

Article

Transcending the Shamed Self

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(Intended for V2N7, Self-Transcendent Experience, Gregory M. Nixon, Editor-at-Large)

Abstract

To contribute to understanding self-transcendence, this article provides an account of my personal experience of transcending my shamed self. This requires explaining the kind of self and shame involved. In mystical literature, the consciousness that remains after self-transcendence is sometimes called the Self or non-ego, in contrast to the self or ego, which is the empirical, executive self of ordinary consciousness and functioning. The self includes specific selves that play distinctive roles in various contexts. The specific self transcended in my personal experience was the *shamed self*, one that was experiencing the self-rejecting emotion of shame. Ordinary discourse as well as philosophical and empirical research often employ the term *shame* generically while failing to distinguish among at least eight closely related emotions: shyness; embarrassment; fear of rejection; feeling exposed, vulnerable, inferior, or unfulfilled; and self-rejection—shame in the strict sense, the emotion caused by my self-evaluation that I do not deserve love, even my own. The article proceeds in six parts: a summary introduction; a phenomenological account of shame; a phenomenological account of my personal experience of shame; a phenomenological account of my personal experience of transcending my shamed self; a phenomenological account of the aftermath; and an outline of a naturalistic explanation of my self-transcendence. Throughout the article, the term *Self* refers to an embodied, observing Self that avoids overly identifying with any aspect or function of the self, rather than an ontologically disembodied entity that transcends nature.

Keywords: self, Self, self-transcendence, shyness, embarrassment, fear of rejection, fear of being exposed, vulnerability, sense of inferiority, unfulfillment, internalization, shame, naturalism.

*Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;*

- W. H. Auden, In Memory of W. B. Yeats

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Summary Introduction

The self that was transcended one summer evening in 1990 was the shamed self: desperate to feel lovable, to feel deserving of love. Its concern was not whether this or that attribute or behavior was lovable, but whether it itself, wholly and at its core, was. I may never completely understand why it felt unworthy of being loved, but I can identify some milestones along the road to its transcendence. Transcendence, not fulfillment, is the right word. The shamed self was not transformed from feeling unlovable to feeling lovable. It dissolved in favor of an emerging Self that knew from its innermost experience that feelings of one's being lovable or unlovable are grounded in nothing but illusion.

Ontological Clarification

The Self that emerged was not some higher being that transcended the natural world. It was merely the humble, empirical self now freed from over-identifying with any of its attributes. Such a Self knew such things about itself as its having the name Gary, 6'0", 160 lbs, living in Walnut Creek, California, USA, planet Earth, in 1990 CE. But it also experienced itself as more than the sum of these attributes, so that most importantly it did not derive its own value from whatever practical or social value any particular attribute might have for it or anyone else. It knew from its innermost experience that any such derivation was an illusion.

Epistemological Clarification

This knowledge was experiential, not theoretical. The Self did not have theoretical insight that there could be no valid answer to the question of whether it was lovable or unlovable, no theoretical insight that the question was itself an illusion. One of its many selves was a professional philosopher who was acutely aware that, as far as he knew, no objectively grounded answers to the question had ever been given; and it was impossible to prove that none could ever be given. Consequently, the Self did not emerge from some theoretical conviction of reason. Instead, it arose along with a simultaneously emerging satisfaction in living that made the question irrelevant. In much the same way, one might resolve a marital spat neither by proving who was right and who was wrong nor by sweeping the conflict under the rug, but by doing something sufficiently loving that the spat becomes inconsequential.

The Shamed Self

The shamed self is a self-rejecting self, one that believes that it is unworthy of even its own love. The shamed self is not *the Self*, which refuses to buy into such illusory global self-evaluations, but which limits its self to specific, pragmatic self-evaluations based on objective performance measures, whether intuitive or formal. For example, the Self simply enjoys being loved and is merely disappointed when it is not, since it draws no self-evaluative conclusions

about whether the experience is deserved. Even when it thinks of itself as lovable or unlovable in some particular, it bases its understanding pragmatically on facts. For example, if I have a speech impediment, I may think of myself as unlovable in the narrow sense that as a matter of fact others avoid my company because of it. I may go further and believe that they have good reason for avoiding me because of the effort they must make to understand me. I may go even further and find myself annoying to listen to. But I create a shamed self only when I go further still and believe that my impediment makes me as a whole unworthy of any love at all. In an act of emotional suicide, I reject my self. As a result, I transform the naturally unpleasant experience of being unloved into something much more: conclusive evidence that I am through and through undeserving of love. Once I take that logical leap I create a debate within myself about whether or not I am really worthy of love. When confronted with alleged evidence of my being unworthy, I desperately counter it by trying to find reasons for feeling worthy. To paraphrase Kierkegaard, from the labyrinth of that debate there is no escape. For in my view—which I will not argue for in this article, but which was critical for my self-transcendence—is that reason cannot settle the question of self-worthiness either by itself or based on evidence. The Self transcends the shamed self only by experiencing the irrelevance of the issue to its personal happiness.

The Phenomenology of Shame

Emotions are complex phenomena that are associated with neurophysiological, behavioral, affective, and cognitive processes (Izard, 1977; Tangney, 1990). The role that each kind of process plays varies so much from one emotion to another that psychology currently has no settled way to categorize emotions (Griffiths, 1997; Kagan, 1984). The difficulty is that we cannot study emotions directly, but only indirectly through gathering self-reports or observing neurophysiological and behavioral processes (Darwin, 1872/1998; M. Lewis, 1992, 1995; Miller, 1995; Simon, 1992).

Data-gathering challenges arise because self-reports can be dishonest, inaccurate, or semantically ambiguous—that is, individuals may differ in their understanding of the words involved. One person's shame may be another's embarrassment or shyness or guilt or something else altogether. Behaviors and neurophysiological processes may not be uniquely associated with different emotions. Covering one's face is associated with shyness and embarrassment as well as shame, though in subtly different ways. Some emotions may even lack one or more of the four processes. For example, feeling guilty does not seem to have any characteristically associated behavior, and feeling startled may not involve cognition in any meaningful sense (M. Lewis, 1995). These problems are multiplied when a situation evokes more than one emotion.

