CURT THOMPSON, MD

AUTHOR OF *ANATOMY OF THE SOUL*

THE SOUL OF SHAME

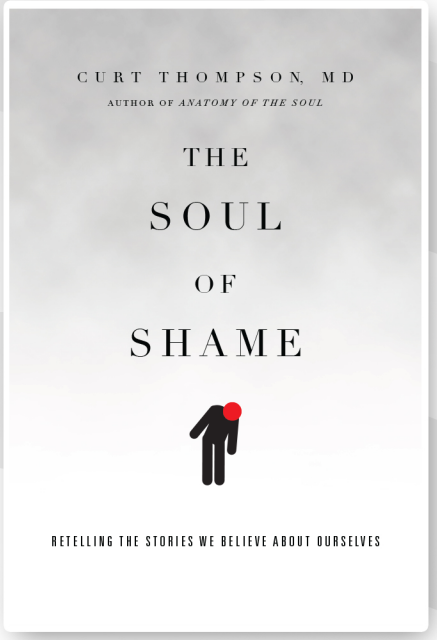


RETELLING THE STORIES WE BELIEVE ABOUT OURSELVES

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THE SOUL OF SHAME

RETELLING THE STORIES WE BELIEVE ABOUT OURSELVES

InterVarsity Press



CURT THOMPSON, MD

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Contents

Introduction / 9
The Story That Shame Is Trying to Tell

1 Our Problem with Shame / 19

2 How Shame Targets the Mind / 37

3 Joy, Shame and the Brain / 57

4 The Story of Shame You Are Living / 79

5 Shame and the Biblical Narrative / 97

6 Shame's Remedy: Vulnerability / 115

7 Our Healing Cloud of Witnesses / 133

8 Redeeming Shame in Our Nurturing Communities / 151

9 Renewing Vocational Creativity / 169

Acknowledgments / 189

Discussion Guide / 193

Notes / 201

Bibliography / 205

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Introduction

The Story That Shame Is Trying to Tell

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This is a book about shame. You might wonder why we need another book about the topic. Shame has made an impressive resurgence in the popular media as well as the academy. It has been the focus of helpful, impressive work by researchers such as Brené Brown and has become a go-to topic of conversation for talk shows. At one level this makes sense, given the place that shame has in our lives. For indeed, it is everywhere, and there is virtually nothing left untainted by it.

From our family at home to the one at church. From the bedroom to the boardroom. From school to work to play. From the art studio to the science and technology lab. It is a primal emotional pigment that colors the images of everything: our bodies, our marriages and our politics; our successes and failures; our friends and enemies, especially the God of the Bible, who may at times feel like both. It starts and (surprisingly) ends wars, only to start them again. It fuels injustice and creates our excuses for doing little if anything about it. It is a featured tool for motivating students, athletes and employees. It enables us to conveniently remain separate from those we disagree with and who make us feel uncomfortable, while keeping to those who will only tell us what we want to hear.

And yet. Given the airplay it has received recently, one would think we would have it all pretty much packaged and wrapped. We simply need

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to do what we now know we can do to manage the problem. Is it really so complicated that we need yet another angle to approach it from?

And yet. If the healing of shame were so straightforward, why are we still so easily buckled by it? If you're reading this, you may perceive faint awareness of shame's place in your life, but perhaps you are intrigued because more and more people are talking about it. Or maybe you wrestle with shame rather frequently, seeing it or suspecting it in much of your life. Beyond this, you may be tormented by it or even feel wrangled to the ground by it; you would excise it from your life if you could. Its presence and activity are undeniable, as are your seemingly impotent tactics for addressing it.

Despite all we know about shame, containing it, let alone disposing of it, is a bit like grasping for mercury: the more pressure you use to seize it, the more evasive it becomes. In my previous book, *Anatomy of the Soul*, I explored the intersection of Christian spiritual formation and findings from the emerging field of interpersonal neurobiology. As I have had the privilege of walking with people in the context of that work, one theme continues to raise its head. No matter the setting, whether it is a retreat I am leading, a business with which I am consulting, a conference I am addressing or patients I am sitting with, shame eventually makes its way to center stage. Though unpleasant, its interpersonal neurobiological effects are fascinating, while it simultaneously bends and twists our narratives into painful story lines. It is ubiquitous, seeping into every nook and cranny of life. It is pernicious, infesting not just our thoughts but our sensations, images, feelings and, of course, ultimately our behavior. It just doesn't seem to go away.

It is instructive to observe the way we respond to recent research that has so helpfully awakened us to shame's presence and the necessary place of vulnerability in addressing it. Given the tidal wave of interest (as of this writing Brown's TED talks have had over ten million views) one would think that we were discovering shame for the first time in history. Indeed, even in the hallowed halls of psychoanalysis, shame has long remained in the shadows and has only in the last few decades been found important enough for writers and clinicians to bring it into the light.

But then again, haven't we been here before? In 1988 John Bradshaw

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gave us *Healing the Shame That Binds You* and the PBS series that followed. It has helped literally millions of readers and viewers. You would think, given this resource, that we would have made major gains in correcting our behavior as a culture and nation. But strikingly shame seems to have effectively slinked into the shadows, only now again being ferreted out by a new wave of hunters. Apparently, we either forgot what Bradshaw and others were saying or never paid attention in the first place. It seems that virtually every generation has to go about the process of discovering shame again for the first time. This all reminds us that for all of our hope in cultural progression, in the deepest recesses of our souls, we sense that that is an illusion.

Upon reflection, perhaps this cycle is exactly what we should expect from shame. It likes to do its work and, when exposed, retreat into the shadows, only then to remerge no less potently than before. But it is also possible that the way shame operates is an extension of something larger and more sinister. And to realize this is also to realize that the healing of shame is not merely going to be a function of greater social awareness of it or a novel mental health exercise. To effectively enter into the healing of shame requires us to know the place it holds in our story as a human race, and that requires us to know which story, exactly, we believe we are living in. This book, therefore, is not just a book about shame. It is a book about storytelling—the stories we tell about ourselves (which of course include others and especially God), how we tell them and, more importantly, the story that shame is trying to tell about us.

