown so clearly in Elsa, then healthy shame is a cautionary pause, a quality of checking things out, looking before you leap. Anna can’t see difficulties and danger when they are clearly before her. She is taken in by a very dangerous social climber. While her lack of limitation is very charming in the movie, that level of naïveté can produce terrible consequences in real life in terms of who people choose as friends, business associates or spouses.

The theme of not seeing the painful truth is reinforced by the character of Olaf, a snowman, brought magically to life by Elsa, who longs for and dreams of basking in the sun in summer. Charming and magical—but potentially self-destructive.

The theme of accepting human limitations is brought home by the wonderful, humorous song “He’s a Bit of a Fixer Upper” culminating in the line “We’re all a bit of a fixer upper.” A strong, if comic, statement that we are loveable even if imperfect. That we deserve love and are basically good and loving, even with our flaws and “fixer-upper” nature is one of the major themes of “Frozen.” The other is that we need to embrace, utilize, control and channel our power and our strong feelings. In that way, we can melt the shame freeze and live fully, freely and lovingly in the moment.

“Frozen” has one more profound twist. John Bowlby, the father of Attachment Theory, has stated that he really wanted to use the word “love” instead of “attachment,” but was afraid other psychologists would simply laugh at him should he name his important work “Love Theory.” Bowlby believed that humans are designed for connection with other people, from birth to death. It is only in connection that we can thrive. Elsa, in trying to get Anna to leave her alone, has inflicted a potentially fatal wound—her rejection has frozen Anna’s heart. Soon Anna will freeze entirely. She must be saved.

First, “Frozen” presents the fairy tale version of a cure: Anna’s frozenness can be cured by “love’s true kiss.” The movie goes on to disabuse us of this fairy tale notion. First, we find

out that Anna's one and only was only using her. Far from kissing her, he is only waiting for her to die. Second, her real love, who is racing down the mountain to kiss her and cure her, never gets the chance. Instead, Anna shows us what true love really is. She illustrates what Olaf, the snowman, defines as love a little earlier in the movie: the willingness to put someone else's needs ahead of your own.

As her true love is running towards her, Anna sees her sister threatened by the deceitful Hans. She runs away from her lover and towards her sister, getting in the way of the fateful blow from his sword. In a perfect culmination to the movie, she freezes solid at that moment and the sword does not harm her. Elsa, seeing Anna's frozen body, finally allows her grief to overcome her. In that moment, her grief takes over. Her grief breaks through her shame, which has kept her so bound. As she cries, she is able to see her sister's love clearly. She realizes that Anna has sacrificed herself.

Anna's heart is unfrozen by her own love for her sister. And Elsa's heart also melts. She is finally able to receive her sister's love, which she has rejected for so long out of fear that she would hurt her sister and a sense that she is bad and destructive—a true fear-shame bind. Now, basking in the warm relationship that is the essence of the movie, Elsa finally sees the way to control her power to freeze. It is love.

But, the movie makes clear, it is love that leads to understanding and caring and encouraging, not the fear-bound, shame dominated, ignorant love that her parents mistakenly gave to her—which focuses on what others might think.

Anna's love is accepting and puts the genuine good of the other person first. It is not bound by fear and shame. It is not concerned about what others might think. It creates and values expansion and acceptance, not contraction and hiding. This is the love that Anna has been trying to give her throughout the movie.

This expansive and accepting love—attachment, connection—is the cure for shame. Elsa's heart softens. Her shame melts. Having finally taken in the love that her shame would not let her have, she realizes that she can control her awesome power with love. She melts all the frozenness she has caused and replaces it with beautiful ice sculptures that are controlled and joyful. And her embrace helps melt and cure Anna as well. And she gives Olaf, the snowman, the one creature who cannot afford to melt, his own personal cloud, so he can enjoy the summer he has longed for. Everything is now in balance. The doors to the castle and the city, which have long been closed, are now open. Warmth and sun replace the frozenness, confusion and disconnection of shame.

