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“You Are Special”: Shame and Grace in Children’s Literature

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Children’s literature has a profound influence on its readers. It often comes into the home without regard to its content or the effect it can have on a child. This article addresses the broad strokes of child development, how unprocessed or poorly processed shame can hinder the growth of children, books that can be used in the processing of shame, and therapeutic case studies in which these books have been used.

Children by their very nature are reliant upon others to provide for their fulfillment. Fortunately, in recent years emphasis has been placed on providing for many of those needs. Laws, for example, are enacted to protect our most vulnerable citizens against situations such as physical abuse and maltreatment. Society regulates child labor laws, and has created programs to help those in need of basic survival essentials, which would otherwise be unavailable. While there are movements toward meeting many needs of children, one must consider what needs are not being met. In the development of children there are certain stages all children go through, and theorists suggest that each stage involves the developmental task of addressing certain stage-specific needs.

Erikson (1963) formulated a developmental chart that begins with infancy and moves through late adulthood. Beginning at age one, the first stage the child goes through is trust vs. mistrust. The basic premise is if all of the child’s dependency needs are met then the ability to trust is established; if not, mistrust occurs. The second stage, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, begins at age two. Here toddlers learn to exercise and do things for themselves. If they do not do them they will experience shame and self-doubt. At preschool age of 3-5 the child goes through initiative vs. guilt. Preschoolers will often take the initiative to start and carry out task or they will begin to feel guilt for not doing so. Competence vs. inferiority begins around the age of 6 and usually ends at the start of puberty. Children feel pleasure applying themselves to a task or they can start feeling

inferior to the task itself. Developmentally speaking, there are times when a child will experience shame more frequently than others. According to Erikson’s model, children appear to be most vulnerable during these primary stages of development. Therefore, when shamed, they lack the internal resources to combat this potentially devastating assault to their ego.

Maslow (1970) proposed that all people have certain basic, hierarchal needs that must be met in order for them to become self-actualized and reach their developmental potentials. All of the higher levels of development hinge on the success of the foundational levels. The first or foundational level involves basic physiological needs. These needs include food, shelter and water—basic provisions of life. Maslow contends that it is impossible for a person to work on intrinsic concerns when the basic provisions to sustain life are in question. When these needs are not met, the person, and in this case the child, goes into survival mode. If the physiological needs are satisfied then the child can move up to the second foundational level which is one’s basic need for safety.

If a child’s basic safety needs were in constant flux or in jeopardy, it would be impossible for that child to attend to anything higher than physiological needs. Once these needs are met in an appropriate manner, the mind, soul and body can begin giving energy to the more intrinsic aspect of the spirit. As addressed earlier, the culture of the United States is seemingly more invested in the physiological and safety needs of children than in their more intrinsic needs for things like emotional security. One reason is because there are punitive consequences to parents who do not address these fundamental needs. When the child starts to develop intrinsically, there are no hard and fast laws to ensure the proper development of a child’s ego and sense of self.

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The third level on the hierarchy of needs is love and belongingness. Once the first two levels are met and stable, the process of love and belongingness begins to unfold. There is an internal craving all people have to be loved and accepted by their loved ones. This is a vital construct for children to develop because it gives them an understanding of how they fit in the world around them. If they feel they are loved and they have a sense of belongingness they can return this love and begin to incorporate others into their limited construct of life. For children in whom this has not happened, anger, withdrawal, shame and fixated repression can occur. If the third level was not stable it would be difficult to go to the next level and there would be a tendency to remain in the first two primitive levels for control-based comfort. The child learns not to trust others for love and belongingness, but learns that all he can control is safety and physical needs. However, if these needs are met and the child learns that he is loved and has a sense of belongingness, his ego is more centered and sturdy.

