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Shame & Spirituality: Living as a Whole Person in a Disembodied World | Curt Thompson

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The Veritas Forum

Psychiatrist Curt Thompson, M.D. addresses the role of shame in our mental and spiritual lives. Presented by the Veritas Forum at Harvard University • Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast.

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are in history, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. Today we hear from psychiatrist and founder of Being Known and the Center for Being Known, Curt Thompson, as he addresses the role of shame in our mental and spiritual lives.

Presented by the Veritas Forum at Harvard University. Let me start with this. I just want to remind us just to say something that is obvious to everyone but we're not thinking about this and that is that we're all here in this gathering even.

We're all here, presumably, on purpose. We're here because we intend to be here and why do I bring that up? The first thing I want to really reflect on is an interesting thing about human anthropology and the way the mind works. Before we get to shame, we need to talk about why is shame an important thing.

We want to say that one of the first reasons why it's important is because it's important for us to have some sense of what we believe it means to be human in the first place. One of the questions that we ask is what does it mean for us to be people of intention? What is it that we really want? What do we want to be about as human beings? I want to

propose to us that in our culture in the West, we often, whether we know this consciously or not, we presume that what we really want to be about is that we want to be about doing the next right thing. We want to do well in school.

We want to move to accomplish things. We want to move to acquire things. We want to move to create things and to reach benchmarks and so forth and so on.

All those things are true in and of themselves. But I want to suggest that in and of themselves, one of the things that the mind knows, this embodied in relational process that we occupy, that we call the mind, one of the things that it knows is that those particular things that we typically think that we are longing for, that we desire most are temporary. What I mean by temporary is that the mind has a way of recognizing that in time when we acquire certain things, when we've gotten the A or the B, when we've acquired the job, we've acquired the marriage or where we're going to live, our mind is already moving on to the next thing.

Our mind knows that once we've reached a benchmark, it's moving on to the next thing because benchmarks in and of themselves, literally, temporarily, are temporary. We have them, you win the Super Bowl and within 10 minutes of being done, people want to know, is Tom Brady going to win it next year. We don't really care anymore if he's just won it tonight.

We want to know if he's going to win next year. And this is a thing that the mind does. This is how our brains tend to operate.

But I want to invite us to consider that an even deeper longing and desire that we have as human beings is that we first desire to be known, ultimately, before we desire anything else. We like to say that every baby that comes into the world is looking for someone looking for her. The minute she comes out of the uterus, the minute he comes into the world, he's looking for someone looking for him.

Even if his 100 billion neurons as poorly formed as they are, don't consciously notice yet. And what's interesting about this longing to be known, I long for you to see me, to hear me, and I long, and I know that you long to be seen and to be heard by me. There's nothing temporary about that.

These are bottomless wells for us to plumb. There is no end to the degree to which you can be known by me and me, by you. And you put four or five or ten of us in a room and the degree to which this depth of being known deeply never really finds an end point.

There is no end point to this, like there is to once I acquire my house. And this is important because along the way, we discover that I not only want to be known by other human beings and known deeply. I don't just want you to know the things about where I came from and what I study.

I want you to know the parts about me that I love, but I also counterintuitively long to have you know the parts about me that I hate the most. Because those are the parts of me that my brain intuitively knows, no matter what my worldview is, those are the parts that in my hiding them from you, I'm going to have to burn energy. I'm going to have to burn energy to contain them.

And that's energy that I don't then have available to do the other thing that we long for. Because we don't just long to be known. We long to be known by one another in order for us to then together create artifacts of beauty and goodness in the world.

Human beings long to be known on the way to creating beauty. And I want to suggest even further that we don't just long to create beauty. Beauty is something we long to become.

And so we asked first the question, what does it mean for us to be human? Why am I at Harvard? I would say if I were at Harvard, I would want to be at Harvard because Because I want to be deeply known by my colleagues, by my classmates, by my professors in order for us together to go on and create objects of beauty and goodness in the world. I want to make in the world those things of beauty, and what might those things be? Those things could be relationships. Those things could be software.

Those things could be education. Those things could be artwork. Those things could be new businesses.

