

Commitment to service on the part of teachers bridges the gap between public school education and the teaching that takes place in colleges and universities. In this sense, service restores connection between the various stages of schooling, countering the artificial separation of public school learning and college experience. The teacher who can ask of students, "What do you need in order to learn?" or "how can I serve?" brings to the work of educating a spirit of service that honors the students' will to learn. Committed acts of caring let all students know that the purpose of education is not to dominate, or prepare them to be dominators, but rather to create the conditions for freedom. Caring educators open the mind, allowing students to embrace a world of knowing that is always subject to change and challenge.

Teach 8

Moving beyond Shame

When educators evaluate reasons some students fail while others succeed they rarely talk about the role of shame as a barrier to learning. As conservatives attack policies of affirmative action and other strategies aimed at creating greater diversity in higher education, we hear more and more about the failure of black students who come from similar class backgrounds as their white peers who score highly on standardized tests. We hear about black students who perform below their skills levels. We hear that they are indifferent, lazy, victims who want to work the system so that they get something for nothing. But we do not hear about the politics of shame and shaming.

Throughout the history of civil rights struggle to end racial discrimination, exploitation, and oppression, freedom has often been determined by the degree to which people of color have access to the same privileges as white peers. Embedded in this notion of freedom is the assumption that access is all that

is needed to create the conditions for equality. The thinking was: Let black children go to the same schools as white peers and they will have all that is needed to be equal and free. Such thinking denies the role that devaluation and degradation, or all strategies of shaming, play in maintaining racial subordination, especially in the arena of education.

Like all members of subordinated groups who must cope with the negative stereotypes imposed upon them in practically all circumstances where dominators rule, African-Americans have suffered and continue to suffer trauma, much of it the re-enactment of shaming. The self-segregation black folks do in integrated settings, particularly those where white people are the majority group, is a defense mechanism protecting them from being the victims of shaming assaults. In *Facing Shame: Families in Recovery*, Merle Rossum and Marilyn Mason define shame using experiential terms: "Shame is an inner sense of being completely diminished or insufficient as a person. It is the self judging the self. A moment of shame may be humiliation so painful or an indignity so profound that one feels one has been robbed of her or his dignity or exposed as basically inadequate, bad, or worthy of rejection. A pervasive sense of shame is the ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being." One of the ways racism colonizes the minds and imaginations of black people is through systematic shaming. The primary vehicle for this shaming is the mass media.

Mass media messages equate blackness with being bad, inadequate, unworthy. Little black children comprehend these messages, which are neither subtle nor covert. Almost every American owns a television. In most homes the television is on at least seven hours a day. In the essay "Mixed Signals: Race and the Media," Alice Tait and Todd Burroughs offer this fact: "African Americans spend more than 70 hours a week watching television—20 to 35 percent more than whites." Acknowledging the profound power of the media, they con-

tend: "It sets agendas, interprets meaning, confers status, and in its worst case, endorses destructive behavior. Its most powerful impact is on children, who frame definitions and draw conclusions about the world through the messages they receive. Studies conducted in the 1990s show that children across all race associate positive characteristics more with white characters they see on television, and negative characteristics with the minority characters." Few black children are born into a world where they are protected from racist thinking about the nature of blackness. Even if they are raised in predominantly black neighborhoods and attend all-black schools they will be subjected to white-supremacist thinking. Mass media assaults the self-esteem of black children. And it is everywhere.

Looking at the impact of mass media on the self-esteem of black children/children of color is important because they encounter a pedagogy of race and racism long before they enter any classroom settings. Usually schools, unenlightened teachers, and textbooks full of white-supremacist thinking merely reinforce the notion that black children are inferior, unworthy. For example in a classroom where children are taught that Columbus discovered America, as though the continent was previously uninhabited, children are being covertly taught that Native American people and their culture was not worthy or valued. And the sort of diversity in which a teacher adds a section on Native American culture does not intervene on the ingrained perception that native peoples were inferior. Similarly, when black children are taught that the black presence in the "new world" begins with slavery and not with African explorers and traders who came to the "new world" before Columbus or the presence of individual free black Europeans who came in search of treasures before slavery began, the message children receive is that black people are always and only subordinate to white people. Without a counter-narrative (and, thankfully, many black children learn counter-narratives at home so that they can defend themselves

against this assaultive mis-information) children of color, black children internalize the belief that they are inferior. If they do not internalize the belief fully they may be consumed by doubt and fear. Wounded or fragile self-esteem leaves the psyche vulnerable—capable of being shamed.