Within the space allotted for this article, it is not possible to establish conceptually and empirically a definition for shame, distinguishing it from the many other closely related and often conflated emotions. I will therefore give a brief account that aims to be intuitively

plausible enough to explain my experience of self-transcendence. *Shame*, then, *is the emotion characterized by the belief that I am wholly unworthy of love, even my own (equivalently, I do not deserve to be loved, even by myself; I deserve to be wholly rejected, even by myself; I am unlovable, even to myself; I am ashamed of myself; I am shameful)*. This definition distinguishes shame proper from at least seven other emotions that are often confused with it: shyness; embarrassment; fear of rejection; and feelings of exposure, vulnerability, inferiority, or unfulfillment. I do not intend this set of eight emotions to be exhaustive. I will refer to it as the shame-family of emotions in virtue of two facts: they are often associated with negative evaluations of the global self rather than of some particular attribute, and consequently they are often confused with one another. Sometimes they are usefully grouped together generically as shame; at other times, however, clearly differentiating them is critical. That is the case here in order to understand the precise nature of my experience of self-transcendence and the implications for understanding transcendence more generally.

The shame-family is sometimes, but decreasingly, confused with the guilt-family of emotions: fear of punishment, desire for punishment, disappointment with oneself, regret, and guilt proper. A consensus has developed for distinguishing broadly between the guilt-family as involving negative feelings caused by one's bad behavior and the shame-family as involving negative feelings caused by believing one's whole self to be bad (Alexander, 1963; Izard, 1977; H. B. Lewis, 1987; M. Lewis, 1992; Lindsay-Hartz, de Rivera, & Mascolo, 1995; Lynd, 1958; Tangney, 1990; Tangney & Fischer, 1995). I will not discuss the guilt-family of emotions except in those few instances where guilt proper and shame proper are usefully distinguished. In those cases, I will define *guilt* as *the emotion characterized by the belief that I have done something morally wrong (equivalently, I have done something I ought not to have done; I have failed to do something I ought to have done; all of these versions can be altered to refer to future action—I intend to do—or present action—I am doing—as well)*. For convenience, I will refer to guilt proper and shame proper simply as guilt and shame, respectively. I will never use the two latter terms generically unless I am directly or indirectly quoting someone else.

Shyness

Shyness is a neurophysiological withdrawal response from social stimuli that is devoid of any appraisal of the individual's situation but simply notes the presence of a social stimulus (Kagan, Reznick, & Snidman, 1988; Kagan, Snidman, & Arcus, 1992; M. Lewis, 1992, 1995). It is triggered just by the awareness of being exposed. The absence of appraisal distinguishes shyness from the other members of the shame-family. Shyness seems to be the most rudimentary expression of a need for privacy, a need to choose when I will be exposed to others.

Embarrassment

Emotions ranging from shyness to a less intense version of shame are often indiscriminately called embarrassment (M. Lewis, 1992, 1995; Lynd, 1958; Rochat, 2009). However, I will define

embarrassment as the emotion characterized by the self-evaluation that I deserve disapproval. It is beyond the scope of this article to establish that the reason why the literature currently does not allow a fully satisfactory account of embarrassment (M. Lewis, 1992, 1995) is that has not yet discovered this definition. For present purposes, we can distinguish embarrassment by imagining ourselves embarrassed and asking if we believe that we deserve to be wholly rejected or unloved; and if we do believe that, asking ourselves if it is then more accurate to say we feel ashamed rather than embarrassed. All other members of the shame family can be defined in similar fashion.

Fear of rejection

Throughout this article, fear of rejection means fear of *emotional* rejection. Nomadic peoples abandon the old and infirm when they can no longer take care of them. This does not mean that nomads cease loving or respecting them, yet they do reject them *physically* from the community. In itself, that has nothing to do with shame, though of course anyone might mistake it for emotional rejection, which with additional factors could result in shame.

Like shame, fear of rejection involves the whole self—fear that one’s very presence will be shunned (Rochat, 2009)—since one’s presence cannot be partially rejected. Instead of a parent telling a child to go to their room, it is usually not effective to tell them to stand half-in and half-out of the doorway. In any case, what makes emotional rejection different from merely physical rejection is the involvement of *deserved disapproval*. What makes it different from shame is that the rejection is compatible with the belief that the child is worthy of love. Giving a child a time-out is not shaming them if the parent clearly conveys either that depriving them of the presence of the rest of the family is punishment for bad behavior or that the child must leave because communication between them and the rest of the family is temporarily not possible or takes more effort than the parent is willing to expend.

Feeling exposed

The philosopher Scheler held that shame lies in the conflict between the public and private spheres of consciousness (cited in Emad, 1972). Many behavioral scientists have made similar claims (Aronfreed, 1968; Buss, 1966; Erikson, 1950). However, one can feel exposed without even being embarrassed, let alone ashamed. There is no necessary link between feeling exposed and believing that one does not deserve to be loved, even by oneself. It is conceptually possible for anyone feeling exposed to reply in the negative when asked whether or not that implies that they are unworthy of love.

Feeling vulnerable

Exposure means that we are uncovered, consequently unprotected, and therefore vulnerable. If then the cause of shame is not necessarily exposure, perhaps it is the vulnerability that we

feel when exposed. Freud (1930/1962) speculated that shame over our nakedness is partly derived from the vulnerability of our genitals that resulted when we assumed an upright stance. Lynd (1958) writes similarly about vulnerability more generally. However, not every experience of being vulnerable produces shame. Anyone told that they have terminal cancer will almost certainly feel both vulnerable and unashamed. There is no necessary link between feeling vulnerable and believing that one does not deserve to be loved, even by oneself. It is conceptually possible for anyone feeling vulnerable to reply in the negative when asked whether or not that implies that they are unworthy of love.

