

Week 10: Why Shame Is the Beginning of Your Story, Not the End of It

Shame is a story-killer.

If our lives are like a long road in a vast landscape that crests on the horizon, and if story is the vehicle of our lives, moving us from a broken beginning to a redemptive conclusion, then shame is like bad fuel, clogging the carburetor, preventing our stories from even getting started. Shame prevents the redemption of our pain.

We get the truth of this backwards—we think that something is going to come into our lives to redeem what has gone before, and we think the redemption we experience will somehow dry up our shame. But the reality is, shame trumps redemption every time, because it prevents us from entering into the very story that will bring redemption to our lives. Shame binds us. It keeps us *waiting* for a story to define us and to heal us, and so we fail to take up our existential pens and become the authors of our own stories. Shame has the power to do this, because at its very core, shame is a cancer in us that whispers, “You are irredeemable.”

The dictionary defines shame as “the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something dishonorable, improper, ridiculous...done by oneself or another.” This is an adequate start, but shame is so much more. So. Much. More. Shame is a murmuring voice inside, convincing us the things we did, the mistakes we made, the actions we would die to take back, were not just things we *did*, but are a reflection of *who we are*. Shame purrs almost irresistibly, “You are, at the very core of you, broken, filthy, ugly, a failure, a loser, unacceptable, disappointing, ignorant, depraved, weak, alone, or despicable.” And always, it cajoles, “You are irredeemable.” It is so quiet that we rarely realize it is there. It is like air in a room—it can be everywhere, it influences everything we do, and we are often completely unaware of it.

Sometimes, though, shame tips its hand, and we experience it in subtle ways. It is the rush of color to our face following an innocent joke made at our expense. It is the subtle lie that masks our mistakes, uttered in the silent conviction that being known, really known, will make others avert their eyes. It is the frightened rush of adrenaline when asked to speak up, to reveal even the smallest parts of our broken inner space. At other times, shame comes crashing in, and there is nothing subtle about it. It is a dark depression that tells us to stay in bed, because we have nothing to offer the world and, even if we did, the world would eat us alive. It is a sweeping panic, screaming that nothing and no one is safe enough to trust with

who we are. It is a deep, deep loneliness that takes us by the shoulders and looks us in the eye and tells us that we are alone because no one can stomach us.

When we experience shame, and when we buy into the lie that we are irredeemable, we foreclose on our story. When we think there is nothing good in us, we simply quit believing our story can be redeemed. Life becomes about protecting ourselves from the view of others, lest they discover who we really are at our core. Our stories become a tale ripe with hiddenness, tentativeness, and fear. Our lives become stagnant and apathetic at best, and small, shriveled, and dead at worst.

But we need not succumb to the power of shame.

Regardless of whether your shame is very small and hidden or like a mountain inside of you, whether it is subtle and quiet or loud and voracious, the shame you experience does not have to be the end of your story. In fact, your shame can be the *beginning*—the beginning of a story that brings change, healing, and redemption.

Around the time I was beginning to face my own shame, I got some song lyrics stuck in my head. They were the antidote to the voice of shame that was shouting there, and they went like this:

*“And in one little moment, it all implodes. This isn’t everything you are. Breathe deeply in the silence, no sudden moves. This isn’t everything you are. Just take the hand that’s offered, and hold on tight. This isn’t everything you are. There’s joy not far from here, I know there is. This isn’t everything you are.”*¹

There are places in the world where a different voice, a new voice, can begin to speak to you. It says, “Steady, I’m here, and you are more than your shame.” This voice doesn’t try to convince us that everything is okay, or that we are flawless or whole. Quite the opposite. It assures us that we don’t have it all together, that we make mistakes and live broken lives, but that we are more than our mistakes and our regrets.

So. Much. More.

The new voice is steady and persistent, and if we listen to it, with time, it begins to compete with the voice of shame, and it rings so true that we can begin to trust it. And then new things begin to happen. We can name our regrets, and then walk past them, telling a new and better story with our lives. We can make

¹ Snow Patrol, *Fallen Empires*. (New York: Island Records, 2011), http://www.snowpatrol.com/music/1391/fallen_empires.

mistakes, maybe even mess up really big, and we can apologize and decide that regardless of who decides to forgive us, we have forgiven ourselves. We can admit that we are awfully messy inside, and decide that the mess is not the end of things, but that it is the beginning of a great project of redemption. There is a place inside of you where a better voice is telling a better story about you.

Let the next chapter of your story be about listening for that voice.