

Anorexia, Shame, and the Grace of God

'Shame' is a word you lift out of the vocab box with kid gloves. It's the real deal. Not awkwardness or embarrassment or discomfort. A deep burning in the pit of your stomach. An 'I want to turn myself inside out and climb into the wardrobe and cover myself in coats, and put my hands on my head and then screw my eyes tightly closed and shrink a bit more' kind of feeling.

Unlike more sociable emotions, shame feels personal. It's hard to believe that normal people could catch it. Anger, for example, has a kind of glamour. But shame mopes around corners and grows behind the wallpaper. Shame is never appropriate in polite company. It's a brand, a stamp, a stain. It makes you want to give up and crawl away and hide and apologize until your speech dries up. It's a lowered gaze, a shuffle, an internal folding. It sets you apart, and you can't go back.

Shame is what drove me to anorexia, but then it kept me there. I starved to escape it, but embodied it instead. Shame has long bony fingers that won't let you go. It clings like a mist and blinds when you least expect it. It's in the stare of others. The neighbour who shook his head every morning as you jogged past. The knowing shop assistants who watched as you filled your basket with lettuce. You pretended not to see them whispering as you left. The pitying glances. The scorn. You could read their thoughts: *What's wrong with her? She's disgusting.*

How do you deal with it? You flee back home, and close the door, tightly. But you can't outrun yourself. Years later, you wonder: Where does that crazy girl go? Is she still there, wandering empty-handed through the aisles? Poised, but infinitely patient. Watching. Waiting.

Here's what I want to do to her. I'd like to lock her in a box. I'd like to toss her in the ocean and delete her name from my address list and pepper her full of bullets and then run her over – just to make sure. But I can't. 'She' is me. And while her behaviour has changed, she won't be silenced.

So what do I tell her? *'Try harder?'* What do I do with my disgrace?

Part of resisting shame is recognizing that I want it too. It serves a purpose. It tells me I'm too disgusting to engage with God or the world. And that's attractive. If I withdraw into self-hatred, I can kill my desires and suppress my regrets. Shame helps me close down the hope I dare not feel – hope that I might be accepted and loved after all. It's a neat way of punishing myself for the years I've wasted, the choices I've made and the damage I can't reverse.

Shame is the shape of an eating disorder. It 'works' like this: I know I'm not OK, but I'll say why and I'll prescribe my own cure. I'll identify what's wrong in me, and I will fix it.

The way of Jesus is very different. *He* – not my 'fat', my 'former life' or even me – is the sacrifice for my sins. *He* is the scapegoat and *he* deals with the mess. Jesus takes my shame and offers

me himself.

The grace of Jesus gives me the strength to be weak. He gives me permission to speak as someone who *struggles*, not someone who pretends. Against my natural instincts, I've started being honest about who I am. This happened with close friends first. Then at church. I've told my story at seminars and conferences. And I write every day, especially on my blog. As someone who's used to hiding in the dark, it's been quite a turnaround. So why do it? Why fix my name to something so ugly?

There are many reasons. I want to make sense of the world. To encourage and be encouraged. To testify to Christ's love and power. To remind myself of where I've come from, so that, by his grace, I never go back. And finally, to unmask the impostor of shame.

I hate anorexia, and I don't want to be associated with it. But more than this, I hate its secrecy and its lies. As I write and speak about it, I'm fighting it as best I can. I'm trying to expose it, as it tried to expose me.

My temptation is to cover up and act strong. But more and more, I'm seeing that real power lies in vulnerability and openness. I've met others who struggle – through my website and at conferences. As we speak with honesty about our darkest battles, *that's* when the shame begins to recede.

Jesus says to Paul, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' I long to respond as Paul does, with these words: 'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me' (2 Corinthians 12:9).

This extract is taken from '[A New Name: Grace and Healing for Anorexia](#)' by Emma Scrivener, and is reproduced here with the kind permission of IVP. Emma blogs at <http://emmascrivener.net>.



Emma Scrivener

Emma Scrivener is the author of *A New Name: Grace and Healing for Anorexia* and *A New Day: Moving on from hunger, anxiety, control, shame, anger and despair*.