Feeling inferior

Shame has been closely associated not only with exposure and vulnerability, but also with inferiority. This is understandable since being exposed and vulnerable puts us in an inferior position to others; and, conversely, if we are in an inferior position, we may feel exposed and vulnerable. Furthermore, we depend upon one another in many ways, so that inferiority can make us less dependable and therefore subject to criticism. Especially in competitive societies certain kinds of inferiority almost inevitably make a person ashamed since inferior performance can result in being shunned. Freud never explicitly compared shame with a sense of inferiority, referring to shame always in relation to feelings about sex (Hazard, 1969; see also the references to shame in the Index of Freud, 1953-1964). Subsequent psychoanalysts, however, refer to both shame and feeling inferior as a tension between ego and superego (or ego ideal) (Alexander, 1938; Piers, 1971). However, there is no necessary link between feeling inferior and believing that one does not deserve to be loved, even by oneself. It is conceptually possible for anyone feeling inferior to reply in the negative when asked whether or not that implies that they are unworthy of love, unless of course they are using “feeling inferior” as a synonym for “feeling unworthy of love,” as may sometimes be done.

Feeling unfulfilled

Piers identified shame with “the particular inner tension which stems from failure to reach one's own potentialities” (1971, p. 25). Others have identified this with guilt (Dabrowski, 1973; Freud, 1923/1960; Gendlin, 1973; Izard, 1977; Lynd, 1958). Helen Block Lewis sees the ego ideal as generating either shame or guilt or simply a goal. “Some discrepancy between self and ideal is 'normal,' not necessarily as the affective state of shame and guilt, but as a motive for striving” (H. B. Lewis, 1971, p. 110). My proposed definition of shame explains why. Unfulfillment can generate either shame, guilt, disappointment with oneself, or regret, depending upon the belief involved. It can produce regret if I want to reach my potentialities and believe that I cannot. It can produce disappointment with myself if I expected to reach my potentialities, wanted to, and now believe that I am incapable of doing so. It can produce guilt, if I believe that I am morally bound to reach my potentialities and that I am inexcusably failing to do so. It can produce shame, if I believe that failing to reach my potentialities is shameful. And it can produce any combination of these emotions at the same time, since the corresponding beliefs

can coexist. In short, there is no necessary link between feeling unfulfilled and believing that one does not deserve to be loved, even by oneself. It is conceptually possible for anyone feeling unfulfilled to reply in the negative when asked whether or not that implies that they are unworthy of love.

Internalization

At various times, theorists have sought to identify one or other members of the shame-family with shame through the mechanism of internalization. However, internalization changes only the conditions under which an emotion is triggered; it does not, for example, change fear of rejection into shame. It means only that one can fear rejection not only under external threat but also independently of it. As we have seen, what changes fear of rejection into shame is the belief that the rejection is *deserved*. The belief itself is the mechanism that both internalizes fear of rejection and transforms it into shame. There is no necessary link between fearing rejection and believing that one deserves it. It is conceptually possible for anyone experiencing an internalized feeling of rejection to reply in the negative when asked whether or not that implies that they are unworthy of love.

My Personal Experience of Shame

This section describes those of my personal experiences that illustrate shame and closely related emotions. The first aim is to confirm that my account of shame does not refer only to a conceptual possibility, but to an emotion that I have actually experienced and that I suspect others have as well. The second aim is to explain the nature of my experience of self-transcendence, why I sought it, and how it affected my life. The third aim is to provide a concrete challenge to accounts of self-transcendence that assert the existence of an experience that is more grand and other-worldly than my own. By being specific and personal, I hope to provide a modest baseline to help shed light on three possibilities: these more grand accounts are necessarily vague because of the higher nature of the experience; they are vague but improvable depictions of a higher experience, or they are vague only because they inadequately depict resolutions of personal conflicts like my own.

This selective autobiography aims to illustrate a life-long dialectic between an insecure and passive doer who was ashamed of himself and a more self-confident and assertive thinker who never quite gave up on himself. When challenged, my deepest instinct is to withdraw to fight another day, a strategy that expresses itself in a dialectic of short-term faintheartedness and long-term resilience. For most of my life, this meant a dysfunctional passivity that kept me from keeping up with life's challenges, leading to intense self-loathing. Yet there remained a profound determination that was continually preparing for a better day. When this conflicted self was transcended, it awakened to a Self where bewildered passivity became an alert receptivity and where desperate grasping at hypotheses became a calm understanding of simple realities.

Mama's Boy 1936 - 1941

The tendrils of this self that felt unworthy began early. My very first memory is of waking up from a nap to hear my parents arguing. My dad was driving a two-seat coupe along a two-lane Nebraska country road, my mother beside him. Lying behind and above them on the shelf between the seat and back window, I could have complained about their fighting. Instead, I withdrew from the conflict by going back to sleep, a life-long practice of a passivity both healing and leaving me vulnerable to shame, a radical kind of non-assertiveness where we not only fear rejection from others, but join them in believing it deserved.

I found respite from my parents' arguments in a farm outside Harvard in south-central Nebraska. The main attractions there for me were my grandfather and my cousin Ricky, one and a half years younger than I was. My grandfather was a warm presence who was delighted with Ricky and me, telling us stories and singing us ballads, most memorably *Streets of Laredo*. Ricky and I were inseparable and so energetically playful that my grandfather dubbed us the Katzenjammer Kids, after the mischievous brothers in the popular comic strip of that time. A doting grandmother and mother completed my experience of life as fundamentally welcoming and secure, a feeling that ultimately overcame a profound vulnerability for feeling shame.

My lack of resilience was tested when my mother returned with me to Beatrice to live with my father, his parents, and my sister Gayle, who was two years younger than I was. My father's loud and angry impatience with my childhood weaknesses, fears, or annoying behaviors was wrapped into one punishing epithet, "mama's boy," which unmistakably conveyed something wrong not just with this or that behavior of mine, but with *me*. His condemnation was supported by the fact that I was indeed sometimes too weak to do certain things. Although I loved outside play with neighborhood boys, my body was more slender and soft than muscular and robust. I did indeed usually cower at threats rather than fight back. I did indeed prefer my mother's consoling arms to his angry, impatient voice; and I did indeed enjoy her play to his. Although my mother defended me against him, I found him the more persuasive of the two because he was the more threatening. There being more evolutionary urgency in avoiding threats than in seeking rewards, I involuntarily sided with him even to my own disadvantage. (Korchin, 1976, attributes the name of this syndrome, "identification with the aggressor," to Anna Freud.) He was the more threatening not only because of his physical strength but because his language was more emotionally powerful than hers. The "mama's boy" that he disdainfully hurled at me was language already deeply embedded in my social world, against which my mother offered merely her opinion in language that was not so socially charged. Consequently, this disdainful self-perception took firm root, to be struggled against but not eradicated until I was in my 50s. Lurking deep within, it transformed normal insecurities into facets of shame. They not only warned me of threats of social snubs and rejections, but insisted that whatever contempt came my way was well deserved.

