

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago . . . I named the core demon in my life. I named “shame.” This means that I became aware of the massive destructive power shame had exerted in my life. I discovered that I had been bound by shame all my life. It ruled me like an addiction. I acted it out; I covered it up in subtle and not-so-subtle ways; I transferred it to my family, my clients, and the people I taught.

Shame was the unconscious demon I had never acknowledged. In becoming aware of the dynamics of shame, I came to see that shame is one of the major destructive forces in all human life. In naming shame I began to have power over it (Bradshaw 2005, xvii).

My hand was in a cast that Sunday morning as I took the pulpit. I had what’s called a “boxer’s fracture”—a break in the finger bone (typically the pinky) between the last knuckle and the wrist. It’s called that because it frequently happens when someone strikes a hard object with a closed fist.

Whenever your hand is in a cast, you inevitably get the question, “What happened?” and I was dreading it. As a pastor, it was going

to be hard to admit that I punched a door . . . then a wall . . . then a bookshelf . . . as I flew into a fit of rage because my teenage daughter, Tapricia, had rolled her eyes at me. My inner voice suggested I lie when people asked, or perhaps make up a grand illusion of saving the family from intruders. But there were too many witnesses. My daughters had seen my dark side; they didn't need to see me lie about it.

The most humiliating part was that the infraction was so small to elicit such a severe reaction. As I look back, I can see how petty the

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entire thing was. Who does that sort of thing? What was inside me that prompted such a violent reaction? How fortunate I was that I just hit those inanimate objects and not this little girl who had been entrusted to my care (I am her *adoptive* father)!

However, even as I type the words, I can see the lump in my hand now—10 years later—that the doctor said will always be there, serving as a reminder of this hidden driver inside.

To that end, the primary question this book asks is, “Why?” Why do we do the things we do and make decisions that we eventually regret? Why do we never do the things we really *want* to do? Why does my low self-esteem lock me up? Why am I so competitive that it ruins my relationships? Why must I hurt other people in order to feel good about myself? Why am I so consumed with my failures that I can't find a way to succeed anymore? Why am I so desperate for approval and praise that I'm willing to do things I don't want to do? And, by all means, why on earth do I bash my fist so hard into walls and bookshelves because a teenage girl—who I LOVE—rolls her eyes at me? By getting at the “why” we do what we do, we can begin to put together a plan to make changes that will allow us to re-own our lives and make the kinds of choices we can look back on with satisfaction.

The main thesis of this book is that the root cause of poor decisions is based deep inside our own psychology, in a place called “shame.” That voice of shame has many different aliases, all of which fail to capture the real breadth and power it has: the enemy within, the inner saboteur, and the inner critic, to name a few. I believe that “shame” is what drives much of the poor decisions and behaviors that make it challenging to live our lives the way we want to live them.

This “thing” that causes us to lash out at others and ourselves (and frequently feel good about it), this “enemy within,” can, without question, become a vehicle of death. It most certainly is capable of leading to our own demise if not also the demise of our fellow human beings. It is this inner reality, this toxin pumping through our veins, this self, and mutually destructive force that we must address before we do any more damage.

This book suggests that our hope for reducing the destructive tendencies we have toward ourselves and our fellow struggling humans is to understand this driver, this thing called shame, in order to put forth a plan for change—to reboot our internal drives so we can begin to function differently.

Many other books about “happiness” or “leading a more fulfilling life” get attention because they offer easy fixes. Believe me, I think it would be terrific if I could offer a simple, multistep program to shake the doldrums, pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, and get back in the game of enjoying life. I wish that plan existed because I would use it myself!

I offer no easy fix, and you should know that going in—but I offer you something better. I offer an invitation to a battle. I offer you an invitation to join me in the battle for our wills. I offer you an invitation to a battle to take back the rightful control of your life from decisions that have been harming you and the ones you love. This is an invitation to live the life of freedom that you’ve so long hoped for and desired.

I dedicate this book to my adopted children—Troy, Tilonda, TiShanté, and Tapricia—who have survived the onslaught of shame

on many levels. I specify they were adopted because this itself brings with it a certain degree of shame induction. They are also African American. I have been educated (by them) about these challenges. Finally, three are women—a gender in many cultures around the world that suffers its own realm of shame.

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Although my doctoral dissertation was on how shame motivates and manipulates our lives, it's been my children who have taught me a great deal about how debilitating shame can be, how early it enters our lives, and the sheer, lifelong determination involved in rewriting the script

you were handed. They have helped me coauthor this book through their stories, inspiration, and my own desire to help them see themselves as the warriors they are. I hope to give them some freedom from what has haunted me.

This book offers some of their story combined with examples from my own life—from my time as a parent as well as my time in professional ministry and my years in corporate America—to help us explore the origins of anger, depression, anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, and insatiable egotism. Once we know their source—their principal drivers—we can prepare a game plan to deal with this condition plaguing not only us but our families, friends, and coworkers.

The goal is to expose the way shame manipulates our ability to make effective and healthy decisions—as I've seen played out in my own life, the lives of my children, and the lives of my coworkers in ministry and the business community.

Finally, the book concludes with lessons from all these experiences that have given me a fresh set of eyes on how to deal with this problem. I give some hope for our ability to begin the process of making better choices and not letting our emotions and psychology

make our decisions for us. I show how we can have more empathy, more compassion, and more integrity in our lives, which will hopefully allow us to release some of the resentment, anger, defeatism, and triumphalism that has been fueling our life this far.

When you're finished reading this book, you will have acquired some language so you can begin to:

- **STOP some of the behaviors you participate in to shame yourself and, sadly, shame others, which frequently makes us feel temporarily good about ourselves.**
- **STOP being manipulated by your defense mechanisms like perfectionism and your need for admiration.**
- **START being more empathetic and caring toward yourself and others.**
- **START being able to accomplish the tasks—large and small—that your inner critic has been demanding you are not prepared to handle.**

I can guarantee you—here, already in the first words of this book—that the voice of shame, that voice that attempts to convince me I am less than I really am, will be my companion as I attempt to get these ideas down on paper. That voice that says the ideas themselves are “stupid” stands ready to make its case every time I pause.

That voice that reminds me that no one will care about my positions on these issues is pulling up a chair beside me even now, suggesting I'm not qualified to write on this subject. That voice that says I will fail, I will have wasted my time, and that I will have embarrassed myself in the process is calling for me to pay it some attention. That voice, inside my own being, has one goal: to silence me. Its goal is to stop me from helping myself and, potentially, from helping others in the process.

As you read this, I hope you find a voice that reminds you that you are not alone in this battle. I hope you find a traveling partner in your journey who encourages you to overcome your fear. I hope you

and I both find a way to walk away from the control shame has over our lives. This book is my attempt to practice what I preach. I hope you'll join me.