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Our Story and Shame's Story

Of all the things that set us apart from the rest of creation as humans, one feature stands out: we tell stories. No other creatures we know of tell stories the way we do. (Well, it's possible that certain plants and animals tell stories. They're just not telling *us*.) Whether we know it or not, and whether we intend to or not, we live our lives telling stories; in fact, we don't really know how to function and *not* tell them. We tell them for many reasons. We do so not just to describe what we are doing but to make sense of what we have done. Some may be familiar with the idea

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of our having a narrator that is infrequently quiet, informing us of the life we are living, and not always using only words. Each of us lives within a story we believe we occupy. Not all of us are equally conscious of this. Depending on which story we believe is the *big* story, the one that unites all the other stories and is the real story about the world, shame will be understood and dealt with accordingly.

In this book I will examine shame in the context of the biblical narrative. And, as I will suggest more directly later, if shame is not understood in this context, it will become a powerful driving force in telling a different story. There are alternatives to the biblical story that consider shame differently than we will in this book. For example, it can be comprehended within some version of a naturalistic evolutionary framework, but for my money that story has very little drama and no purpose. It goes nowhere. It ends with the earth and humanity either flaming out or freezing up, and we are left to make up our own existential meaning while we wait for the end to come. If that's the story we're living in, shame might be an interesting topic for a discussion, but for the most part it simply plays the role of emotional nausea.

But what if shame is embedded in a story that does have purpose? Even more troubling, what if it is being actively leveraged by the personality of evil to bend us toward sin?

Typically, whenever researchers study and discuss shame, we do so as though it is some abstract emotional or cognitive phenomena. We describe shame as something we would do well to better regulate, but not as an entity that has a conscious will of its own. But I believe we live in a world in which good and evil are not just events that happen to us but rather expressions of something or someone whose *intention* is for good or for evil. And I will suggest that shame is used with this intention to dismantle us as individuals and communities, and destroy all of God's creation. You may not agree, but even so I believe this book will still be helpful for you.

This, then, is a book about the story of shame. The one we tell about it, the one it tells about us, and even more so the one God has been telling about all of us from the beginning. Most important, this book also examines how the story of the Bible offers us a way not only to understand

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shame but also to effectively put it to death, even if that takes a lifetime to accomplish. But putting shame to death is not simply about addressing it as a deeply destructive emotional and relational nuisance. For we cannot speak of shame without speaking of creation and God's intention for it. From the beginning it has been God's purpose for this world to be one of emerging goodness, beauty and joy. Evil has wielded shame as a primary weapon to see to it that that world never happens. Consequently, to combat shame is not merely to wrestle against something we detest. It is to do that very thing that provides the necessary space for each of us to live like God, become like Jesus and grow up to be who we were born to be.

The premise of this book, then, is that shame is not just a consequence of something our first parents did in the Garden of Eden. It is the emotional weapon that evil uses to (1) corrupt our relationships with God and each other, and (2) disintegrate any and all gifts of vocational vision and creativity. These gifts include any area of endeavor that promotes goodness, beauty and joy in and for the lives of others, whether that be teaching our first graders, loving our spouse well, managing forests, conducting healing prayer services, creating a new medical technology, offering psychotherapy or composing symphonies. Shame is a primary means to prevent us from using the gifts we have been given. And those gifts enable us to flourish as a light-bearing community of Jesus followers who work to create space for others who wish to join it to do so. Shame, therefore, is not simply an unfortunate, random, emotional event that came with us out of the primordial evolutionary soup. It is both a source and result of evil's active assault on God's creation, and a way for evil to try to hold out until the new heaven and earth appear at the consummation of history.

However, while this book holds shame to be within the context of a grand story, and so takes on its place and meaning, within that story's purpose lie the mechanics of how shame works. Familiarity with those mechanisms, through the lens of interpersonal neurobiology, though not substantiating shame's teleology, can open up ways for us to align ourselves with the purpose that God has for a world in which mercy and justice reign, a world teeming with goodness and beauty, and in which joy of true relationship is our destiny.

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A Tale of What Is Ahead

Toward that end, this book approaches our topic as follows. In chapter one I will establish a working description of shame and what we assume it to mean for our purposes. I will describe how we generally experience it and what its nature tends to be in everyday life. Chapters two and three engage our quarry from an interpersonal neurobiological (IPNB) approach. We will take a tour of what the mind is and what it means to flourish from an IPNB perspective, followed by an introduction to how shame operates as a disintegrating force within the mind, relationships and communities.

This sets the stage for chapter four, which reminds us that at our core we are storytelling creatures. To know your story is to know shame's place in it. Here we will explore some features of stories in general, how we tell them and the value of knowing which story you believe you are living in. We will see shame's potential both as cause and effect of the stories we construct. Chapter five invites us specifically into the biblical narrative, offering one way of considering shame in light of the story that followers of Jesus believe they occupy. We consider how in the Genesis account of creation, shame is featured as something that evil has been wielding from the very beginning to corrupt God's intended creation of goodness and beauty.

Chapter six introduces us to the fulcrum on which the healing of shame hangs in the balance. We will discuss the deep reality of what it means that (1) we are relational and therefore necessarily vulnerable beings, and (2) the healing of shame begins and ends in the experience of being known, a biblical notion that begins in the heart of God, is offered to humans in Genesis, and reaches its culmination on Good Friday. Healing shame requires our being vulnerable with other people in embodied actions. There is no other way, but shame will, as we will see, attempt to convince us otherwise.

