

Loss of shame is to the detriment of society¹

- By James F. Burns
- May 23, 2017
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Shameful and shocking: the Cincinnati suicide of an 8-year-old boy named Gabriel Taye, two days after being assaulted by a classmate in a school bathroom. The video of the event is more than disturbing—and not just from the assault, Gabe reaching out to shake hands with a bigger boy who pulls or throws him into a wall, rendering him unconscious as he slumped to the floor. Nor is the most disturbing aspect of this tragedy the school's handling of the situation, labeled “inexplicable and inexcusable” in a recent Cincinnati Enquirer editorial.

No, the most disturbing behavior of all is Gabe's classmates who, for seven long, torturous minutes, walked past him going in or out of the bathroom, a few of whom stopped to stare or step over or even poke or prod Gabe with their feet — just to see if he'd move, I guess. He didn't.

Those boys who passed by on the other side — yes, I'm reminded of the parable of the Good Samaritan — weren't ignoring a stranger. They knew Gabe, they liked Gabe, yet they passed by on the other side. And those who did stop to poke him with their foot, getting no response, well, they've helped write the new parable of the Uncaring Classmate within the larger theme of the Uncaring Culture.

Many readers will strongly disagree with my judging the behavior of 8-year-olds. But I believe that being 8 does not exonerate. In terms of suicide, children of that age may not comprehend the finality and permanence of death. But they surely know pain and being hurt and needing to summon an adult when another child is lying motionless on the floor.

But children do not grow up in vacuum — they learn from adults. Nerve-gas bombs dropped on Syrian children? Another Islamic State beheading video? Mass murder and cremation of Syrian prisoners, starvation in drought-stricken Africa and even in the streets of Venezuela? Not my problem.

Remember Joseph Welch's penetrating question at a Senate hearing, “Have you no sense of decency, sir?” So I ask today, “Have we no shame?” A dulled sense of shame or common decency goes hand in hand with a weakened importance of personal character and moral compass. At larger levels — family, community, nation, such degrading of group morality and standards leads to lesser pride in a family's, community's or nation's reputation.

¹ http://www.lockportjournal.com/opinion/loss-of-shame-is-to-the-detriment-of-society/article_4063bfb8-a9e8-55c0-9bd9-52b505a151f3.html

One's reputation used to be of central importance. Long ago. Here's a letter that Dan Hosbrook, who lived in Cincinnati and had been blind for years, received on his 80th birthday from his son in Indianapolis. The year was 1865.

“Respected father, In looking over the list of your children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, I believe there is not a drunkard or a swearer or a vagabond or a beggar in the catalogue, and I now pledge myself that none of my children ever shall be.”

Family pride. Moral compass. Pretty old-fashioned, eh?

Dan's son clearly had pride in his family's reputation. He would have been shamed had his son walked by another boy lying helpless and motionless. He would have cried had his son been the one who threw Gabe into the wall. Simply put, we are now in an era of nudity, crudity, cussing, road rage and walking by on the other side, an era when it's harder to shame people into much of anything. When's the last time you blushed?

This increased callousness and abrasiveness at the local level is taking place within rapidly lowering national and global standards for human conduct. Genocide — or near- genocide — is occurring in some countries as well as mass starvation and displacement. Will we walk by on the other side? Will America exert moral leadership on the world stage, and will we, as a culture and country and government, better behave ourselves?

And will we help children have strong reasons to live — and to live a life of caring for others? If we can't have the Ten Commandments in schools, let it be the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

²Sunday, August 28, 2016

A loss of shame. . .

Perhaps one of the most significant developments of the modern age is our utter lack of shame (except, of course, the enforced shame of political correctness which acts as the voice of conscience that appears to be mute in us as individuals). Shame once defined us as much as virtue. We could put it into religious language and call shame sin and virtue righteousness but it was not merely religion. The common understanding of what shamed us as well as what honored us was key to the assimilation of folks from other cultures and religions. We were able to mesh together because the common values of right and wrong, virtue and shame, righteousness and sin transcended our differences.