When assaults on self-esteem in public arenas (including school settings) are coupled with traumatic abuse in dysfunctional families, black children coming from these troubled backgrounds must work harder to create healthy self-concepts. Across class, many African-American parents use a discipline-and-punish model that includes shaming. For example, a dark-skinned black child who is told repeatedly at home that they are either bad or that they must try not to be bad internalizes the fear or belief that they are unworthy. According to therapists Gershen Kaufman and Lev Raphael this creates a shaming imprint. In *Coming out of Shame* they provide a lengthy explanation of this shaming process: “Language is another way we reactivate old scenes and reproduce the feelings originally experienced in those scenes. We can synthesize new repetitions of old scenes through language, as when we say the identical phrases to ourselves now that others said to us before. If your mother or father, for instance, said ‘You never do anything right’ over and over to you as a child, then when you’re an adult you’re apt to say the identical phrase to yourself, typically in very much the same kind of circumstance. Your parent’s phrase became embedded in the original scene, and by repeating that phrase to yourself as an adult you are actually reactivating that scene in the present. When reactivated through either mode—sufficiently similar scenes or language—an old scene intrudes directly in present consciousness, usually with no awareness that it’s happening. Then we relive that scene, in the present, with all the force of its original affect.” It should not surprise anyone, then, that those black children who have been encouraged to excel academically to prove that they are worthy have ambivalent attitudes toward learning and are vulnerable to shaming.

Even though I was raised in a segregated world where education was valued and I, like all the other children around me, was taught to study hard, to strive for academic excellence, when I left this environment to attend a mainly white college it was unnerving when I had to face the skepticism of white teachers and student peers who found a smart black person an anomaly. Smart black people had always been a given in my life. In white settings the objectification of “smart black people” engendered fear and doubt in me. Just as the constant scrutiny (whether real or merely a fear-based response to being in a racist context) led me to perform poorly for a while. Initially, though I did not consciously understand it, I quickly realized that my self-esteem was being attacked, that this is one of the strategies the dominator used to reinscribe subordination. Unlike individual black students of today, who judge themselves as not worthy of being smart and eschew academic excellence, I was judged by the white people in my environment. Even the liberal white folks who supported and affirmed my presence simultaneously acted as though there was something strange and aberrant about me being black, female, and intellectual. More often than not they, and not the overt racists, were the folks interrogating me about my background. At times I felt as though in their minds I was coming from the “jungle” and they wanted to know “how I escaped.”

In the segregated educational environment I came from I had been affirmed as being a good writer. Imagine my sense of bewilderment when in a white setting professors would ask me “Did someone help you write this paper?” Contrary to the notion that black folks are always holding out our racism detectors (like metal detectors), I began college believing fully that my professors believed in my capacity to learn. I was shocked when I was forced to confront the way in which white-supremacist thinking about the nature of race and intelligence surfaced in interactions between professors and myself. Since I had been raised in an environment where resistance to racial

assault and white-supremacist thinking was the norm, I began to view my professors with a degree of skepticism. Rather than simply accepting their “judgments” of me and my intelligence, I sought critical feedback from individuals I could trust.

