Chapter Five
Shame Extinguished

While shame keeps its watch, virtue is not wholly extinguished in the heart.

Edmund Burke

One of the most remarkable effects of the expansion of personalism and the medicalization of morality in late-twentieth-century America is the eclipse of shame, or at least a notable diminution of many public manifestations or expressions of it. Casual, uninhibited openness about what were once private matters is a notable feature of our modern America, a society which strives for the communication of information—and whatever that information is about, no matter how personal, it must indeed be communicated. Everyone is entitled to receive the communication. One of the myriad rights that came into being in the late-twentieth century is the “right to access information.” Like many of our late-twentieth-century rights, it is tendentious and an interpretational quagmire.

Television thrives on personal self-exposure. Indeed, one can easily see in television a technology, assisted by the personalist impulse to uncover and expose even the most unsavory aspects of the self, that makes voyeurism a large feature of everyday life. It enables us to peer into the lives of anyone and everyone. “Reality television” is the elevation of voyeurism into a unique amusement genre—people eagerly seeking self-exposure on camera for the amusement of
millions of onlookers. The now ubiquitous, commonplace impulses of self-exposure are stimulated and sustained by the collective assurance of toleration: tell us *all* about yourself—how you feel, what you think, what you did, what you hope for and fear—and we solemnly promise we won’t be judgmental. Just open up and tell us everything. We will understand.

Many of us today are more open to others about the details of our personal lives. The destabilization of the family and the devolution of marriage into “relationships” of various and precarious sorts leave us more inclined to reveal the private, intimate details of our lives to casual acquaintances or strangers than were our parents and grandparents. Self-revelation, a la the narcissistic Rousseau, has emerged as a norm. The therapeutic ethos with its rituals of self-divulgence and its pressures to bare the soul has helped to break down the barriers of the private and intimate. The expectation is to tell all. Thus, it is considerably easier now for one to admit to one’s sordid or sleazy deeds from the past since they can either be passed off as “mistakes” or excused as a natural consequence of victimization. Therapists insist upon self-revelation. Without it treatment cannot be properly and effectively dispensed. Self-revelation provides the therapists with the details they need to play their role effectively as aggressive procurers of compassion. Conduct or habits or dispositions that once were considered to be disgraceful or shameful can now be positively presented for public inspection and comment in a therapeutic context that renders them expected and understandable.

Our amusement industry thrives on the seamy, intimate details of the lives of celebrities. These details are in great supply, and the celebrities are not reluctant to provide them. The revelation intensifies interest by the public and increases popularity. No serious penalties or sanctions follow. Less shame now attaches to conduct such as declaring bankruptcy, going on welfare, having a child out of wedlock, seducing someone else’s spouse or being convicted of a crime than in earlier times. Professional athletes, particularly, seem to be exempt from censure of any consequence: they can commit rape and assault, and after a short hiatus, resume their celebrity status. The base and perfidious conduct of public
figures and celebrities is becoming flagrant and shameless: betrayal, profligacy, dishonesty and criminality are routine. We watch the celebrities as they recycle their way through life—through the courts, the rehab programs and clinics, and through spouses and assorted self-images on the endless quest to feel good about themselves. The clinic named after President Ford’s wife, Betty, became in the 1980s, a popular destination for celebrities to recompose themselves. A visit there was just a standard entry on the average superstar’s resume.

With the past so easily shed, shame has less of a bite. The word itself, “shame,” like “virtue”, is becoming less a part of the everyday working moral vocabulary than it once was: it is now a term that appears to be more of interest to social historians, moral philosophers or clinicians. As the twentieth-first century opens up to us with so much therapeutic assistance in the exploration of our feelings, the promotion of our self-esteem, and the reduction of any acquired tendencies for acting judgmental, we discover that there are now many fewer kinds of actions for which we need or ought to feel any shame. Being shameless has become a state of being for which we strive and for which there is considerable professional support.

The personalist seeks to eliminate shame because it is so inhibiting of the self and because it is driven so much by traditional norms and standards of conduct. The deep subjectivity of our moral orientation makes the kind of personal constraint that shame is called out to exert highly problematic. From the therapeutic perspective, shame is a potentially powerful social force that inhibits or warps the development of a completely healthy self. Moreover, shame carries so many long, close associations with traditional religious beliefs and practices, particularly those related to matters of sexual conduct. Shame is the enemy of healthy sexuality. Insofar as sex is regarded as natural and good and wholesome, there must follow a therapeutic imperative to reduce whatever shame there may be associated with sexual matters. This imperative will, of course, be powerful, clear and legitimate. This has been the dominant trend in our society for many years. Thus, shame in our modern society turns out to be an enormously
ambiguous phenomenon. It can do terrible things to people who are engulfed by it. Yet, if one looks about and observes how people without the constraints of shame are typically disposed to act, it does not seem to be something we would want to relinquish. Shame may be painful to experience; shameless behavior is revolting to contemplate and hard to endure.