We may not have all practiced it, but we understood fidelity to spouse and infidelity shamed us. It was not spoken of out loud or in mixed company but in whispers and with care to see who was listening. Marriage between husband and wife was epitomized by the self-denial of sexual urge apart from this relationship. Religion encouraged this but so did the state which had a vested interest in shame and virtue as well as faith. Stable homes, good families, and moral, productive children were the ingredients to the American dream every bit as much as the pursuit of happiness. Freedom was not license but the encouragement toward good unconstrained by fear.

One of the casualties of our modern era in addition to the common virtue of fidelity in marriage or even marriage itself is the whole idea that certain things can and should do shame us. Our conversation has become ever so tolerant of vulgarity. We are content with a coarseness of language that would not have been tolerated by politeness long ago. Some call it prudish but it was not naivete -- no, it was not that they did not know the words but the knew enough not to speak them in certain contexts.

In addition to the salty conversations that now delight in saying out loud what was once only whispered is our penchant for leaving nothing to the imagination. I am not only speaking here of sexual images but the graphic images of violence and horror that were once suggested but left to the imagination and not to the eye. Now we are accustomed to seeing nudity and graphic violence on TV and in the movie theater and video games thrive on these images once thought too much to be shown openly or without constraint.

Many were once prodded to become productive citizens by less than virtuous motive. Boys became men because of their desire for love and sex. Girls became women for some of the same reasons. Now it seems that more and more boys are choosing a prolonged adolescence with the virtual reality of the video game and pornography over work, wife, children, family, and community. Almost as many 18-30 year old boys who have not completed college live at home as they do with spouse or significant other. That is a statistic few of us saw coming. There seems to be little shame in failing to board the engine of work and responsibility and find it no

² <http://pastoralmeanderings.blogspot.com/2016/08/a-loss-of-shame.html>

big deal to be taken care of (when a generation or so ago independence and self-sufficiency were driving forces to move out).

My point in saying this is not to condemn everyone who is not old. I will have plenty of time to do that in a few years when I retire. It is great sport. At this point my concern is more about the Gospel and how to speak to a people who seem to have no shame -- about anything! The Gospel of Christ crucified presumes shame -- the shame of sin and the awareness of its death that chains down hope of the future to its terrible anchor of death. The Gospel speaks to people who know shame, who lament their sin, and who seek not only forgiveness but new life. What does it have to say to people who have no shame?

Sure, someone will say that this is why we preach the Law but preaching the Law to a people who have no shame sounds simply like prudes complaining that they are not free enough to indulge themselves like the people they condemn. It only feeds the notion that the church is basically a bunch of naysayers who do not want people to be happy, to have fun, to fulfill their wants and desires, and to enjoy themselves doing so.

My point is this. How do we speak the Gospel outside the framework of sin and shame? I wish I had the answer. My fear is that we in the Church are proceeding like people in the dark trying to find their way by feeling along the wall. I am not at all suggesting that we need a strategy or program but how do we preach to people who have learned not to feel shame? How do we speak the faith to folks who use their feelings to define everything from gender to happiness, right and wrong? I know that the Spirit will work through the Word even when we speak awkwardly or hesitantly but I also know that we can learn to speak it better so that our speaking itself is not an impediment.

These are the kinds of things I ruminate on day and restless night. Perhaps I need to trust God more. I am sure I do. But as someone who regularly preaches to the products of our modern world and who weekly teaches them, I want to be a more effective spokesman of the Gospel to those who hear it -- all ages for sure but especially to those who will replace me and my generation as we age.

I am not at all convinced that mirroring the culture or trying to duplicate the ambiance of their technological and entertainment oriented lives will do anything but render the church an orphan in the next generation. Such is the future for those who marry the spirit of the age. So I am not talking about redefining the church or re-imagining what it means to worship. I want to be a more faithful and effective preacher and teacher for the sake of Christ and His cross. In this, I expect many are in the same place I am. So, you tell me what you think?

For Shame: The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture

by [James B. Twitchell](#)³

Overview

Just a generation ago, outrageous Americans like Joey Buttafuoco and O.J. Simpson would have been scorned. Talk-show host would have been viewed with suspicion. Self-help books, the recovery movement, and grade inflation didn't exist.