Chapter seven offers a model for what it means to directly address shame in concrete ways. Passages from the epistle to the Hebrews and the Gospel of John will serve as guides for implementing the requirements necessary for us to not only heal shame but to begin to see how its redemption leads to greater relational integration and opportunity for creative endeavor. Chapter eight then extends the path of what we learn in chapter seven into

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the primary communities in which we are nurtured: our family, the church and our educational institutions. We will see how these realms have their particular ways of incubating shame, and what we can explicitly do to re-imagine our stories in these most formative of settings.

This brings us to the book's culmination in chapter nine, in which we will explore how shame's healing leads to renewed vitality in the multiple ways God has called us. For in our deliverance from shame we are not simply liberated to be nicer, happier people; rather, we are redeemed to live into those multiple roles of calling—from parenting to teaching to engineering—with joyful creativity.

Reading this book will require varying degrees of effort, for any number of reasons. Combating shame requires more work than you might imagine. I say this not because I am in any way impressed with what is written here or how it has been said; it's not as if the ideas are original to me, for they certainly aren't. Nor do I say it because I have slain all my dragons of shame—far from it. Rather, it is just the opposite. I am deeply aware of how difficult it is to directly confront this problem. I am living proof of this. In fact, the very act of writing this book has revealed more spaces within my inner life that shame inhabits than I would like to admit. The process has activated a whole host of feelings that include fears of inadequacy, worries that I will not be clear or correct or effective, concerns that whatever I may have to say, someone else could say it better, more simply and certainly not require the reader to work so hard to get through all the ink on the paper. I didn't expect that writing a book on shame would be the very thing that revealed just how deeply rooted shame is in me. But frankly, if putting shame to death requires this much hard work, I would rather have folks along for the journey who are willing to do the same, reminding me that I am not alone in the process.

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A Few Caveats

In this book I do not address the distinctives that pertain to shame cultures, shame-honor cultures or shame societies vis-à-vis guilt cultures. Much has been published on these topics, and they are not unhelpful in providing a window through which we can understand societal behavior.

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Suffice it to say, however we choose to talk about cultures as a whole, each one has its own particular way of manifesting shame and guilt. These words symbolize human experience that is universal, although certainly the socialization of these fundamental emotional states is bound to shape how we interpret them. These categories of shame-honor and guilt cultures do not imply, either, that shame cultures do not know about or experience the phenomenon of guilt, or that guilt cultures do not experience shame. In this book we are exploring shame not as a socially constructed finding but rather an interpersonal neurobiological event. This is not to say that what you find here is the last word on shame or the only or even the best way to comprehend it. Rather, this is hopefully one way to approach it such that we may live more fully integrated lives.

On another front, I do not address to what degree shame is a good thing, something that we require in society to ensure that people will behave appropriately. In this book I am not debating this question, nor in any way suggesting that all shame experience is necessarily bad. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that shame as an interpersonal neurobiological process plays a necessary role in helping us develop proper self-regulatory behavior. However, it is equally true that many behaviors that are *not* deterred (but that we believe should be) emerge from established shame-based patterns of life that precede said behaviors. It is beyond the scope of this book to explore every aspect of our topic. My intention here is to address those universal experiences of shame that lead to disintegrated states of mind that end in disintegrated communities with little creative capacity for goodness and beauty.

Still, questions may remain. Exploring in the way I propose, might we not run the risk of dismissing the necessary, helpful aspects of shame too easily? Without it, won't we devolve into madness? Moreover, is there not a clear difference between the shame felt by a woman who commits adultery and a woman who is raped?

Although these are not unimportant questions, they are not the primary subject of our inquiry, nor is there space in this volume to address all of the questions that our topic invariably raises. However, a world in which shame did not exist would also be one in which those

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very behaviors we fear would be unleashed would not likely exist either, given how many of them emerge out of shame in the first place. And, yes, the story of an adulteress is quite different from that of a rape victim. But the shame that the victim of sexual assault feels is often no more easily healed than that of a woman involved in an affair "simply" because the former "knows" her shame was not a result of her actions. For indeed shame's power lies not so much in facts that we can clarify but rather in its emotional state, which is so much harder to shake.

Throughout this book you will read the stories of people like you and me who are wrestling with shame and doing their best to fix their eyes on Jesus, do what he did and despise it on the way to being liberated to create as they were so intended from the beginning. No matter if you are one who is simply curious about shame or find yourself buried underneath it, I believe this book can offer help and hope.

I acknowledged earlier that you may be either unfamiliar with or do not believe the story the Bible tells. Well, you're in good company. There are many days that I have a hard time believing it myself. The very nature of the world is such that at times it takes near Herculean effort to maintain the conviction that Jesus is real, that God is truly loving and that we are at war with evil. This book, therefore, is no proof text about anything. It is, rather, an invitation to be known, to be loved (whether you believe in God or not), but also to join me and others to risk all you have on a God who would rather die than let anything come between us all. As you read this invitation, then, you may find some practical help for dealing with shame (especially as you apply the elements of IPNB), even if the big story of the Bible doesn't yet feel comfortable enough to try on. At the very least I'll be glad to know that in having read this book you have found yourself to be drawn into relationships that are more joyful and intimate, engaged in work that is more meaningful and creative, and casting a vision for seeing goodness and beauty where perhaps before you did not.

At the book's conclusion you will find questions associated with each chapter for further discussion. Shame is not something we "fix" in the privacy of our mental processes; evil would love for us to believe that to be so. We combat it within the context of conversation, prayer and other

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communal, embodied actions. Therefore I encourage you to use the questions not only for your own personal use but also for engaging one another as a means of healing in real time and space.

With these thoughts in mind, I invite you to join me in discovering the soul of shame, the story it is trying to tell and the alternative story of goodness and beauty that God is telling, one that God is imagining for us all, one in which he is doing "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."

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Our Problem with Shame

No, I'm not willing to do that." He was succinct and clear. I inquired what he felt as he imagined telling his wife about the affair. "Terrified." Of what, I asked? He could only describe in vague terms the abject sense of humiliation he would have to endure should this illicit relationship come to light.