Those things could be new architectural design. Those things could be new farms. Those things could be anything in the world in which beauty becomes an imagined possibility.

This notion of being human in order to be known, in order to create beauty and goodness in the world usually requires at least three things. The first thing is that it requires what we call in the mind differentiation. By differentiation, we mean that in order for me to create beauty well, I'd like to create beauty.

Honestly, you know, it'd be nice if the world were just like me. I've been married for 34 years, and I'm married to a lovely, beautiful woman, and her name is Phyllis. What I tell people is after 34 years, I realize when I married Phyllis, I didn't really want to marry Phyllis.

What I really wanted was to marry someone who looked like Phyllis, but was really me. I really wanted to marry me. I wanted someone who thinks like me, who thinks the things that I think are funnier like me, who wants to waste time like I want to waste time.

I want to marry me. I didn't actually want to marry a real person who is this different from me. But we know that when we want Van Gogh, when we want Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto, when we want great software, we have to bring together different pieces.

We need to be differentiated. It's not going to do very well for me to be with someone who's just like me. We bring together differentiated parts to create beauty.

But the second thing that we need is that we need great vulnerability. You see, in order for us to create together, it needs me to be able to say there are parts of this creative endeavor in which I'm not a knock. I need you.

I need you. I'm vulnerable. There's a part of me that is broken.

There's a part of me that is weak. There's a part of me that is not enough on my own in order to create the world of beauty that I long for. I need to be with the other.

That requires me to be able to name the parts of me that are inadequate, the parts of me that are not up to the task, the parts of me that may feel broken and as we'll get to in a moment, feel ashamed. In a third condition that we talk about with creativity is this notion of creating in a differentiated way, in a vulnerable way, in the absence of shame. Because what I want to suggest to us is that where we begin with shame is like you're all smart folks and you know, I don't need to tell you what shame is and what it is.

You know when you feel ashamed. You know when you sense it. You know when you feel it.

You'll get to some of those technical things in just a moment. What I want to indicate to us is that shame isn't just a way in which we feel bad. Shame is in my understanding of the world.

Shame is what happens to us and primarily what it does is that it undercuts, it shears off our capacity to create. Not only does it make me feel bad, but in feeling bad, I am now subverted from creating in the world those artifacts of beauty and goodness that I've been called to create. And those of us who are followers of Jesus would say that if we believe in evil, I would say that evil's primary use of shame is to keep humans from creating the beauty and the goodness that they were destined to make in the world.

So when we talk about shame, first we have to recognize that it's not just something that happens to happen to be in the universe. It's something that evil actively wields to disintegrate our minds. We like to say in our business, this world of interpersonal neurobiology, we like to say that the mind is an embodied and relational process that emerges from within and between brains whose task it is to regulate the flow of energy and information.

That's a lot of words. But the shorthand is that the mind we like to say does at least five things. It senses, it images, it deals, it thinks, and it behaves actively, physically.

All those five parts, much like an orchestra, need to come together, differentiated parts, coming together, linked in order to create the symphony in which the mind flourishes.

What shame does is it disconnects all of those interacting parts. Here's some of what shame does.

If you were to just look at the clinical literature on what shame actually, what it is and how it functions, you'd read something of this nature. First of all, it's important to know that shame, at the same time that we all kind of know what it is, shame is first a neurophysiologic event. It is first something that I sense literally in my physicality.

It isn't just something that first happens because I think it. It is something that happens literally in my embodied awareness of the world. If you've ever been around a dog long enough, you know that dogs can be shamed and you can watch what dogs will do.

When I sense shame, I will physically turn away from you. I will then make it, it will be make it very difficult for me to have the experience of thinking and sensing and imaging and drilling in a concert hole when I'm in that situation. Mechanically, what happens in the brain, you like to say that it's not unlike what happens with a standard transmission automobile.

Some of you might be familiar with that if you drive a stick shift. You know that you have an accelerator and a brake and you have a clutch. And then if you don't employ the clutch anytime the car slows down or anytime you're trying to shift gears, the car doesn't just stall, it stalls violently.

If we imagine that our desire to create is like the accelerator, but even then we know that we need sometimes to be able to slow that pace down. Being the accelerator in the brakes, if we don't have a clutch, our engine tends to stall violently. If any of you have ever been in a moment in which you've been embarrassed, whether privately or publicly, you know what this feels like.

