

Healing from the Blame that Binds

by Kelly Bryson, MA, MFT

Blame is the game that protects me from the understanding that the cause of all my emotional distress, fear, shame and guilt comes from the part of me I call "the inner voice." As long as I keep the big bony finger of blame pointed in your direction, I can remain unaware of the fact that it is what I am telling myself about your behavior that is stimulating my painful reactions. This lack of awareness of the true cause of my distress also keeps me powerless to do much about it. And even though I may make great efforts to souse this distressing fire inside me by ensnaring you into taking responsibility for it, the fire still burns. It is as though there were a mirror reflecting a fire and I continued to pour bucket after bucket of water on the mirror expecting the fire to be put out.

Another way of looking at blame is to notice that it is a tragic expression of an unmet need. When I call you "selfish," I am expressing disappointment about wanting you to give more consideration to my needs. When I call you "stupid," I may be expressing frustration about wanting you to have already been aware of certain information. When I call you a "jerk," I may be scared and wanting more space between my car bumper and yours. So I might say that blame is an ineffective request for empathy, for painful feelings and for understanding of unmet wants. The tragic part is that the form I have chosen to express my request almost guarantees its denial. This is not only true of requests I make of others but also those I make of myself. Here's an example.

This morning I tried to motivate myself to get out of bed early and write this article by telling myself that I was lazy and self-sabotaging if I didn't. Well, that was such an unpleasant nagging voice to hear so early that I rolled over and went back to sleep.

So what can be done about this habit of making requests of ourselves and others in the form of blame? Just as blame is a protective move based on fear and ignorance, compassion is a corrective countermove based on courage and understanding. Whenever I find myself blaming myself or others, I want to take some time to turn my attention to that part of my body that feels the blame. Sometimes it's my stomach, and I know it's anger; sometimes it's my heart area and I know it's hurt; or if it's my upper chest it's fear. It feels relieving just to acknowledge it, feel into it and imagine what it wants in order to feel better. Now I'm ready to try what Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, a clinical psychologist, calls "Giraffe Speak." Now I am ready to take responsibility for what I am wanting, and for what I am feeling. I am willing now to "stick out my long neck" and reveal my true feeling of the moment and ask for exactly what I want. Now instead of calling you inconsiderate, I might say "I feel lonely and want you to come over." Instead of calling myself lazy, I might tell me, "I'm feeling scared and want you to finish this article before the deadline." Giraffe Speak is not a technique to manipulate, but a way of increasing your chances of inspiring compassion and cooperation from yourself and others.

The reason blame is so rampant is that it looks like it works. A mother tells her grown son that he's ungrateful because he doesn't phone often enough. So the son starts calling weekly. Did the mother get what she wanted? Maybe on the surface, but not for the reasons she can enjoy. Yes, the son is calling, but



only because he feels too guilty, ashamed, or scared not to. And the deeper longing the mother has for connection with her son will continue to be unmet.

Another popular feature of blame is its usefulness in extracting sweet revenge on our hated ones. Aside from my private practice I work with gang kids and their families in Southeast San Diego. I have noticed that few things seem to delight the kids more than to catch one of the counselors breaking the rules and then to point the big bony finger at them for it. When you ask the kids why this brings them such joy they say, "cause now they can know how I feel all the time when they yell at me for stuff." Again I can see how this blaming and trying to get revenge is a poorly coded S.O.S. for understanding and empathy.

This reminds me of a story Dr. Rosenberg told about his work with a certain murderer in the Swedish prison system. The murderer told him that the only thing that got him out of bed in the morning was the joy of fantasizing about the revenge he was going to take on the person that had turned him in, once his nine years were up. Dr. Rosenberg, being a gambling man said, "I'll bet you that if you give me one hour of your time, I can convince you that there is something you want even more than revenge." The prisoner, having plenty of time on his hands, agreed.

Dr. Rosenberg began, "So it sounds like you're completely enraged with this man that turned you in, and would like him to know just how you feel about him."

"Yes, I'd like to break the squealer's neck," replied the prisoner, "And to think he used to be my best friend."

The doctor: "And besides anger is there also a sense of deep pain and confusion about how your best friend could do this?"

The prisoner: "Yea, I would have never turned him in, he was my best friend."

The doctor: "Is part of the pain you're feeling about the loss of this friendship?"

After an hour of this deepening dialogue, the prisoner began to cry as he became aware that his desire for revenge was a cover for a deeper need to have his feelings about the situation understood. This prisoner went on to convince many other prisoners to take workshops with Dr. Rosenberg, who now goes back to Sweden every year to work with them.

Self-blame is the same game. It's an attempt to get some relief, through revenge, on ourselves. And again this self-blame is a poorly coded S.O.S. for help in the form of self-understanding, empathy and compassion. I have tried to affirm the self-critical voices away, only to create more polarization.

The Voice: "How could you be so stupid?"

Me: "I am a perfectly intelligent person."

Voice: "How could anyone like you?"

Me: "I am a perfectly lovable person" etc.

But this is like ignoring a crying child. And inside of us the crying either gets louder or takes another form in an attempt to get heard. Sometimes it takes the form of self-sabotage, relationship or work addictions, spiritual addictions or depression.

So what I am wanting to always remember is to keep clear my intentions to compassionately connect with any blame I hear whether inside or outside of me. Unless, of course, I am feeling overwhelmed, and that's when I want to remember to reach out to you for understanding. And one hopes you'll have your "Giraffe Ears" on and hear my feeling and understand about my unmet dreams. And please try to remember not to try to solve my pain with New Age Chicken Soup, like, "Why have you created this in your life," or "You'll probably need to increase your zinc intake," or "with the Common Variety Chicken Soup, like "things could be worse," and "No pain, no gain."



“Words are windows or they’re walls
They sentence us or set us free.
When I speak and when I hear
Let the healing flow through me.”

“There is luxury in self blame.
When we blame ourselves we feel no one else has the right to”

- Oscar Wilde

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