

Today, we're faced with a hard topic, but if we remain present to it, we can receive much grace and growth. Licensed Master Social Worker and Research Professor Dr Brené Brown, PhD explains that "vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness."¹ Shame, thus understood, is attributed to the fact that **"we are physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually hardwired for connection, love, and belonging."**² Hence, **"shame is really easily understood as the fear of disconnection: Is there something about me that, if other people know it or see it, that I won't be worthy of connection?"**³ Nonetheless, when we have the courage to face our vulnerability, it becomes **"the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love."** Embracing our vulnerability is essential to the process of transformation. When we are transformed, we become like a city which is built on a hill-top or a light on a lamp-stand by which our good works shine for others.

Shame is not to be confused with guilt. Brené explains that **"the difference between shame and guilt is best understood as the difference between 'I am bad' and 'I did something bad.' Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad."**⁴ Brené adds that while shame is highly correlated with addiction, violence, aggression, depression, eating disorders, bullying, and other unethical behaviour, guilt is a *remedy* for these outcomes. Essentially, guilt enables us to hold up something that we have done or failed to do against our values and find that they do not match up; whereas, shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we can change and do better. Shame is binding when it has us in its grip; whereas, guilt is a powerfully and socially adaptive emotion because it gains its impetus from empathy and values. Guilt is a psychologically uncomfortable feeling; nonetheless, it is helpful.⁵

In addition to guilt, St Ignatius of Loyola discovered that paying attention to feelings of shame is also helpful, not because a remedy can be found *within* shame, but because God's liberating grace can be experienced when we exercise the courage to look *underneath* it.⁶ The merit of

¹ TEDxHouston: "The Power of Vulnerability," June 2010. https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

² Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead* (London: Vermillion, 2018), 126.

³ TEDxHouston: "The Power of Vulnerability."

⁴ *Ibid*, 128.

⁵ *cf. Ibid*, 129.

⁶ Having stated this, Jungian-trained Psychologist Karen Signell explains that sometimes the shadow is so far from consciousness and so frightening that the door to the unconscious must not be opened until one is ready to face it. We may be inclined to think "the deeper the better" regarding awareness of the unconscious, but a person's real vulnerability must be taken into account, for defences serve a purpose. A scab may leave a raw wound if it is torn off too early, as the natural process of healing takes time.

cf. Karen Signell in *Meeting the Shadow – The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*. Eds. Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 258.

Likewise, Brackley states: "Some people may not be ready for certain vital truths, and dwelling on them could do them harm."

Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 8.

The observation of both Signell and Brackley is consistent with the teaching of Jesus, for he said, "I still have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now. But when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth" (Jn. 16:12-13). Returning to the analogy of looking at a wound, Signell affirms that no harm is done when a protective coating for a deep wound has formed; on the contrary, looking at the lesion is safe (*cf. Loc. cit.*).

looking underneath feelings of shame is analogous to looking beneath the undulating surface of water. Just as the agitated, uneven surface of water distorts our perception of objects beneath it, the disturbance of shame distorts our perception of our true self. We can even project the parts of ourselves that we dislike onto God. Consequently, we expect God to relate to us in the same manner by which we detest ourselves. This detestation, this shame, is what is called a *limiting belief*.

Limiting beliefs have their origins in our childhood *schemas*.⁷ To give an example, consider a child whose activity, words, thoughts, and feelings were ignored by his parents by the most part of his upbringing. Consequently, in the formative years of his childhood, he developed a schema by which he believes he is invisible to everyone around him, a belief that remains hard-wired within him in adulthood. In this man's experience, his limiting belief manifests itself in thoughts such as, "I'm not accepted," or "I'm unworthy," or "When I'm not needed, that means I'm not wanted," and so forth. This example illustrates how the origins of vulnerability within our unconscious can be found within the context of our inherited narrative.

The schemas we developed for ourselves before the age of six determine patterns in our life. Between the age of two and six, a child operates in Theta brain wave activity. Consequently, the brain has no filter such that every thought, feeling, and intuition goes into the unconscious mind like a sponge. Traumatic experiences have particular relevance to this understanding of a child's brain. Ultimately, the *meanings* you ascribed to the disturbing feelings that were not attuned to reality under the age of six become hard-wired, such that they remain in a continuum throughout life, unless these limiting beliefs are conceived and visualized in a new thought paradigm. As an adult, looking back at small cases of childhood trauma may appear to be inconsequential. However, even a five year old child's first "It's not fair!" response to some injustice (trivial though it may appear to an adult) can result in a limiting belief, especially if the child was not given adequate assistance to process the pain, as children lack the inner-resources to process their anxiety.

Once conceived, limiting beliefs will find their way, even if unconscious, to work their way into reality like a *self-fulfilled prophecy*.⁸ For instance, if a child is told by his father that he is 'stupid,' he will believe it. This response has nothing to do with truth, but with belief. Consequently, believing that he is stupid determines how he responds to opportunities for human

⁷ This psychoanalytic term pertains to the way we perceive our self in relation to our ingrained beliefs. These beliefs are precipitated by our affective memory deeply rooted in our psyche because they originated in early childhood experiences.