There are some other things that are important for us to know about how it works. The first thing is that shame is something that human beings can begin to experience as early as 15 to 18 months of age. Long before we have language, long before I have some kind of an awareness of what is going on with this, long before I can make sense of why I feel it, I'm already in the position of having to somehow regulate it.

I'm having to find out ways to make sense of it and to manage it. So we see that we human beings have been trying to manage shame from an early time in our own personal development. Not only is it early in the game for us, it is also quite disintegrating.

As I mentioned before, it disconnects my different mental functions from being able to function together as a whole. One of the primary behavioral things that I do in response to this is the behavioral modality of hiding. I literally feel shame and I don't want to tell you that I feel shame because they're very active telling you makes me feel ashamed.

And in this overreactive and self-reinforcing neurophysiologic events, because I do not tell you where I feel shame, the very active hiding strengthens its capacity within me. Not only am I going to hide from you, I'm going to have to begin to burn energy literally neurophysiologically. I'm going to have to burn energy to contain it, to not talk about it, and eventually to keep myself even from thinking about it.

Whatever these small or large moments are in which this takes place, with this hiding eventually comes isolation. I begin to cordon off these different parts of my story, the story parts in which this shame has occurred. The hiding and the isolation only leads to the strengthening of the neural impulse to continue to hide and remain ashamed.

In addition to this, one of the primary cognitive features of shame is that of condemnation. By the time of about four or five years of age, the feeling that I have is one that begins me to lead to say things to myself that are pretty self-critical, not that anybody here in this room has ever been self-critical. But shame tends to launch me into states where I will say things like, "I should have done this better.

I should have done that better. I'm not good enough at this. I need to be better at that." This spirit of condemnation only reinforces my sense of shame.

Now, we think that when we shame ourselves in this way, that this motivates us to do better the next time. One of the things that we know about shame is that because it then eventually sucks dry the energy that I'm using that I don't then get to use to create, over time, we know that shame does not as a tool for behavioral change does not ever lead to human flourishing over time. It's therefore not ever going to be effective.

That's a different question from whether or not there actually are appropriate times for us to feel shame. That's a different question because the answer is, "Yes, there are times when it's appropriate for us to feel it." The question is not, "Do we sense shame at all?" The question always is, "In what way do we respond to it?" Moreover, one of the other things that happens then is, as you can imagine, with shame, I tend to literally become physiologically static. I tend to become less mobile.

If you're ashamed in front of a group, how easy is it for you to move about? We either want to flee the situation or we feel paralyzed, but the point is that I'm not easily able to move about within the context of those relationships that I'm currently occupying. Shame leads to stasis and that static position, that lack of mobility internally with my cognition, the flexibility with my emotions, that stasis eventually disrupts my ability to create. At the end of the day, what shame is a harbinger of? The harbinger that tells us that I'm about to be abandoned, I'm about to be left.

Now, we who follow Jesus would say things like, "In our texts of origin," where we read that God says, "It's not good for man to be alone." We would say that the ultimate sense of what I'm afraid of really has everything to do with this question of, "Am I going to be

left alone?" Now, here's what's important. All these things that I've just talked about with shame are things that take place in a context of a story. You see, you can read about shame in the literature in terms of the mechanics and the way that I just mentioned them, but that in and of itself doesn't really explain the real impact of shame because everybody here on our screen tonight, everybody here.

Because we're human beings, we need to know that we invariably are people who tell stories. We can't not tell them. We are always in the business of telling stories.

From the time we begin to acquire language, we are using language to make sense of things in the world. We like to say in our business, first we sense and then we make sense of what we sense, and we are doing this 24/7. I am always in the business of telling stories, and what's important is that shame finds my story to be the context in which it takes root.

And then it begins to shape the very story that I tell. If I'm a kid who at age 10 comes to my dad with a 92% on my math work, and I'm really pretty excited about this, and my dad says, "Well, that's great. Where's the other 8%?" If that's the story in which I live, I begin to consider this shame.

