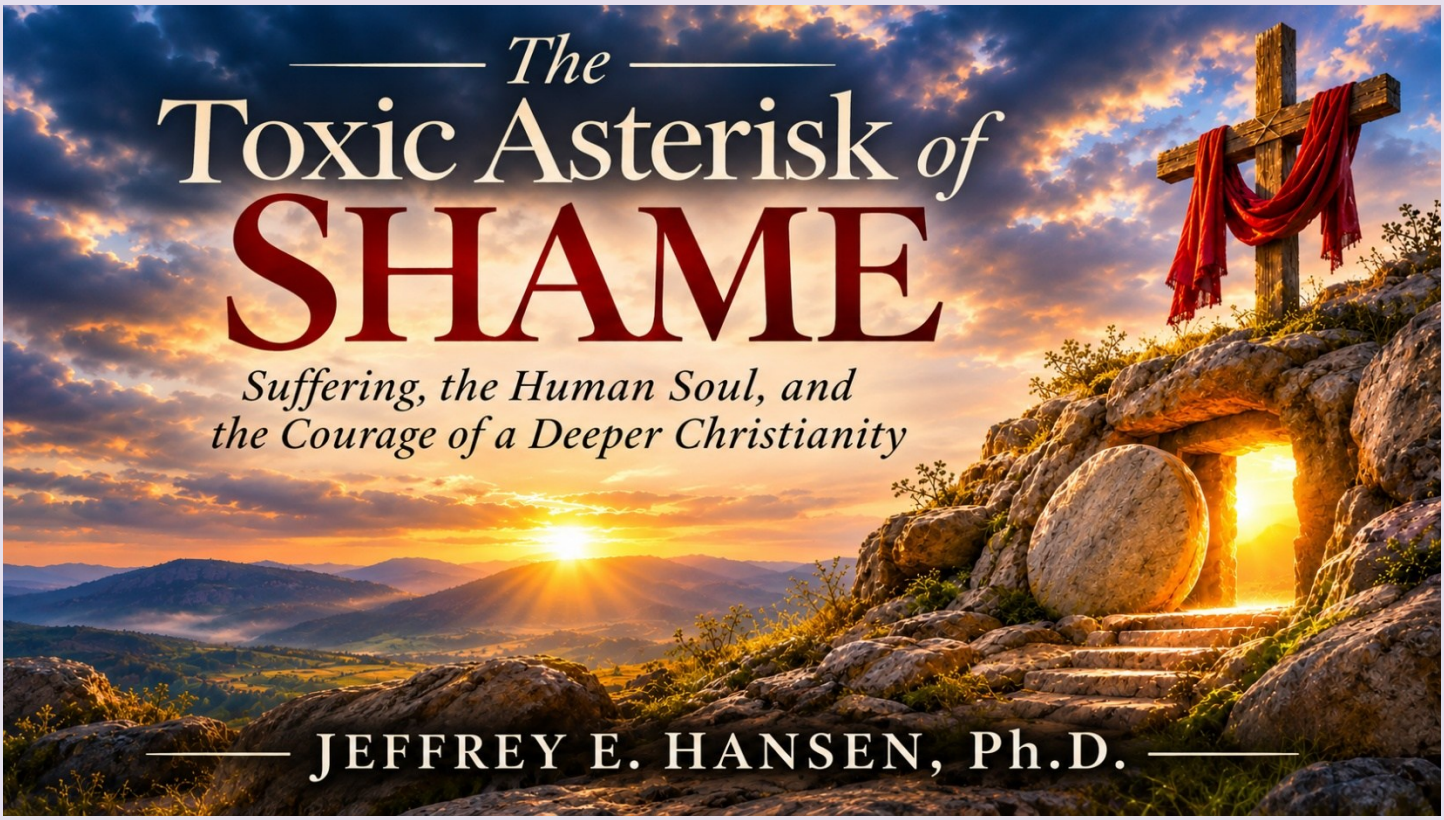


> *"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2, KJV)*

Why is it that we Christians are sometimes so uncomfortable talking about the darker dimensions of human existence? We love to talk about joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And my goodness, what is not to love about the fruits of the Spirit? I cherish them. I aspire to them. They are among the most beautiful expressions of our Christian faith.