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She was the chief executive of a successful marketing firm and had relied on her hard-driving style to get things done. She was bewildered that her company was listing, and her effort to work harder was not effectively righting the ship. She was running out of ideas. I inquired as to whom she could ask for help. Without hesitation she informed me that to admit she needed assistance was tantamount to resigning. "I can't afford not to have ideas that work. If I have to ask for help, I will be seen as incompetent and the board will fire me."

"She didn't get in, and I'm worried about what this will mean for her future." This, coming from a mother who had worked diligently to do her part to help her daughter gain entrance to her top school choice. This might be understandable, except for the fact that her daughter was only three years old.

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Why had no one protected her? By the time she was twenty-six she had slept with over fifteen men and endured two abortions. But the sex had begun when she was eleven, with an uncle who had first treated her as special, but eventually threatened her very life if she were to reveal the horror. This lasted until she was seventeen, when she left for college, where she was free of her uncle but imprisoned to the behavior that was the only path she knew to "intimacy" with a man. How in the world was she to tell her parents, let alone friends or anyone in her faith community? The only reason she was telling me was that her depression had become too overwhelming for her to function.

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The hypothesis had finally been proven. The elegant biochemistry, the complex statistical analysis of the patients' clinical responses to the drug, and a little luck had all added up. All the work, all the long hours away from his family, all the grant money spent—it was all finally worth it. Along with this discovery would certainly come the offer of a tenured position he had long coveted and that the university would be unable to deny him. Not to mention the potential earnings once the patent came through. There was only one problem. An ethics board that was tasked to make sure his lab's research was beyond reproach had found some questionable data reporting. And before the week was over, his life was unraveling faster than he could have imagined, the result of someone's need to make history fighting cancer.

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He began drinking when he was thirteen. He had two DUIs by the time he was twenty, the second one landing him in jail for a month. That was more than two decades ago, before he met Jesus. But in the last five years the bourbon had begun to flow again most evenings after everyone went to bed. His wife had informed him that if the drinking didn't stop, she was leaving and taking the children with her. Then there was the issue of his work. How, exactly, would he tell the people of his congregation where he had been the pastor for fifteen years? Jim Beam seemed to be

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the only thing that helped him hang on in the face of the burnout he felt shepherding such a challenging flock.

Our Stories of Shame

Stories. Each of us has one, and at some point the people in the previous scenarios sat in my office telling me his or hers. And theirs are just the tip of the iceberg. There are many more, each with different screenplays, each that emerges from a different family of origin, each with its own particular joys and sorrows, victories and defeats. No matter what initially brings them to see me, their stories eventually lead to the moment when what I believe to be the lowest common denominator in human relationships makes its way into the room. It matters not if the person earns a two-comma salary or works for minimum wage. She may be married or single. He may be African American or Caucasian. Depressed, anxious or just plain angry; happy, sad or indifferent. He may be the father or the son, the employer or employee. It may be an individual, a couple, family, community, school or business organization. And you needn't have ever darkened the office door of a psychiatrist. It doesn't require the breakdown of our mental health to be plagued with it. It only requires that you have a pulse. To be human is to be infected with this phenomenon we call shame.

Shame is something we all experience at some level, more consciously for some than for others. Of course there are the obvious examples that come to mind: times we have felt everything from slight embarrassment to deep humiliation. The tabloids are rife with cover stories of the latest follies of celebrities or politicians who have behaved badly. But many of us carry shame less publicly, often outside the easy view of even some of our closest friends. Unemployment. Having a family member whose alcoholism is displayed in front of your friends. Losing a major account at work. The breakup of a marriage. Our child's seeming disinterest in school. A boss whose motivational tactic is to regularly compare your work to that of someone else who is outperforming you. Any of these more common scenarios carry the burden of shame in ways that we work hard to cover up. And our coping strategies have become so automatic that we may be completely unaware of its presence and activity.

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Shame can vary in its range from the most relationally subtle ways—the condescending glance or tone of voice from one spouse to another—to wholesale cultural movements that involve groups, communities and eventually nations that war against nations—the biblical story of Dinah in Genesis 34, racial bigotry and suppression, or the murder of a woman for having publicly shamed her family, known commonly in some cultures as an honor killing. It is therefore not merely a function of the things I think or say about myself or others, nor is it limited to what happens between two individuals. It can move stealthily from the bedroom or kitchen to the playing field to the boardroom to the Situation Room, where decisions are made on a global scale. In this way, even the slightest shaming interactions between individuals can eventually grow into conflagrations that involve multiple parties. Longstanding conflicts such as those in the Middle East or East Los Angeles are evidence that when individuals do not address the shame they experience at a personal level, the potential kindling effect can eventually engulf whole regions of humanity. One of the purposes of this book is to emphasize that what we do with shame on an individual level has potentially geometric consequences for any of the social systems we occupy, be that our family, place of employment, church or larger community.

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It is also important at the outset of this book to note that I do not consider this infestation to be neutral or benign. This is not merely a felt emotion that eventually morphs into words such as "I'm bad." As I will suggest, this phenomenon is the primary tool that evil leverages, out of which emerges everything that we would call sin. As such, it is actively, *intentionally*, at work both within and between individuals. Its goal is to disintegrate any and every system it targets, be that one's personal story, a family, marriage, friendship, church, school, community, business or political system. Its power lies in its subtlety and its silence, and it will not be satisfied until all hell breaks loose. Literally.

Over the last ten years I have been privileged to walk with people as they have been courageously engaging their stories, moving to places of greater depth and connection with God and others while applying new insights that have emerged from the field of interpersonal neurobiology, which I explore in *Anatomy of the Soul*. They have learned about various

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domains of the mind and what it means to love God and others with all of it. They have realized what it means to pay attention to what they pay attention to; the overarching role of emotion in human activity; how memory is as much about predicting the future as it is about recalling the past; how their patterns of attachments with their primary caregivers and current intimate relationships shape their experiences of God; that our awareness of God's deep, joyful pleasure with us at all times everywhere changes everything about how we interpret what we sense, image, feel, think and do; that life is not about not being messy but about being creative with the messes we have; that ruptures will occur but resilience and life is to be found in how we repair them; and that Jesus has come not only to show us how to do all of the aforementioned but to empower us to do so on the way to God's kingdom coming in its fullness.

