

Because I'm committed to building the beloved community, where each of us can authentically be who we truly are I want to talk with you about shame this morning. It's only by being more authentic that we are able to accept the authenticity of others. There is a quote by Marianne Williamson that says it so well.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,

we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,

our presence automatically liberates others.

My ministry is largely about promoting authenticity, otherwise know as being real. That means helping people become more accepting, more comfortable with who they are, as they are, warts and all. We are human, none of us are perfect. By definition, to be human is to be flawed. In order for us to be authentically who we are, we must claim not only our strengths and gifts, but our faults and frailties as well.

My own journey along this road of authenticity has taught me a great deal. First, I've learned that there is more to me than my wonderfulness, a difficult learning, but true. Second, I learned that I could survive wrestling with those things about myself that embarrassed me. More surprisingly, I discovered that the less energy I spent on trying to keep my closet door bolted the more whole I became. Third, so often, when I grappled with those things that embarrassed me, I found shame lurking, sometimes hulking, in the corners of my psyche.

I've come to believe that Shame not love is the most powerful emotion we humans experience. And it's not low on the frequency scale either. You know, it's a shame we don't talk about it more often, because shame can have a powerful impact in our lives.

I believe shame is not talked about because we are shamed by our shame. This is a perfectly circular construction. It serves to keep us from talking about shame. We don't talk about shame because we are ashamed of what we would have to talk about. [Repeat] A large part of Shame's power is that it is insidious.

Lets acknowledge that shame is one of those so-called negative emotions. There is little about shame that's fun. Talking about shame may make you uncomfortable, it may make you squirm and it may push some of your buttons. I ask that you wear your seat

belts, trust the driver and know that we will all arrive at our destination safely. In the end, there is good news.

Shame can be like a noise in the dark. Our minds can grab hold of a sound and turn it into a monster. In the light of day, that very same sound may go unnoticed. I want to shine a light on shame, de-fang it, pull it into the light of day and befriend it. Yes, make friends with it.

In order to find shame, we usually have to go looking for it. It's not one of those emotions that tends to sit out in the middle of the room, like laughter, happiness and joy. It's not as visible as anger, sadness or frustration. Shame tends to hide-- behind or beneath other emotions. I found shame hiding behind a strong need I had to always be "appropriate".

In the early 80's, I worked for a major corporation. I was on the fast track, getting promotions and stock options. By all accounts I was being successful. But deep inside, I knew something wasn't right. Organizationally, I wasn't fairing as well as my white, mostly female counterparts. With the help of a black psychiatrist, I came to understand that I was being confronted by institutional racism.

For a couple years I wrestled with issues of race and racism. Some of those issues were external and others I carried on the inside. I began to see how I had internalized the cultural notion of black people as "less than". I had internalized the devaluation of blackness. While being a smart and successful professional in corporate America, there was a part of me that was ashamed of who I was, what I was, and what that might mean.

It wasn't obvious, at least not to me. I was a proud man. I was proud of my family. I was proud of my work and accomplishments. But I always felt the need to be appropriate. I monitored myself, so I wouldn't stand out too much. I always followed the rules. I had to do things the "right" way, the "white" way. It took me a long time to understand that what sat behind my need to be appropriate, to do things the "right" way, was a deep seated fear of being seen as "one of *those* people". Put bluntly, I didn't want to be seen as a nigger.

I had to work at untangling what was real for me. I had to work at understanding which of my beliefs and behavior were driven by fear of being seen as "less than" and which were driven simply by who I was? I had to come to grips with culturally induced shame. I was not ashamed of my behavior or what I did, I was ashamed of how I might be seen.

I came to understand there is a difference between feeling badly or negatively judgemental about WHAT one does and Who one is. It's a lot easier to change or fix what you did wrong...there can be hope for a better day. But where is there hope if the "problem" is who you are, a part of your very fiber?

These experiences taught me the power of shame, and it taught me how to extricate myself from it's grip. I paid attention to shame. I made myself conscious of shame. I looked at it with intentionality. I invited it into my awareness. Acceptance and familiarity de-fanged my shame, along with a lot of acceptance and love from friends.