Today, celebrity is its own reward, and every American has the right to an A and high self-esteem. Much to the joy of Madison Avenue ad agencies and the tabloid press, there is no stigma attached to bad behavior—as long as the perpetrator truly repent, of course. As all Americans have asked themselves at one point or another: What's wrong with this picture?

Now, James B. Twitchell, critically acclaimed author of *Adcult* and *Carnival Culture*, offers a fascinating and original look at shame, and shamlessness in American culture, taking to task everyone from conservative hypocrites to bleeding-heart liberals. Whether or not you agree that shame is building block of a healthy society, you'll find this a provocative and addictive read—and you just may decide to reexamine "the social *good* of feeling *bad*."

³ <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/for-shame-james-b-twitchell/1112235136?ean=9780312194536>

Perry R. Branson M.D.⁴ [ShrinkWrapped](#)

Shame: A Third Pillar of Civilization

Our loss of shame threatens our culture.

Posted Mar 10, 2011

[Shame](#) is an underrated emotion whose impact has been diluted in the last 40 years, all done with the best of intentions, and with cascading unintended consequences. What is shame? A dictionary definition would include:

A painful emotion caused by a strong sense of guilt, [embarrassment](#), unworthiness, or disgrace.

In Psychoanalytic terms, the template for shame is the feeling that is produced when the infant or young child desires and needs the approval and [love](#) of their parent and fails in their attempt to elicit the desired response. If the failure is pervasive and repetitive, the young child develops an organizing fantasy of being not only unloved, but **unlovable**. In the clinical setting, this is often a major impediment to progress in [therapy](#); patients who feel they are "bad", that is, unlovable, will feel undeserving of anything good. This makes it difficult for them to make changes that are in their own best interest. Their [unconscious](#) question becomes: How can I love myself and treat myself well if I am unlovable? Furthermore, since they are deeply convinced they are unlovable, they are also convinced that anyone who would know them well would inevitably reject them. As a result they are extremely sensitive to any negative emotional response from significant others.

People with [parents](#) who are not "good enough" ([D. W. Winnicott](#)) or are abusive or neglectful, tend to have more than the usual [narcissistic](#) vulnerability to slights because the chronic and severe failures by their caretakers of empathic [understanding](#) of what the child needs has caused disruptive levels of shame. Shame leads, defensively, to [rage](#), which is disorganizing for the young mind and leads to severe [personality](#) distortions (but that is a subject for further exploration at another time.)

Shame is the affective concomitant of narcissistic injury and we are highly motivated to avoid or minimize shame.

[Our Narcissistic culture has diminished the use of shame as a motivator for people. Today, no one is expected to be ashamed of any behavior; what used to be considered shameful is now more often hailed as a source of [self esteem](#). Examples are too numerous to mention, but a recent one stands out: Once upon a time behavior such as Charlie Sheen has exhibited would be considered so shameful as to warrant secrecy. Now it is big business.]

In the usual situation, children feel shame when they behave in ways which elicit disapproval from their parents. This is especially related to loss of control over themselves and their bodily

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/shrinkwrapped/201103/shame-third-pillar-civilization>

functions. For example, a child in the midst of toilet training will be ashamed of himself when he has a urine or bowel accident. He will feel diminished in the eyes of his disappointed mother and father. Since shame is such an unpleasant feeling, it serves to powerfully motivate the child to gain better control over his instinctual impulses. All of us have felt shame at one time or another and it is manageable, though intensely distasteful, and exerts a strong civilizing influence on our behavior.

On my personal blog, I have written about [religion](#) as one of the pillars of society. The laws and customs of a community are a second pillar. Law and community mores are essentially an external buttress for the functioning of society; that is, they are generated outside of the individual's mind and impinge upon it. [Religion](#) has some attributes that are external as well, but insofar as the individual has a personal relationship with his Deity (or Ethos), there is an internal dimension (usually internalized as part of the [conscience](#) or super-ego). Shame is a third pillar of civilization. It is the pillar that is most dependent on the internal structure of the personality.

If any of these pillars are weakened, the structure of civilization that is built upon it is weakened.