The experience of shame has been closely bound up with feelings of guilt. Shame and guilt are closely related things, and I use the terms in a non-technical way, without any pretense to clinical precision, recognizing that psychologists make important theoretical distinctions between them. With guilt, says psychologist Donald Nathanson, we experience punishment which follows because of some action we have taken: with shame, "we are punished for some quality of the self, some unalterable fact." With this distinction in mind, shame is probably more relevant to personalism than guilt because it has more direct bearing upon the moral composition of personality and ultimately the formation and strength of an individual's character. The complete absence of shame in a person would be evidence either of self-perfection—no qualities of character would be lacking—or a signal of fundamental amorality, that is, the total absence of a capacity to feel pained by one's own short-comings or misdeeds or failures.

It seems that shame does have a more visible social quality, while guilt appears to render its effects more privately in a quite individual, personal way. Shame carries certain nuances of meaning that suggest more public or physical implications of the effects of the emotion such as the flushing of the face—being "shame faced"—or the disgraceful withdrawal of someone from public office or public life after the exposure of some shameful deeds. Vice-President Spiro Agnew, for example, retreated in shame to his private life (and it seems a quite comfortable one, too) after his long and sordid personal history of corruption and graft was exposed by a battery of criminal investigators. His fall was a decade or so too early, one might conjecture with just a touch of cynicism. He missed out on the various opportunities for enrichment that would be open to unrepentant "celebrity" felons just a few years later—opportunities to cash in, to publish a
self-serving, self-pitying memoir about his difficult “ordeal” and the pain it caused him and his family, and to assign all the blame for his fall onto others—all with an aggrieved self-righteous air. We never saw the ex-Vice-President making his way through the television talk show circuits, chatting with the reptilian Larry King on CNN, exploring his inner-most thoughts and feelings for the benefit of on-looking millions, unashamed, promoting a ghost-written, soon forgotten book.

We know shame to be an acutely uncomfortable even painful feeling. We experience it when we realize that it has become apparent to others that we have ignored or violated a standard of behavior, disappointed a social expectation, or transgressed a social or moral norm. Shame, at least in some cultures, comprises a rather large affective chunk of moral experience and can bring about the severest consequences, but not typically in ours. Because the experience of shame is potentially so painful one might wonder whether it would be better to live in a society where there was very little of it. What kind of society would a shameless one be? A view of the social-moral “evolution” of our own society in the last fifty years or so provides at least the beginnings of an answer to such a question. From a traditionalist standpoint, the need for a person to be subjected, potentially, to the experience of shame, as an effect of transgressing a social norm, is an extremely important one. That experience in the proper context helps to discourage the formation of dispositions and habits that are generally regarded as vicious or sinful. This notion has long been regarded as practical wisdom. The Talmud speaks of the moral necessity of shame.

A sense of shame is a lovely sign in a man. Whoever has a sense of shame will not sin so quickly; but whoever shows no sense of shame in his visage, his father surely never stood on Mount Sinai.2

In the book of Genesis Adam and Eve first felt shame when they discovered their nakedness after their initial act of disobedience to God. Shame necessarily accompanied the moral knowledge of good and evil that they acquired from eating the forbidden fruit. Shame, as it is represented in our moral and religious traditions, would seem to be an element in the construction of a civilized order. In the book of Proverbs: “He that gathereth in summer is a wise son: but he that
sleepeth in harvest is a son that causeth shame." Shame dramatically points to ways of conduct that are harmful or vicious. Also, shame is used to counter natural inclinations—the son spoken of in Proverbs is probably more inclined to take it easy and shift, if he can, the hard work of harvest to others—and in that sense the inducement of it in this context is a fundamentally repressive measure of natural impulses. The obligations and norms around which stable institutions and useful social conventions are built are, the traditionalist would argue, reinforced by guilt and shame. They compose essential elements of the world of individual autonomy or self-governance—without them, other less effective and more coercive external methods would probably have to be employed.