All this has been very good news for many. However, invariably, on the way to greater freedom they must pass, as we all do, through a common place of suffering: the place of shame. It may be cloaked in the minute details of one's narrative or on public display. It may be obscured in the language of other emotions we are more familiar with such as sadness, anger, disappointment or even guilt. Or it may be a deeply, consciously felt presence in many of our waking hours. We may have different events, images, words or explicit feelings that represent it. It may be consumptive or we may barely notice its activity in our day-to-day comings and goings. Eventually, however, we all come face to face with this specter, the (virtually) unspoken, primal obstacle to our growth and flourishing, and it seems there is no getting around it.

What then exactly is this thing we are calling shame? How do we distinguish it in the moment it occurs? From the countless hours spent with people on their respective pilgrimages, it seems that even defining it is no easy task, which, as I will invite you to consider later, is part of shame's intention. For its elusiveness is a key element of its power. We can use various words such as *humiliation*, *embarrassment*, *indignity*, *disgrace* or more. And though these words get close to what we really mean, ultimately they are essentially symbols that represent the actual *neuropsychological state* we enter when we experience it.

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It is not easy to wrap a simple classification or explanation around our topic. However, despite the challenge of developing such a universally accepted definition of shame, there are particular qualities about it that we immediately recognize as being common to our experience of it.

More Than a Feeling

One way to approach its essence is to understand it as an undercurrent of sensed emotion, of which we may have either a slight or robust impression that, should we put words to it, would declare some version of *I am not enough*; *There is something wrong with me*; *I am bad*; or *I don't matter*.

But we would be mistaken if we thought that the story of shame begins with those words or that they tell it in its entirety. For although we come to understand much of who we are via the medium of language as a way to make sense of reality, our lives emerge most primally in the forms of bodily sensations and movements, perceptions, and emotions. Emotion itself could be considered to be the gasoline in our human tank. If we were to take emotion out of the human experience, we would literally stop moving. Hence, although the description of our experience of shame is often couched in words, its essence is first felt. Though I may say, "I should have been better at that" or "I'm not good enough," the power of those moments lies in our emotional response to the evoking stimulus, be that a comment, a glance or a recollection of that day in third grade when your teacher pointed out in front of the rest of the class that you weren't that bright.

We use many different words to convey various bandwidths of emotional tone. We know that pleasure and sadness are different, that disappointment and anger are not felt to be the same. But it is revealing that so many of what we would term "negative" emotions (i.e., those that we find generally to be distressing in some way) are actually rooted in shame. Again, by shame I am not talking about something that necessarily requires the intensity of extreme humiliation. Rather, it is born out of a sense of "there being something wrong" with me or of "not being enough," and therefore exudes the aroma of being unable or powerless to change one's condition or circumstances.

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The important feature here is not just the *fact* that I am not enough to change my life (though of course the fact is necessary as part of the experience), but rather the *felt sense that I do not have what it takes to tolerate this moment or circumstance*. There are other examples of this. Qualitatively, we would not usually associate sadness with shame. If I lose my best friend to cancer, I do not initially anticipate that shame would be anywhere close to what I would feel. But sadness, though certainly not always, is often related to a lessening. A lessening of relationship (such as death or a betrayal), function or agency (unemployment or an amputation), or the nature of one's story (discovering as an adult, for instance, that when you were a child your father had had an affair and fathered a child you have never known about, lessening the confidence you have in your place in your family). In each case, we inevitably encounter the moment when we are not enough to change our reality as we are currently imagining it. As such, this "not being enough" to tolerate this moment is the grounding for how shame operates, albeit in dimensions of mental activity that may escape my immediate awareness of it as shame.

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The purpose here is not to prove that all emotion that we experience as uncomfortable is rooted in shame, but that we notice many of the emotions that represent distress within us are an extended development of this particular emotional state. Out of this state, then, arise words that we use to make sense of it, so that we can do something about it. When Alison brought her test result to her mother showing a score of 92 percent, her mother asked, "What happened to the other 8 percent?" It doesn't take much to imagine what Alison sensed and felt, nor would it be a surprise if you were to learn that in the wake of multiple interactions like this one Alison developed a knack for telling herself (among many possible options) that she simply had not worked hard enough. Furthermore, she would go on to tell herself that she needed to work harder in order to improve her scores. She would not necessarily be aware that such self-talk was primarily about coping with shame, despite this being the most fundamental thing she is doing. And so, out of the feelings of shame come the words *I don't work hard enough*.

However, soon enough, the words we use double back to reinforce the

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feelings. Alison, by repeatedly telling herself that she is never working hard enough (and therefore needs to work harder) deepens the felt sensation of shame. Hence, an unending loop is created: sensations and feelings beget thoughts that in turn strengthen the felt experience. And so we see that shame is certainly formed in the world of emotion, but it eventually recruits and involves our thinking, imaging and behaving as well.

Thus, from the outset we come to the realization that shame is both ubiquitous in its presence (there is no person or experience it does not taint) and infinitely shape-shifting in its presentation. If it were a member of the Periodic Table of elements, it might be carbon, the element common to all living organisms. That it is so fundamental within our existence also makes it quite challenging to root out. If we approach it as a problem that we can solve merely by changing how or what we think, we are likely to limit our effectiveness in combating it. This is what Matt discovered.

