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Racism, Shame, and the Complexity of Human Nature

Martha Moore-Keish, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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One photograph: a luminous dark body curved in upon itself, hands pressed to head. One photograph, chosen in haste and shown as part of a recorded lecture in theology class this spring. That's all it took to bring me face to face with my own racism, and to trigger a torrent of shame.

I offer the following reflections not to focus attention on myself, but to explore one particular experience of shame as a clue to what white privileged people might need to learn, in our bodies, about what it means to be human. I offer this as a testimony to what I am learning, dimly, in fragments, in my own body, about the pain we have inflicted on the bodies of others. I offer this as a snapshot of how shame might be an opening to the healing of racism.

For the past 17 years, I have co-taught the two-semester introductory course in theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. Every time I teach on theological anthropology, I draw on a conceptual framework that I picked up long ago from Serene Jones to talk about the complexity of the human condition. There are four basic stories of humanity, I say to students, and all four are simultaneously true:

- we are created good in the image of God
- we are distorted (individually and collectively) by sin
- we are forgiven and redeemed

- we are drawn toward the future in hope for a day when all creation will be made new

When we ponder the mystery of what it means to be human, it is vital to attend to all these dimensions to avoid major pitfalls in dealing with other humans. If we do not affirm that *all* are made good, in God's image, we can invent division and hierarchy among different groups of humans, some imagined as more valuable than others. If we affirm that we are all made in the image of God but fail to grapple with the reality of sin, we do not tell the truth about the way that we wound each other, ourselves, and the world that God so loves. If we confront the reality of sin but do not also proclaim God's forgiveness and transforming grace, then we have no hope. If we affirm that we are forgiven now but do not also announce the eschatological promise that God is not done yet, then we can lapse into complacency. We are complicated, fragile, wondrous, beloved, and unfinished creatures. Our theological anthropology needs to say at least this much.

This is what I sought to remind students back in February, as we approached the week on the doctrine of sin. In my introductory recorded video, I repeated these four dimensions of humanity, each with an associated image to provoke reflection:

- an early mosaic of Adam and Eve in the garden (creation)
- a photograph of a (male) human being curved in upon himself (sin)
- a painting of the prodigal son welcomed home (forgiveness)
- a painting of the peaceable kingdom (eschatological hope)

As you read this, you may already suspect the problem that emerged. But I did not. Not yet.

Friday night, I recorded and posted the video, so that all the materials for the coming week would be available for students working ahead over the weekend.

Tuesday morning, as soon as I turned on my computer, I discovered an email from a student naming the obvious racism in the images I had chosen as they were associated with the four stories of humanity: the images of Adam and Eve, the prodigal son and his father, and the little child in the peaceable kingdom all were portrayed as white. The only human being of color in the set of images was in the portrayal of sin. I had presented to my students the lie that white people represent goodness and forgiveness, while a Black person represents sin. Sick to my stomach, I could only shake my head in horror at my own blindness—my own sin.

The student raised other concerns about the class as well, but it was the juxtaposition of images that was the trigger for their rightful pain and anger.

That day and the days immediately following were a blur of conversations, confessions, and attempts to begin the long work of repair for the damage done. Nights did not bring much sleep. Over and over I replayed what I had done.

Why did I choose these images?

Why did I not see the implications?

*I have used these same pictures before, and no one said anything . . .
Imposter.*

After careful consultation with colleagues, I posted a public apology and promised to try to do better. I listened as students described their pain. I tried, and failed, to focus attention on the harm I had done, rather than fixating on what I was feeling. Yet could it be that what I was feeling was itself an important clue to the harm I had done?

The next day was Ash Wednesday. Lent came right on time.

Almost immediately, I named for myself what I was experiencing with one word, in capital letters: SHAME.

How could I have done this? How could I not have seen what my student saw? My grandfather spent a night in jail in 1930 to protect a Black woman from being lynched after she killed my five-year old aunt in a hit-and-run accident. My father worked in Selma in 1965 to register Black citizens to vote in the days following "Bloody Sunday." My parents enrolled me in the first racially integrated preschool in the city of Tallahassee. I had been raised to protest all forms of racial discrimination. I knew better. I *knew* better.

My knowing did not go deep enough.

As I wrestled with shame, I sought wisdom from Brené Brown, who has spent years doing research on this emotion. Brown says that shame has two big tapes: "You are never good enough" and "Who do you think you are?" These are common tapes in my mental rotation, as I think they are for many women, including those in Black, AAPI, Latinx, and white communities.[1] These refrains reinforce my deeply held fear that in spite of the fact that I am trying my best, someone is going to find out that I am really inadequate to the task. I know these messages are harmful to me and they contradict my own theological teaching — that I am also good, made in God's image, and am forgiven, justified, and free. The day I was confronted with my own racism, the Shame Tapes were all I could hear. I curved in upon myself, like the image I had chosen to represent sin.