But somewhere along the way, I fear we have placed a rather large asterisk beside our Christianity. There are certain things we would rather not discuss, certain emotions we would rather not acknowledge, and certain dimensions of human suffering we would rather camouflage beneath the reassuring language of our faith.

In an earlier essay, I referred to this phenomenon as *milquetoast Christianity*. Perhaps another way of describing it is the vanillaization of Christianity—a sanitized expression of faith that celebrates the mountaintops but is decidedly uncomfortable accompanying people into the valleys.

And among the darkest of those valleys is shame.

The Courage to Enter the Darkness

Interestingly, some of our greatest psychological, philosophical, and literary thinkers were willing to venture into territory that many Christians today seem reluctant to explore.

Carl Jung (1959) understood the importance of confronting what he called the *shadow*, those aspects of ourselves that we reject, repress, conceal, or refuse to acknowledge. Jung recognized that psychological maturity required considerable courage because it demanded that we confront dimensions of ourselves that we would much prefer not to see.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1886), despite his profound differences with Christianity, understood something about the dangers of confronting the darkness within human nature. His famous metaphor of gazing into the abyss reminds us that such an encounter is neither casual nor without consequence.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose Christian convictions were forged through extraordinary personal suffering, ventured into the darker recesses of the human soul with remarkable psychological sophistication. In *Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, he explored our capacity for cruelty, self-deception, humiliation, guilt, spiritual anguish, and redemption.

These men dared to go there.

Why, then, are we Christians sometimes so reluctant to do likewise? Have we somehow convinced ourselves that our faith inoculates us against the darker dimensions of human experience? That if we pray enough, believe enough, worship enough, or immerse ourselves sufficiently in Scripture, we will somehow be spared the terrible battles that can take place within our own minds?

I wish it were that simple.

The Toxicity of Shame

In my book, *The Shadow of Shame: Transformational Healing Through Faith, Neuroscience, and the Rewriting of the Soul* (Hansen, 2026), I made the argument that toxic shame is perhaps the most destructive of all human emotions.

David R. Hawkins (1995), a psychiatrist and spiritual teacher, placed shame at the very bottom of his *Map of Consciousness*, below guilt, grief, fear, and anger. His kinesiology-based scale is not a validated scientific measure, but that placement resonates profoundly with what I have witnessed over four decades of clinical practice and, perhaps more importantly, what I have experienced in my own life. Psychological research also distinguishes the destructive effects of shame from those of guilt (Dearing et al., 2005; Tangney et al., 2007).

Guilt tells us that we have done something bad. Shame tells us that we *are* something bad. Guilt concerns our behavior. Shame lays claim to our very identity. Healthy guilt can lead us toward accountability, repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. Toxic shame, on the other hand, persuades us that we are fundamentally unworthy of any of those things.

What makes shame particularly sinister is that it attacks our most fundamental human longings—to be seen, to be known, to be loved, and to belong. It convinces us that if others truly knew us, they would surely reject us. And so we hide. We conceal the very wounds that desperately need the presence, compassion, and love of another human being.



Is it any wonder that one of the first responses of Adam and Eve in the Garden was to hide from God (Genesis 3:8)? From the earliest pages of Scripture, we encounter this extraordinary relationship between shame, fear, hiding, and disconnection.

Shame is a cruel and deceptive companion. It not only wounds us but attempts to persuade us that we are unworthy of healing. It not only drives us into isolation but convinces us that isolation is where we belong.

And therein lies its extraordinary toxicity.