As a marketing executive he had developed a successful business and now had several employees working for him. He was conscientious and cared about his workers, treating them generously and justly. But he worried that at any moment the economy would shift enough that he would have to lay someone off or, worse, that the business would fail outright, which at times kept him up at night. He was insightful enough to recognize that he could not control all the variables that determined whether his company would survive; furthermore, he easily admitted that he worried too much about, well, just about everything. He came for help because he saw his problem primarily as one of anxiety; it was not debilitating but present enough to get his wife's attention. It was not making sense to her (and eventually to him) that despite the steady progression of his business, Matt sometimes would find himself ruminating about how he and his family would one day end up living in a box under a bridge. One noteworthy caveat was how effectively he compartmentalized all of this. Anyone who knew him, apart from his wife, would never have guessed that he had a care in the world, as he had practiced how to effectively manage his concerns when in the presence of just about everyone, ironically, because as he would later tell me, he worried about what people would think of him if they knew about how much he worried. Go figure.

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He came to see me to explore the possibility of using cognitive therapy to restructure his thinking about his life. This was a reasonable goal, as cognitive-based interventions have been demonstrated to be effective in treating a number of emotional problems, especially anxiety. But despite Matt's best efforts, he continued to feel wrapped around the axle of an imagined catastrophic future. One of the most glaring troubles for him was the reality that his life with God did not seem to be able to budge his incessant trend toward ruminating about disaster. Despite the fact that his relationship with Jesus was the most important thing in his life, thinking and reflecting on Scripture passages that admonished him to leave anxiety at the door only left him standing at the door's threshold, right along with his worry. For him, it was not until we began to explore the nature of his experience as one that was *felt*, *sensed* and *imaged* as much as it was *thought* that he began to gain some traction in overcoming his problem.

For instance, we quickly uncovered that what he felt as worry was often correlated with thoughts such as *I won't be able to figure out what to do if the work starts to drop off*. (This, despite his having navigated effectively more than one downturn in business over the course of his career.) Or even more commonly he found himself thinking, *Sooner or later I'm going to be found out to be the fraud I am.* He agreed that most of his friends would find his way of thinking hard to fathom, given his consistent history of competence. Matt's interest was in confronting these thoughts with alternative thinking processes. This is standard operating procedure for cognitive-behavioral therapy. But in his case we found that despite his best effort at restructuring his thinking, this approach still left him with the residual *feeling* that undergirded the thought *I do not have what it takes. When it will count most, I will not be enough*.

On the surface of Matt's complaint, it appeared that his primary problem was one of anxiety, and surely anxiety was a problem. But further exploration revealed that under all of this was a deep *sense* that he simply did not have what it took to be effective, a sensation that was not reducible to a statement but rather something that seemed to have been woven into his DNA. Although we often try to get our minds around shame by using language (which is not unimportant), its essence precedes language; we

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therefore often have difficulty regulating it by using words. Telling ourselves we shouldn't be ashamed often only reinforces it.

Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged

One of the hallmarks of shame is its employment of judgment. Here, by *judgment* I am not referring to the necessary, everyday process of discernment required by each of us for navigating our lives wisely. Nor am I considering the actions taken by maturing, flourishing people to set appropriate limits for themselves or others, be that within a family, church, business or government. Rather, I am referring to the spirit of condemnation or condescension with which we analyze or critique something, whether ourselves or someone or something else. I may say to myself, *I should have done better at that assignment*. What is crucial is the emotional tone that undergirds those words. The spirit of judgment Jesus warned against is such a common part of our mental lives that we barely notice its presence. In fact, it can become so automatic that its manifestation does not require spoken words but rather presents as something felt. Nor is it necessary to be overtly harsh; indeed, much of what passes as "reasonable observations" about ourselves or others is merely cloaked judgment.

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Will believed he knew how to get the most out of his employees, which was to regularly point out their shortcomings so as to "encourage" improvement. He was unaware that his constant criticism was one of the reasons there was such a high turnover rate in his company. He had always assumed that people simply were either unwilling to work hard or to accept honest feedback. It never occurred to him that his penchant for managing people in this way was rooted in his own sense of inadequacy and shame, which he had learned to cope with by turning it outward toward others.

Parents experience a similar result when we have to discipline our children, especially our teenagers, whom we believe we can reason with by the use of our impeccable logic (letting them know that ours is patently obvious and theirs is groundless). We believe we are merely correcting their actions, but fail to see that in offering what we consider to

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be necessary measures, shame enters the process. We are perplexed at why they don't respond to our logical arguments for why they shouldn't be smoking pot or hooking up with their friends.

But it is important to be aware that the act of judging others has its origins in our self-judgment. As I often tell patients, "Shamed people shame people." Long before we are criticizing others, the source of that criticism has been planted, fertilized and grown in our own lives, directed at ourselves, and often in ways we are mostly unaware of. Suffice to say that our self-judgment, that tendency to tell ourselves that we are not enough—not thin enough, not smart enough, not funny enough, not . . . enough—is the nidus out of which grows our judgment of others, not least being our judgment of God. The problem is that we have constructed a sophisticated lattice of blindness around this behavior, which disallows our awareness of it.

Eventually, judgment, and the shame that is its master, can become the source of an ever-enlarging circle of conflict. We have all had experiences in which someone's criticism of another, even though subtle at first, expands to include additional people until whole systems are involved and corrupted by it. Soon enough, what started out as Mary's stated opinion about Stan's proposal during the school board meeting devolved into entire groups of people publicly choosing sides not just about how to spend several thousand dollars but privately about personalities, with anger and hurt strewn everywhere in its wake. It doesn't take much to make the jump to how these forms of conflict, writ large on the community or world stage, lead to the violence we see all around us.

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Hide and Seek

Another feature of shame's presentation is that of hiding. Whether it is the involution into the silence of our own minds or the literal turning away from someone with a downcast facial expression with eyes lowered, shame leads us to cloak ourselves with invisibility to prevent further intensification of the emotion. It is not hard to bring to mind a secret you have worked hard to keep as a countermeasure against the rejection you anticipate you will have to endure should someone find out the truth

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about you. The expense of this labor is often buried as hidden cost, as we collect multiple secrets and keep them neatly stacked in our closets—until the closet can no longer contain them.