Back Home 1941 - 1942

In early 1941, my father enlisted in the Army Signal Corps. While he was away and America still in the Depression, my mother was unable to care for both Gayle and me by herself. Nor could either set of grandparents take us both on. So my mother left Gayle with the Schouborgs and took me to live with her parents, who had recently moved to Scottsbluff near the westernmost border of Nebraska. The never-fulfilled plan was for my parents, Gayle, and me to get back together when things were more settled.

The train ride to my maternal grandparents was my return home. The love that my mother and grandparents had for me was so genuine, unwavering, and delicious that I never doubted the innocence of anything I felt deeply. Even when I felt my deepest shame, I never completely lost that sense of innocence. It gave me an emotional clarity dramatically illustrated in my earliest memory of playing doctor. Taking a neighborhood girl into our garage, I beheld, stroked, and kissed her naked cleft with a blissful wonder that would do the Buddha proud. At the same time, I could not have been more terrified of discovery had a giant spider been lurking outside the door. But at no time did I feel a hint of doing anything wrong or shameful, just something wonderful but forbidden. The feeling was too deep to be felt as anything but innocent. So in that garage in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, in the Fall of 1941, my sense of innocence survived even my terror of disapproval and punishment. Worthiness or unworthiness had nothing to do with it. This was indeed a kind of self-transcendence, however temporary the transformation.

The emotional security and nourishment at home left me free to enjoy self-initiated, solitary, intellectual projects. In one instance, I asked my mother to buy me a pad and pencil so I could count numbers from one to a hundred. I remember vividly the satisfaction I felt in the physical act of writing down the numbers and the mental experience of moving with confidence from one number to the next, finally arriving at a hundred. The experience is my earliest and treasured memory of experiencing the life of the mind.

Social Challenges 1942 - 1951

Shortly after Pearl Harbor, when I was still five, my mother's side of the family joined the hoard of Midwesterners migrating to Los Angeles to seek work in aircraft plants. The standing room only train ride filled with newly drafted soldiers, sailors, and marines left me with an abiding memory of a world filled with strong, friendly adults who were my reliable protectors.

Peers, on the other hand, were another matter. When starting school in East L.A., standing in the doorway before the first-grade class as the teacher introduced me, I surprised myself by bursting into tears. I do not recall any fears beforehand or any interactions (good or bad) afterward with my new classmates. My best guess is that meeting a full room of strangers was a boatload of stimulation that overwhelmed me. I have always needed time to digest both food and interactions with others. In any case, a month later when my mother, grandparents, and I

moved to an apartment four miles west of downtown L.A., I succeeded in not embarrassing myself like that again when the nun introduced me to the first-grade class of St. Paul's Grammar School. But I did so only through a deliberate act of will.

Grammar school put its own stamp on my dialectic between short-term faintheartedness and long-term resilience. I excelled academically because I always had time to pursue scholastic tasks. Although modestly above average athletically, my performance was limited not only by my slight build but also by my lacking the killer skill to act decisively in the moment. Similar factors militated against any better success with girls. Unfortunately, my peers and the culture at large, and my blue-collar family as well, greatly valued action over thought, so that I not only found myself unable to accept my average abilities in sports and romance, but I compensated by exaggerating my failures, which coalesced onto my mama's boy shame like barnacles on a great ship.

The earnest and naïve nuns who taught us unwittingly nourished both my penchant for thought over action and for exaggerated self-recrimination whenever I failed social or divine standards. In the 1940s, their emphasis was so rule-bound as to undermine a natural trust in personal judgment and therefore self-assertion. Railings against materialism were too heavy-handed for us Catholic children to see that moral danger lies not in material things as such but in our attitude toward them. Focus on attitude would have encouraged the short-term challenge of constructively engaging the world rather than the long-term challenge of keeping it at a distance while concentrating on the world to come. Ubiquitous of course were warnings against the sins of the flesh, which were subject to eternal hellfire. Encouragement of common sense, with its practical engagement with the world, might have made us wonder whether eternal hellfire might be something of an over-reaction, however undesirable we suppose such sins are. Not limiting herself to exaggerations about sins of the flesh, the seventh-grade nun told us that the slightest venial sin was so abhorrent in the eyes of God that we ought not tell a white lie even to prevent World War III. Encouragement of common sense, with its practical engagement with the world, might have made us wonder whether the consequences of a World War III might far outweigh whatever evil there might be in a white lie. In fact, those with common sense dismissed such teachings outright. But as ungrounded in the practical and as proficient in the abstract as I was, I bought them hook, line, and sinker. The authority of the nuns, who were supposedly giving me Truth from God Himself, along with the weightiness of the consequences—my eternal destiny—fed my other-worldly orientation all the more. And because that orientation undermined trust in common sense or personal judgment, it made me that much more vulnerable to shame, the ultimate act of self-rejection.

Conscious Self-Rejection 1951 - 1954

Graduation from St. Paul's in 1950 therefore found me vulnerable to social challenges that were intensified in high school by the inexorable rush of hormones, dramatically increasing the normal adolescent insecurities—shyness; fear of disapproval; fear of rejection (external or

internalized); fear of being exposed vulnerable, inferior, or unfulfilled—and the shame that they so cruelly triggered. The cycle of self-rejection even intensified into self-awareness when one day my freshman year, ridiculed by some classmates for something I have long forgotten, I quite consciously refused to stand up for myself because I “knew” they were right. So I desperately tried to avoid isolation by joining with others in rejecting myself.