Like I came to my dad with joy, and now the experience, the neurophysiologic experience of shame is getting spliced together with experience of joy. And so a number of things begin to happen. I begin to tell myself without even using words as a 10-year-old that to feel joy is dangerous, because the moment that you begin to offer something to someone in joy, there's the risk that I'm going to feel bad like that.

I don't need words to tell that story, because most of the best stories don't even need words to be told. If you were to go to the best movies, most of what makes the movie great is it's going to be its, yes, its dialogue, but also its score and its cinematography. So much of how we tell our story is wrapped up in the emotional element of that.

So one of the questions we then also have to ask is this, in what story do each of us believe that we're living? In what story do I believe that I'm living? Because shame is going to happen. The question is, is the story that I live in, is it big enough to contain it and is it big enough to redeem it? We then get to this question of like, okay, this is shame. What the heck are you going to do about it? And I would say that there are two or three really important components that go into this.

The first is our willingness to actually confront it. Remember, shame is a thing that tends to want us to have us not looking at it, because to do so only intensifies the immediacy of how bad that feels. We need to be able to look at it.

But the second thing that's crucially just as important is that I only effectively heal and redeem and recommission my shame in the context of community, in the context of

others who are coming to find me, in the context of others to whom I can tell my story and can reveal those parts of me that are a shame in order to have the experience of being seen and being known by them and have them not leave the room. How many of us have had experiences in which the parts of our stories that we hate the most when told to someone who is able to hear it with compassion and mercy gives us the experience of that very part of our story being utterly transformed? Many of us have had all kinds of experiences that things have happened to us, things that we've done to ourselves, things that we've done to other people in large moments, but most of the time in micromoments. One of the things I tell people is we can have large events, abuse, trauma, things that take place to us, racial trauma, ranges of different things that happen to us, not just as individuals but as whole ethnic societies.

But the most shaming that happens to us most of the time is the shaming that takes place in the privacy of our own minds in which I am telling myself, I wasn't enough there. I'm not enough here. I wasn't enough there.

I wasn't up there over and over and over and over again, literally dozens if not hundreds of times a day, we are telling that story. And in order for that story to be told differently, I'm going to need a payload that's bigger than the one that I'm walking around with in my brain. And in that sense, I need the presence of a community that is collectively able to help me practice over time telling a different story and then being able to believe a different story.

And by believing, I don't mean I believe a different story like I believe that the moon is so many hundred thousand miles from the earth as a fact. I mean the difference between I believe that Columbus is the capital of Ohio, but that's different than me believing what it's like to sit or stand in the Ohio State House to be in the city. We have a number of groups that we run in our practice and I'll wrap up with this.

And these communities, these regenerating communities as we call them, stand out mostly because more than anything, they provide a landscape, they provide a space in which as people tell their stories, their listeners are giving those storytellers an opportunity to tell their stories categorically differently. And they're not just giving them different facts on the ground, they're giving them different neurophysiologic experience in the group such that my felt sense of my story is different because I'm seeing you see me in this moment. And instead of me feeling only my shame, I'm able to borrow the compassion that's coming from your sightlines and literally allow that to transform my mind while changing my brain and my body at the very same time.

These kinds of transformations in our stories take time and practice. But what they lead to ultimately is not just that I get to feel better about myself, no. They lead back full circle to where we started at the top of our time in which the healing of my shame does not simply lead to me feeling better, it leads to me being liberated to create the beauty

and the goodness in the world with you with whom I have great differentiation.

In the presence of vulnerable lives and keeping shame outside of that context in appropriate ways in order for us to realize these moments of beauty and goodness, these things that St. Paul would say were the good works that God has prepared for you to engage in before the foundation of the world. And so what I'm really hopeful about is I tell people, look, the news about shame is far worse than you know, and it's far better than you can imagine. Is there anything we can do when we sense someone we know is ashamed of something? Well, one of the things that happens, we like to say, my colleague, Courtney Morrison, with whom I work closely, you know, she likes to talk about emotion in general being contagious.

It's a great word because it is. We like to talk about emotion in general as being the fuel in the tank of the human experience. It's the gasoline in the tank.

