

Some Notes on the Subject of Shame and Recovery

Walter F. Ricci, M.D.

All of us as part of humanity, live connected to some standard of perfection. Whether we are aware of this or not, there is a system and powerful structure in our minds that is quickly activated if there is a gap or deviation in our pre-established standards and values. The distance between that level and the one of our actual performance, appraised either subjectively or objectively, will be experienced by us as a state of pride or shame. Thus, any experience that engages the evaluation of the self, according to the valence that we attribute to that moment, will be subjectively felt as deadening or enlivening. Like an inexorable law, whatever does not increase our pride will increase our shame, whether this is perceived or not. Like a light touch or an intense blow, it is omnipresent with the same inescapability as the law of gravity. The degree of the perceived lack of achievement interacting with our resiliency and coping mechanisms, will determine the final configuration that the activation of shame will produce. The activation of shame will usually be experienced as deadening, while the perception of pride is felt as enlivening. To be ashamed is to be disconnected; we are shorn off from ourselves or the parts of ourselves that make us acceptable and lovable. Furthermore, the feeling of shame may disconnect us from others in our lives and in our community with whom we are deeply engrossed. Connectedness is vital for the integrity of our psychic cohesion, for our state of wellbeing, and for our very survival. When we disconnect even parts of ourselves, we are sequestered from the sources of vitality necessary to maintain the existence of those parts, and keep us fully alive. Like a fox or a wolf caught in a trap, who will amputate its own leg to be free of the trap, that same sacrifice of part of ourselves to ensure the chances of survival of the rest of our feeling and experiencing selves will occur. That aspect of our self that is segregated or eliminated is the part that is found as unacceptable or too painful for exposure to the prying eyes of the other, or even worse, the implacable eye of our unconscious. The sentinel of our values dozes off lightly but awakens

quickly to the slightest deviation of our values, and lets us know with a roar that it has awakened. Part of our self is sensed as damaged or defective, and the rest is the pained and relentless witness of that defect just revealed. The witnessed sentinel of the observing self, based on previous experiences and history, will oscillate between nurturing and compassion, and ruthless judgement.

Steps in Restoring Our Cohesiveness

To reconnect with others as well as with ourselves, we must first be able to recognize that the bond between the missing connection and the experience of our wellbeing has been broken. This means that we have to activate a basic resiliency in order to take the first step toward recovery, and this first most important step is the most challenging: that being our awareness of what has occurred. Awareness can be brutal. It means trading the serenity of our anesthetized ignorance for the pain of our shameful condition. The difficulty is in questioning and confronting the role we play in our perpetual victimization. By this confrontation, we exchange the oxygen-deprived, highly isolated stance of always being the judge of the others' lack of worth for the tragedy of our own debacle. Whatever our defensive maneuver, whether it is engaged automatically or not, we must reign in our defenses. By so doing, we shall bring the light of insight to our eyes along with undesirable sounds to our ears, and feelings of torment to our souls. This is a Herculean task, and one that many are not ready to confront. This confrontation will mean a radical change in the manner in which we see ourselves, like exchanging the role of the master for the one of the slave, or the perfection of pride for the ignominy of humiliation. This must be balanced with the awareness that the energy required and the price to be paid in keeping our self-deception alive, is in fact energy ill spent, and leading us to the destruction of our lives and the lives of others.