Digging My Way Out

Fortunately, along with my self-loathing I still had my family and best friend. They gave me a deep sense of the goodness of life simply from the experience of our being together, a sense that proved ineradicable however easily I could lose sight of it. Further and completely unexpected support arose only a few months before I graduated. A fellow classmate approached me with a proposition: “Would you like to have a coke with me and each of us will tell the other what others think about him?” This was triply intriguing for me. First, he and I had seldom if ever spoken a word to each other in the three years that we had been in class together. I was flattered that he noticed me. Second, the question had never occurred to me, since I never doubted that everyone but Gus despised me, however friendly they might appear at times. Third, I instantly found the prospect of talking about myself with someone who was interested in me inherently appealing and deeply relieving.

The classmate’s effect on me was immense. To this point, I had made no connection between academics and my personal life. In my blue-collar upbringing, doing well in school was simply a way to get a good job; it never occurred to me that I could usefully turn that studious energy onto my personal life. Now out of the blue came someone who not only gave me feedback on what others thought of me, but even more importantly demonstrated how he himself made use of such feedback. Not least of his healing attention was his genuine surprise at how little I thought of myself and at how paranoid (his word) I was about others’ disdain for me. When at the end of the summer he left to enter the Jesuits, his example of self-reflection planted the seed for me to enter four years later in order to “explore inner space,” as I put it then, by exploring my inner experience in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Thanks to this one person’s initiative, I began to develop tools for digging my way out of the emotional grave in which I had buried myself, a continuous process that would eventually bear significant fruit forty years later.

College 1954 - 1958

My account of non-coed college dating can be short and sour: I made no developmental progress to speak of. This was in the 1950s, when describing a girl as a good conversationalist meant that she was not hot but could talk about sports. Fortunately, majoring in engineering gave me male classmates who benefited me socially as well as intellectually, since they had the same interests I had and respected my academic excellence. About ten of us developed into an informal fraternity of good friends. The friendly and respectful feeling went beyond this circle

to the rest of our class year and to other years as well. My social circle therefore widened beyond just my best friend and me, and my positive sense of myself broadened accordingly. However, it was still dwarfed by the deep conviction that, with the exception of my best friend, they did not know the real me.

The self-reflection that began in conversations just before graduation at Loyola High continued in the philosophy classes required of all undergrads at Loyola University. In junior year epistemology, I took immediately to the question of what we can know and how we can know it, since it opened a fascinating door to the theoretical suppositions behind my engineering studies and most especially my life values. This theoretical bent also shifted my interest from electrical engineering in my junior year to the foundations of math in my senior year. The latter took on an increasingly psychological emphasis as I became intrigued with the psychological question of how the mind could come up with such astounding creations from perspectives whose existence I had never suspected. This personal bent was also fed that year by the Jesuit approach to moral philosophy in terms of natural law, which was a Copernican revolution for me. Instead of demanding that we be good little boys and girls and follow rules to prove ourselves worthy of heaven, natural law told us that the moral demands on which we had been raised as Catholics were based on our nature. Catholic moral teaching was really an instruction manual telling us how we can find happiness by understanding how we are built. Although I was oblivious to how much the account of nature was manipulated to conform to Catholic doctrine, the basic principle of looking to nature for guidance was what took hold for me.

Toward the end of my senior year, then, four inner dynamics merged that impelled me to join the Jesuits. The first was my feeling of failure with women. At the ripe old age of twenty-two, I concluded that if I had not found the right woman by now I never would, since all the desirable ones would be taken. The second grew out of the excitement that I found in the natural law approach to moral philosophy, which based my behavior toward others on my nature and theirs rather than on proving myself a good person. I instinctively felt this to be a significant step into adulthood and a mature understanding of what Catholicism had to offer the world—an inspiring perspective that I wanted to share with others as a Jesuit priest. The third dynamic was my temperament, with which you are by now familiar: the Jesuits offered a life of reflection shielded from the practicalities of everyday living. The final dynamic was a vision of the spiritual life as an exploration of inner space.

The Jesuits: 1958 - 1970

The morning of August 14, 1958, at L.A.'s Union Station, I boarded the train for the Jesuit novitiate in Los Gatos, California, just south of San Jose. My mother all but collapsed in tears, much to my embarrassment in contrast to the calm goodbyes of the mothers of the other two men entering that day, who had recently graduated from Loyola High. Once on the train, I was relieved to be out from under my mother and her emotionality. My lack of any regrets, the result of having emotionally cut all my ties in this radical decision, was reinforced by the high

spirits of the other two, who were also enthusiastically looking forward to a grand but challenging adventure.

The novitiate and juniorate 1958 - 1961

Ignatius counseled Jesuit Masters of Novices to keep their charges so busy that they would not have time to think of fleshpots outside the novitiate walls. That may sound sinister to some, but it was well-intentioned, designed to develop a disciplined focus. It was effective, at least for me. Unfortunately, the Master of Novices was as narrowly focused as any boot-camp sergeant. Although I had entered with a vision of exploring inner space, my understanding of what that meant was so inchoate and my personal history so governed by moral rules that I did not notice that the novitiate training was intense indoctrination rather than a process that facilitated listening to my deeper impulses. Again, this was not deliberately sinister even though it was naively seditious. The Master was a moralistic and rule-bound man who believed what he taught; and he drove those beliefs home with a force intended to keep us from straying after we left the protective confines of the novitiate.

Unsurprisingly, I experienced little emotional development in such an atmosphere. Quite the opposite. Having put all my eggs in this lifetime basket, I subordinated all I had to following the Jesuit rules and practices faithfully and precisely, greedily grasping at personal merit rather than opening myself up to an emotional flowering. This attitude persisted when I graduated from the novitiate to the juniorate studies in the humanities, giving myself headaches from avariciously reading everything I could. Having given up all my possessions, my body, and my will in vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, I had nothing else in which I could find self-worth but my learning. Revealingly, I was shocked one day to discover looking back at me in the mirror a severely ascetic face drained of the warmer friendliness it had before it entered the novitiate.

