

Shame, Contempt and Politics

By Bret Lyon, PhD, SEP, BCC

On a recent trip to Canada, my wife and I were struck by how many Canadians asked us, “What in the world is going on with your election?” I really didn’t know how to answer.

Since returning home, I have become obsessed with the election. I spend hours each day reading the news. Each time I hope it will somehow calm my extraordinary anxiety, but each time I find myself becoming more anxious. I try to quit cold turkey, but I soon find myself back on my computer, reading the news once again. I am reminded of people who can’t turn away from a terrible accident. But this accident feels like it involves me directly.

In looking at my obsession, I realize that I have not just a personal, but a professional interest. I am a student of shame and shaming. And here is shame and shaming as I have seldom seen in American politics—not since the days of Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. But I was much younger then and unable to see what was happening through any lens but confusion and terror. Now I can use shame theory to try to cast some light on what is happening.

Toxic shame is an incredibly painful emotion. It is toxic to our nervous system, toxic to our sense of self. It is very hard to stay with the felt sense that “there is something terribly, horribly wrong with me.” Shame can be expressed in phrases like: “I’m a loser,” “I’m bad,” “I’m worthless.” Shame also provides an amazing, coherent narrative. It can explain everything. “It’s all my fault.” “I deserve it.” “I made this mess.” If this message is drummed into us by other people, or even by very difficult circumstances, we may react to it through one of the most primitive defenses—projection. To avoid the feeling of shame, we may attack others. “It’s not me who’s bad, it’s them!” Another person or group—or many other people or groups—can be singled out and condemned. The intensity of the shame is thus taken off us and shamelessly placed on someone else.

Thus, contempt, or the looking down on others, can be a way of shifting the painful spotlight off of our own flaws. Gershen Kaufman calls contempt “a strategy of the powerless.” Kaufman explains, “The most essential requirement in the internal development of contempt as a defense against shame is experience with a parent already skillful in the modeling of contempt.” Kaufman suggests that a child who lacks protection and feels shame can identify with a contemptuous parent and also become contemptuous of others. The more effectively the parent uses contempt as a way to avoid shame, the more likely the child is to become contemptuous as well.

A client, bright and accomplished, complained to me that he had few friends. “They just don’t live up to my expectations. It just doesn’t seem worth the trouble.” As we explored this, he talked about his mother, who used to compare him to other children and always commented on how much smarter and more creative he was. She often remembered that he was walking at an early age and compared him to her friends’ child who was still “pooping in his pants.” He was aware that his mother had used him to build herself up.

His mother had always blamed his father for their divorce. When he asked her once whether she had any part in what went wrong, she answered, “I can't go there.” To my client, it was revelatory. As long as his mother could just blame his father, she didn't have to look into the deep well of shame inside her. If she had been able to look at her part in the divorce, we could say that she had “healthy shame,” which includes a sense of limitations and an ability to clearly assess what happened and take responsibility for one's own behavior.

Just as a parent can model contempt for a shamed child, so a political leader can model contempt for people who have been severely shamed in childhood and may feel shamed and marginalized by society. Rather than experience the pain of feeling less than others, followers can experience the excitement of feeling better than others. As deep and wide-reaching as the shame, so can the contempt be deep and far-reaching. One can become contemptuous of many aspects of the larger society. Driven by the need to keep the feelings of shame at bay and away from themselves, people can exult in their contempt and cynicism—finding a curious kind of gratification in it. And, just as shame can be a powerful, coherent narrative, so can contempt. “They're all losers.” “It's all rigged.” “Those (fill in the blank) are dishonest, they're crooks, they're lazy, they're just no damn good.” “They caused this.” “I'd still have my job if it wasn't for them.”

When I hear a politician call a political opponent “the devil” or say directly to the opponent's face, during a national debate, “You have hate in your heart”—I have to wonder who he is really talking to. What is he trying to excise from his own being, from his own heart? Or what is he trying to evoke and exploit in his supporters? When we hear chants of “Lock her up” or “Kill the pigs,” we can imagine the deep sense of shame and powerlessness that those expressions may cover over.

Not only is the shame, powerlessness and isolation avoided, but there is a deep sense of connection to the other shamers—a sense of belonging to a group. In this way, the sense of shame is buried in shared righteousness. We are now united, right and good, the group believes. And we live in solidarity with many other angry, disgruntled, contemptuous people. What is wrong is now on the outside, to be scorned and shamed—even mistreated. This is the power and danger of a mob, venting “righteous” anger against someone who is “wrong” and “bad.” For the moment, at least, whatever they say or do is justified. There is a complete lack of healthy shame, no awareness of oneself and others as valuable and flawed human beings, deserving of respect and consideration.

In extreme cases, runaway contempt can cause people to lose sight of another's humanity. Even their right to exist. This has led to extreme behavior, in Germany and many other places.

There can be a slippery slope towards increasingly destructive rhetoric and behavior if we indulge in the empty gratification of contempt. American democracy is being tested, as it has been many times before, and, so far, it survives. Unfortunately, contempt is often met by contempt, and the country can be more and more polarized through the contagion of contempt. The solution, which is difficult and requires much introspection and

compassion, is to somehow get below the contempt and to bring our awareness to, understand, and begin to counter to the underlying shame.

If, as Kaufman suggests, shame comes from “the breaking of the interpersonal bridge,” the solution is to find a way to rebuild that bridge. Not the false connection of shameless pseudo-righteousness that mobs can experience, but the true connection that derives from honoring our shared humanity. We are all human. We are all flawed. And we are all deserving of love and respect.

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