Never good enough. Who do you think you are? These loops stand in stark contrast to what scholars like Kerry Connelly describe as the story that many white Americans tell ourselves: that we are basically "good" people.[2] "Good people" do not intend to harm others. They mean well. More insidiously, as Connelly describes it, good people are "nice and never disruptive, and they value peace and comfort and the status quo." [3] This tape, too, is well played in my head; though I rarely if ever describe myself as a "good person," I often say it about others, to highlight their positive intentions even if a particular behavior was harmful. "They're good people," I might say, "They did not mean any harm."

This monolithic insistence on the goodness of the race one identifies with is obviously problematic, for many reasons. It reduces "goodness" to "niceness," which has gotten twisted into "whiteness." It confuses fundamental human value with nondisruptive human behavior

that conforms to the status quo. In addition, it fundamentally masks the complexity of who we are as human beings—yes, created good in God’s image, but also deeply warped into patterns of behavior that harm ourselves, one another, and the earth.

Despite Connelly’s focus on the tendency to see myself as “good,” on that day in February, and on the days following, it was hard for me to see any kind of “goodness” in myself. Instead, it was the shame refrain: “I am bad.”

This is where Brené Brown focuses attention in her own research on shame. She points out that shame says, “I *am* bad,” while guilt says, “I *did something* bad.” Shame becomes a totalizing narrative enclosing a person in an identity as “bad,” while guilt focuses on a particular action as bad. Brown urges people to move from shame, which immobilizes, to guilt, which can motivate a person to change and do better.

Brown has much wisdom here, rooted in years of research with people whose narratives of shame have prevented them from thriving as healthy human beings. Shame can be debilitating, even deadly. Too often, shame is connected with sexuality, particularly women’s sexuality. Young women are particularly vulnerable to being “shamed” for the way they dress or for engaging in sexual behavior. Shame in this sphere of life is surely problematic, reinforcing unhealthy views of gender and sexuality that need to be healed.

Shame is also destructive in the world of addiction. My friend Jenn Carlier effectively documents the power of shame in her work on addiction and atonement theory. “The paradox of having some sense of agency and yet feeling compelled to keep drinking creates a space for the tremendous shame and self-loathing that perpetuate [drug] use. [One writer] says of her behavior, ‘I’m sick. I’m responsible.’ It is this combination of being sick and yet feeling the shame of moral failure that makes it so difficult for those struggling with addiction to get help.”[4] In the case of people suffering from addiction disorders, the experience of shame often becomes the driver for continuing to abuse substances, and the continuing abuse then feeds the cycle of shame. The constant reminder of being “never good enough” keeps people mired in patterns of self-destruction, preventing them from seeking help.

Shame can clearly be destructive, especially when it is imposed by an external community that repeats the messages, “You are not good enough. You are a failure. Who do you think you are?” When these are the only messages that we hear, we hide from others. We curve in on ourselves, refusing to admit our need for help. It is especially problematic among marginalized communities, who often internalize messages of shame for “failing” to live up to societal expectations of financial success, behavior, physical appearance, or ability. This kind of shaming is not what I want to endorse.

Yet I am convinced that the shame I experienced taught me something vital about myself, and about race and racism. While Brené Brown advocates moving from shame to guilt, I think that at least in some cases, and especially for those of us who carry privilege, shame is what we must face. Shame as a deep-seated, embodied encounter with my own failing is still the best word I can summon to describe what I experienced, and it revealed something I need to know.

To call this simply “guilt” would be to reduce the problem to a single incident, an example of an action that I needed to confess, make amends for, and move on from. “Shame,” on the other hand, signals the depth and endurance of a problem in which I am implicated, for which I am partially responsible, and from which I cannot completely extricate myself. In this case, shame welled up as I confronted my own racist entanglement. It is precisely shame that reveals an important truth about who I am—and who we are. Wrestling with painful shame offered me a dim awareness of the horrific pain endured by members of the Black community—including the real pain of my own student, which I had exacerbated by my thoughtlessness thoughtlessness.[5]

Further, shame does not have to immobilize us. A recent *Rabbis for Human Rights* essay offers this insight into the positive side of shame: “A remarkable teaching in the Babylonian Talmud (Nedarim 20a) reads: a person who has no shame, such a person’s ancestors did not stand at Sinai. I don’t read this as genealogical research, but as ethical teaching. To be heirs of those who stood at Sinai, to stand ourselves at the foot of the mountain, means not only to affirm identity. It means to take responsibility.”[6] Shame then, rather than immobilizing us, can ignite responsibility.