⁸ In addition to psychological research, the concept of *self-fulfilling prophecy* is a well-known phenomenon in sociology, where it was first discovered and defined by American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1910-2003) in the following manner: "The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation, evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true. The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error." R. K. Merton, "The self-fulfilling prophecy." *The Antioch Review*, 8 (1948): 477.

development and flourishing. For example, when sitting for an exam, he will unconsciously experience a blockage. By underperforming, he can unconsciously prove to himself that he is stupid. Thus, limiting beliefs are predicated on emotion, not logic; in fact, they consist of **“fallacious reasonings”** that St Ignatius identifies to be intrinsic to desolation **“to prevent the soul from advancing.”**⁹

Regarding this form of desolation, Rev Dr Brian J. Gallagher, MSC PhD declares: **“The inner messages are objectively false;”** yet, **“they sound credible because of their appeal to one’s vulnerable spot.”**¹⁰ Not all thoughts which are predicated on emotion are illogical. In contrast, consolation intrinsically enlightens us with truth – even if the truth hurts us at first – and puts us in touch with reality.¹¹ St Ignatius of Loyola was aware of this difference, for he observed that **“just as consolation is the opposite of desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation”** (*SpEx*, [317]). Having said this, detecting the unpleasant affective criteria within the desolation associated with the messages within limiting beliefs is not easy, for Gallagher clarifies: **“Such a message will even bring a kind of satisfaction, a peacefulness, for it becomes a place that the person is at home in. This is a pseudo peace, a non-relational peace.”**¹²

This psychological observation correlates with the following finding in neuroscience. Author, journalist, and lecturer David McRaney details the results of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) brain scans which show that when people hear information that disproves a belief of theirs, their brains’ cognitive centres do not light up; rather, the emotional centres become active. So, our first instinct on hearing information that disproves our own beliefs appears to be an emotional need to rally our defences against that new information.¹³

Therefore, to transcend a limiting belief, the emotional relationship to the belief needs to be unearthed and changed. One way of unearthing a limiting belief is to think of a goal you were striving for that you did not reach or gave up on with much disappointment.

- What were the feelings that prevented you from achieving that goal?
- Does this feeling remind you of any early childhood memory?
- What meaning may you have ascribed to that feeling when you were a child?
- Is that meaning in tune with reality, or a distortion of it?

⁹ *Spiritual Exercises*, ([315]). Hereafter, *The Spiritual Exercises* will be abbreviated as *SpEx*. All citations from the *SpEx* are from *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, SJ (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

¹⁰ B. J. Gallagher, *Set Me Free: Spiritual Direction & Discernment of Spirits* (Bayswater, VIC: Coventry Press, 2019), 150.

¹¹ Dr David G. Benner, PhD, a Canadian depth psychologist, who, in integrating psychology and spirituality, declares that “the soul thrives in reality but withers when we choose to live in places of illusion or denial.”

David G. Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self* (Grand Rapid, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 122.

¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹³ cf. David McRaney, *You Are Now Less Dumb: How to Conquer Mob Mentality, How to Buy Happiness, and All the Other Ways to Outsmart Yourself* (New York, NY: Avery, 2013), 63.

- Speak to God about these feelings and the meanings you ascribed to them, and as you do, be attentive also to what God is like for you: How is God looking at you? How is God present to you as you talk to him about these feelings and thoughts? Does God look at you in a different way that others did, or how you looked upon yourself, in this experience?

Among the various passions that mislead us, shame is among the most detrimental, as it prevents us from experiencing the deep and intimate love God has for us. As this heart-knowledge is foundational for discernment, exercising the courage to embrace our vulnerability by addressing the shame that underpins our limiting beliefs is in our best interest; otherwise, these forms of self-deception will lead us to respond to God's call to use our gifts in a particular way with the insecure thought, "I don't have what it takes to do that."

Having said this, we're unable to do *anything* on our own, for Jesus said, "**cut off from me you can do nothing**" (Jn. 15:15). Still, Jesus cannot work in us if we bury our talents (cf. Mt. 25:25) or allow ourselves to be like a lamp which we put under a tub (cf. Mt. 5:15). When a lamp is hidden, no one benefits from the radiance of our good works which would otherwise shine for others.

Conversely, when we look at what is hiding underneath feelings of shame, we discover an amazing potential which has great significance to the Christian life. This discovery results from becoming in touch with the interior movements of the Holy Spirit that can, as St Ignatius says, "**dispose [us] for the way in which [we] could better serve God in the future**" (*SpEx*, [15]). In other words, unearthing the gifts God has given us which lie hidden underneath feelings of deficit puts us in touch with gifts we never knew we had which can help us to spread Christ's Kingdom. Then, like St Paul, such transformation is a "**demonstration of the power of the Spirit**" (1 Cor. 2:4).