As long as educators are unwilling to acknowledge the overt and covert forms of psychological terrorism that are always in place when unenlightened white people (as well as unenlightened people of color who have internalized white-supremacist thinking) encounter people of color, especially people of color who do not conform to negative stereotypes, there can be no useful understanding of the role shame and shaming plays as a force preventing marginalized students from performing with excellence. Recently, lecturing on the issue of self-esteem at the same institution, I was challenged by a black woman student completing her doctorate, who shared publicly, “I just don’t think that self-esteem is that important.” Later in private conversation she let me know that she had been offered a teaching job at an Ivy League institution—that her advisors were suggesting that she would do better at a less prominent school. I encouraged her first to think about her needs. Then I asked her to consider if she were a white male doctoral candidate with a job offer from an elite school whether he would be advised not to take the position, to go work at a less distinguished school. My advice to her was to consider choosing the elite school with a plan to shift to another institution in a few years. I told her to focus during her years there on being an excellent teacher and scholar rather than worrying about whether or not she would be “judged” worthy enough for tenure in the long run.

When I was offered a job as an assistant professor at Yale University (my first “real” job) my immediate response was fear because I was not sure I could “survive” in the Ivy League coming from a working-class background and knowing that I was not willing to support the dominator culture that was the norm at that time. Healthy self-esteem allowed me to choose to teach

at Yale and to not go through a tenure process then. Overall it was the most rewarding teaching experience of my entire teaching career. At the time, it was not an institution that was just in its assessment of marginalized individuals when it came to awarding tenure. Understanding this, I left before I was reviewed. I believed that had I allowed unenlightened colleagues to review me they would have endeavored to crush my spirit. Yet none of the racism, sexism, class elitism I encountered at Yale overshadowed the joy in teaching I experienced there, teaching dedicated, committed, brilliant students, many of them students of color and white females. More than ten years have passed since my time at Yale but the students I taught there are still in my life, still allowing me the privilege of teaching them, albeit out of the classroom setting.

Sharing these experiences I hope to call attention to the need for critical vigilance when marginalized students of color (or marginalized individuals of any group, that is, a Jew at a Christian school, a gay person in a predominantly heterosexual and heterosexist environment) enter environments that continue to be shaped by the politics of domination. Without critical vigilance, shaming as a weapon of psychological terrorism can damage fragile self-esteem in ways that are irreparable. Self-esteem is not simply a concern of black folks or individuals from marginalized groups. Many of the professors who teach in colleges and universities have crippling long self-esteem that is covered up by the mantle of power and privilege their positions as educators affords them. Just as white supremacy or male domination serves as a location of privilege that provides pseudo self-esteem, academic hierarchies deem smart people chosen and therefore more worthy of regard than the unintelligent masses. Delegated the “elect,” professors who are highly intelligent often feel that it is their role in life to pass judgment on students, to sort out the wheat from the chaff. Usually this sorting-out process includes rituals of shaming. Simply imagine a professor who thinks it important

to test students emotionally to see if they have the character to succeed in school or in academic careers standing before a smart black student asking them if they were admitted on the basis of affirmative action or on merit. That question could activate serious feelings of shame. It might, as Kaufman and Raphael contend, evoke memories of childhood scenes when their worth and value as a self was questioned.

Importantly, Kaufman and Raphael identify the "inner voice" of a "scene's conscious residue" that may lead an individual to be self-shaming. For example: a black child told repeatedly that he or she is stupid and not to act stupid before whites may fear being stupid. When faced with a white teacher who treats them like they are stupid these children may activate that internal shaming voice. This can happen with a student who may be exceptionally intelligent but who may discount their worth because the inner voice says that they are really stupid. Kaufman and Raphael state that "the principal effects of shame on the self are hiding, paralysis, and a feeling of being transparent." They contend: "The urge to hide and disappear from view immediately follows shame because we desperately want to reduce the agonizing scrutiny." I would add to this that being the object of intense scrutiny can trigger shame-based re-enactment of painful scenarios. Often black students, students of color, and gay students of all races seek out classes where they are in the majority or social spaces to avoid being "seen" and shamed.