The philosophate 1961 – 1964

The narrow world of the novitiate and juniorate opened up slightly in the summer of 1961, when I took the train to St. Louis, Missouri, to study graduate philosophy and math at Saint Louis University. I lived at Fusz Memorial, the dormitory exclusively for Jesuit scholastics (Jesuits in studies before ordination). The university was co-ed, which introduced some normalcy to our lives compared to the cloistered existence of the novitiate and juniorate. Other sources of alternate viewpoints began to loosen my dogmatic bent: Jesuit scholastics from all over the U.S., some even from other countries, who had been taught diverse perspectives on Jesuit spirituality; Bill Wade, a legendary and beloved Jesuit philosopher-curmudgeon who attacked our assumptions with wit and incisiveness; leading historians of philosophy; and Erich Fromm's *Man For Himself*. The book was the first step in freeing me from Jesuit rationalism, by which I mean an over-emphasis on the conceptual to the disregard of personal experience. The moral philosophy at Loyola University pointed me beyond rules to the empirical, but only as highly

constrained by Catholic non-empirical beliefs. It also referenced human nature only abstractly, not in terms of personal experience. Moral philosophy in the Saint Louis philosophate followed suit. Fromm, however, although agreeing implicitly with Jesuits in grounding ethics in reason against relativism, did so through his experience as a psychoanalyst. I concluded that behaviors were not right or wrong because of abstract moral principles, but because of how they affected the way we related to ourselves and others. I instantly recognized that this was the perspective I had been looking for since I had begun self-reflection near high school graduation in 1954. As a result, I abandoned my studies both in math as too remotely connected to the personal and in Catholic scholastic philosophy as too rationalistic or ungrounded in the personal. More socially cut off than I wanted to be from people—even most of my Jesuit peers—by being consumed with philosophy, I also hoped that this more experiential approach would make me more popular.

Regency 1964 – 1966

Regency is the two to three year break between Jesuit philosophy and theology studies when scholastics teach high school or college or take advanced degrees. Superiors assigned me to teach philosophy for two years at my alma mater, Loyola University. Even greater than my excitement was my relief that I was not going to teach high school. Still in the firm grip of my painful adolescence, I was terrified of facing high school boys. However, I was much less afraid of college young men, because my college peer experience had been rewarding, I loved philosophy, and I felt I had something to offer them that they would appreciate. I was deeply gratified and relieved to find this truer than I had hoped. Along with their support, the Jesuit community was very friendly and supportive, especially the young liberal priests, who encouraged my questioning of basic Catholic assumptions.

Another major influence on me during regency was theoretical. The writings of Bernard Lonergan, a leading Jesuit philosopher and theologian, merged the traditional seminary staple of Thomas Aquinas with Kant's critical philosophy and an empiricist (speaking broadly) emphasis on a never-ending, self-correcting inquiry into experience as the way to distinguish knowledge from mere insight or belief. He thus provided a theoretical framework for my interest in personal experience that had begun at the end of high school, got a booster shot from reading Erich Fromm in the philosophate, and became more tangible yet when one of the Jesuit priests introduced me to the personal coaching methods of Carl Rogers.

None of the above influences threatened my Catholic faith, but only liberalized it. The seeds of my eventual break from Catholicism, and from Christianity more generally, came in counseling students about sex with their girlfriends. When they asked how far they could go before committing a mortal sin, and instead of giving them rules I invited them to reflect on what was emotionally going on between them, they invariably took me to be telling them to do what they wanted. Up to this point, I had disagreed with the church on this or that point, but now I concluded that it was systematically misguiding people by insisting on rules rather than helping

them reflect on their personal experience so they could develop more caring relationships with others. Consequently, my students were primed to hear only a black and white moralistic choice: either what you want to do is forbidden or it is allowed. There is no need for you to understand your relationship to others beyond what the rules tell you. This began my systematic disagreement with the church, a process that was fed by my increasing focus on inner experience that terminated eventually not in the unprovable denial of the existence of God but in finding the notion of God irrelevant to figuring out how to live my life.

Regency at Loyola University, then, was a wonderful gift to me. It was a proving ground for my intellectual and teaching abilities. It provided friends who enjoyed me personally and supported my relentless inquiry into what makes life really meaningful and what morality contributes. It gave me an intellectual framework for identifying the relevance of personal experience to that inquiry. It even gave me some slim hope that as a man I was not invisible to women, an issue I needed to resolve even if I remained celibate. In short, it helped me immeasurably along the road of building some self-respect, of creating some sense of being capable of making my way in the world. Nevertheless, it left largely untouched my feeling of being unworthy of love. My first reaction upon meeting any stranger was still that they would find me of no interest, that I would be essentially invisible to them.

The theologate 1966 – 1969

The three years of theology studies were roughly a straight-line development of the themes that emerged in regency. One notable experience was spending the summer of 1967, the height of the Haight, taking philosophy classes at Cal Berkeley. One of the Jesuits with me was an Adonis whom many coeds shined up to while ignoring me as though I were invisible. I was particularly hurt since I had hoped that the counterculture, with its anti-1950s aesthetic, would not put the same premium on good looks. However, my perception was that people were people no matter what their ideology. If you had less than matinee idol looks, some woman might settle for you but never really love you. I did not condemn women for that; after all, it was only the mirror image of my own lack of interest in any woman who was not hot. (Stendhal: Beauty is the promise of happiness.) Accepting both viewpoints, I literally told myself that neither I nor anyone like me deserved love, since we had nothing to offer others.

The University of Texas at Austin 1969 – 1978

Intellectually, the philosophy faculty at Texas quickly took me the last small step in abandoning the Jesuits, the Catholic Church, Christianity, and the notion of God. At Alma, I was still very much the budding liberal philosopher intent on showing how church doctrine was relevant to the contemporary world. The grounds for my optimism was that I was recognized as an intellectual leader in my peer group and the theology faculty at Alma was reputed to be world-class. So I concluded that the declining influence of the church was due only to its failure to get out its message, which I was well equipped to explain. At Texas, however, I was immediately

exposed to thinking that was conceptually more sophisticated than anything I had seen in the allegedly world-class theology at Alma. In addition, it led wherever logic and the relevant evidence would take it, whereas even the most sophisticated Jesuits seemed subtly constrained by church doctrine. Feeling completely free and at home in this secular environment, I did not so much leave the church as recognize that it no longer played a role in my life. In early 1970, I informed my Jesuit superiors of this fact and moved out of the Jesuit community near campus.