The lessons I learned served me well as I learned about and now counsel, those who are dealing with loss, grief and bereavement. You see, shame often lurks behind the pain we experience with significant loss.

When one gets laid off from a job, we can experience any number of different emotions. But somewhere, beneath the fear and anxiety is often a feeling that "*I am not good enough*", prompting a sense of shame. After the loss of a long-term friendship or a marriage, we often feel there must be something wrong with me. We experience shame. After the death of a loved one, beneath the grief, is often the lurking question "If only...if only I had seen it sooner, if only we had gone a different way, if only I had been more forceful with the doctor"...prompting a sense of failure, self-loathing, shame.

We can talk to our friends, family and colleagues about our anxiety from having been laid off. But it's awfully hard to admit feeling "I'm not good enough". We're allowed to grieve, but how many of us are willing to talk about the shame we might feel because we feel we've failed to keep someone alive?

When I saw the shame people experienced from every day, real life occurrences, I knew I had to go public. I had to start talking about shame. I had to bring this thing called shame into our collective awareness. I was pained by how hard we make it for people to grieve, as they need to. I was pained by how hard we make it for people to simply be where they are and do what they need to do in order to heal themselves.

Our culture makes it so hard for people to speak the truth of what's real for them. There are those of us who have discovered that we really don't like being a parent or lawyer or whatever else we were told we should be. And because we often don't feel safe talking about such feelings, we feel shame and a need to keep it secret. There are those who have a gambling, drug or alcohol addiction and feel too much shame to let it be known. There are others who have cheated on their spouse or partner. There are those who have thought about suicide. There are those who have thought about just packing their bags and running away. There is nothing new under the sun.

The culture, our parents, our families, our church give us *so* many messages about the way it *should* be, the way *you* should be, the way *I* should be. But those are external messages, they come from someone else, they come from outside of you and me. Your truth, my truth may be different. And you have a right to your truth, you have a right to seek your truth. We must take personal responsibility for the choices we make, but we do have a right to make choices. We have a right to be our authentic selves.

Being our authentic selves can be so very hard. One would think that being yourself would be the easiest thing in the world. But au contraire. Being yourself can feel like the hardest thing in the world. Being yourself can take great courage.

I think about those who are gay, bi-sexual or transgendered. To go public or the first time one thinks about going public may feel like a life or death decision. And for oh too many, it has been exactly that. For many, going public about the truth of who they are has cost them professions, their friends, their families, even their lives. And for so many who have chosen *not* to be public, it too has cost them dearly. In many cases, it has cost them a life... a life lived as they truly are.

Life in a body that feels different or alien must be difficult. Not being able to talk with others about it must be even harder. And being made to feel shame about your truth must be the worst of all worlds.

We as a culture, we as Unitarian Universalist, have come a long way. Not long ago, another state, this State, determined same sex partners have the same constitutional right to marriage as heterosexuals. But for the transgendered, we have so much further to go. Our society still needs to learn that we are not just the male the doctor determines us to be at birth. We are not just the female our pink dress implies. As humans we can be so much more complicated than that.

We all carry something inside us that we want to keep from public view. Probably a number of things. The details may change, but there is nothing new under the sun. It is said, that which is most personal, is most universal. Whatever you or I feel we need to keep hidden, there are others who feel the very same way. There are others with the exact same fears or concerns.

Shame is based on a belief, ...that we should do, act or be a certain way. It's a belief, just a believe. We get to *choose* what we believe. **We** get to decide what is right for us. Now **That's** good news, and there's more!

We, are loveable just as we are. There is more to us than our shame. If we look hard enough, we can find a supportive community. We, are not alone. With carefully chosen help, we can learn to deal with our shame with conscious intentionality. We can pull our shame into our awareness. We **can** learn to de-fang our shame.

I want our churches to support this work. I want our churches to support authenticity. I want our churches to be a solid foundation of the beloved community. I want **this Place** to be a place where we are free to be our true selves. Where we can bring our hopes and wishes, our joys and concerns and have them shared by others in community. I want **this Place** to be a place where we can shine a light into our dark corners and be free.

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May it be. Ashe, Amen