The Well of Shame

Those of you who have followed my writing know that I have not been particularly reluctant to share my own struggles. I have spent much of my professional life studying trauma, addiction, and the complexities of the human mind. But there are some things that no doctoral program, clinical fellowship, textbook, or professional conference can adequately teach you.

There are some things you come to understand because you have lived them.

As I shared in the introduction to *The Shadow of Shame* (Hansen, 2026), my own descent into the depths of shame was profoundly personal. The convergence of my developmental trauma, the accumulated stressors of adult life, and a devastating event that forever altered the landscape of our family brought me to a place of extraordinary psychological and spiritual suffering. The wounds I had carried for decades came crashing into the circumstances of my adult life. And good grief, I was a clinical psychologist with decades of experience and a deeply held Christian faith. Neither inoculated me against what was about to unfold.



I think this is an important distinction. The circumstances that finally overwhelm us are not necessarily the whole story. Sometimes they awaken wounds that have been carried for decades. What appears to others to be a sudden collapse may, in fact, be the culmination of a lifetime of suffering and adaptation. That was an essential part of my own story.

When I fell apart, my shame was so dark and so deep that even now I struggle to find the words to adequately describe it. I remember the terrible loneliness of it all, the sensation of descending deeper and deeper into a well from which I could no longer see the light. You feel

so utterly alone. You become convinced that no one could possibly understand the darkness in which you find yourself. And perhaps more frighteningly, you begin to believe that if anyone truly understood you, they could not possibly love you.

That is the insidious nature of shame. It persuades us to conceal from others the very wounds that desperately need human connection to heal.

Shame nearly took my life. I also believe that shame played a profound role in the suffering and eventual loss of my beloved identical twin brother, Gregg. There is hardly a day that passes when I do not miss him.

I did not write *The Shadow of Shame* simply because I found shame to be an intellectually interesting psychological construct. I wrote it because I know something of its darkness. I know something of its brutality. And I know something of what it can take from us.

Please Do Not Talk Me Out of My Shame

Anyone who has worked extensively with individuals suffering from addiction and trauma, and who has dared to go sufficiently deep in that work, knows that eventually you have to touch shame.

You have to touch shame.

You have to understand it, experience something of its darkness alongside the person carrying it, and resist the all-too-human temptation to immediately make it go away.

One of the most difficult lessons for clinicians, pastors, and well-intentioned Christian friends to learn is that you cannot simply talk someone out of deeply embedded shame. You cannot reason a traumatized nervous system into safety. You cannot intellectually persuade a wounded soul into believing that it is lovable when virtually everything within that person's lived experience seems to suggest otherwise.

And please, my dear Christian friends, resist the temptation to immediately reach for a Bible verse as though it were a spiritual Band-Aid.

It is not that Scripture lacks power. Quite the contrary. It is that the wounded human being sitting before you may need to experience something of the love described in that Scripture through your very presence before he or she can begin to receive its truth.

Sometimes the most profoundly Christian thing you can do is to sit with someone in the darkness without demanding that they immediately find the light.

When Shame Becomes Our Identity



Perhaps the most insidious dimension of shame is its capacity to insinuate itself into the very story we tell ourselves about who we are. What may have begun as an emotional response to trauma, rejection, humiliation, or failure gradually becomes a narrative through which we

interpret our entire existence. We move from experiencing shame to identifying with it. And that is a terribly dangerous transition.

The default mode network (DMN), a remarkable network of interconnected brain regions involved in autobiographical memory, self-reflection, and our internal narrative, offers a window into how deeply entrenched these stories can become (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2014). When our internal narrative becomes saturated with shame, even our accomplishments, loving relationships, and expressions of faith may struggle to penetrate the darkness of our perceived identity.

Our inner critic becomes relentless. We withdraw from others or desperately seek their approval. We pursue perfectionism, professional achievement, or some other means of proving our worth. Or we reach for alcohol, drugs, pornography, or virtually anything that will temporarily silence the torment within. And then, in a particularly cruel twist, we experience shame about the very things we have employed to escape our shame. What a terrible, self-perpetuating cycle!