The fourth level is esteem needs. This level is highly vulnerable to shame. A child's esteem is formed at first primarily by the most significant objects in the child's life. As the child expands the domains of her world, other influences will begin to influence a child's esteem. The fourth stage is the most critical for children, since the last stage is self-actualization, which is something striven for throughout the lifespan. When a person is shamed, his fundamental belongingness and love needs are not satisfied. Potentially, a person encountering shame may consequently experience difficulties having their esteem needs met, due to a fractured sense of self. Not surprisingly, this dis-integration can be detrimental to a child who is in the process of developing her sense of self, a time when affirmation and validation are of utmost importance.

How Shame Impacts the Developmental Needs of a Child

Shame is defined by Fossum and Mason (1986) as, "the ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, not fully valid as a human being." (p.5) Kaufman (1996) also proposes that, "shame itself produces self-doubt and disrupts both security and confidence" (p. xvi). When these emotions become embodied in the mind of a child, her core sense of self is severely damaged, if not drastically

altered. There are a number of ways a child can be shamed in the world. A child's race, body size, belief system, height, weight, clumsy behavior, and birth defects are just a few of the many areas shame can infiltrate a child's daily life.

In his model for Internal Family Systems Therapy, Richard Schwartz (1997) noted that when people are shamed, a certain part of them splits off and goes into exile. The shamed part is now disenfranchised from the rest of the integrated self. The length of time the part stays in exile greatly depends on the ego strength and the core center of the person who has been shamed. If the person's core is not stable, or that child's sense of belongingness was not fully actualized before moving to the esteem level, the exiled part might not have available coping skills or strategies. This is vital information to have when working with children. Children will be shamed. The message is not to prevent the shame from happening, but how to teach children to remove the shaming information. A therapeutic intervention for processing shame is the use of children's literature.

Children's Literature as a Therapeutic Intervention

Narrative stories and metaphors have long been considered effective clinical tools. Research has shown that bibliotherapy has empirical validity in the treatment of children with diagnoses such as aggression, ADHD and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (Shechtman & Ben-David, 1999; Edwards, 2001; Tolin, 2001, Jackson, 2001). Reading children's stories has become an integral part of the culture in the United States. In particular, there are some children's stories that offer wonderfully redemptive themes to characters who have been shamed and have lost a sense of self. Inside these books there are corrective emotional experiences for the character. These stories can be translated to fit most shaming situations: whether the issue is with religion, body image, race, or physical handicaps, there can be redemptive experiences using these as therapeutic tools.

These books can address not only clinical needs of ego functioning, but a base and core belief of self that can go into the spiritual realm for children. If a child has a fractured sense of self, and these fractures have been caused by the child's environment, often the child will reflect spiritual beliefs of God based on the environment. If this is not a redemptive environment,

but a punitive, aggressive or neglectful environment, this could also be the lens through which a child views God. It is important for a child to have corrective experiences when shamed so the shaming experiences will not cloud other dimensions of a child's life. There are several books that incorporate the concept of shame and grace. However, Max Lucado's (1997) children's book *You Are Special* is exceptional in its integration of these two topics.

Summary and Clinical Interpretation of *You Are Special*

The story begins with Wemmicks, wooden people who live in a village and who are all made by the same woodcarver, Eli. All day, every day the Wemmicks walk around the village giving golden star stickers or gray dot stickers to the other Wemmicks. Only beautiful, finely painted or talented Wemmicks got golden stars. One got a gray dot sticker if his paint was chipped or if he did something stupid like fall down while trying to jump high.

Punchinello was one of these Wemmicks, and he could never get a golden star. He would try to say something bright but it would always come out wrong. He would try to jump high but would fall and get more gray dots. Sometimes he got gray dots just for having gray dots. He started to believe that he was only worthy of gray dots, that he was not a good Wemmick.

One day Punchinello met a different type of Wemmick named Lucia. She had no stars or dots. Punchinello was very curious how this was. He noticed other Wemmicks trying to give her stars and dots but they would not stick to her. He eventually asked her how she did it. She said, "I go visit Eli everyday and maybe you should too." Then she turned and skipped away. Punchinello was concerned. Because he had so many gray dots, he was nervous about what Eli would think of him. He eventually got up the courage to go see Eli.