This fundamental connection of shame to the workings of a civilized order is a problem for the Roussean personalist who tends to view the process of civilizing human beings itself as a study primarily in the application of power, the outcome of which despoils an individual of his innate, natural goodness. Civilization, recalling Rousseau’s passionate declamation against the founding of the convention of property, imposes a vast order of oppression and inequality. Shame, of course, can also easily and understandably be viewed as a social-psychological weapon, an insidious instrument of social control wielded by the more powerful members of a social group against the weaker more vulnerable members to assure their continuous submission and compliance. Shame is about social power, a means for one group to control another. Children are particularly vulnerable to shame and are the most obvious example of a weaker, more vulnerable class that is often manipulated by those who attempt to induce it.

Much can be said against shame, and has, particularly by psychologists. Indeed, a visit to any sizable research library in quest of books and articles on the subject yields a substantial discovery of materials written primarily by psychologists who are critical of shame because of the emotional pain it inflicts upon individuals, its terrible self-tyrannizing effects. Says therapist Michael Lewis: "A therapist, if prepared to look for shame, will notice that many patients initiate therapy because of their shame." Lewis suggests that shame is a prime
cause of psychological impairment or distress, a major diseconomy, so to speak, of the whole enterprise of social control. Shame, from the perspective of mental health and psychotherapy, is often a tool of manipulation used by parents, teachers, ministers and other institutional authority figures to achieve the legitimation of the institutions they represent, to preserve their vested power and authority, and to help ensure that their wards are as much as possible, cooperative participants in their own subjection. Shame is a powerful tool of the oppressor, one of the many strategies of domination. It enables him to keep the reality of his coercion well hidden or dissimulated and to make the oppressed function as accomplices in their own subordination.

The aversion to shame, the characterization of it as self-destructive and manipulative, is a completely understandable and predictable as a further development of the personalist outlook with its natural affinity for the healthy, expanding self. Insofar as it exerts an inhibiting force over the personality, shame becomes a primary object of exorcism upon which the therapist directs his energies. The founder of Gestalt therapy, Fritz Pearl, called shame, along with embarrassment, the 'Quislings of the organisms.' From any perspective, shame, indeed, functions as a powerful constraint, a fetter on the personality. To avoid its unpleasant effects, we do things and say things we would prefer, strongly at times, not to do and to say. Because of the threat of it we keep important portions of ourselves—our emotions, our ideas, our desires—concealed from others, even those close to us. An episode of shame can bring deep humiliation and cause lasting pain: the desire to avoid it may create severe inhibitions. Thus, to the extent that the expression and development of the self becomes the primary goal, and that authenticity and self-realization are the ultimate moral and social achievements, then, shame, which is a psychological obstacle to the attainment of these goals, should be resisted. Shame causes pain, and we should always strive to reduce or eliminate pain.

John Bradshaw, whose lectures, books and video and audio tapes on addiction, recovery and spirituality have been extremely popular, has made the
eradication of what he calls “toxic shame,” the center piece of his widely disseminated therapeutic program. Bradshaw, as a highly successful pop-culture psychological healer and guru of self-awareness and personal growth, is in many ways a most representative figure of the personalist-therapeutic ethos of late-century America. He speaks fluently the language of popular psychology and adroitly captures its preoccupations with healing and the recondite processes of acquiring self-esteem. Taking up and absorbing Bradshaw’s way of speaking and conceptualizing can help one bring about a radical conversion of thinking and orientation whereby one’s existence becomes an intense life-long project of self-analysis and recovery from one or more of the almost innumerable addictions by which one may be snared.

The eradication of shame is one of the central therapeutic imperatives in Bradshaw’s popular program of psychological healing. The dedication of his book *Healing the Shame That Binds You* gives some indication of the large role that shame plays in Bradshaw’s life and in his work.

To Nancy, my wonderful wife, who heals my toxic shame by loving me unconditionally. To my long-time friends (who used to be my children) Brad, Brenda and John. Forgive me for all the times I’ve transferred my shame to you. To my father, Jack. Toxic shame took your life and robbed us of our time.

Toxic shame obviously remains at the core of all of Bradshaw’s important human relationships. It is transgenerational—his wife, children and father are all caught up with it—and it is the ultimate source of the misery and unhappiness (and one senses that they were considerable) in his life. For Bradshaw, shame permeates every human relationship. The toxic effects of shame yield to Bradshaw’s unique therapeutic techniques. Relief from shame brings “healing,” a word that Bradshaw often employs, one so conveniently vague as to convey almost any meaning you care to bring to it. Healing, as this dedication suggests, is what his wife does for him on an on-going basis—he is never completely free of this toxic shame—by attaching, apparently, no conditions to her affections for him and good opinions of him. This is the culmination of the personalist quest—to enjoy the esteem and
affirmation of others without the impediments of regular expectations or standards of conduct, to be completely free to explore and expand the self without norms that impose *conditions* on the evaluation of conduct and whose transgression may cause pain. Unlike physical healing that at some point culminates in recovery or restoration, Bradshaw’s “healing”, it seems, becomes a perpetual and lifelong project.