Those of us who work in addiction and trauma recovery must understand the extraordinary significance of this process. If we merely extinguish the addictive behavior without addressing the wounded identity beneath it, what have we ultimately accomplished? We may have taken away the anesthetic without adequately treating the wound.

And herein lies one of the most beautiful intersections of neuroscience, psychology, and Christian theology. Shame tells us that our wounds, our failures, and our darkest experiences define who we are. Grace offers us an altogether different narrative. As Paul reminds us, *"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature"* (2 Corinthians 5:17, KJV).

The challenge of transformational healing is not simply to quiet the tormenting voice of shame, but to reclaim the identity that shame has attempted to steal from us.

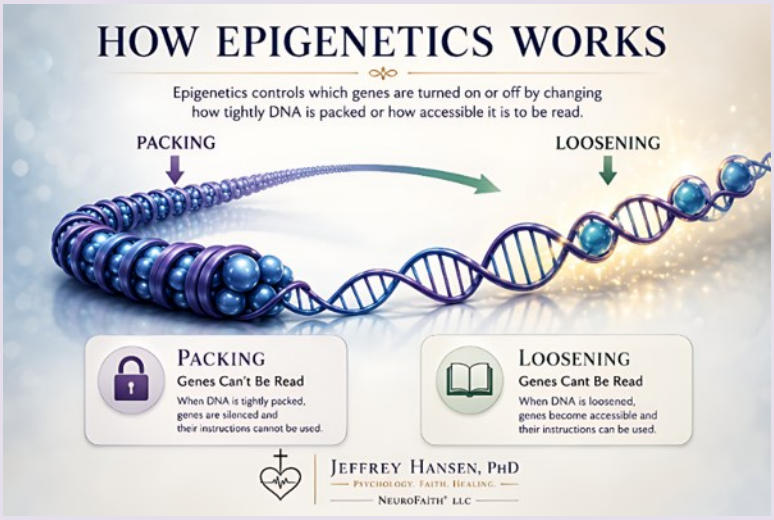
When the Body Bears the Burden of Shame

And my goodness, the body suffers too. Our own internal critic can become a recurring source of threat, setting our stress machinery in motion. The hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis and sympathetic nervous system mobilize cortisol and adrenaline. Imagine what it costs us when the voice we are trying to escape is our own (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Dickerson et al., 2004).

Stephen Porges's (2007) polyvagal framework offers a way of understanding what I see so often in my clinical work. We may oscillate between sympathetic activation and what Porges describes as dorsal vagal shutdown. I call it chaos in the brain and molasses in the brain. In one, the heart races and thoughts spin as the brain's alarm circuits, including the anterior cingulate, compete with our capacity to think clearly (Arnsten, 2009). In the other, life loses its color and even getting out of bed can seem an insurmountable task. In the safety of connection, associated in this framework with ventral vagal regulation, we begin to find ourselves again.



Over time, the price we pay for this relentless stress—what McEwen (1998) called allostatic load—can be enormous. Our heart, metabolism, and immune system suffer. Stress can even influence which genes are read, a process known as epigenetics, with implications for inflammation, cardiovascular and autoimmune disease (Klengel et al., 2013; Zannas et al., 2019; Song et al., 2018). Even cancer-related pathways are being studied, although stress has not been established as a direct cause of cancer (National Cancer Institute, n.d.). Good grief, is it any wonder that we become desperate for something, anything, to make the pain go away?



The God who designed our souls also designed our bodies. Shame does not respect the boundaries we have constructed between the two. Neither should our efforts to heal.

The Tyranny of the Quick Fix: When Pain Avoidance Replaces Healing

And we live in a culture more than happy to accommodate that desperation. We have opioids for physical pain, psychotropics for emotional pain, abbreviated therapies for psychological pain, and sometimes an equally abbreviated Christianity for spiritual pain. I am grateful for the relief that good medicine can offer. But the opioid crisis is a tragic reminder of what can happen when we confuse relief with healing (Dowell et al., 2022). Have we become as sophisticated in our efforts to heal suffering as we have in our efforts to silence it?

