

Preaching in my Underpants: Stories of shame and grace

In my late teens I was invited by my friend Melinda to attend a Christian assembly called Breakforth that's held every year in Edmonton. Thousands of Christians come from all over the province to throw their hands up in the air and fall to their knees and weep uncontrollably as they feel moved by the holy spirit. To watch people being so moved was deeply disconcerting for me as a meek Mennonite girl because I'm pretty sure we Mennonites invented the term "quiet as a church mouse unless one is singing the Bass part in which case a volume that is slightly louder than the other three parts is acceptable but a volume that prevents one from blending appropriately is not." Despite feeling acutely like I did not belong, I found myself crying at one of the sessions that Sunday morning. The speaker was talking about hearing God's voice in his head telling him to do something, I don't really remember what. I was crying because I'd never heard God's voice. And I remember Melinda encouraging me to keep listening and praying but what I was thinking was "God doesn't want to talk to somebody like me anyways." The speaker could have told me "God loves you" fifty billion times and it would not have mattered. I was convinced that grace was for everybody but me. Because what I haven't shared was that my friend Melinda was actually my girlfriend and we'd been keeping our relationship a secret from everyone including our parents and friends and church, for three years. Looking back, I see that what was leaking out was deep abiding shame.

Brene Brown is a researcher who studies shame and vulnerability and is someone who inspires me to be a better human. In her book "Daring Greatly" Brene defines shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and unworthy of love and belonging. We all have shame; it's one of the most primitive human emotions that we experience. We're all afraid to talk about it and the less we talk about it the more control it has over our lives. Here are some responses when Brene asked people to give an example of shame: shame is raging at my kids, shame is bankruptcy, shame is my DUI, shame is flunking out of school, shame is my husband leaving me for my next-door neighbour, shame is gaining weight. No matter the context, shame is real pain. In fact, researchers found that physical pain and intense experiences of social rejection hurt in the same way, at least as far as brain chemistry is concerned. In her TED talk "Listening to Shame" Brene talks about shame being organized by gender. For women, shame looks like a web of unattainable, conflicting, competing expectations of who we're supposed to be. We're supposed to be perfect mothers who work full time, cook, clean, and look good doing it all. For men, shame is about not being perceived as weak. Men are supposed to put work first, pursue status and always always show emotional control. In a society that values individualism and stoicism, shame is an epidemic. But in order to understand shame, we need to distinguish it from other emotions that appear to be interchangeable, such as humiliation and guilt.

There is a very distinct difference between guilt, humiliation and shame according to Brene. Guilt is "I did something bad" whereas shame is "I am bad." During my relationship with Melinda, my thoughts were pervasively "I am bad, I am less than human." I was a living

breathing meat sack of shame and I protected myself by hiding and by lying to my parents about who I was with. Brene says that when we feel shame we either blame something or someone, offer a half-hearted apology or, as it was in my case, we hide out. According to Brene, guilt, or “I did something bad” can be a positive thing because it causes us to apologize for something we’ve done, or to make amends, or to change a behaviour that doesn’t align with our values. It creates a psychological discomfort that motivates change. Because I was feeling shame I wasn’t able to look at my lying behaviour and say “I’m not somebody who lies, I’m somebody who tells the truth.” Because it wasn’t guilt I was feeling, it was shame. So I just hid. Then when I finally told my parents they felt betrayed by the fact that I had lied about my whereabouts and my relationship for years. In a similar vein, there is a huge difference between humiliation and shame. People believe that they deserve shame whereas they do not believe that they deserve humiliation. If I was standing before you talking to you in my underpants I could experience that as either humiliation or shame. If I was experiencing it as humiliation I would be thinking “this whole situation sucks, nobody is making eye contact with me and I’m pretty sure I’ll never be asked to share up here again.” If I was experiencing the situation of talking to you in my underpants as shame I would think “I am such a loser, how could I think this was a good idea, my ideas suck, I always do stuff that is way too over-the-top and weird, I’m such a failure.” Distinguishing guilt and humiliation from shame is an important first step in recognizing shame in our own lives and working towards dealing with our shame.

Since we’re on the subject of language, it’s important that we as a church recognise that some of the language that we use creates shame. I’ve heard plenty of my Christian friends say that because we sin we are broken beings. That’s some pretty obvious shame language right there. We sin, or we do things that cause disconnect between each other and between ourselves and God, but we are not the embodiment of sin. We are not bad. There is no need for shame nor the language that creates it. God wants us to be happy, and, by extension, free of shame. So God asks us to repent. Psalm 103:2 says “as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us.” It does not say “do something that you’re ashamed of, ask for forgiveness and then beat yourself up about it for twenty years.” God wants us to be truly free from our sins. And that means letting go of our shame.

In the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus if the woman should be stoned according to the Law. They must have thought that they really had Jesus trapped. On the one hand, if he upheld the Law and commanded that the woman be stoned, the Pharisees would bring him before Pilate because Jewish authorities were not permitted to carry out the death penalty. On the other hand, if Jesus overturned the Law he would be discredited with the people. So anyways they thought they had Jesus cornered. Then Jesus said “let anyone who is without sin throw the first stone.” I think Jesus had an infinite understanding of our capacity for shaming others, and that shaming others is our way of hiding from our own shame. I think before that moment everyone was ready to condemn the woman instead of looking at their own shame. Maybe husbands were focused on

the woman's behaviour because they didn't make enough denarii and maybe wives were focused on the woman's behaviour because they didn't bake enough unleavened bread for passover. Whatever the reasons for their shame the people were like "crap Jesus is right I'd better deal with my own shame instead of standing here shaming this woman" and so they left. So eventually it was just the woman and Jesus. Instead of condemning the woman, Jesus simply asked that she not do it again. That's it. Jesus never said "you're bad, you're wrong, you're worthless" in this situation or in any other. He said "don't do it again." And that same mercy and forgiveness that Jesus shows the woman caught in adultery is offered to all of us. If Jesus were standing right here in the middle of the circle and I said "Jesus, I had a secret relationship with a woman for three years and lied to everyone about it" Jesus would probably say "I forgive you, don't do it again, and there's nothing you could do that could make me love you less." It took me six years but I finally truly understand that yes, Jesus loves me. To put it another way, I finally realized that I am an intriguing representative of the human species, I am a contribution to the world, and I am worthy of God's love.

So...I'm in a good place. But I'd really like to prevent any major shame spirals from happening and the good thing is that Brene has the answer. The bad thing is that it requires some intense sessions of sharing vulnerably. Brene has given us the following mission, and whether we choose to accept it is up to us. First, she says, we need to look at our shame under a microscope. Then once we've acknowledged our shame, we need to share about it with people that we trust. Because according to Brene's research, the three things that shame needs to thrive are secrecy, silence and judgement. When we tell our stories we receive the number one thing that we need to deal with shame: empathy, or the realization that we are not alone. And then once we've dealt with our shame we can throw away our ingrained Mennonite uber humility and say "look at me. I am beautiful, whole and worthy of love." Because we are. We are. And the next time we have shame attacks Brene recommends that we say to ourselves "shame attack! Pain pain pain pain pain. You're ok. You're human, everybody makes mistakes. You're ok. You're human. Everybody makes mistakes." The trick, she says, is to talk to ourselves in the same way that we would talk to the people we love. Gently and compassionately. As Brene says: "There will always be mistakes and failures and criticism in life. If we're going to find our way out of shame and back to each other, vulnerability is the path and courage is the light." So let's repent and let go. Let's share ourselves with courage. Let's welcome God's abiding love and abounding grace. Amen.