That an adult could come to a point where he would need or want unconditional love is rather remarkable, childish perhaps, but consistent with one of Bradshaw’s main therapeutic prescriptions which is “liberating your lost inner child.” To help those who submit to his tutelage achieve this life-altering “liberation” Bradshaw routinely assembles small groups of adults who are encouraged to entwine themselves intimately and are led through a “therapeutic” ritual in which they engage in fondling and babble mutual endearments to each other and, most importantly, cry.

I like to set up small groups (six to eight people) and let one person sit in the center of the group.... After the group is set, we play lullaby music and each person in the group communicates one of the verbal affirmations while touching, stroking or just sitting near the subject. Those who have been neglected [as children] will start sobbing when they hear the words they needed to hear, but did not hear [as children]. If a person was a Lost Child, he will often sob intensely. These words touch the hole in his soul.  

Note the upper case “Lost Child,” the designation for an important psychological construction for Bradshaw, denoting a dysfunctional state in which many adults are trapped. Only in a society where individuals have surrendered their dignity and lost their moral and spiritual bearings could the practice of purposely reducing adult individuals to weepy, self-pitying creatures who seek to emulate small children be widely regarded as salutary, beneficial, or enhancing. What strength of character, resiliency, or fortitude can be expected from people who are given to whimpering and lamenting about the deprivations they suffered from childhood? What achievements and monuments could we expect from people who pursue such a tortuous, prostrating process of conjuring suffering out of their
pasts and re-living their psychic injuries?

Bradshaw does speak of something he calls “healthy shame,” but like much of his working vocabulary, the words can designate almost anything he or his patients like, which is probably one big reason why his work has been so popular. This is appropriate for the personalist who generally embraces liberation: being bound or confined by precise meanings of words is simply one more constraint from which one may strive to be liberated.

Our healthy shame, which is a feeling of our core boundary and limitedness, never allows us to believe we know it all. Our healthy shame is nourishing in that it moves us to seek new information and to learn new things. 7

Nothing here could be remotely associated with the traditional sense of shame; no talk of inhibitions; no convicted sense of wrong doing; just more self-expansion and self-discovery. Being a motivating force for acquiring information and engaging in learning are probably not what most people typically understand by the mechanism of shame. Bradshaw equates healthy shame with “nourishment,” a remarkable piece of pseudo-psychological conjuring. Shame becomes “healthy” by making it something other than shame, by connecting it with a “growth” metaphor so that it is consistent with his ruling impulse toward self-expansion, development, and the breakdown of inhibition.

The experience of shame is incompatible with the essential subjectivity of the personalist ethical or spiritual orientation. “What is spirituality?” asks Bradshaw.

I believe it has to do with our life-style. I believe that life is ever-unfolding and growing. So spirituality is about expansion and growth. 8

Spirituality becomes something identified by that vacuous label of 1960s-vintage, “life-style,” something which amounts to “expansion and growth”—more vacuity; expansion from what and growth into what? Bradshaw never ventures to say because he cannot. Be whatever you want to be. Concentrate on dispelling whatever shame might visit you and feel good about it; and expect others to
dispense their approval on you as you reciprocate. With the unfolding, developing self as both an ideal and the primary reference point of value, an emotion like shame creates nothing but problems. This is because anyone who attempts to apply it as a means for reprobating forms of disreputable conduct finds himself appealing to an external standard, some norm that has been established by tradition or long term practice, the observance of which may well be inimical to the expression or creative expansion of self.

Bradshaw’s quest for a recovery of the lost inner-child and the self-absorption of his therapeutic program represent the culmination of a decades-long effort to dismantle traditional constraints. Thirty years earlier, Carl Rogers, in the development of his “client-centered” psychology, argued that the emotive experience of the individual should establish itself as an absolute primacy of moral authority. This carries enormous implications for an affective phenomenon like shame which has so much potential moral impact and which is so strongly and intricately tied to traditionally established norms and other sources of externally established moral authority.

