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On Researching Shame in the Church

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This article explores the way in which undertaking research on shame in the church as part of my ordination training has engendered transformative learning impacting both my professional and personal life. The origin of my interest in shame was an incident at primary school and the article begins with a short autoethnographic account of this event. The research is described in relation to the following processes: clarifying the concept of shame; autoethnography, vulnerability, practical theology, conscientization, pedagogy, catharsis, healing, liturgy and ecclesial. Phenomenological definitions of shame, institutional shame and practical theology as developed in the thesis are included.

KEYWORDS shame, autoethnography, church, transformative learning, research

Introduction

I have that horrible knotted feeling in my stomach. Why would they ask that question? That's so horrible, so mean, I don't want to be at school. As the teacher begins to go around the class, I put my hand up – 'I feel ill, can I go and sit quietly for a bit please'. The feeling of relief when I am sent to the nurse but the feeling of dread at having to repeat the lies. The last thing in the world I want to do is say how much I weigh, I know I am a bit chubby but I am tall and sporty too but no one will take any notice of that. They will just laugh as they see I weigh more than most of the boys. I get back to the classroom, I don't believe it, they are still doing the exercise! Thinking I had avoided it I chose a low figure and ignored the looks of disbelief but I blushed, felt bad about myself and wondered why school wanted to show me up like that (Nash, 2015: 4–5).

This inadvertent public shaming happened at school when I was eight years old. This incident shaped my life. When I had the opportunity to do a piece of research as part of my ordination training it was this experience I returned to. Reflecting on this incident resulted in a transformative learning experience and this article seeks to

articulate different dimensions of this. Transformative learning is ‘the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) — sets of assumption and expectation — to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change’ (Mezirow, 2009: 92). This definition does not embrace a physical or embodied element of learning but that was also part of my experience.

I undertook this research as part of my ordination training and finished it as I came to the end of my curacy. For the sake of transparency and reflexivity I am a middle aged, middle class, married, childless, white, introverted woman. Vocationally I am a full-time theological educator (with a focus on those who work with children and young people) and also a self-supporting minister at a church in Birmingham. My church experience includes various streams of Anglicanism, Baptist, new church and Pentecostal. This broad range of experiences had introduced me to what Douglas (1966) describes as purity guidelines. This is where many experiences of shame can originate from as boundaries exist (often unarticulated) where one is sometimes conscious of being out not in, disapproved of and in some way flawed. Such experiences can engender shame. Examples of this emerged in the research. Sadly, a focus group participant reported how some people feel shame because they experience being judged but have no idea what it is that they are doing wrong, as no one tells them. However, other responses make it clear that much of what people are shamed for they are aware of and it relates to issues which are more cultural than theological such as social class, area lived in, dress, appearance, literacy level. Respondents on both sides of more theological debates about such things as the ministry of women and sexuality reported experiencing shame from those holding an alternative position.

I have been employed in Christian ministry since 1984, and while not agreeing with the perspective, I was aware that in getting ordained some would look at me differently. I would also be a more overt representative of God than previously I had been, particularly when wearing a dog collar and robes. Because of a history of feeling shamed in institutional contexts I wanted to be able to explore the topic of shame and the church in depth. I was particularly conscious of not wanting to be a priest who inappropriately shamed others. I could write an entire thesis on the meaning of the word inappropriate in the previous sentence. However, for the sake of clarity for this article I mean causing people to experience shame in the context of their engagement in church in a way which is not in keeping with the God I seek to mediate. Part of this process included what Scharen and Vigen call a ‘courageous willingness’ (2011: 19) to be changed by the research process. This led me to engage in extensive personal writing before I asked others to share their shaming experiences. One of my pedagogical philosophies is not to ask a learner to do something that I am unwilling to do myself and I needed to be aware of the risks, and perhaps rewards, of encouraging people to reflect on such a difficult topic. Initially I considered what I was doing as autoethnography ‘a way of using personal experience to investigate a particular issue or concern that has wider cultural or religious significance’ (Walton, 2014: xxxi–xxxii). However, towards the end of writing my thesis I encountered Walton’s use of the term ‘life writing’ which is ‘a way of reflecting upon how experience shapes identity’ (Walton, 2014:

xxxii) and found that term resonating with me. Life writing is perhaps a more useful term to use with others when encouraging them to explore their own shame experiences.