He walked up to Eli's house; everything was so big, it scared Punchinello. As he turned to run away, he heard his name. "Punchinello, how good it is to see you," said Eli, "Let me have a look at you." Eli stooped down to pick up Punchinello. "It looks like you have been given some bad marks." Punchinello, embarrassed, tried to explain. Eli smiled and told Punchinello, "It does not matter what the other Wemmicks think. All that matters is what I think and I think you are special." Eli explained how he made all the Wem-

micks and they had no right to judge because they are all made by the same woodcarver. Eli told Punchinello that because he had lots of gray dots he should come and see him every day. He set Punchinello back on the ground, and as Punchinello was about to leave Eli reminded him that he thought that Punchinello was special. Punchinello did not say anything but in his heart he thought that Eli really meant it. As he thought this, a gray dot fell to the ground.

Clinically, this book has a clear message about shame and how to process through it towards an experience of grace. It takes the reader on a journey with Punchinello, who is shamed, through the process of healing of his emotions and inner self-doubt. This book offers a redemptive message to children who experience the gray dots of shame, and how to begin to cope with its' damaging effects. It gives children a vocabulary that is relative to their personal experiences of shame. This book also has a discrete spiritual integration aspect.

Max Lucado masterfully places Eli as the creator of the Wemmicks, paralleling God as the creator of mankind. He gives Eli the ultimate power to place worth on his creation and to help his creation process the damage given by his other creations. This can be helpful with children and their construct of God. As the creator, ultimately his opinion is the only one that matters, and he thinks his creation is special. This book has been used in numerous therapeutic settings, including groups with early latent adolescents who were struggling with shame-based inner wounds.

Case studies using *You Are Special*

The primary author led a group with latency aged females with clinical disorders varying from Oppositional Defiant, Post Traumatic Stress, Anxiety and Depression. In this group the book *You are Special* was used. The story was read to the girls and dialogue was made about how one receives golden stars and gray dot stickers. The girls latched on to the concept of golden stars and gray dots; it gave them a vocabulary to use in group.

During group the girls talked about their own gray dots and how hurtful it was to receive them. They also talked about the golden stars, and how nice they feel but how often the pain of a gray dot out-weighted the beauty of a golden star. The girls admitted contributing to the gray dots and golden stars, and discussed ways in which they

would give other people stickers based on looks, performance, or status in school.

The creative element came when the girls started to write down their own hurtful encounters on the gray dots they cut themselves. The remainder of group time was committed to becoming like Lucia, and having the girls develop coping skills for shame. The girls were able to look objectively at each sticker and decide whether that quality was true. If was not true, they learned how to discard that information. This seemed to register strongly with the girls. Each week they would return to group with more stories of receiving golden stars and gray dots and how they would discount the false information and keep the true information. Overall, this therapeutic tool helped the girls learn how to process their own experiences of feeling shamed. It also served to develop a sense of cohesion in the group that was not previously there.

This book has also been used in individual therapy sessions with children. One individual session will be discussed for this article. The client was a 9-year-old boy, who according to Erikson would be in the competence vs. inferiority stage of his development. He was clearly struggling with the concept of love and belongingness as well. His father had sexually abused him, and then he sexually molested his younger brother. As the story was read to him, he resonated strongly with Punchinello. He felt as if he was one large gray dot. He could do nothing right and every time he tried he would fail. He enjoyed drawing and often drawing would be incorporated in therapy. He would draw himself and place on dots. Then we would come up with a redemptive ending to the stories to see if any of the dots could be taken off.

It was an insightful intervention for the therapist as well. It gave a window into his internal processing of other people. When he drew characters they would always have at least one star and one dot. Many times in the picture he would draw people and they would have more stars than dots. However, when drawing himself, he would not add stars, but only dots like Punchinello. This too became a point of intervention, exploring the thoughts and ideas of what it would be like if this character had a star on him, and what would that be and feel like?