And shallow therapy? Shallow therapy can cost lives. I am not talking about brief, effective therapy. I am talking about therapy that never touches the wound. Why do so many people relapse after walking out of addiction treatment centers? There are many reasons, but how often have we taken away the anesthetic without treating the wound? Recovery takes time and continuity of care, and appropriate medications can save lives, particularly in opioid addiction (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2018; McKay, 2021; Sordo et al., 2017). Yet we sometimes send people home to the very circumstances that wounded them and then wonder why they relapse.

That is why I am so passionate about transformational healing. We must have the courage to go deeper, at a pace our patients can bear, and attend to the whole person—body, heart, mind, and soul.

And my dear Christian friends, this same mentality has invaded the Church. We want the joy without the sorrow, the peace without the wrestling, the resurrection without the cross. I love a joyful worship service! But the Church was never intended to be merely a feel-good experience. We are called to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). Have we so vanillaized Christianity that we have lost something of its very essence—the courage to enter the wounds of our fellow human beings? Medicine, psychology, and the Church all have some soul-searching to do.

The Sacred Ministry of Presence

When my world came crashing down in 2009, and again when I lost my beloved identical twin brother, Gregg, it was not the quick fixes that ministered most profoundly to my suffering. It was not a pill, a clever psychological intervention, or a theological explanation. It was those precious few human beings who had the courage to simply sit with me.



They showed up. They did not need to fix me. They did not need to talk me out of my suffering or hasten my journey through it. They could tolerate my pain without becoming so uncomfortable themselves that they needed to make it go away. They could enter into my darkness without insisting that I immediately find the light.

I am reminded of the extraordinary passage in the Book of Job: *"So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great"* (Job 2:13, KJV). Perhaps the most beautiful ministry they offered Job occurred before they began speaking. Once they began attempting to explain his suffering, their words became yet another source of anguish for an already devastated human soul.

How much we could learn from those seven days of silence.

We call it co-regulation in neuroscience. The quiet presence of another human being can help our nervous system rediscover safety (Porges, 2007). But in that moment, I was not thinking about neuroscience. I was experiencing something my tormented mind desperately needed: I was no longer alone.

From a spiritual perspective, I believe these moments can become extraordinary manifestations of the love of Christ. Sometimes the most powerful sermon is never spoken. Sometimes the most meaningful ministry occurs not from a pulpit, behind a therapist's desk, or through the dispensing of advice, but in the quiet and profoundly sacred space between two human beings, one suffering and the other willing to remain.

I wonder how much of our preoccupation with quick fixes reflects not merely our desire to alleviate another person's suffering, but our own inability to tolerate being in its presence. Is our urgency to fix the wounded human being sitting before us sometimes more about alleviating our own discomfort than ministering to theirs?

There were people who entered my pain when I could scarcely bear it myself. There were far too few of them, but those who did taught me something about healing that no graduate school, medical textbook, or theological treatise could adequately convey.

They did not rescue me from the well by shouting instructions from above. They climbed down into it and sat beside me.

And through their presence, I began to experience something of the presence of Christ.

Christianity Was Never Intended to Be Vanilla

When I read Scripture, I am struck by how little effort God seems to have made to sanitize the human experience.

David cried out in anguish. Job wrestled with unimaginable suffering. Jeremiah lamented. Elijah reached a point of such despair that he no longer wished to live. Paul described the terrible battle within himself in Romans 7. And Christ Himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane, expressed an overwhelming sorrow.

Even the Psalms contain cries of abandonment, anger, grief, confusion, and desperation. Psalm 88, remarkably, ends in darkness without the reassuring resolution we might expect from a contemporary Christian devotional.

"For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave" (Psalm 88:3, KJV).