In the rest of this article I offer a brief understanding of shame and then explore different facets of my learning in relation to the different processes that I encountered in my study. These processes engaged with autoethnography, vulnerability, practical theology, conscientization, pedagogy, catharsis, healing, liturgy and ecclesiology. These areas emerged as I re-read the thesis and thought reflexively, a year after submission, about how the research had impacted me.

Defining shame

There is no clear consensus as to either the meaning or nature of shame. Shame is culturally determined and while historical western approaches broadly see shame as a negative evaluation of self, more collectivist cultures see shame in relation to external expectation or pressure. This suggests some tension between how shame may be experienced in a western church setting, as theologically it is more of a collectivist organization but also operates in what some are seeing as a growing shame culture (Watts, 2001: 54). In order to try and understand shame more fully I engaged in widespread reading across a range of disciplines including theology, psychology, sociology and anthropology. This led to me developing a phenomenological definition which drew from the breadth of research and writing in the field:

Shame can cause us to act both positively and negatively, it is contextual and related to an audience including an ideal or internalised other. Positively it may constrain our behaviour in ways which maintain appropriate boundaries, self-respect, facilitates intimacy, discretion, dignity and is facilitated by our conscience. Negatively, shame may involve disgrace, estrangement, exclusion, believing oneself to be worthless, flawed, contaminated, unlovable and manifest in a variety of ways including physiological, withdrawal and rage.

It is this latter type of shame that I focused on in my research. I understand disgrace shame in a church context as:

the consequence of practices, structures, processes, behaviour, attitudes and liturgy that people encounter through their involvement in and with the church and other Christian institutions, which fail to reflect the reality of the body of Christ as exemplifying the love, life, work and example of Jesus and which engender shame in individuals, groups or communities.

The literature suggests that shame and guilt can often be confused. Evocatively, McNish talks about guilt as making a mistake and shame as being a mistake (2004: 24), a widely held differentiation across disciplines. An illustrative explanation of the powerful and destructive nature of shame is this:

When you are shamed, the space around you is eviscerated. Now your every move draws negative attention. Hostility and disgust are flung at you. It is impossible from outside to even imagine the humiliation that shame brings. All the natural shelter and support

around your presence is taken from you ... Everything about you is telescoped into the single view of this one shameful thing. Everything else is forgotten. A kind of psychological murdering is done. The mystery of your life is reduced to one thing. You become a 'thing of shame'. (O'Donohue, 1998: 115)

Reading such descriptions helped confirm to me that I did not want anyone to experience this as a consequence of my ministry.

In order to identify what shame might look like in ministerial praxis I developed a typology which identified shame as occurring in six domains: personal, relational/vicarious, communal, structural, theological and historical. Identifying these different contexts helped me to see how shame can permeate a setting and might manifest itself in different ways and also that there were a range of facets of my ministry that I needed to be conscious of the potential to shame in or encounter shame in. Discussing these six domains in detail is outside of the scope of this article but I have written elsewhere on my typology of shame in the church in relation to youth ministry (Nash, 2017).

An autoethnographic process

I framed my thesis with two accounts of personal experience written in autoethnographic mode. I began by telling my story through a 'shame' lens, and ended it with a more personal reflection on the research journey in the light of my formation as a priest as an afterword. I was drawn to using autoethnography because of underlying principles that emerged in my review of the literature such as the production of 'meaningful, accessible, and evocative research, grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to ... experiences shrouded in silence' (Ellis *et al.* 2011: 2). While I had prolonged discussions about the wisdom or otherwise of engaging in autoethnographic writing with my supervisors, ultimately, I concluded that it was important to pursue. It was only towards the end of my doctoral journey that I read Walton's helpful observation that

very often we will seek to speak out of epiphanic moments of transformation. Frequently these epiphanies will be linked to embodied experiences that are rarely voiced in institutional religious contexts but nevertheless carry great significance for us. Evocative autoethnographic writing can also convey the complexity and ambiguity of our religious selves. (2014: 5)

In reading this it became clearer to me that shame for me is a deeply fundamental issue which goes to the heart of who I think I am. That is a person made in the image of God but who had somehow lost the mystery, awe and acceptance of what that means because of my reactions to things I had experienced.