My nine years in Austin were the loneliest in my life as I increasingly opened my heart to its deepest yearnings through a series of failed affairs that included one marriage. In retrospect, there were several reasons why none of these relationships succeeded; but at the time all I could see was that I did not have enough manly charisma to keep any woman interested, at least not any woman whose interest meant anything to me. Whatever the women's reasons, two related dynamics were common to all the relationships: I unknowingly demanded of each one that she heal my feelings of shame; and I was so caught up in this need that I was unaware of what she thought and felt about me other than that she either wanted to make love with me or she did not. If she did, I was briefly ecstatic; if she did not, I was crushed.

Primal therapy 1974

The process of shaming was for me a hollowing out of feeling, intensely focused as I was on proving myself worthy in the eyes of others. My Jesuit, philosophical, and psychological self-reflection had at this point given me exceptional conceptual clarity about myself, but still left me feeling empty because it was primarily only a view from the outside onto my shame. Primal therapy, with its emphasis on feeling, seemed a possible antidote. And so it was, to the extent that it gave me access to my feelings. This was so true that when a friend took me to a Buddhist lecture, what in its teachings I found incomprehensible before primal therapy I now found crystal clear. The difference was a shift from reading Buddhist teachings as ontology—theories of the objective nature of reality—to interpreting them as phenomenology or descriptions of inner experience, a view to which primal therapy opened me without ever mentioning anything about Buddhism.

A Turning Point: December 20, 1976

The emphasis of primal therapy was “getting into feelings,” especially ones very early in life before mainstream science thinks the brain can store autobiographical memories. Whether such early memories really exist, later ones do that are deeply painful and unresolved. Primal therapy had techniques for accessing them by breaking down intellectual defenses. One danger, at least with the therapist I had in Austin, was that participants were so intent on feeling deeply that they often manufactured feelings to please the therapist. Even more dangerous was the assumption that opening up painful feelings would necessarily resolve them. Sometimes they could be more powerful than an individual could digest, at least with the limited skills of this therapist, as I concluded one night in the winter of 1976.

For several months I had been dating a woman in an open relationship. One evening I knew she was dating someone who was probably going to spend the night. Early the next morning, I drove over to her place “to get into feelings” about how her involvement with someone else affected me. When I saw his car still parked in front of her house, I was overwhelmed with pain, flooded with my deep conviction that no woman worthwhile could love me. That day I bought a .38 revolver to put an end to my unlovable existence. That night, lying on my bed with my head propped up on the pillow, I placed the gun three times into my mouth but could not bring myself to pull the trigger. When I saw that I did not have the nerve, I decided that I was going to have to build a satisfying life without relying on some “princess” to make me happy. I was going to have to find my happiness within myself.

My pain was so overwhelming, that it was clear that my situation was way over the head of the primal therapist. Fortunately, a friend directed me to the chief clinician of the Travis County Mental Health Mental Rehabilitation office in Austin. He was only vaguely aware of primal therapy and skeptical of the process I was going through. But he was also a listener. When I told him that I believed in my process, but while I went through it I needed someone as a reference point to guard me from going in a destructive direction, he agreed to help. His warm, personal support and some theoretical frameworks he provided to help me understand my experience were of immense value. For the several months we were together, I wept deeply several times a day over my sense of loss, loneliness, and unworthiness to be in human company. I ended therapy when I finally broke the back of my shame by realizing that even I did not deserve this much loathing.

Breaking shame’s back did not yet bring the peace I sought, anymore than breaking a fever instantly heals all the damage the illness has done. Just as the body must restore and rebalance healthy processes, so I had yet to find that inner satisfaction in life that is our birthright and that exists independently of the normal joys and disappointments of our daily lives. Although I no longer punished myself with self-loathing, I still knew no road to happiness except by satisfying my ordinary desires, which were consequently exaggerated in lieu of my inner emptiness. As a result, on New Year’s Eve 1977 I married an especially attractive woman even though I knew deep down that we were wrong for each other, but from whom I could not walk away because her good looks fed my self-esteem. We separated a year later when I received my PhD, she was finishing hers, and our potential career paths diverged more than we were willing to work through. Deeply disappointed from also failing to receive an academic appointment, I returned to L.A. to look for a job.

Moral epistemology and psychology merge 1976-1978

Ever since I was an undergrad I had been interested in moral epistemology, the study of the basis in reason for our value judgments. There is no space here for the details on my own view, so I will just note that by the late 1970s I concluded that moral judgments have no basis in reason—no objective truth or validity—but are misleading expressions of the desires we hold

most dear. This philosophical view merged organically with my psychological exploration of inner experience, resulting in a doctoral dissertation on the implications for the psychological diagnosis of guilt and shame (Schouborg, 1978), where I identified substantially the same characteristic beliefs that I have presented here. My personal conclusions, which were too controversial to include in my dissertation, were that guilt and shame are emotions that cause us unnecessary suffering because they are confused expressions of closely related emotions that are useful in helping us navigate our interactions with others. This was for me both an intellectual and experiential view. The intellectual component concluded that there was no objective validity to the value judgments involved in guilt and shame. The experiential component came largely from my experience in primal therapy, which helped me access and discriminate among the closely related members of the guilt-family and shame-family of emotions.

More recently, my position has evolved in parallel to my earlier one on God. Roughly, just as arguments either for or against the existence of God ultimately depend on circular reasoning, so also do arguments for or against the validity of value judgments. And just as I eventually walked away from thinking about God because it was not useful in living my life because thoughts of God are misleading expressions of our inner experience, so I eventually walked away from guilt and shame for the same reason. This merger of philosophical and experiential reflection broke the stranglehold that traditional thinking about guilt and shame had on my self, easing the way for the radical letting go that was my self-transcendence in 1990.

