

Empathy is the strongest antidote for shame.

—BRENÉ BROWN

Self-Empathy for Shame



One of the most difficult emotions for humans to experience is shame. It produces the greatest flow of cortisol, the stress hormone, of any human feeling. Mostly people try to avoid shame, using distraction or addiction strategies to shift their brain chemistry enough to pop out of the experience. Alcohol, for example, is a great shame neutralizer. “Bottoms up!”

Every year I experience a movement into shame so great and so persistent (it lasts for four weeks!) that I have begun to mark the time on my calendar in an effort to anticipate what’s happening and to give myself extra support. The time period is October 20 through November 12. As near as I can tell, my mom had a difficult time during this period, so I imagine she went into a dark place during these weeks every year of my childhood. It just happens (coincidentally? I don’t know) to span the creation of Halloween costumes, my birthday, and end the day after my parents’ wedding anniversary.

In the past couple of years, I’ve been focusing on the question of what deep needs our nervous systems are meeting by creating self-sabotaging behaviors. To ask this question, we need to stop thinking of ourselves as alone. We have to strip away the myth of aloneness and look at the original dyads we were a part of.

The Healing Power of Empathy

Humans are not grown in petri dishes, they are made inside wombs and relationships.

As I evolve in the work I do with others, bringing empathy processes to heal and transform difficult emotional experiences, I try the work out on myself. So this year I asked myself, where is the missing dyad partner in my shame? And what needs am I meeting with the shame? I opened my sensation gate to let in what my body is feeling. What came to mind was a deep loneliness and a sense of the absolute disappearance of my mother's warmth and her shift to cold, mechanical functionality.

As I brought a sense of the missing person in the shame dyad, my perception was that I was receiving scrutiny and dismissal. My mother moved far away from me in my imagination, increasing my sense that I was in this on my own. The density of the shame lightened when I allowed myself to wonder if she was leaving her child self behind with me, and if I might be feeling the shame for both of us. Her father turned away from her when she was eight and she never saw him again, but she asked to be buried with him when she died. I had an image of peeling orphan after orphan from past generations off my shame body and letting them stand around me in acknowledgment of the loss of parents.

My shame was lighter, not so dense, but there was a nausea in my head.

My body's vow to me was something like "I, Sarah's body, solemnly swear to you, my essential self, that I will keep my head and my eyes down for the rest of my life so that my presence doesn't burden others who do not want me in order to save myself from heartbreak and disappointment and further shame, and not to be in relationship with the planet itself in order to lessen the burden I place on the earth and on life, no matter the cost to myself." Ugh. Lots of nausea there.

And then I asked myself, "Sarah's essential self, did you hear the vow that Sarah's body made to you?"

Empathy at Home

My essential self said, “Yes, although the voice is very small and weak and doesn’t have much life energy in it, I heard it.”

“Is that a good vow for Sarah’s body?”

“No, definitely not.”

“Would you tell her that you release the vow?”

“Sarah’s body, I release you from this vow and I revoke this contract. I wish for you to know that the world delights in your existence. I wonder if you were so worried that you were broken and defective? Do you need to know that you are just right? I wish for you to reach out for and enjoy relationship.”

As my body experienced the release of the vow, my head came up, creating shooting pains at the base of my skull as the muscles there let go and started to move. My shoulders came down, and an encasement of tension that had surrounded my whole body faded.

I was meeting deep needs for humility, integrity, and respect with my strategy—my vow to pull myself back from life in order to hold everyone else with care. And I was making myself safe from disappointment at the same time. But that wasn’t a particularly good strategy for a lifetime.

The shame and the nausea are gone now. The period of shame had been such a lifelong experience, it was impossible to imagine that things could really be different. But I’m willing to wait and see where I can bring empathy to bear next in my ongoing quest for self-warmth and self-care.

—SARAH PEYTON, www.yourresonantself.com