Early in my research I had the opportunity to present some ideas to a group of practical theologians and one of the exercises was to reframe a song, *At Seventeen* (Ian, 1975), which for me had evoked the shame of adolescence around who I was or was not. This is what one participant wrote:

I learned the truth at 23
That church was meant for men, not me

That girls should learn with quiet grace
 And never run about the place
 I learned that leaders had to be
 Clothed in respectability
 And women should modestly obey
 And know the proper words to pray ...

This was an example of how the church as an institution can shame people. My participant had put into words something that I had experienced and the poetic form of the writing touched something deep inside as I heard the pain and resonated with it. I know more of her story than this and am clear that shame is what she experienced in this setting.

A vulnerable process

I cannot talk or write about shame without being vulnerable. Because of my commitment to exploring my shame I was aware that I would be exposing things about my own life. This risks others looking at me differently, whether the difference is positive or negative largely depends on who they are. In deciding to begin each lecture or seminar about my research with a personal story and my thesis with an autoethnographic foreword I experienced what Forber-Pratt describes as ‘voluntarily standing up naked in front of your peers, colleagues, family, and the academy, which is a bold decision!’ (2015: 821). However, there are reasons for doing this. One is a personal commitment to vulnerability as part of a rule of life I follow as a companion of the Northumbria Community. Another is that sometimes hearing someone share a difficult experience and some of the legacies of this help us to see that we are not alone. This is particularly true over pressures to conform or being made to feel insufficient in a church context in ways which seem dissonant to the person God created us to be.

A practical theological process

I undertook the research as a practical theologian and wanted to work through a process that reflected my discipline. An early task was to come to my own understanding of what practical theology was. I approached this phenomenologically which resulted in a definition of practical theology formed of words which together embraced my understanding of practical theology: holistic, creative, experiential, contextual, socio-politically aware, interdisciplinary, analytical, integrative, dynamic, communal, loving, theological, reflexive endeavour with a primary focus on exploring, developing and transforming praxis. I crafted a research question which was designed to transform my own praxis: *How might an understanding of shame in the church inform approaches to ministerial praxis?* I was particularly influenced by Swinton and Mowat’s conclusion that ‘Practical Theology has a wider theological remit which involves challenging current practices in the hope that they will move closer towards faithfulness. This requires more than simply problem-solving. It involves consciousness raising’ (2006: 256). Consciousness raising was one of my drivers for undertaking the research. Having reflected on

both practical theology and qualitative research my process ended up with the following stages: noticing; reflexivity; describing/naming; focusing; investigating; analysing; evaluating; theorizing/synthesizing; responding.

A process of conscientization

My research revealed many instances of what I think was inadvertent shaming because there is not always a clear understanding of what shame is and the impact it has on people.

For example, a youth worker telling a young person off saying that ‘they are acting like they are five years old’ was, on reflection, seen as shaming the person concerned. There were several instances of parents feeling shamed, i.e. perceiving themselves as a bad parent, because of the response of individuals to their child’s (normal) behaviour. Some stopped going to church because it was too stressful. It is unlikely that someone who showed overt disapproval to a child’s behaviour was aware how a shame prone parent may feel in response. Ideas of what is ‘proper’ behaviour, dress, language etc. in a church setting can lead some to shame others who have a different set of norms or mores.

Shaming is a tactic that is sometimes used in relation to institutions and power over serious structural issues which result in oppression of those without or with less power (Jacquet, 2015).

It feels inappropriate to do it to individuals over issues which are usually cultural, around norms of particular groups or reflect prejudices or disputed theological concepts. Most ministerial training invites students to explore reflective practice; however, it sometimes feels that what is experienced by some is non-reflective practice which can be seen as ‘ineffective, demotivating (if not soul destroying) and unethical practice that discourages learning and development and reinforces low standards’ (Thompson and Thompson, 2008: x). To facilitate this process of conscientization I consider when I am facilitating learning if shame is a subject I need to include.