I am starting to think that “shame” is another way of naming what some Christians have called a deep awareness of original sin: the truth that human beings are infected by inexplicable tendencies to harm ourselves, others, and the world around us, to turn away from the holy and loving Mystery we call “God.” In my case, shame shocked me into recognition of my own complicity in the sin of racism, as well as offering a tiny hint of the destructive kind of shame experienced by Black people and other marginalized persons. Shame, in at least this case, can be an engine for empathy and change.

Of course, this is not the end of the story, but just a beginning. Much as I hate to admit it, I fully expect to run up against shame again, to be faced with my failings again and again, to feel that sickness in the pit of my stomach. I hope, however, that having named it this spring, I will be better equipped to acknowledge it for the revelation it is, and to hear the Shame Tape not as a single voice in my head, but as one truthful voice among others that I need to hear.

The real danger is not the experience of shame itself, but the experience of shame by itself, as the only story of who we are. Just as it is problematic to tell a single story of “goodness” without the truth of sin, so too it can be deadly to experience shame without also being told “you are forgiven. You are still beloved.”

The courageous student who wrote to me back in February to call out my racism in the classroom has shown remarkable patience and grace in our ongoing interactions. In spite of exhaustion and pain in the wake of that week’s presentation, the student continued to show up to class discussions, alert and engaged, ready to discuss the readings and offer insights. They also offered forgiveness (accompanied by an appropriate call to accountability). In so doing, this student enabled me to see myself not as locked into the narrative of shame, but as someone who might be transformed by grace.

Mine is not a simple story of sin moving to redemption. Instead, my experience this spring has deepened my understanding of the complexity of what it means to be human. I am not just one story. Rather than telling a single story about ourselves, or simply moving from one story to another (with the corresponding risk of premature closure), I think it is more appropriate to recognize that we are complex creatures, living multiple stories. We are AT ONCE beloved and corrupted, forgiven and unfinished.

Several years ago, one of my daughters shared with me the work of Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie, who gave a now-famous TED Talk in 2009 on “the danger of the single story.”[7] I’ve been thinking about this, too, in light of what happened this spring. Adichie reflects on her own experience of growing up reading British and American children’s books, which led her to assume that there was only one story of what books are, and what childhood is like. When she discovered African literature, she realized that there were other stories that could be told—stories that included people who looked like her and lived like her. Later, when she came to college in America, her roommate was shocked by Adichie’s elegant English because the roommate had a single story of Africa that shaped her perception of what all African people must be like. On her first visit to Mexico, Adichie confronted the danger of the single story in herself. “I was overwhelmed with shame,” she says, when she realized that she had assumed that all Mexicans were one thing: “the abject immigrant.” “I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.”

If we tell a single story about other people, it narrows our understandings of others into stereotypical assumptions, usually based on stories told by those in power. Adichie illumines this point powerfully. And she has helped me to see the further point that we need multiple stories not only of other people, *but also of ourselves*. I have taught this before, but shame has shown me the truth of it in a new way.

If I do not affirm that *all* people are made good, in God’s image, I invent division and hierarchy among different groups of humans, some imagined as more valuable than others. *That is what my image choices conveyed*. If I affirm that we are all made in the image of God but fail to grapple with the reality of sin, I do not tell the truth about the way that we wound each other, ourselves, and the world that God so loves. *That is the truth that shame is teaching me*. If I confront the reality of sin but do not also proclaim God’s forgiveness and transforming grace, then I have no hope. *That is the possibility of transformation that my student and my colleagues are offering me*. If I affirm that we are forgiven now but do not also announce the eschatological promise that God is not done yet, then I can lapse into complacency. *This is where my work lies*. We are, all of us, complicated, fragile, wondrous, beloved, and unfinished creatures. Thanks to the student who called me out, I am learning more deeply the truth of what it means to be human.

***Read the accompanied blog by DeNoire Henderson [HERE](#)**

[1] Recent psychological and sociological research is exploring how shame functions in distinctive ways in different cultural communities, but with similar messages of not being worthy or good enough.

[2] See Kerry Connelly, *Good White Racist? Confronting Your Role in Racial Injustice* (Westminster John Knox, 2020).

[3] *Ibid.*, 11.

[4] Jennifer Carlier, *Finding God in the Basement: Addiction and Metaphors for Salvation*, PhD dissertation (Emory University, 2021), 37.

[5] Psychotherapist Joseph Burgo helpfully distinguishes between productive shame and toxic shame in a way that resembles my own hunch: <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/4/18/18308346/shame-toxic-productive>. In addition, many of the essays in *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation, and Agency* edited by Suzana Milevska (2016) are also working along these lines: <https://mitpress.mit.edu/contributors/suzana-milevska>.

[6] Michael Marmor, *Rabbis for Human Rights* email newsletter, 5/13/2021.

[7]

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en#t-10322.

<https://wabash.center/2021/11/racism-shame-and-the-complexity-of-human-nature/>