AT&T and Pac Bell 1981 – 1990

Given my college minor in electrical engineering and major in math, along with my communication skills from the Jesuits, I thought a professional sales position at Pac Bell would be a snap. I soon discovered, however, that I was unable to perform at my best in the harried rush of the business world. This was especially true when I transferred to American Bell in 1982, the newly deregulated AT&T. Time to digest information was a luxury that did not exist, and I am not a quick study. I was moderately successful but constantly struggling to keep my head just above water. I was therefore very excited when in 1986 Pac Bell accepted my proposal for a position in corporate education to help evaluate training effectiveness. This was an academic-like position, giving me time to make a substantial start on a manual that I later published on the subject. However, the position was eliminated in 1989 as part of the continued downsizing stemming from the 1982 deregulation of AT&T. Asked to head the sales team of a major Pac Bell customer, after much soul searching I declined in order to start a consulting partnership with two other trainers whom I had met at Pac Bell.

This was the most difficult decision of my life. My eight and a half years in sales and corporate education at AT&T and Pac Bell were the only ones in my life in which I earned a comfortable wage, along with excellent benefits that were especially meaningful to a 53-year-old. Yet I did not have the heart to return to sales. When I entered the Jesuits, I felt that I was doing God's

will and embarking on a great adventure of exploring inner space. When I left the Jesuits, I felt that I was continuing that exploration. But when I declined the sales position with Pac Bell, I had no idea whether I was following a creative impulse or was just too lazy to make the effort required of a sales executive. What I knew for sure was that I was abandoning financial security that many would envy.

This was the most instinctual decision of my life, in the sense that it was based almost exclusively on feeling and almost no understanding of either its psychological integrity or the consequences of following it. But good or bad, I had no will but to yield to it. As it happens, my yielding to feeling by letting go of grasping for certainty foreshadowed and prepared me for self-transcendence.

Transcending the Shamed Self

The Experience 1990

Becoming an independent consultant was a two-edged sword. Success required the same sales effort I escaped when I left Pac Bell. Depending on that effort for a successful partnership did not increase my zest for it. I therefore inevitably followed the path of least resistance and returned to research and writing in philosophy, psychology, and spirituality. Except for the occasional consulting work, I lived like a research professor with no teaching responsibilities, but also without a steady paycheck.

Thus free to follow my inner promptings, I was reading some poetry one afternoon when it suddenly occurred to me that I was at peace. For most of my life, however much I enjoyed what I was doing, I could not completely escape the dissatisfaction I felt from not having a woman whom I imagined would make me completely happy. When employed at AT&T and Pac Bell, this gave way to a longing to feel competent, which felt like a step up in my development since it was a desire for something within rather than external to me. That afternoon I felt a peace I had never experienced before and that I instantly understood did not emerge from anything I had done—indeed, from anything I could do. No woman or feeling of competence or any achievement could give me this. Most importantly, no self-evaluation or worthiness could create it either. It was a peace beyond anything my self—that is, the ordinary executive functions of sensing, thinking and acting—could create, a peace that only my Self—that is, a consciousness beyond that of ordinary executive functioning—could experience. It came to me only after I had exhausted all my efforts to create it my self. My life of philosophical and experiential reflection had cleared the way for it but could not produce it, which is why such peace is called grace (from the Latin *gratia*, meaning gift).

The Aftermath

The Self that was at peace was not the self that had normal insecurities about social rejection, the kind that can sometimes be reduced by self-affirmations (Stinson, Logel, Shepherd, & Zanna, 2011). For that sort of issue is pragmatic, one that the self can address by calculating threats to rejection and developing skills to deal with them. In the aftermath of my self-transcendence, I therefore had a Self and a self that were complementary aspects of my conscious life, the latter creating the ordinary joys and disappointments in life and the former providing an abiding satisfaction in living that gives emotional perspective within which to experience them.

The abiding satisfaction in life that I now experience is unconditional in the sense that it exists independently of whether my desires are met or not. It is not unconditional in the metaphysical sense that I experience it independently of the natural world of time and space. I most particularly do not experience it independently of desire in the sense that it kills desire, which is the creative engine of life. Quite the opposite, this abiding peace gives zest to desire. For by providing equanimity when desire is unfulfilled, it frees me of an exaggerated fear of failure. And by freeing me from that, it allows me to enjoy the quest rather than be anxious until achievement is at hand. And when achievement is at hand, this abiding peace allows me to enjoy it in its inherently ephemeral nature rather than counter-productively trying to hang onto it.

Explanation

It is beyond the scope of this article to explain adequately the nature of my experience of self-transcendence and the peace that resulted. The sections on the phenomenology of shame and on my life aimed not only to provide a context to understand as precisely as possible the experience itself, but also to set the groundwork for explaining it. Briefly, my view is that this article gives strong reasons to suppose that my experience of self-transcendence was well within the natural experience of every human being, however different the biographical details. Anyone disagreeing with this view must show either that my phenomenology of shame is not adequate or that my account of my personal experience is implausible. As for whether any non-natural experience of self-transcendence exists as well, perhaps my naturalistic account might serve as a useful reference point with which to contrast any proposed non-naturalistic hypothesis.

Within a naturalistic framework, I have argued that the inner peace that results from self-transcendence is what I called *soma*, a sense of unconditional well-being (Schouborg, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c), thinking of it as a primal bodily feeling alongside those associated with ordinary experience. However, it is difficult to imagine that one could focus attention on the specifics in one's practical daily life while simultaneously being aware of a sense of unconditional well-being. I am now more inclined to think that unconditional peace is the satisfaction inherent in

every experience that is not distorted by grasping attitudes. It would come and go just as our awareness of our feelings comes and goes as we go about practical tasks. But it would still be unconditional in the sense that we cannot intentionally produce it ourselves. We can only allow it to emerge naturally by not overly identifying with what we are doing. To formulate this hypothesis more precisely will require considerably more research, both phenomenological and neuroscientific. Among further questions is whether unconditional peace is available to us in extreme pain or only within certain psychophysiological limits, which perhaps vary among individuals.

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