A pedagogical process

I have been an educator for most of my working life and wanted to reflect on pedagogy as part of my research. Ministerial education was unlike anything I had experienced before because of the power of others to write not just about what you can do, but also, more significantly, about who you are as a potential priest. I had no issues with my academic capacity to study but there is potential to experience shame in the way that reporting processes work and in our own reflections on our vocation. I began to see the importance of including shame in the curriculum for theological education. Shame is such a complex concept which is often misunderstood. It is important to both understand that it might occur in those we are working with pastorally but also in us. I have become more conscious of the breadth of examples I need to share when teaching on leadership and ministerial praxis and have found that being willing to share liberates others to do so too. With many courses starting with a biblical studies module, a brief introduction to a shame and honour culture

and the differences between understandings of that in biblical times and now is one way of beginning the conscientization of shame as a concept significant in ministry. I am also now more aware of the importance as a research supervisor in helping people become aware of, and if necessary process, any emotional or personal implications of the research they are undertaking.

Perhaps the most significant pedagogical insight is around a non-shaming approach to formation. There are times when the formation process can feel paternalistic or deskilling and I have had many conversations with people who feel that their previous skills and experience have not been well integrated into their training by the institutions where they have studied and that policies and procedures do not always take into account the reality and pressures of life. While from the perspective of being a recent student as well as a tutor I can see both sides, shaming people for the way they have chosen to deal with situations which are often outside of their control does not seem to be the most constructive approach. How you have a formation process which is robust but which treats people as autonomous adults who are seeking to be accountable to a wide range of stakeholders can be difficult. I am aware that occasionally I am seen as soft but that is when I am trying to be equitable and understand the unique pressures that individual students are under and I am passionate about helping everyone fulfil their potential but some are starting so far back. In formational contexts attitudes are often caught as much as taught and this comment from one of my participants summarizes a growing awareness of the power that those who are labelled leaders have can be used or abused:

there is a need for clergy to be open-minded about what their theological values are and that they may differ to others. Even if they continue to disagree, this should be an opportunity for dialogue and learning rather than finger-pointing. There should be an understanding of the impact of labels that people carry (that aren't easily shaken off) when the finger has been pointed.

A cathartic process

Shame has lingered in my life for fifty years and undertaking this research has enabled me to see myself through a new more informed understanding of how my past had been shaping my present and had the power to shape my future. While not all research will have the potential to do this there was an element of the process being cathartic and through this therapeutic for me. One of the ways I have felt shamed as a Christian is in being childless and to hear Jesus say 'blessed are the barren' (Luke 22.29) destigmatizes a shame that other parts of Scripture seem to impose (e.g. Genesis 30.23; 1 Samuel 1.11; Proverbs 30.15-16; Isaiah 54.1; Galatians 4.27). There were other encounters in the life of Jesus that helped me to deal with some of the baggage I carried as a woman who felt I did not fully fit with the expectations of what a female should be in the particular culture I was a part of. It helped liberate me to grow into more of the person God created and to be less conscious of the inappropriate expectations of others.

A healing process

Perhaps the most unexpected element of researching shame in the church was the impact on a long-standing personal problem I have had. For most of my life I have been chubby, fat, overweight, obese, depending on what word you want to use and what stage I was at in my endeavour to get to a healthy weight. In December 2016 I achieved my target weight after 14 months of attendance at Slimming World. I had lost 4.5 stone. I now have a body mass index in the top end of the normal range. I have lost weight before but never maintained that weight loss for any significant time. Although statistics and my previous experience are against me I am wondering if studying shame and fully processing that incident which happened 50 years ago means that I have also experienced healing around some of the issues which caused me to be overweight. I was an avid reader of *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (Orbach, 1978) as a young adult and I understand many of the reasons why there was some comfort in being overweight. The reasons I wanted to lose it were health related. I feel as if I have moved on from the shame that was triggered by the incident at school and am no longer trapped into old ways of thinking and living. I cannot fully articulate how the healing took place but through sharing my story in the thesis and in the several conferences and events that I spoke at, it became externalized. This put it into perspective and the reactions of others to my story helped me to see that my response was understandable and that the teacher was wrong. When I started this research it never occurred to me that an inner healing would be part of the process. Research can be personally as well as intellectually transformative. I am now more aware when discussing potential research projects with students that it can be important to think very widely about what the implications or consequences might be for them.