It is easy to see why client-centered therapy would be intent on reducing shame as a social force. Affirms Rogers:

Experience is for me the highest authority. No other person’s ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my own experience.9

All genuine values, Rogers here appears to be arguing, emanate from direct, personal experience. Hence, these life-guiding values are fully self-referential and completely self-authenticating. Moreover, and even more remarkable, he also seems to be affirming that the kind of experience that counts, that is “authoritative,” is an emotional experience unmediated by reflective thought. Even “my own ideas,” not to mention those of others, must be secondary to these primary emotions I feel. Natural inclinations and emotions, the sorts of things that shame often works against, are primary. Thus, from the perspective of anyone with an affinity for Rogers’ psychotherapeutic program of self-affirmation, the experience of shame should be fiercely resisted since it is most
often caused by a self-recognition that one has failed to conform to some external (false or irrelevant) norm or source of authority—someone else's ideas of right and wrong, proper and improper—and thus must be viewed as potentially tyrannical and oppressive of self. The self-emoting subject becomes for Rogers and his clients the ultimate determination of value.

The personalist views shame as a detrimental, debilitating emotion because it is activated by external, interpersonal processes of judgment or evaluation and because its effects are punitive. Shame comprises an essential working element of the outmoded virtue-model that governed human conduct, that is, shame is connected with the traditional moralist perspective that views human behavior as a phenomenon that involves free choice-making and requires responsibility relative to the choices that are made. In our common, daily life, much of which we are not even completely aware, we find ourselves entangled in a web of obligations and expectations over which we do not exercise complete control and in which we must participate. Complex systems of obligation bind us at many levels, from the manners and etiquette we employ, to our business dealings, friendships, to the levels of law and basic morality. When we violate the norms—sometimes informal, sometimes formal, we often pay some penalty for the transgression. The dynamic is basic and straightforward: one violates the norm, one is held up for that failure, experiences the pain of guilt and shame and then attempts to make atonement. All of this, of course, presupposes a structure of norms and values behind which lies some generally acknowledged source of authority.

But if what we have traditionally called vice or sin is more appropriately understood as an affliction or disability, caused by unfortunate events, (if vice is converted to illness) then the infliction of shame (like punishment) is, indeed, just the gratuitous addition of another layer of pain added on to those arising from what are dysfunctional or pathological states of personality. One cannot help being ill or disabled; such a state is not something that one usually wants or intends to bring about. Sympathy and understanding not disapprobation, as noted
above, are the normal and fitting responses that illness should evoke from the observer. Why should people be ashamed of what they do if they cannot help doing it?

In our contemporary setting, where dysfunction and social disability seem to be almost natural, expected states of character or personality, we now encounter what seems to be a conscious effort to rid ourselves of shame. This indeed is one of the effects of the growing dominance of the therapeutic approach for dealing with misconduct of all kinds and the increasing subjectivity of social norms. This effort to rid ourselves of shame, at least from a casual observation of public behavior, appears to have been highly successful in the sense that many of those failings and shortcomings in social life that used to give rise to shame no longer seem to do so.

The extinction of shame seems to be the most conspicuous in public life where, with increasing frequency, we observe prominent and famous people who flaunt the system and transgress the rules and appear to suffer little consequence in the way of public opprobrium. Says psychologist Donald Nathanson:

Perhaps it is the devaluation of the affect shame that has allowed our culture to slip into its current 'narcissistic' preoccupation with exposure.\(^{10}\)

Because the norms themselves have been weakened or diluted, little expectation of that deflating, humbling feeling of shame in transgressing them can or ought to be expected. It becomes increasingly difficult to find wrong doers who either express shame or appear to feel any: we live in a time, increasingly, of shamelessness as there seems to be nothing for anyone to be ashamed of.

Public shamelessness is probably inevitable. Norms and values exert much weaker claims over conduct because of their immersion in subjectivity and because of the medicalizing of so much human behavior. The increasing subjectivity of social and moral norms and the growing doubt about the authority of any such norms cut deeply away the confidence any of us may have in applying sanctions against those who violate them. Medicalizing vice effectively divorces wrong doing from considerations of character and personal
responsibility; wrongdoing becomes an impersonal, morally neutral matter and thus completely shameless. James Twitchell has noted that the "group most threatened by the absence of shame has been the most willing to countenance its effacement." That "group," the American middle class, has made a dramatic turnabout and embraced behavior that was once regarded as obscene, vulgar, irresponsible, and ultimately, shameful just a generation ago, including out of wedlock childbearing, bankruptcy, and welfare. The therapeutic community, with its persistent efforts to de-stigmatize many forms of behavior, has been the midwife that ushered into the moral world this turnabout.