If you take the gasoline out of the human engine, human beings stop moving, right? Emotion from the Latin word *amotia*, that which precedes movement. We don't do anything in the world. We don't think we don't move.

We don't do anything that is not emotional in nature in the same way that an automobile doesn't do anything apart from fuel regulation. You can't turn it on. You can't make it slow down.

You can't speed it up. You can't turn it. You can't break it.

You can't, apart from it being a matter of fuel regulation. Now we don't build cars just to have a place to put gasoline. It's not that gasoline is the most important thing.

It's just that there's nothing you can do in a car that doesn't involve it. Shame as an affective state, as an emotion, means that when somebody else is sensing it, if we sense it in somebody else's because there's some part of us that is also sensing it, we're sensing that emotional state. So, if I sense that one is embarrassed, it is likely because there is a part of me that knows what shame feels like that is able to register that you are feeling this kind of thing.

And in that regard, this has to do with a thing that we call mirror neurons and how we echo and mimic others with whom we sense their intention. One of the first things that we can just say is like, "Gosh, I notice the look on your face. Can you tell me what you're feeling?" Now one of the things that we invite people to do when we tell people, "Look, we become really good at things that we practice." Which is why we're so good at shame because we practice it a lot.

We become really good at feeling shame and then we feel like it's a good for anything for us to share that with the rest of the world. So we can condemn others around us because like, "I got enough. I got too much."

I want to share some with you." In this regard, when I sense it in someone else, it's easy for me to ask questions that are yes or no questions. Are you feeling ashamed? Oh, which of course, like if somebody asks you, "Are you feeling ashamed?" Isn't the first thing you want to like, "Yes, of course. Thank you." I thought you would never ask.

I was hoping to show you what my shame was looked like since we could have this conversation. Hopefully, I'm glad that you asked me in front of some of our friends, in fact. No.

It's helpful for us if we're going to become professional relationship people. If we become good at that, if we're going to pay attention to that, then it's helpful for us to know how to ask questions. And one of the ways that we ask questions as much as we possibly can, avoid asking questions that give people yes or no is the option for their answers.

We know these as open-ended questions, but it's helpful for us to say like, "I'm wondering if what you're feeling." And invite them to say more about that. Tell them, invite them to tell you the story around, remember, shame isn't just a thing that I feel independent. I don't just like wake up at the morning and go, "Wow, that's really weird.

I'm suddenly overcome with shame." No. Anything that we feel is always going to be contextualized to a particular event in which it takes place. And so if I'm feeling shame, if that person is sensing, if you're sensing that they're feeling shame, it's good to be curious about what's been happening with you in the last 10 minutes in the last day.

I'm noticing some things and to be able to say, "Gosh, I noticed a look on your face. We like to talk about having seven different kinds of nonverbal cues that communicate about 85 to 90 percent of whatever it is that human beings are communicating to each other." I notice that you're just kind of like being pretty quiet today. I notice that you're not looking at me very much.

I notice that you haven't talked much. I'm noticing the look on your face. I'm wondering, "What's going on?" One of the things that's important for us to make sure that we don't do is not to with certainty ascribe it to people that they feel things that they haven't actually told us themselves that they feel.

Now we might be correct. We might be able to understand and know that that person looks ashamed. I'm sure that that's what they're feeling.

But it's going to be really important for us to give them the opportunity to name it themselves. Because it is in my naming what I feel, especially what we call a "flifting emotion," negative emotion, emotions that I find to be unpleasant. As I name it, the naming of negative emotion, the naming of unpleasant emotion is the first step to being able to regulate it.

Part of why I don't name things that I feel are the same reasons why a three-year-old,

when suspecting that there are monsters in her closet because of the light that is casting shadow from the hallway into her bedroom, she doesn't get up and go look for where the monsters are. She pulls the covers up over her head because she thinks, "If I don't look at them, they can't see me." If I feel these things and I name them, then it's going to be worse. So I don't name the monsters in my closet.

But here's the thing, if dad comes into the room because she's crying and he says, "Well, what's going on?" And she says, "No, there's monsters in the closet. Could you please just close the door?" And what does a wise father do? No, he picks her up and he takes her to the closet. And she's like, "No." But the moment that they open the door and he turns the light on, he sees it.

