

Wilfried Ehrmann

Shame

The Mysterious Feeling

**In the Vast Land of the Soul
Volume 1**

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Introductory words

I have never come across a book on shame with this level of detail and holism. Not even Sigmund Freud commented on it in detail. Particularly from a psychoanalytical point of view, this emotion seems to me to be of fundamental importance in relation to our behaviour and our actions. Shame is a co-trigger and cause of many social anxieties.

In this work, the author of the book "The Evolution of Consciousness" (an interesting and also very readable concept on the development of our socio-cultural evolved consciousness) has succeeded in taking a further step towards understanding human beings in their psychological development by dealing with the important topic of shame, which many authors (perhaps out of shame?) have so far avoided exploring to this extent and in this detail.

It is very exciting how courageously, authentically and comprehensively Wilfried Ehrmann describes, works on, expands and analyses this topic to make it easily understandable. The readability and the many case examples in the book, not only trigger aha experiences when reading, but also lead to many insights that help us to "understand". Because by addressing experiences and traumas that we have all suffered in some form on this topic, healing becomes possible through recognition and understanding. That is what makes this book so valuable!

Even after my 38 years working as a psychotherapist, this book, surprisingly, has brought me many new insights and thrown light onto my own unconscious shadow parts. Therefore, I consider the therapeutic value of this book on shame to be particularly significant and I am happy to incorporate essential insights from it into my work with clients.

At a time when social anxieties are increasing and the autonomy of human beings seems to be endangered, this book has a special significance because it helps us to recognise the root causes of personal suffering (which even reach far into the prenatal phase of life) and thus to heal them.

The honest self-reflection of the author, who follows a humanistic worldview and who, with objectivity and great sensitivity, repeatedly points to the uniqueness of the human being, is very touching and underlines the intention of this book when he writes: "Where shame recedes, human dignity once again takes its rightful place".

I am grateful that this book has been written and would be happy if others also experienced the release of old feelings of shame when reading it. This book is hard to put down.

Dr Martin Gartner, Clinical and Health Psychologist, Psychotherapist

Foreword

For a long time, the feeling of shame has been given only incidental and secondary attention. It does not even appear in many lists of basic emotions (e.g., Gieler et al. 2010, p. 30). Both psychological research and therapeutic practice, with their diverse methods, have focused very much on the emotions of fear and aggression, and there are a large number of studies, specialist publications and popular books on both topics, while shame has long been confined to a "shameful" secondary role. In the great work of Sigmund Freud, there are only a few scattered remarks on this emotion, and for this reason, too, it led only a shadowy existence in the field of psychoanalysis for a long time.

Only in the last few decades has shame become more of a focus of interest both in research and in practical therapeutic work. Some researchers now describe shame as the main emotion of daily life and the predominant cause of emotional stress, with much stronger effects on mental imbalance than anger, sadness and fear.

The US-American shame and vulnerability researcher Brené Brown once said in an interview: "If I am asked at a party what I do and I want to continue talking to the person, I answer: I am a vulnerability researcher. After five minutes, people usually confide in me about their life story. If I don't feel like talking further, I say I am a shame researcher. That's how you get rid of someone very quickly."

Shame: a topic to run away from? That's understandable, because it's such an unpleasant feeling that no one wants to be reminded of at a party. So why would anyone voluntarily read a book about it? Even though shame is not a nice and pleasant feeling, it plays a very important role in our lives, with ourselves, in our relationships and in the society we live in. It shows itself in many facets of our lives and interferes with many experiences. It often remains in the background and is easily overlooked. It interferes in our everyday life, determines our actions and influences our mood, often without us noticing.

Therefore, it makes sense to get to know shame better and to understand it better. After all, it is our companion from a very early age, and it can do us no harm to become acquainted with it and possibly make friends with it. We can use our curiosity to uncover many of the secrets of shame while reading this book. However, it may still remain shrouded in the veil of mystery when we put the book aside.

Why write a book about this elusive subject, which is so hard to grasp and often acts from behind?

Writing this book has been a doubly interesting process for me. Writing is always exciting for me, no matter what the subject, with the excitement, the frustration, the breakthroughs and writer's blocks, with the feelings of creative growth and stagnation, and, finally, with the uplifting feeling of holding the finished work in my hands; however, there are also special challenges with the topic of shame. Shame is a feeling that wants to force us to withdraw from the public eye. Those who feel shame would prefer to hide. Writing a book is the exact opposite of this: it drags the author with all his strengths and weaknesses and his subject with all its facets into the public spotlight.