In the past, when the conduct of a person who malingered, or stole, or cheated or mistreated or betrayed someone was exposed, he would attempt to retire, withdraw or hid from public view in order to escape whatever expressions of outrage or contempt might be rightfully vented against him. This resort to shameful retreat into hiding, especially for public figures, has diminished significantly for at least two reasons. First, the willingness of the public to accept or at least tolerate higher levels of deviancy has risen significantly. Senator Patrick Moynihan called this phenomenon a collective act of "defining deviancy down" which is, in effect, the steady lowering of our moral expectations of human beings such that acts that used to horrify us and bring severe consequences upon the perpetrators, no longer do—the intolerable has become quite tolerable. Thus, what was once outrageous has become routine and the expected. What used to provoke outrage and shock us, such as multiple murders—Moynihan uses the example of the St. Valentine's massacre which was shocking world wide—are now common weekend occurrences in large cities. The kinds of behavior that in the past we did not tolerate, we now do. The effects of vicious behavior have become so routine and have been so trivialized that we now just take them for granted and thus accept them as normal. The abnormal, the offensive, becomes the norm and no longer offends. We shrug off and casually accept what our predecessors vehemently eschewed and harshly punished.

Second, and in some ways even more significant, deviancy itself has
become a rich source of material for feeding the ever expanding amusement industry. The purveyors of amusement need to find new ways to maximize the shock that contributes to the intensity of amusement. For it is the shock itself, the arousal of those strong emotions in reaction to contemplating the outrageous, the horrible and the perverse, that makes the experience of them so amusing and of such intense interest. In a restless, rapidly changing society such as ours in which norms of conduct are immersed in doubt and ambiguity and are continually being challenged and revised, deviancy is a curiously ambiguous phenomenon, at once both repellant and attractive. It repels because it represents the transgression of a rule or principle that for at least some people still establishes a boundary of human decency or a standard of integrity or a rule of fair play. Yet, the powerful attraction of deviancy for many derives from the fact that breaking the rules provides a means for rolling back conventional and largely arbitrary boundaries of the unacceptable. One can also increase one’s opportunities for self assertion and at the same time decrease personal accountability.

Self-assertion has become an important pursuit in our early-twenty-first-century therapeutic America, and it has been increasingly divorced from conventional limits and restraints. This in turn makes the efforts at self-assertion even more open-ended, impetuous, relentless and unrestrained. Even if we cannot fully assert ourselves, there are many individuals who do, and they have become objects of intense public attention and infatuation. We buy their ghost-written books. We watch them interviewed on television and follow the gossip about their lives. Rule-breaking, convention-shattering, and various forms of defiance and incivility have been artfully taken up and made into careers by those we now call "trash celebrities," individuals who are "in demand" because they defiantly flaunt the rules and scorn the conventions. Deviancy expands the far edges of normal behavior and opens the personal horizon for new levels of excitement and unexplored areas of self-expression.

Who would deny that public shamelessness is in much greater abundance than even a few short years ago? For the prominent or famous who now get
"caught," the potential amusement-value that the stories of once shameful, despicable actions provide makes for lucrative book contracts, magazine interviews and television talk show appearances—various avenues of mass publicity which provide the opportunity to turn what was once shameful conduct into cash. A huge market of voyeurism exists. Nothing is too sordid, corrupt, perverted or disgusting to deter the impresarios who package the stories for public consumption. The trials, for example, of celebrities accused of crimes are public spectacles, opportunities for the captains of the amusement industry to expand their offerings. These "trials" spin off a succession of parasite celebrities—television commentators, pundits and "experts" who predict, speculate and "add value" to the legal proceedings in the form of glib, amusing opinion, and conjecture overlaid with bogus moralizing and psychologizing.

The criminal trials are so much longer and protracted than they used to be because they are now scenes of amusement. Recall the astonishing length of the O. J. Simpson trial, the circus antics of the participants, and the extraordinary amount of media attention that was lavished upon anyone remotely connected with the proceedings. At the beginning of the last century, the assassin of a United States President, President McKinley, was tried and dispatched in a couple of months. Imagine the length of time now it would take to conclude a trial and carry out the sentence of a murderer of a major public official. The many years that would unfold would also be polluted with movies, television shows and endless commentary and speculation about the event. The lawyers and judges presiding over the circus would themselves acquire celebrityhood. They would write books, make television appearances, grant interviews, and visit university campuses.

There is another reason that trials are now so prolonged. With the rise of the many victim classes produced by societal inequities, guilt itself has become so much more problematic—theoretical, and practically contentious. The establishment of legal guilt is no longer a process that can be readily accomplished by common sense exercised by ordinary people: it has become a complex, contentious theoretical process involving the professional mediation and
interpretation of experience by many different kinds of experts.

For the non-prominent shameless, the opportunities to cash in are not as plentiful, but the celebrities set the standard for shameless behavior, and they actually seem to benefit from the voyeuristic interest of the general public in their misdeeds. They conduct their personal lives with few restraints and the shocking things they do become just more material for the amusement industry, although the boundaries of indecency are so indistinct and expansive that it is more difficult than it used to be to shock anyone.