Many black students with excellent academic skill and talent are performing poorly in academic settings because they are shame-based and in settings where shaming is a common practice. In many cases simply the experience of being "judged" activates deep-seated feelings of shame. Messing up, performing poorly eases the anxiety. If the fear is that they will be found wanting, then as soon as they can inappropriately act out so that they are indeed wanting, they can feel better. There are serious taboos against acknowledging shame. Individual

black students and colleagues have broken down emotionally as we talk in my office about negative experiences in predominantly white academic settings. They voice shame about feeling shame. One dark-skinned male student confessed that every time he was asked a question in a class where everyone else was white he felt inwardly terrified of failure and he always responded with anger. Even though he could see that this response alienated him from his peers he felt stuck.

With keen insight Kaufman and Raphael identify rage as the most common secondary reaction to shame. They explain: "When the intensity of shame reaches the highest levels, rage is triggered. Rage serves a vital self-protective function: it shields the exposed self. At certain times, rage actively keeps everyone away, covering the self. We refuse further contact because rage has shut us in and others out. But at other times rage in response to shame may make us invite or seek direct contact with whoever has humiliated us—if for no other reason than to strike back . . . That is why if we feel worthless or inadequate . . . we often mask our deeper shame with surface rage." Often individual students of color, and other marginalized students, are consumed by feelings of rage. Their anger blinds them, preventing them from taking needed steps to restore their integrity of being and personal agency.

Until the power of shaming is taken seriously as a threat to the well-being of all students, particularly individuals from marginalized and/or subordinated groups, no amount of support staff, positive programming, or material resources will lead to academic excellence. Many white male professors entered college as students fully aware that they might be subjected to rituals of shaming to prove their worth, their right to be one of the chosen. As a consequence they may endure these rituals without feeling threatened or destroyed. Not so for vulnerable students from marginalized groups who may enter college (often as the first member of their family to attend) with no awareness that ritualized shaming may take place. Rituals of

shaming may create in them a true crisis of spirit where they doubt both their self-worth and their reason for being in college. Often students experiencing such crises feel as though they are losing their minds. They recover themselves only as they work to come out of shame. They recover themselves only when there are progressive educators who give them space to feel their shame, express those feelings, and do the work of healing.

Academics who use shaming to crush the spirit of students who challenge and interrogate all they are learning, the environments in which they come to learn, and the teachers whose classrooms they enter, are engaged in forms of emotional violence. They are abusive. Though rarely explicitly stated, their violence is often committed in the name of maintaining imperialist white-supremacist patriarchal hegemony in the academic world. Students should not and cannot bear the sole responsibility for challenging these individuals. Professors must dare to critically intervene not just on behalf of an individual student, but also on behalf of our teaching profession. When a black female student confessed to two white female professors, both feminist scholars, that she was repeatedly shamed by a white male professor, they investigated. They intervened. Their intervention was the act of critical resistance that affirmed the student's right to be respected, to be educated, her right to well-being at a predominantly white college; it affirmed her self-esteem.

As long as educational institutions continue to serve as settings where the politics of domination in any form are perpetuated and maintained, teachers will need to confront the issue of shame. Conveying genuine respect for colleagues and students (especially those deemed other or different) we can affirm everyone's right to self-determination. Kaufman and Raphael remind us that "all human beings stand equal in the sudden exposure wrought by shame." They state: "Shame shadows each of us, and everyone encounters the alienating effect

in some form, at some time. Entering that experience long enough to endure it, deliberately, and consciously in order to transform it, is a challenge which knows no bound. Yet only by facing that challenge can we ever hope to re-create who we are." While writing specifically about the experiences of gay people coming out of shame, Kaufman and Raphael offer insights that pertain to any member of a marginalized, exploited, or oppressed group, or any individual experiencing the detrimental affects of traumatic shaming.

When education as the practice of freedom is affirmed in schools and colleges we can move beyond shame to a place of recognition that is humanizing. Shame dehumanizes. There can be no better place than the classroom, that setting where we invite students to open their minds and think beyond all boundaries to challenge, confront, and change the hidden trauma of shame. We do this by enacting a politics of affirmation where difference is accorded respect and all voices deemed worthy. As teachers we can make the classroom a place where we help students come out of shame. We can allow them to experience their vulnerability among a community of learners who will dare to hold them up should they falter or fail when triggered by past scenarios of shame—a community that will constantly give recognition and respect.