



## THE START OF MY JOURNEY OUT OF SHAME



by Carolyn Spring

*Shame.* It's a familiar word and yet the more I think about it, the stranger it becomes. *What does it mean? Where does it come from? How does it go? What is the point of it? Why does it even exist?*

I'd never even considered it before therapy. It was just a run-of-the-mill emotion: one that I'd heard about, but never (so I thought) really experienced. I could grasp it at the level of 'embarrassment'—realising you've been wearing your top inside out all day—but beyond that I hadn't given it much thought. It was like hydrogen: all around me, part of my very being, and yet invisible and odourless. I had never paid it any attention whatsoever.

Part of the problem was that I didn't know how to do emotions *at all*. I could name a few, but I was unaware that I was so emotionally illiterate. Like not being able to speak Japanese, my deficit didn't occur

to me except very occasionally. Not for one moment did I think I was a captive of shame: I lived in an invisible prison.

I sat in that very first therapy session, tense, awkward, feeling like I was playing a game of chess and conscious that I didn't know the rules. It felt like a dangerous game to be playing, but I didn't know why. My very existence seemed at stake.

Shame was there in the room from the very start, this 'thing' in the space between us, black but formless and empty, and ever-shifting. It held us apart, stopped us connecting, kept me away from her. It glued all over me like sticky, dripping tar. Everything about me felt wrong in that first session, but I didn't know that was shame. I thought it was just the way it was, just the way it had always been, just the way it would always be.



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Coming for therapy—looking for help, to change—is a strange thing to do when shame has shaped your life. Because what help is there?—*You don't deserve any.* What change can there be?—*Surely none when you are intrinsically defective.* Then why come?

Even here shame has a hand: I think I came to therapy, that very first time, to placate other people: those around me fed up with my breakdown, my broken-down way of relating, my mood swings and dissociation and profound suicidality. Shame, about who I was and how I was acting, was my primary motivation in seeking therapy. Not because I believed it would help—I was beyond repair, and undeserving of the help—but so that they would at least see that I was trying.

Now this woman sits here looking at me and I don't know how to be. I know that all of me, here, now and always, is wrong. I am filth. I am broken. I am a dirty, damaged, defective, sub-human. That is who I am. And I don't think it: it just is. It just always has been. *This is me. I am shame.*

She asks me why I've come, what I'm hoping to get out of counselling and dutifully I tell her what I think she wants to hear. Shame navigates a course for me along the downstream of acceptability. She asks me why I have come *now*, what has prompted it, and I tell her a little of my breakdown and she listens. But she *listens*. I've not known listening like

it before and I feel like a layer of my skin has been peeled away and I start to worry that she's seeing me from the inside. I have the sense, and it steadily grows, that she's listening to more than my words. She's listening to *me*. It's like she's trying to find me, and pull me apart like Lego, to see how I'm made. She's listening to what I'm not saying. She's listening to my body. I feel utterly, and shamefully, naked.

*I have to leave* comes the panicked thought in my head, because it feels like she is on top of me and I need some space and I didn't think it would be like this and it's all too much. Panic in my throat and jiggling my left leg up and down, and to make things worse she glances down at it, watches it for a few seconds and then looks back at me with her head to one side, silently enquiring. *She's noticed.* I don't know why my leg is jiggling and I don't know what it means. I don't know why she's pointing it out with her eyes. I don't know what any of this means or how to be, or not be.

I feel *ashamed*.

Suddenly I can name it. Like it's just taken form, and it's welling up from within, a geyser ready to burst. Hot and flashing it comes from within me. *Shame. Shame. Shame.* I want the ground to open up and for me to fall into it and then the earth to cover me over, so that I can't be seen any more. So that I won't exist. So that I won't be this twisted, damaged, evil, rotten nastiness that is me.



I have just told her that I was abused as a child, and I'm getting these flashbacks and ... *no, no, that's enough, don't tell her about what happens at night.* I don't think I've spoken it aloud in quite this way before and the shame scalds all over me but there's nothing in her face where there should be disgust. I look for the curl of the lip, the squinting of the eyes, the flaring of the nostrils—something to denote how she feels, but it's not there. I don't know what's there. I can't read it. She is inscrutable.

I feel ashamed that I can't tell what she's thinking of me.

There's a thump on the inside of me, drums in the deep, a cavernous, chilling emptiness and the shame just fills the space. *What am I doing here, sat with this woman, a woman that I don't know, a counsellor? What am I doing?* And there's something about her that makes me want to stay even though everything in me also wants to run. It's like my shame is a sonic boom and she's absorbing it like egg boxes and it's not echoing starkly back at me. This is a new experience. I don't understand it.

I am overrun with opposites. I want to leave and I want to stay. I want to tell her more, and already I've said too much. I want her to help me, and I know that she mustn't.

I feel like I ought to warn her: that in working with me she will be contaminated. And she will hate me. She

will find me out as the fraud that I am. She will peer into the darkness of my soul and glimpse the horror of the badness that is me. She will smell my rankness.

*So what is the point in starting work with her if all that lies ahead is rejection?*

These are the thoughts that churn through me in the moments between words. *Why am I here? What am I doing? What do I say next?*

But that first meeting changed the course of my life. It was the start of nine and a half years of therapy with her. I saw other therapists too, but she was a constant.

Because 'I can help you,' she said, at the close of that first session. She was looking intently into my eyes, almost beyond them and into me. I was terrified but entranced. I had told her that I had been abused as a child—the most shameful, shocking thing I could ever imagine telling another human being—and she said, 'I can help you.' Just like that. Confident, but not brash. Quiet and calm and meaningful. And I believed her.

It was the moment that I first dared to hope.

Shame had told me that there was no hope: I was intrinsically defective. It was not about trauma (which I didn't understand) or behaviours or choices. It wasn't even about mental health or emotions or skills. For me at that time,



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my symptoms and my experiences were only and always a direct result of the badness that was me. I didn't have any other way of framing it. I had had a breakdown because I was bad. I couldn't cope because I was defective. I wanted to kill myself because it was the only way to be free of my ugliness.

I was puerile and pathetic and needy and wrong. I hated myself with unadulterated loathing. When I self-harmed, I was acting out the violence upon myself of sheer hatred: I seethed out my anger in scars.

But I never once called it all shame. I never thought it had a name. I thought my way of being—powerless, incapable, rejected, unloved—was as native to me as the colour of my eyes.

In that first session, I didn't say, 'I need help with shame' because I didn't know that shame was the problem. Shame told me that *I* was the problem. And then was the moment: 'I can help you.' And later: 'I think we can work well together,' with gentle, placid acceptance.

I was surprised that she had been weighing me up. I thought she took on

clients like me out of pity. It dawned on me that she actually intended working with me, because she thought she could effect change. In *me*. Even in *me*.

*Maybe she really can help me*, I dared to think. I hadn't bargained for this. Just go and meet with this woman you've been sent to for counselling, and be good, and say the right things, and don't say the wrong things, and do as she says, and be polite, and try not to let her see who you really are ... That had been my remit from myself.

I walked up the High Street afterwards. *I can help you*. It trilled in my ears. Somehow from her brain to mine had wafted a fluttering of hope. That things could be different. *I can help you*. She spoke of change and possibilities and a different future. *I can help you*.

That was the start of my journey out of shame. I didn't know it at the time. I had no idea that I was its prisoner. And it started with someone believing they could help me, and thus believing that I was worth helping at all. •