This clandestine behavior manifests across the entire spectrum of what we would generally consider to be noble or ignoble activity. We can be a felon or a Rhodes Scholar. In either case we will have elements of our life that are expressions of shame, hidden in our embezzlement *or* our appointment to the Federal Court of Appeals bench. Stephen's diligent work was certainly a tribute to his devotion to having spent hours honing his skill as a trial lawyer. But after his marriage began to crumble under the weight of having committed far less energy to his wife and children than to his clients, he was brought up short. Although judged by his peers to be unsurpassed in his profession, he eventually was willing to admit that a great deal of his work was energized by his longstanding worry of being found out to be wrong. Wrong about a case. Wrong about his choice of profession. Wrong about his ideas about politics or theology. Wrong about his ideas about God. He recounted how growing up his family dinner table conversations, ostensibly couched merely as playful verbal jousting, became his father's opportunity to criticize his ideas—all in the name of needing to make sure Stephen's thinking was sound about everything. Eventually this gave birth to not only a way of studying but also living in general that made the management of feeling "not smart enough" his number one emotional priority. Given his otherwise amiable and kind demeanor, no one would have guessed the degree to which he covertly lived in the midst of his shame.

Gloria spent thirty years of marriage to a man she loved before coming to terms with the abortion she had had as a teenager—but had never revealed to her husband. Not until she found herself on the brink of a psychiatric implosion did she begin to consider her history. It is standard practice for me to inquire in the very first session with patients about their sexual history, or if they have endured any significant sexual, physical or emotional trauma as they understand it. Despite this, it was not until I had been seeing Gloria for about two months that she was finally able to tell her story, as if she had been unaware of it at the time

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of our first encounter. As the veterans of Alcoholics Anonymous report, we are only as sick as the secrets we keep. And shame is committed to keeping us sick.

Caught in the Loop

We recognize early and often that shame tends to be self-reinforcing. When we experience shame, we tend to turn away from others because the prospect of being seen or known by another carries the anticipation of shame being intensified or reactivated. However, the very act of turning away, while temporarily protecting and relieving us from our feeling (and the gaze of the "other"), ironically simultaneously reinforces the very shame we are attempting to avoid. Notably, we do not necessarily realize this to be happening—we're just trying to survive the moment. But indeed this dance between hiding and feeling shame itself becomes a tightening of the noose. We feel shame, and then feel shame for feeling shame. It begets itself.

Athletic and attractive, no one would have suspected it of her at first glance. Nancy had been bingeing and purging for the better part of fifteen years. She had kept it a secret rather effectively from the time she was a teenager until she was into her first year of marriage. When her husband, Mark, first discovered it, he immediately suggested they both seek professional help, but she stonewalled. He was stunned at this skeleton in her closet, given how well he thought they had worked at being honest in their communication heading into marriage. Now he simply felt helpless to do anything about it. Every time he raised his concern, Nancy firmly, and sometimes harshly, redirected the conversation, indicating that the very act of talking about it unleashed an unbearable torrent of shame, which made it impossible for her to even look at him. And so she turned away. Away from Mark, away from the immediacy of the sensation of shame and toward the very behaviors that would only increase the burden of shame she carried over time. Every time this cycle repeated itself, every time she attempted to deflect her shame by turning, she revolved into an ever more tightly spun spool of that which she was hoping to avoid becoming.

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Divide and Conquer

Isolation and disconnection are natural consequences of hiding and resisting reengagement. With enough reinforcement of the features we have thus far considered, we see how the outcome is the separation of people from one another. In any of the previous examples, relational disintegration is obvious. But this isolation is not limited to that between people. For as we will see in chapter two, the fundamental neurobiology of the experience of shame disintegrates different neural networks and their corresponding functions within each individual brain, isolating them, causing the mind to be decreasingly flexible in its capacity to adapt to its environment. In order for us to flourish, we need to be able to connect with others, but this connection is deeply rooted in our ongoing work to increase the degree of connection we experience within our own minds. As Daniel Siegel and others have pointed out, this process of intra- and interpersonal integration is a dance that depends on the fluid movement between the work of the individual and that of a community.[1] I need the community in order for my mind to be integrated, and with a more integrated mind I will be more able to work toward a more integrated community, which reinforces the cycle. Shame both actively dismantles and further prohibits this process of integration, leading to disconnection between mental processes within an individual's mind as well as between individual members within a community.

As a child and adolescent Helen had never considered her family to be broken. It never struck her as odd that her older brother, Jack, consistently received attention from her parents (especially her mother) that she did not. She simply attributed it to the fact that he had been the golden boy of their local school and church community; his reward was well-deserved. Her parents were quick to publicly shower accolades on him but offered nary a mention of her. This pattern continued into adulthood; even when Helen and Jack were married and had children of their own, Jack's children received particular affection, which Helen's did not. Her response was simply to work harder to gain her parents' affirmation, now for her children as much as for herself.

Eventually it all became too much. During one family reunion when the conversation again turned naturally to all that Jack had been accom-

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plishing at his work, and then moved to his son's new interest in baseball, Helen, longing to be seen, offered how delighted she had been at her daughter's interest in lacrosse. She might as well have been speaking to an empty chair. Her mother, ignoring Helen's comment, asked what position Jack's son liked to play. No one was prepared for what happened next.

It began with the slinging of a plate of food and the breaking of a wine glass. Her tirade erupted and continued for ten uninterrupted minutes, with forty years of neglect and hurt spewing over anyone within earshot and sightline. It only stopped when the emotional ammunition chamber was empty. She and her husband left without waiting for a response from her brother or parents. Predictably, in the aftermath and attempted cleanup of the brouhaha, her parents said nothing about the past forty years or the role they played in it. They only had words for the last ten minutes Helen spent at the reunion and all of the trouble she had caused. They expected her to make things right, and especially with her brother. Of course.