"Lord, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me?" (Psalm 88:14, KJV).

"Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness" (Psalm 88:18, KJV).

God saw fit to include that psalm in Scripture. Perhaps we ought to ponder why.

Centuries later, St. John of the Cross wrote of the *Dark Night of the Soul*, recognizing that the spiritual journey could include periods of profound desolation, apparent abandonment, and painful transformation. Christianity has a rich tradition of confronting suffering, spiritual struggle, and the darker dimensions of our existence. We seem, in some contemporary expressions of our faith, to have misplaced much of that tradition.

Scripture does not shy away from shame itself. In Psalm 69:20, the psalmist cries, "Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness," and searches in vain for someone to offer comfort (KJV). Is that not the terrible loneliness of the well? And Romans 8:1 declares, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (KJV). What a profound contrast to the condemning voice of our internal critic.

Brennan Manning, in his beautiful book Ruthless Trust (2000), invites us to trust God beyond our need for certainty and reassurance. Being a Christian, in the fullest sense, is a ruthless experience—not ruthless toward ourselves or others, but ruthless in our willingness to trust God even when we cannot make sense of our suffering.

Christianity was never intended to be a sentimental journey through life. We cannot fully appreciate the resurrection if we are unwilling to contemplate the cross.

The Christ Who Entered Our Shame

Perhaps the most extraordinary dimension of our Christian faith is that we worship a God who did not remain insulated from the darker dimensions of our human existence. Christ did not merely descend into our world to speak of love, joy, peace, and kindness. He entered into the very depths of our suffering. He experienced betrayal, rejection, abandonment, humiliation, physical torment, and the extraordinary public degradation of crucifixion.



The writer of Hebrews tells us that Christ endured the cross, despising its shame (Hebrews 12:2). Think about the extraordinary significance of those words. Our Savior was not unfamiliar with shame. He endured public humiliation in its most brutal manifestation, yet He did not allow it to define His identity. The joy set before Him did not spare Him the agony of the cross. He did not circumvent the suffering to arrive at the joy; He endured the suffering and refused to grant shame the final word.

And perhaps herein lies something profoundly important about the healing power of our Christian faith. Christ offers us understanding, forgiveness, grace, and redemption not from some comfortable distance from our suffering, but as One who has entered into the very experience of human suffering itself. Hebrews 4:15–16 reminds us that we have a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses and invites us to approach the throne of grace with

confidence. He knows the darkness of the well because He entered into the darkness of our humanity.

As a clinical psychologist, I cherish what medicine, neuroscience, and psychotherapy can offer. But the reconciliation of the human soul with its Creator belongs to an altogether different order of healing. There is no pharmacological equivalent of grace. There is no surgical procedure for redemption. There is no psychotherapeutic substitute for the assurance that we are fully known by God and, notwithstanding the darkness He sees within us, profoundly loved. Clinical treatment and spiritual healing need not compete.

This is where Brennan Manning's notion of ruthless trust becomes so extraordinarily meaningful. It is one thing to trust God when our lives are filled with joy, our relationships are flourishing, and our prayers seem to be answered. It is quite another to trust Him when we are sitting at the bottom of the well, when our nervous system has collapsed into exhaustion, when our mind has become our tormentor, and when our soul can scarcely perceive His presence. Our identity in God does not depend upon our emotional state, the regulation of our nervous system, or even our ability to sense His presence. That is ruthless trust: a faith forged not through the avoidance of suffering but through the extraordinary vulnerability of encountering God within it.

And when I reflect upon the depths of my own suffering, that is the Christ I need. Not merely the Christ who promises me joy, but the Christ who understands why, at times, I cannot feel it. The Christ who knows the anguish of my soul and does not withdraw His love in the face of it. That is the Christ I trust. Ruthlessly.