A liturgical process

Worship and liturgy may both cause people to experience shame or facilitate release from shame. However, I found few existing resources which focused on this. I am aware that any liturgical act needs to be very carefully thought through and that ‘sacred rituals must respect and balance human stories — both individual and communal — with the divine narrative without manipulation or deceit’ (Anderson and Foley, 2010: 43). In circumstances where the Bible may have been used to shame people, this is important. For example, I never use the Prayer of Humble Access when I preside at Holy Communion as for those who are shame prone saying ‘We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table’ may reinforce a negative self-image as opposed to encourage a healthy humility. Most people experiencing shame do not need to be told they are not worthy, they live with that all the time. I am also now more aware of how confession and absolution in Anglican liturgy focuses more on what we have done or not done and thus can be a response to guilt. This is the confession and absolution that I routinely use on a Sunday and the focus is clearly on doing which is related to guilt:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we have sinned against you and against our neighbour in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault. We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, who died for us, forgive us all that is past and grant that we may serve you in the newness of life to the glory of your name. Amen.

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon us, pardon and deliver us from all our sins, confirm and strengthen us in all goodness, and keep you in life eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (Archbishops' Council, 2000).

However, the liturgy for confession does not usually mention or address shame which may need a more therapeutic response. Litanies which include affirmation as well as forgiveness may better encompass experiences of shame as well as guilt. It may also be helpful to use a variety of media to mediate God's grace and mercy including Scripture, music, images and icons and that gazing on an image of Christ may be healing for some (Pembroke, 2010: 41).

An ecclesial process

Part way through the thesis I began to see the importance of articulating my understanding of ecclesiology as this impacted how I saw shame. My membership of the institutional church changed my life giving me a purpose, a vocation, a community and a place of belonging (to various degrees over the years). Succinctly I believe that the church is Christ's body in the world and we need to mediate his body in a way that reflects a loving, caring God. I realize the church has flaws, that she has and does behave badly but my hope is in the church and when Dykstra argues that he believes that 'in and through the church, God in Christ by the power of the Spirit actually makes people's lives better and stronger, more hospitable and gracious, more joyful, generous, and just' (2008: 42). Shame is one of those things that can prevent us being that sort of institution both corporately and individually. The task of building non-shaming churches falls to everyone, not just clergy, every member ministry was integral to what I believed from my teenage years onward. For churches to be a place of belonging, acceptance, honour and respect takes each person to play their part.

Conclusion

Through this research I have been 'acquiring a disposition' (Mezirow, 2009: 94) as I have become more critically reflective of assumptions, more engaged in discourses around shame and the practices which might trigger disgrace shame and am acting in the light of a transformed insight. The process of researching shame in the church has brought me a greater degree of wholeness and perhaps holiness as some of my experiences have been sacralized (Nash, 2009). It has also helped me process issues from the past; offered me fresh ways at looking at biblical teaching that are more life giving to me; has helped me to acknowledge things that I have done which have not been helpful; and has changed my praxis as

both a priest and a theological educator (see Nash, 2016). I conclude this article with an autoethnographic extract from the afterword of my thesis:

Finding faith for me was, eventually, like the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 13.44 where someone sells all they have to buy the field where they have found the hidden treasure. That this treasure was to be found in an earthen vessel (2 Corinthians 4.7) served to remind me of the fragility of humanity, and particularly my own vulnerability. When I read, and then heard, this part of the ordination service: ‘Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ’s own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross. It is to him that you will render account for your stewardship of his people’ (Archbishops’ Council, 2000). I was offered a new lens through which to see my ministerial praxis, people were treasure, to be treasured, this noun and verb were new for me in this context. If I think of those I treasure, disgrace shaming is something I would never want to inflict on them. Instead I want to cherish, protect, value and honour them (Nash, 2015: 175).

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