The Death of Shame⁵

[December 12, 2007](#) #culture

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Over the past few years, Aileen and I have continually returned to the question of why so many young people these days seem unwilling or unable to grow up. It is a question that has confused us, especially as we look to many of the young people we know. There was a time when young people seemed eager to grow up, to mature, and to head out into the world to make their mark on it. Or that is how we remember it (we were, after all, married at 21 and parents by 23). But those people now seem to be the exception more than the rule. More and more, it seems, young people (and increasingly older young people) are choosing to stay home, to stay in colleges, to earn a second or third or fourth degree. They are, it seems, refusing to grow up.

To help our thinking on this issue, I've been reading [The Death of the Grown-up](#), a fascinating book by Diana West and one that seeks to answer the question of "Where have all the grown-ups gone?" The book's subtitle is "How America's Arrested Development is Bringing Down Western Civilization." I suppose that says it all. West has studied this phenomenon and has determined that it is one that is going to have serious repercussions. The lines between child and adult are growing increasingly blurry. I hope to write a review of the book next week.

One section of the book that has caught my attention deals with the notion of "shame." Shame is a bit of a tricky concept, I think, as it seems to me to be both negative and positive. The Bible makes it clear that, in their innocence, before they invited sin into the world, Adam and Eve were "naked and unashamed." Written after the fact and written at a time when people could hardly conceive of nakedness as being anything *but* shameful, these words are clearly meant to make people think and to consider a world without shame. Shame, after all, in at least one of its forms, is product of guilt. Shame comes about as we realize our guilt or our inadequacy. Shame comes as we compare ourselves to a better standard or even as we compare ourselves to *another* standard (which is, more often than not, other people). So while it is a product of sin and a necessity only in an imperfect world, it is also a gift, of sorts. Shame is an aspect of God's common grace that keeps us from expressing ourselves in ways that would otherwise result in serious consequences.

But shame is becoming increasingly foreign in our culture. We hear of the way teens act these days—with 13 year old girls propositioning their male friends and dispensing sexual favors on the school bus; with men and boys alike proudly discussing just how much pornography they consume; with the sexual preferences of movie stars being discussed in the evening news; with commercials for sexual enhancers constantly playing on television. Where has shame gone?

West traces the decline of shame to the death of the notion of obscenity, especially in the world of art. "By the time the courts, in effect, declared obscenity was dead, they had killed something vital to a healthy society: the faculty of judgment that attempts to distinguish between what is

⁵ <https://www.challies.com/the-death-of-shame/>

obscene and what is not obscene—the avowedly ‘grown-up’ sensibility of an outmoded authority figure who had long relied on a proven hierarchy of taste and knowledge until it was quite suddenly leveled. From this leveling came another casualty: society’s capacity, society’s willingness, to make even basic distinctions between trash and art.”

This has led to all manner of offensive, vulgar art being paraded in front of us, even if that art is just plain bad. The question is not, as it should be, “is it good art?” Rather, people simply cry “censorship” and allow anything to be displayed, no matter how vulgar, no matter how devoid of artistic merit. We can no longer distinguish between trash and art. Exempting art from censorship laws, effectively concluding that there is no such thing as obscenity, has had consequences.

“Once the law balked at recognizing obscenity, the populace began to doubt the very basis for shame. With no legal, institutional support for consensus, little wonder the bottom fell out from under morality.” As obscenity became a thing of the past, so too did its necessary consequence: shame. Shame is increasingly missing from our culture. We do things, watch things, enjoy things, participate in things that at any other time and in any other place would be considered shameful. Politicians show little remorse, little shame, when their dirty sexual deeds are exposed. Parents cavort with children, acting like children. “Shamelessness sheds light on why it is that American matrons are more likely to host sex-toy parties than Tupperware parties; why the Major Leagues showcase Viagra ads at home plate; why a presidential fund-raiser for GOP candidates includes a well-endowing—that is, *contributing*—porn star and pornographer; and why at grocery store checkouts shoppers can check out “hot sex tips” along with a loaf of bread. We have all learned—or at least we have all been taught—that the mental blush is superseded by the genital tingle.”