It's just a pair of boots. And she then knows that the very act of naming things helps to tame things. And part of why that's true is not just because I'm connecting my left brain and my language centers with my emotionally charged right hemisphere and my lower brain portions that are feeling and sensing this.

I'm bringing an integrated hole together, but also because I'm doing it in the presence of another human. My healing is always going to take place not just in the presence of, but because of the presence of another person. For you to invite me to be known, even in my shame, is the very thing that allows my shame to be transformed because you are in the room enabling those new neural networks to form in my brain while my mind is being changed at the same time.

And so when we notice what we believe someone's distress of shame to be, we see that in them. Being curious, being courageous, being compassionate, and helping create the space for them to tell their story more effectively, which of course may not happen in the next 30 seconds or some important steps for us to keep in mind, to not just make sure that shame stays where it needs to belong, but also to invite those parts of their story into the room in order for them to be healed. Amazing.

Thank you, Dr. Thompson. For our next question, we've submitted how do we learn to reject shame without also throwing out godly grief and what is the role of repentance in growth? Wow. What a great question.

And I think that whoever's asking this question may, may in fact be thinking of the very text to which I usually refer people when we talk about this question. This gets around to the issue of, you know, is there, you know, I've been asked this a lot. Is there such a thing as helpful shame? And we read St. Paul as he writes in 2 Corinthians chapter 7 and the 10th verse where he says there is a godly grief that leads to repentance and there is an ungodly grief that leads to death.

And I would just say that this neurophysiologic and interpersonal experience of shame is something that is part of the human condition, it is a built-in siren system. It is a smoke

detector. It is an emotional state that wells up within us that tells us that something is wrong.

Now there are plenty of times when we human beings do things for which shame is the proper response. There's no question about it. The question is when shame is something I'm experiencing in response to and in light of something that I've done for which shame is that proper response, the question becomes what will I do in response to it? Most of our trouble with humans, with humans, yeah, most of our trouble with humans is not that we experience shame, it is how we respond to it.

And here's the key element that we see and this is reflected in the creation text. Genesis 2, Genesis 3, Genesis 4, Genesis 5 and 6, this notion that where shame is actively destructive, it is that way, it takes place in that way in contexts in which people are first being separated from one another. When left to my own accord, my grief, my shame does not lead me to repentance, it leads me to death because it leads me to continue to turn away from you and from the other.

One of the interesting things that comes up in the research between guilt and shame, this question will occasionally come up with, are they different? And how do they take place, you know, neurobiologically? What we see as we said earlier that shame is a neuro-affective state that can emerge as early as 15 to 18 months of age. The thing that we call guilt is a similar neurophysiologic response, interpersonal response, that typically does not begin to emerge in human beings until they're somewhere around the ages of about three, maybe four to six years of age. And it is deeply related to the development of the prefrontal cortex.

The development of the prefrontal, like I don't need my prefrontal cortex to feel shame. To feel guilt, a number of things have to take place, one of which is I am now aware that I have done something that is wrong, that is separate from myself. You know, guilt, we would say I've done something bad.

Shame says I am bad. With guilt, I have this awareness that I've done something that is separate from me and it typically affects a relationship with somebody else that I have. But my brain has to be well-developed enough in order for me to be aware of these things.

But here's another key difference between these two neurophysiologic events. When human beings sense what we call guilt, especially if they've committed some act against someone with whom they have a close relationship, their typically first response is to move toward that person in order to create a reconciliation process. Guilt will move me toward a person with shame, I won't do that.

It is too painful for me to turn toward you with shame, which is why I need you to come find me in my shame. Which is why when my shame finds me in isolation, it is more

likely that I enter into this world pool that eventually literally leads to death. None, an ungodly grief leads to my demise.

Because shame writ large in my isolated state means I stop creating, I stop seeing myself for others as lovable, and I become static unto death. But godly grief turns me toward the other and allows me to be open to a community that points something out to me to which I would say, "Wow, I've screwed this up. What are the things that I need to do to make this right?" But my ability to do that, does not come apart from my already having established a connection with people who I trust will stay with me even in the middle of the presence of my shame to begin with.

[music]

[music]