Bookstores are clogged with the ghost written productions of current and has-been celebrities — actors, rock stars, athletes — who trace out in tedious detail their prodigious practices of fornication and drug and alcohol intoxication and other forms of self-indulgence, personal treachery, and criminality.

The amusement-oriented media routinely feature the excesses and antics of movie actors, rock stars, multi-millionaire athletes and other professional celebrities who engage in lewdness, assault, drunken rampages, drug use, rape, and other various forms of criminality and perversity. They appear disposed to feel little shame. They incur no opprobrium and often pay no serious penalties. Indeed the preferential treatment they often receive seems to be equaled only by those who came from the ranks of hereditary aristocracy in an earlier age. Judges confer with their expensive lawyers and “punish” them with counseling or rehab programs. Coached by public relations-savvy handlers, they feign a bit of contrition while their publicists invent the excuses. If they are bona fide trash celebrities, the predictable response is arrogant posturing and an outpouring of abuse. And on it goes. The standards of public accountability and responsibility have profoundly shifted over the last fifty years such that we now look for causes which ultimately become excuses for the bad things that people do. When you can brandish a good excuse, especially if it is recited in a contemporary victimization jargon, you need not feel shame for anything that you do, no matter how despicable. Moreover, no one should be too judgmental or expect you to feel bad.

The disappearance of shame is also reflected in a near extinction of any
standards of personal morality or integrity that might bind our political leaders. When, as it seems to be now, almost no misconduct, unethical behavior or sordid dealing will arouse shame upon exposure, the range of choices in self-expressive iniquity are expanding like television cable channels and suburban shopping malls.

One can grasp how wide this chasm of permissible perversity has opened over the last forty years by speculating what the reaction of the public might have been to the sexual conduct of John Kennedy had it become widely known during the time he was in office. This is an interesting historical hypothetical to ponder in light of the revelations of President Clinton’s scandalous conduct in the Oval Office as the century was drawing to a close. For Kennedy, a World War II hero who assumed office in 1961, it is now apparent, with the stories and reports that have appeared in countless books and articles, that fidelity in marriage, or faithfulness of most any kind for that matter, was a meaningless notion to him, and that he was utterly lacking in any standards of probity or sexual morality. He was, to put it in the blunt language of an earlier era, a complete and unregenerate lecher. Over the years biographers, journalists and historians have uncovered and revealed the staggering dimensions of his womanizing. During his Presidency, the Washington Press corps properly looked the other way. The public never knew anything about of it until years after his assassination, even though some of the dallying had occurred in the White House. Had the details of his appalling philandering and profligacy been revealed during his tenure in office, he would have been driven in disgrace from public life. There can be little doubt of this. He had won the Presidency by the narrowest of margins, and his apotheosis with the assistance of the intellectual class was achieved only after his assassination. Even if the public would have been inclined to forgive his regular faithlessness to his wife, the sheer recklessness of his conduct, and the wanton disregard for the Office of the Presidency that such conduct implied would have guaranteed his rapid departure from office. The standards of propriety and the expectations of moral character and decency for occupants of high office were substantially
higher, even as recently as forty years ago.

Judging by the most minimal standards of probity and personal integrity, President Clinton appears to have achieved great success in his confessed aspiration to emulate the hero of his boyhood, John Kennedy. Several decades later, Clinton’s appalling course of sexual adventuring became common knowledge during his time in office—indeed the ludicrous sex scandal conducted with a young intern that led to his impeachment will be how we all best remember him. The public had some intimation of what this man’s character might be like in the 1992 primary campaign when one of his former Little Rock mistresses, in pursuit of her own fifteen minutes of fame, went public and divulged the seamy details of her “relationship” with Clinton during his Governorship in Arkansas. With the assistance of his wife, he was able to lie convincingly at the time and spin his way out of the damage to his ambitions. The full extent of his lecherous proclivities did not emerge into public view until well into his second term. Accused of cavorting with one of the White House interns of half his age, and after months of lying, dissimulating and obstructing the inquiry, he was finally forced to admit, in his words, to an “inappropriate relationship,” the details of which might, without much embellishment, be easily scripted into a porno short for the Playboy Channel.

Yet, in contrast with what we can easily imagine the outcry would have been a generation earlier if John Kennedy had been caught in such an act, the extensive details of the President’s faithless and reckless conduct appear to have met with a large yawn of indifference by the American people. To the practices of what the President’s apologists have called his “private morality” the public did indeed seem disinclined to make any severe moral judgments, that is, to be judgmental of the man they twice elected to the highest office. If a modern day Rip Van Winkle, who nodded off in front of the tube in the early sixties, suddenly awoke in the late 1990s and had turned on a fairly typical television evening news program that covered President Clinton’s sexual antics, along with the detailed technical discussion of fellatio, its fine legal implications and the interpretation of
its political significance, he would, no doubt, be astonished.

