



HOW SHAME SAVED MY LIFE



By Carolyn Spring

What if shame is nothing to be ashamed of ... but instead is the hero in our story?

Even as I write it, my head is twisting inside-out, upside-down to get used to the idea. But it's something I've come to firmly believe is true, no matter how counter-intuitive it may feel.

I grew up as shame incarnate. I was bad-that was plain to see. I was beyond hope. And I knew that I didn't fit in, that no one liked me, that no one would ever love me. The constant slurry of self-disgust filling my guts was as normal as my daily nausea. I literally found myself sickening.

How can someone grow up to feel so out of place in the world, so wrong, so bad, so unwanted?

Unfortunately, I'm not alone. Not only does active abuse make us feel intrinsically toxic, but emotional neglect can do so as well. After all, what is more shameful than not being loved by the very person who gave birth to you and on whose benevolence you are totally dependent for your survival?

At school I didn't get on easily with other kids. I didn't understand them; they certainly didn't understand me. I felt like I ought to keep my distance; I assumed that they didn't like me, and a lot of the time I was right. I saw the cool kids, the nice kids, and the popular kids and they had an ease about them, even about the way they moved their bodies. I felt by contrast like a malfunctioning robot, moving jerkily through life, failing to compute the right thing to say or the right thing to do.



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By the time I started therapy in my early thirties, I was sick to death of my shame. I was sick to death of being me. I just hated myself. Because everything in me was wrong. I was tethered up within myself with shamefulness.

So therapy didn't start well when the issue of shame was first raised. *Oh no, I thought, she's noticed. And here's something else I'm crap at. I'm full of shame, and she's seen it. Something else that is wrong with me.*

I couldn't understand how other people could live without shame. I couldn't understand why they didn't cringe at the sound of their own voice, or gag at the sight of their own reflection. I couldn't understand why some were happy to be the centre of attention - even quietly at

the centre, not in a raucous, narcissistic way. They didn't mind people talking to them. They didn't mind people noticing them. I couldn't think of anything worse.

And I was stuck. I had one great dream: to be a writer. It involved being noticed. I wanted to throw up at the mere thought of it.

So, shamefully, I began to explore in therapy why I was so ashamed. But the more we talked about it, the worse it became. All it seemed to do was point out how crap and shameful I was. It increased my sense of inadequacy. I despaired of ever feeling any different.

And then.

Sometimes, breakthroughs come at the most unexpected times and in colours and flavours we couldn't have anticipated. This breakthrough came in the form of a sliver of understanding about the role of shame in our survival. It was such a distinct, inside-exploding moment: a completely different way of looking at the problem, and even of looking at myself. All was not lost after all.

I understood for the first time that shame had kept me alive.

The feelings of shame, the reactions in my body of shame, were not evidence



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of my shamefulness; rather they were unconscious attempts to navigate a world in which people attacked and hurt me. If I huddle small into a ball, if I slump my shoulders and avert my gaze, if I take the blame and submit, perhaps I will survive.

Shame accomplished two things: it ensured that I was angry only at myself, rather than at my abusers, thereby containing my rage and keeping me safe from the consequences of expressing that anger. And it explained the world to me, in a way that prepared me for further maltreatment - I was bad; therefore I could expect to be treated badly; therefore I would be prepared for the next, inevitable wave of hatred and malevolence from others.

It was brilliant, simply brilliant. What better way to survive continual childhood abuse? What better way to keep myself as safe as possible, so that I could live to fight another day?

The problem was that I had become stuck. I hadn't moved on to *fight another day*.

I was stuck in the freeze posture of shame, anticipating the next blow and bracing myself to withstand it. By continually hating myself, I put myself in a state of readiness, anticipating the hatred of others, so that it would never come as a

shock when I was rejected, or bullied, or criticised, or abused.

At the same time, my hatred-habituated brain interpreted the actions and motives of others as consistent with my view of myself: they must hate me, because I hate myself; they must be out to hurt me, because I deserve to be hurt; they can't want to befriend me, because I have only enemies. I interpreted every approach by others through this lens of shame, in a way that validated my shame-based view of myself, but which led to a deeply lonely and isolated existence.

This overpowering, nauseating shame that I lived with was trying to keep me safe. It was an attempt to submit and take the blame, to minimise the pain. It was an attempt to huddle small and still, so as not to provoke my attackers. It was trying to protect me.

It was like dawn bursting on a mountainside. The thought occurred to me - novel, fantastical - that maybe there wasn't anything actually, truly wrong with me after all. Maybe that was just a belief that had served to help me through the abuse. Maybe, *just maybe*, I could see my beliefs about my unworthiness, my rottenness, my badness, my non-worth, as attempts to survive rather than reflections of reality.



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Oh, oh, oh ...

What if this were true?

What if I were not bad, incorrigible, evil, pathetic, worthless? What if my abusers were, and I was just taking on their worldview, subscribing to their ideology, as a way of surviving a world where they held the power? Like citizens in a dictatorship, where it's better to bow your head and hail the evil empire, than to rise against it, while you have no power?

Even thinking these things made me nervous. *What if they know what I'm thinking ...?* Such was my terror, my submission to their regime, that even years later, as an adult, I felt clammy dread at the prospect of my rebellion.

Shame made so much sense in the light of this revelation. I *had* to be the bad one. I *had* to take the blame. I *had* to bow my head, and scrape along the floor, in obsequious servility. It was the only way to survive.

But now ... but now ...

It felt like, for the first time in my life, I was standing up and straightening my spine. I still heard my internal voices, telling me it wasn't safe, that I would get hurt, that I would get shot down. *Who do you think you are, to think that you're not bad? Who do you think you are, to think you're not to blame?*

But for the first time, rather than believing those voices, I began to see them as attempts to warn me, to keep me safe. I'm not bad, I replied, with a glint of joy in my voice. I'm not bad - THEY are. I'm not wrong - THEY are. I have nothing to be ashamed of.

Oh, what a thought! Oh, if that were true!

And over the intervening years, I've learned to believe that it *is* true. I took the blame while it was adaptive to do so. I refuse to take it any more.

I'm no longer ashamed of being ashamed.

