

Week 14: The Life Changing Difference Between Shame and Guilt

On a Friday morning, my daughter Caitlin—who was a three-year-old at the time—was drawing me a picture with a colored pencil. Her face was screwed up with concentration, nose crinkled, dimples lopsided. She let out a big-dramatic sigh and said, “I made a mistake; I need to erase it.”

I tried not to laugh as I looked at the random loops and swirls of abstract toddlerhood and wondered to myself, “Honey, how can chaos contain mistakes?” But I fetched an eraser anyway, and she started to rub. However, colored pencil doesn’t erase—it *smudges*. So she rubbed harder. And the “mistake” got worse. And worse. And worse. She flung down her pencil and began to tear the paper to shreds.

I don’t think my daughter was feeling ashamed about her drawing—I think she was being a three-year-old. Yet, on a Friday morning, she illustrated the way shame destroys us: shame is like the crummy pencil eraser of life—it mires us in an endless, hopeless effort to erase our mistakes. And it tears up our lives in the process.

Shame whispers, convincing us our mistakes and shortcomings and failures and faults are *who we are*. It convinces us we need to erase our mistakes and our mess if we are to be worthy of love and belonging. So we spend our life mired in depressive regrets about words and actions and days and years we wish we could take back. Or we spend our nights in anxious rumination about how everyone reacted when we said this or did that. We quietly beat ourselves up and wish for a do-over. But the truth is, our mistakes are written in the colored pencil of time—time can’t be reversed and our mistakes can’t be erased.

There are no do-overs.

Yet shame keeps us stuck in this endless cycle of hopeless attempts to erase or hide our history and ourselves. It immobilizes us. It shuts us down. And in doing so, it can destroy a life—one paralyzed day at a time. *But there is another way.* The way out of our shame is not to *erase* our mistakes. The way out of our shame is to *feel guilty* about them.

Guilt is shame redeemed by grace.

Shame tells us we *are* lousy; guilt tells us we *did* something lousy. Shame whispers, “Your mistakes define you,” but guilt proclaims, “We are defined by *redemption*, not by transgression.” Whereas shame seeks to *hide* the past, guilt *claims* the past. Shame says you are corrupt and rotten and weak and powerless and you should hide because anything you do will be another failure, but guilt says, “Yes, I messed up. I’m guilty as charged. But my mess *doesn’t* define me. And because it doesn’t define me, I can do something different *now*.” Shame looks backward interminably; guilt *glances* backward and then moves *forward*. Shame coerces us into

passivity; guilt propels us into *action*. Shame *buries* our mistakes; guilt *apologizes* for them. Shame disconnects us from people; guilt propels us into the *arms* of people. Shame is a lie we swallow; guilt is the truth we *tell*.

Shame is the death of us; guilt is the beginning of a resurrection...

As Caitlin began to sink to the floor on the verge of a meltdown, I suggested, “Instead of erasing that picture, how about you draw me another one?” She stopped mid-tantrum, crumpled paper in hand, and a smile evened out her dimples a bit. I pointed at her big stack of blank papers. “You can draw me a *bunch* of new ones.”

I wonder if redemptive guilt is really just the voice of grace, whispering quietly to us. “Hush, little one,” it says, “quit trying so hard to erase and hide the past. You’re learning and growing and every time you mess up and try again, let’s rejoice. So put that eraser away, own your mistakes, and let’s try again, even if it’s a holy mess.”

Caitlin looked at me, bounced to her feet, and attacked a new blank page with abandon.

In life, we can choose to listen to our shame—we can focus on all our mistakes and we can get hopelessly bogged down in trying to analyze them, erase them, justify them, or hide them. Or we can approach every day like a new sheet of paper. The size of the stack is different for each of us, of course—our remaining days are all differently numbered. But if we have only a single page on our stack—only one day remaining to live—we have one blank page on which to draw a new, redemptive picture of our life. We can draw pictures of courage and vulnerability, of apology and forgiveness, of love and sacrifice, of passion and purpose.

Today is a new day. Today is your blank page. Today is pregnant with the possibility of a new picture, a redemptive event, a beautiful love.

What will you do with today’s blank page?