The Courage to Enter the Well

I sometimes wonder how many people sitting beside us in church on Sunday mornings are quietly descending into their own wells of shame. They smile, they sing, they shake our hands, and they assure us that they are doing fine. They may even be among the most accomplished and seemingly spiritually mature members of our congregations. Yet beneath that carefully constructed exterior lies an internal narrative so brutal that we would be horrified to hear it. Would they feel safe enough to tell us? Or would the prospect of disappointing us, of being judged, or of having the authenticity of their faith questioned drive them even deeper into hiding?

Have we inadvertently created Christian environments in which people experience shame about experiencing shame? Have we become so enamored with the joyful expressions of our faith that we have made it increasingly difficult for people to be honest about their suffering? God help us if we have.

Perhaps our reluctance to enter another person's darkness reflects our discomfort with our own. Jung, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky challenged us to reckon with that darkness. How equipped are we to accompany others through theirs if we cannot acknowledge our own? Perhaps the true measure of Christian maturity is our willingness to encounter the darker

dimensions of humanity, in ourselves and in others, without withdrawing our love. Accountability and grace are not adversaries.

As I reflect upon my own descent into shame and the loss of my beloved twin brother, Gregg, this is no longer an academic or theological discussion for me. I cannot undo what happened to my brother. But perhaps, in speaking more openly about shame, I can help another human being find the courage to reach for help, and help another Christian find the courage to respond.

When I was at the bottom of my own well, there were those who stood at the top offering encouragement, advice, and well-intentioned words of reassurance. But it was those precious few who had the courage to climb down into that well and sit beside me who helped save my life. They were willing to enter a place that was neither comfortable nor pleasant. They could tolerate my anguish without demanding that I resolve it for their comfort. They brought something into that darkness that I could no longer find on my own—the healing power of compassionate human presence.



And so I ask you, my dear friends, do we have the courage to enter the well? Are we willing to descend from the relative comfort of our own lives and sit beside another human being in the depths of their suffering, even when we have no immediate answers, no clever explanations, and no quick solutions? Can we bear witness to another person's pain without turning away from it?

In *The Shadow of Shame*, I wrote that the opposite of shame is not pride. The opposite of shame is love. Not some sentimental, vanillaized expression of Christian love, but a fierce, courageous, uncompromising love that is not frightened by the ugliness of trauma, the messiness of addiction, the brutality of self-hatred, or the darkness of despair. A love that does not demand that people earn their place among us by getting well first.

My dear Christian brothers and sisters, perhaps we have become so enamored with the joy of our salvation that we have forgotten the extraordinary suffering through which that salvation was made possible. We celebrate the empty tomb, as we should. But let us not become so eager to get to Easter morning that we rush past Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Christ did not fast-track our redemption. He did not circumvent our suffering. He entered it. He endured the cross, despising its shame, and in doing so demonstrated that shame need not have the final word in the story of our human existence (Hebrews 12:2).

That is the Christ I encountered in the darkest chapters of my life, sometimes through the presence of those precious few human beings who had the courage to sit with me when I could scarcely bear to sit with myself. They taught me something about Christianity that no sermon,

theological treatise, or psychology textbook could adequately convey. That is not a comfortable Christianity. It is not a vanillaized Christianity. It is the Christianity of extraordinary courage, radical grace, and what Brennan Manning so beautifully called *ruthless trust*.

Perhaps it is time for medicine to rediscover the wounded human being beneath the symptoms, for psychology to rediscover the courage to go deep, and for the Church to rediscover the extraordinary depths of its own Gospel.

For those of you who find yourselves at the bottom of that terrible well of shame, please know that your darkness does not diminish your worth, your suffering does not invalidate your faith, and your inability to experience joy does not diminish God's love for you. Shame may have written some of the darkest chapters of your life, but it does not possess the authority to write your final chapter.

Christ entered our darkness so that darkness would not have the final word. May we have the courage to enter the darkness of another human being's suffering, because Christ first entered ours.

And may we never again place an asterisk beside the suffering of another human soul.

Peace

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