Equally remarkable, and revelatory of our times, was the conduct of the President himself. He appeared to feel little if any shame. His consummate skills as a lawyer emerged as he quibbled over legal definitions and adroitly deflected blame by attacking and defaming his accusers. No Agnew-like retreat from high national office in shame for this former Governor. In spite of the revelations to the entire country of his wholesale mendacity, his betrayal of the confidence of friends and associates, his public humiliation of his wife and daughter, this man went shamelessly about his business. He moved back and forth between, on the one hand, feigned weepy performances at staged media events riddled with his psycho-babble about "healing," and, on the other, oozing with phony indignation like some seedy entrenched bureaucrat caught with his hand in the till, for whom the only sure method for removal from his position would be to change the locks to the office and buy him his bus ticket home.

What little remorse he demonstrated came from the counsel of his handlers and pollsters and seemed to be orchestrated merely for effect. His regrets, one gathered, appeared to be aroused primarily because he was caught. Indeed the emotion that seemed dominant in the President’s self-presentation was resentment directed at those who brought the evidence to light. His political survival of the scandal was an enormous piece of irony, the ultimate expression of post modern morality where the focus of the event became, not conduct of the accused, but rather the hypocrisy of the accusers and the reaction of public to their corrupted motives. Public morality has become so immersed in subjectivity and consequently so invertebrate that no one is supposed to pass judgment on anyone. Why pretend that the “inappropriateness” the President confessed to mattered? What is appropriate and inappropriate is all a matter of context anyway. This scandalous set of events near the end of the twentieth century in many ways is emblematic of our time—the complete shamelessness of a shameful acting man occupying the highest office of the land, abetted a by powerful coterie of media, amusement and political celebrities, with an indifferent public looking on. This
scandal, the behavior of the man caught in it, and the general public reaction represent a profound culmination of our post-World War II era where toleration is the ultimate value.

Shame's natural impulse is to cover up. Such impulses conflict directly with the modus operandi of our organs of mass culture, particularly television. Television thrives and grows by exposing things, moving ever deeper into once forbidden terra incognita, making those things that were once matters of shame now subjects for public contemplation and, ultimately, amusement. The heavily hyped two-hour prime time television interview with President Clinton's former intern, who, with obvious enjoyment and excitement, discussed the intimate details of her trysts with the President as well as confessing to affairs with other married men and an abortion—all quite shamelessly—illustrates the point. Why was she discussing these very private matters on prime time television before millions of people? She had become a celebrity, and talking about yourself on television is what a celebrity does. The television interview was a prelude to an international book-promotion tour. Such brazen, shameless conduct would have been completely unthinkable even as recently as forty years ago.

These amusement-confession rituals serve to shrink severely the sphere of shameful conduct. Deviancy becomes routine and defined further down. Eventually almost nothing can be regarded as shameful. From this shrinking of the realm of deviancy arises a growing disparity between what people do and the characterizations of it in any traditional terms. Thus, Mr. Clinton during the period of the controversial events surrounding his behavior could with a straight face declare the observance of "Moral Character Week."

The collapse of public shame is simply the reflection and the consequence of the destruction of the objective standards of morality over the last thirty or forty years by the forces of personalism. Shame arises and makes its effects deeply felt when we confidently hold our conduct up against a shared norm or standard: shame requires the existence of a moral community whose members share a moral
vocabulary and consistently apply the words and concepts to their conduct.

But it would be difficult to say that there now exists anything in early twenty-first-century America that even remotely resembles a moral community. The appeal to moral principles as a way of guiding our lives has dissolved into a process of sorting out which personal and subjective inclinations may be deemed "appropriate," and there is no shared moral vocabulary which can be consistently applied to anything. We are in danger of living our lives nihilistically—judging, acting, affirming, according to nothing. Nothing exists, including religion, around which such a type of community could be constructed and maintained. The only possible central mediating value that can come into play is toleration. Toleratation is absolutely essential precisely because no other principle or norm can be affirmed or established. But this affirmation provides no basis for a moral community and solves nothing: for the question raised earlier remains—what conduct we will not tolerate? And if not, why not? What principles are there to appeal to? The near impossibility of answering questions like this is one more reflection of the desolation of our times.
Chapter Five: End Notes


6. Bradshaw, Healing the Shame that Binds You, 139.