In addition, the task of making public something that is itself reticent, continuously brings one into contact with feelings of shame: Who am I to write a book about it? There are much better writers who have tried their hand at this subject. What do readers think of someone who writes so much about shame? What is my part in the different aspects of shame? Will I succeed in presenting this wide topic comprehensively or will I fail? Will I write concretely and experientially enough and will I meet the demands of well-educated professional readers? Will I overlook errors in content or typography that will be blamed on me afterwards? Does the book have lengths or incomprehensible passages that will annoy the reader? Have I overlooked essential aspects of the subject? And so on.

Shame is an important part of our inner life that deserves much attention. But it should never be so powerful as to hinder us in our constructive and creative projects – that is one of the central messages of this book. For us to gain clarity and certainty in the mysterious land of shame, it takes a deep and consistent engagement with the subject. That was one of my motivations for writing about and against shame. And that is why I am convinced that this book deserves its publication and its readership.

Some of the details of the approximately 60 case studies in this book, which originate from my therapeutic work with clients, have been changed so that the people concerned cannot be identified. To all the people who have placed their trust in me as therapists and group leaders over the many years of my work, I offer my thanks and appreciation for all that they have taught me in the process of exploring together. I thank my own therapists and supervisors for what I was able to learn about myself with their support.

Shame is a serious subject, quite far from fun and light; however it can often be handled quickly and easily with humour. To lighten things up, I have therefore interspersed a few jokes in this book. We are very human in our shame, and part of that is that we can always take ourselves for a ride.

For the sake of fluid readability, I refrain from consistent gendering and keep changing the assignments. I owe a great deal to the great researchers of shame, especially Léon Wurmser, Stephan Marks, Mischa Hilgers and Jens Tiedemann, as well as to all the other authors who have made important contributions to the discussion of the broad topic. I have processed the broad field of shame with my own linguistic possibilities and shaped it with the experiences from my life as well as from therapeutic work. In the course of writing, I first became aware of how widely ramified shame is in our lives - on the individual as well as on the collective level. That is why there are some sections in this book that read more like introductions to a publication to come, because there is not enough space for an in-depth exploration. So, some of the subtopics are only touched upon (e.g., the role of shame in society, in communication, in adulthood) in order to at least open up insights into the respective areas. The individual sections in the developmental history of shame also deserved much more space and detail. At such points, the suggestion would be to independently think further and to use other sources.

A special focus of this presentation of the topic of shame is on prenatal development – this is a new territory in shame research. For many years I have been dealing with the early phase of our individual lives with their many exciting aspects and I am always fascinated by the insights we can gain here. They point us towards the high vulnerability and the miracles and challenges from this time, which need to be understood in their effects on our lives.

My wish is for readers to gain more awareness about the influences of shame on their own feelings, on interpersonal processes and on social contexts. May we succeed in contributing more and more to a shame-free world. Where shame recedes, human dignity takes its rightful place. People who live in awareness of their dignity are the best guarantors for an open and adaptive society.

Recognising and understanding our emotional responses allows us to find ways out of protective states and into the energy of growth and creativity. This book is about understanding more about shame in order to develop constructive ways of dealing with it so that it helps us in life instead of blocking us.

Quotations from German texts in this book are translated by the author.

Basic Anthropological and Psychological Assumptions

I would like to begin this book by outlining my conception of the human being, my anthropological and psychological presuppositions, so that it is clear from which background the following explorations are formed. Not every reader has to accept these views, but the ideas and insights presented can also be interesting and helpful if someone prefers a different model of the human being.

I see the human being as a body-soul unity, not as an amalgamation of two fundamentally separate entities. The physical side is spiritual, the spiritual side is physical. Moods that we experience are at the same time hormonal processes in our body, which in turn can be influenced and changed by mental processes. There is no mind without a body and no body without a mind.

Every human being is unique. Nature is not able to produce identical forms and shapes: No raindrop and no snowflake, no bird chirping and no blade of grass is the same as another; so why should one human being be identical to another? In addition, we are not fixed and defined beings, but beings that are constantly changing, learning, growing and adapting. This is also what we need most - recognition for this uniqueness.

We are densely written sheets of paper with empty spaces, we are fragile because many things can easily throw us off balance, and we have infinite creativity and plasticity so that we can cope with so many predicaments that we get into. Fragility and strength, vulnerability and healing capacity are the poles between which human existence moves.

Human beings are social beings, always part of social units, in constant interaction with other human beings, individuals, groups and larger communities. Therefore, the social dimension is interwoven into every bodily-mental unit, which cannot be understood without it. Social also means political, economic and ecological - we are involved in the fate of those close to us and also those we do not know at all, the nearest and the furthest away. We are part of decision-making processes that determine the directions in which our society and humanity as a whole are going. We help determine whether or not humanity and the diversity of nature will continue to exist in the foreseeable