Often a client has a difficulty resonating with some parts of the story. It was difficult for him to latch on the concept of Eli as a person who

loved him just as he was. It was difficult because Eli is a male character; the male object in his life sexually abused him. The trust issue was too raw for him to metabolize. Eventually he would start to process this character. He would start placing him in the picture and then make him a minor contributor to the story. This will probably be an issue that will resurface in different areas in his life.

There are other books which clinicians have found to be very helpful in their efforts to help their young clients transform their internalized shame into an experience of grace and self-acceptance. An annotated bibliography is presented in the appendix which highlights some of these children's books. They have been selected, for the most part, for their excellence in integrating both psychological and spiritual healing from shame.

Conclusion

While shame is an inevitable process of life, as caretakers and parents it is our responsibility to see to it that a child is equipped with the right tools to process through the shame-based situations she will encounter. There are many types of interventions that can be quite effective with children. One that is usually readily available is children's literature. These books provide an atmosphere that allows the child to fall imaginatively into the characters being portrayed. The challenge as clinicians and child-care providers is to give the children access to their exiled inner parts (that were split off due to painful shame) and empower them to successfully re-claim these wounded parts of them. The goal is for these children's stories to help the client to have a corrective and redemptive experience; this is possible for all children and for the child within us all.

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Authors

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APPENDIX

Annotated Bibliography

Davoll, B. (1988). *A Sunday Surprise*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press.

This delightful story is about a little mouse who feels shame after disrupting a church service, and his experiences of redemption through learning about God and respect for the time of worship.

Hunt, E. & Jonke, T. (1999). *The Tale of Three Trees*. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Lion Children's Books.

This important book provides a warm example about feelings of inferiority amidst desires to be remarkable, as seen through the eyes of three trees. They experience God using them in unique and beautiful ways to serve Him.

Jansen, L. (1984). *My Sister is Special*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing.

This gentle and heartfelt story about a boy and his experiences with a sister, who has Down's syndrome, is appropriate for children of all backgrounds and walks of life. The story offers a familiarity and normalization of diversity not just in regards to those with Down syndrome, but of all of God's creation.

Keane, G. (1987). *Adam the Raccoon at Forever Falls*. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Chariot Victor Publishing.

This is a story about Adam the raccoon who finds himself very tempted to swim in a forbidden and dangerous pond. After diving in he finds himself in trouble. The king of the region (a lion) saves Adam from the waterfall, but at the risk of personal sacrifice. Adam feels shamed knowing the enormous sacrifice that was made for his behavior, and then experiences a positive and redemptive ending.

Lucado, M. (1997). *You are Special*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

A shamed wooden doll finds redemptive grace and acceptance through his maker.

Lucado, M. (1994). *The Crippled Lamb*. London: Word Publishing.

"A lamb, who has always felt different and sad because of his black spots and his limp, feels his true worth when he is called upon to help keep the baby Jesus warm."

Lucado, M. (1992). *Just the Way You Are*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

This book provides a redemptive story about a girl's journey seeking her place in the world, and finds that just being herself is worth more than she could have imagined.

Maslyn, S. (2000). *Mad Maddie Maxwell*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderkidz

Mad Maddie is a child who used accusatory anger toward her friends and family and learned a lesson about the power and importance of forgiveness.

Mills, L. (1991). *The Rag Coat*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.

"Minna proudly wears her new coat made of clothing scraps to school, where the other children laugh at her until she tells them the stories behind the scraps."

Trent, J. (1994). *I'd Choose You*. London: Word Publishing.

When little elephant tells his mother about his bad day, she helps him realize just how special he is to her and to God.

Wilkinson, L. (1999). *Prickle Says I'm Sorry*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing.

This is a story about a girl who finds that the outcome of shaming others does not turn out as she had expected.

Williams, M. (1975). *The Velveteen rabbit*. New York: Avon Books.

A worn-out stuffed rabbit toy feels defective around the more "flashy" toys in a child's play room. The rabbit receives reassurance when he is told about the value of being loved just the way he is. This is a wonderful story about inner versus outer beauty.