The paradox is something Christians know well. “Less restraint doesn’t necessarily deliver greater freedom.” It should be not surprising that the “land of the free” is also the land with more laws than just about any other nation in the world. With rules comes freedom—not with a lack of restraint. Humans being what we are, we rely on rules to keep us acting within the bounds of morality and within the bounds of shame. When these rules are tossed out and when shame disappears, so too does our willingness to restrain ourselves. With no concept of obscenity there is no shame; with no shame, anything goes. “In a shameless culture...self restraint is continually undermined.”

“By the twenty-first century, shame and embarrassment have zero association with sexuality—or so we are endlessly, numbingly instructed—and, correspondingly, an infantile lack of behavioral restraint may be observed in everything from freak dancing, to ‘super-size’ eating, to McMansion-building. Without the concept of obscenity, without reason for shame, the ‘self’ in self-control sees no greater, larger, socially significant point in holding back.”

What has happened to shame? Well, it appears that shame has been put to death. “Culturally speaking, obscenity is all but legally obsolete, and shame is a kind of secular sin—a symptom of ‘hang-ups,’ of repression, of inhibition, of liberty lost.”

The only thing our society tells us to be ashamed of, it seems, is shame itself.

Loss of a sense of shame⁶

By [Cal Thomas](#) - The Washington Times - Tuesday, December 15, 2009

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

Early in my column-writing career I took note of comments by the singer Madonna. A skin magazine had published nude photos of her, taken when she was a teenager. An interviewer asked if she was ashamed about having posed for them. She threw the question back, saying something like, “What have I got to be ashamed of?”

Today, shame seems to be something experienced after an action, if it is felt at all. Shame now follows what used to be considered shameful behavior before everything became relative and tolerable in a society that judges nothing, except those who judge certain behavior to be wrong.

Some commentators claim that Tiger Woods’ multiple extramarital affairs might be a “teachable moment.” If Mr. Woods, along with some celebrities and philandering politicians, ignore the ancient prophets and proverbs that warn of the consequences of infidelity, who among us moderns has the moral standing to teach them, and average men, how not to cause serious harm to themselves and their families?

There are standards for swinging a golf club. Violate them and the ball goes awry. There are standards for living an ordered life. Violate them and your life can land in a “bunker.”

It would be difficult to improve on this sage advice: “For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.” (Proverbs 5:3-6)

Everything in modern culture seems to deplore the straight and promote the crooked. People who wish to promote the tawdry, and the commerce that makes many of them a fine living, brand those who seek to remind others of eternal truths as “fanatics” and “fundamentalists.” But there are casualties to such behavior, much as there is collateral damage to an out-of-control Congress that spends money as if we had it in the bank while mortgaging our country to foreigners, many of whom wish for its destruction.

What is wrong with such people? Why won’t they see the consequences of errant behavior? It isn’t that they can’t. They can. But they have chosen not to, which is worse than not seeing. Having an unavoidable accident is different from driving drunk and having a head-on collision that leads to the death of the other driver. Is there too little information about the consequences of drunk driving?

⁶ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/dec/15/loss-of-a-sense-of-shame/>

Like the inmates who thought they could commit the perfect crime and avoid arrest, there are those who have become prisoners of their lower nature, believing they could get away with bad behavior. Their enablers, flunkies, political advisers and interest groups, tell them to keep doing what they are doing because it provides them with employment or political power.

At the heart of every “sin” (if I may use a word that has been replaced by the less judgmental word “dysfunctional”) is pride. The Satan character in the film “The Devil’s Advocate” says “pride is my favorite sin.” That’s because it leads to all the others, including sexual infidelity and the infidelity of politicians who abuse the power given to them by the people, becoming poor stewards of other people’s money.

Let’s not have any more of this business about someone being able to be one person in private and another in public. Anyone who breaks a pledge to his wife to remain faithful is more likely than not to engage in public behavior that is shameful, suspect and in some cases illegal.

Dictionary.com defines shame: “the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something dishonorable, improper.”

The definition presumes a standard by which “honorable” and “proper” might be measured. We have abandoned that standard in favor of doing whatever makes us feel good. And then we feign surprise when growing numbers among us surrender to the “music of the night.”

That’s a shame.