Helen's story reflects how the shame of emotional neglect, even and perhaps particularly because of how unremarkable it seemed in the early years of her life, led to her feeling isolated and cut off from her family. Eventually this led to an event in which the whole system was disintegrating. Given shame's intention to provoke the process of isolation, neither Helen nor her family system had the wherewithal to repair the toxic rupture.

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In all these features of shame, emotion is at the heart of the matter; judgment is actively in play. In their hiding, people become disconnected from each other and within their own minds, and the process tends to snowball, caught in a self-perpetuating loop. Is there hope for us? Fortunately, there remains one response to shame that can begin to point us in the right direction.

Our Counterintuitive Conflict

With little effort we can get a sense of how the essential feeling of shame would lead to judging, hiding, reinforcement and isolation. It is not so straightforward to see that exposure is the very thing that shame requires for healing. Given how compelled we feel to turn away, strike inward at ourselves or strike out at others in response to shame, it is not our intuition

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to then quickly turn *toward the other* as a means to resolve the problem. When we are in the middle of a shame storm, it feels virtually impossible to turn again to see the face of someone, even someone we might otherwise feel safe with. It is as if our only refuge is in our isolation; the prospect of exposing what we feel activates our anticipation of further shame.

The work required to overcome the inertia of shame and turn in a posture of vulnerability toward someone else can initially feel overwhelming. Later, we will consider tactics for beginning this process in earnest. But it is helpful to remember that part of shame's power lies in its ability to isolate, both within and between minds. The very thing that has the power to heal this emotional nausea is the reunion of those parts of us that have been separated.

The school system in which Jordan had grown up prided itself in the number of gifted and talented programs it provided for elementary and middle school children, and then the number of AP courses it offered its high school students. What had started out as an attempt to provide more opportunity for students, however, eventually devolved into a cauldron of pressure and anxiety for students and parents alike. Instead of providing an opportunity for expanding curiosity and deepening character, teachers wound up being caught in the same vortex, feeling the pressure to train their students to score well on AP exams so they could get in the best colleges. No longer was school and the learning it represented joy filled. Instead it had become a factory of worry. Worry that was fueled by shame. The institutional shame that the school and all of its parts—test scores, students, teachers and administrators—carried was subtle but palpable. All driven by the fear that no matter how many graduating seniors were admitted to Ivy League universities, they would eventually be judged and found wanting.

By the time Jordan had finished graduate school and had begun his work as a high school English teacher, he wanted life for his students to be different from what it had been for him. And so he began inviting his students to a local coffee shop gathering once a month after school for conversations about what it was like to be in their place in life. They talked about a range of topics, but eventually the discussion turned to

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how much pressure they felt and how worried they were about their performance, not only in his class but in just about everything they were engaged in. They described how alone they felt in their worry. Life for them wasn't very joyful, but they figured this was the price they had to pay to get into the right college so they could find the right job so they could make the right amount of money so they could start the whole process over again with their own kids. But of significance was that some students spoke of how hard, even embarrassing, it was to admit to the weight they were under. They described how they believed they should simply be able to survive this pressure cooker, and to complain that something wasn't right about it would make them seem weak. They felt vulnerable talking about it openly, even with Jordan and their friends in what was for them a relatively safe venue.

But what they found to be most helpful—and had them coming back month after month to the coffee shop—was that in admitting their embarrassment, they didn't feel nearly as alone, and many reported over the course of their year that the pressure to perform, and the fear of the shame of not performing well, gradually receded. The connection they experienced with Jordan and each other actually enabled them to feel more at ease as students. Eventually, word got out to administrators about what was happening in these gatherings. The administrators invited Jordan to talk more openly about the conversations, which ultimately led to a restructuring of the curriculum, including a reduction in the number of AP classes offered at the school. This is a rare story in education, but it began with one teacher courageously creating the opportunity for institutional shame to be exposed in the voices of those for whom the school ostensibly existed.

In this example we see how shame's healing encompasses the counterintuitive act of turning toward what we are most terrified of. We fear the shame that we will feel when we speak of that very shame. In some circumstances we anticipate this vulnerable exposure to be so great that it will be almost life threatening. But it is in the *movement toward another*, toward connection with someone who is safe, that we come to know life and freedom from this prison. And in Jordan's story, not just an indi-

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vidual but an entire institutional system came to breathe fresh air on its way to a more integrated state and liberation from shame.

Pilgrims on a Journey

Although it is tempting to hope that we can eliminate shame from our relational diet, it is futile to wish for this. Our hope is, rather, in changing our response to it as we journey together toward God's kingdom, which is now but not yet in its fullness. We would like to have it excised surgically from our brains, but instead find ourselves having to grow in our confidence in combating it. To do so requires that we strengthen our capacity to turn our attention to something other than shame. As such we do not execute shame quickly via some behavioral guillotine, but rather we starve it over time, not by avoiding it but by attuning to it as a component of a larger story. A story whose beginning is as much about *how* we were made as it is about *why* we were made. Part of that *how* is the subject of chapter two, a subject that will add a helpful layer of understanding in our pursuit of making sense not only of shame but of the story that the gospel tells in order to realize its healing.

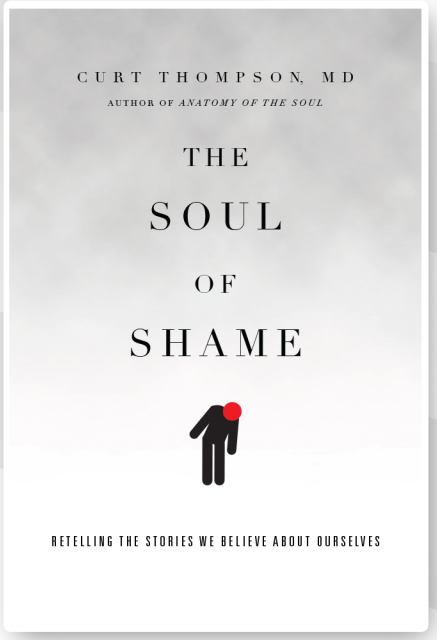
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