

Unmasking Shame – The Phantom of the Opera

By Sheila Rubin, LMFT, RDT/BCT

While on a walk, after watching the movie version of “Phantom of the Opera,” I was surprised to hear a friend comment that something in the drama was upsetting to him. The facial wounding of the phantom seemed too small to warrant the level of reaction of violence; even wounds from his childhood wouldn’t have had to have resulted in such an extreme reaction. He told me about someone he’d met who had wounds from a fire, much more distressing and dramatic—and more believable.

I explained that the powerful effect of “Phantom of the Opera” was partly that the Phantom’s wounds were horribly shaming to him. It was not because of his facial wounding but because of the shame that it brought up in him that he became the Phantom, hiding behind his mask and theatrical makeup. The facial wounding was much less than the unseen wounds that lay deep inside—and those are the wounds of shame.

More fully, the power of the movie comes from the heroine twice reaching for his wound. She removes his mask. He reacts with shock and disgust at being exposed and lashes out, not at her but at someone nearby. In the pivotal scene, she is given the ultimate choice: to live with him as his bride or to try to leave with her lover, in which case he will kill the lover. This is an impossible impasse. How will she respond? There is no right answer. There is no way out.

She answers, speaking slowly from a deep place within herself. The way she responds to this horrible choice is with deep love. She reaches deep inside herself to understand him, and from this place inside she says, “I see your darkness, I see your pain. I see the dark place where you live and why you hide. And I choose to live with you. I choose to make your pain my pain. I choose to be with you. I choose to be your bride.” As she speaks, she is reaching from her humanity, from her heart to his. She is seeing his shame. She is naming that she sees it. And she is not running away. She is choosing to stay with him, in that moment and forever. She is reaching from the depth of her innocence, her love, to the love inside him, and healing his shame.

In that moment, he is restored and he feels his love for her. He for the first time experiences her as a separate person, separate from his fantasies of her. He says, “I love you so much, I don’t want you to live in the darkness with me, and I want you to have your own life.” And he releases her. He releases her to her lover. As she and her lover begin to walk away, they are free to go; yet she walks back to the Phantom once again—she does not run away. Instead, she looks into his eyes, into his face, and returns his treasure, the ring he has given her. She puts it into his hand, handing him back his treasure, handing him back his promise, his dignity. She is saying, “I respect you. I trust you. Thank you.”

When I am working with a couple with an interminable shame loop, this is often what is underneath for one or often both persons. Each has what they imagine to be secret, horrible shame, and both are longing to have the other be able to witness and restore the interpersonal bridge.

But the risks are so high. This is an impossible impasse where there seems to be no way out. One or both are hiding behind their mask of reactivity—blame and anger. Sometimes I am able to get one partner to reach a little beneath the reactive anger to a place of

disappointment, embarrassment. I gently hold a loving space for that deeper emotion... *shame*. And this is what I try to do in therapy—find this softer place, this tender place underneath.

When one person's shame is revealed, he may react with one of the four reactions to shame: blame self, blame other, deny, or withdraw. I watch and hold loving space. And when I am catching Sue Johnson's "bullet" towards his partner, it is most likely a shame bullet. And then I work tenderly, carefully, with the partner to help them understand and open to the one who reveals his shame, to witness the shame with love and understanding. When this happens, the partner may say, "He looks so vulnerable. I never knew he felt that way, I just want to protect him" and then both cry or laugh together. It is the witnessing of the shame by the partner from a place deep within them that is healing.

In the movie, it is the early childhood wounding that causes the Phantom of the Opera's shame. When he begins to confide in the heroine, she lifts his mask. She wants to see his wound. She wants to see his pain. This comes from an innocent place, from the place of the child where all things are curious, and there is no right or wrong, there is no shaming in her actions. She reaches out in innocence and with love.

There is a difference between his inner wound and his outer wound. The Phantom can be portrayed without a severe outer wound. His inner wound, his shame, is what gives him such pain. Many of my clients have the inner wound. There may be an actual outer wound, but the inner wound is universal. So many have a tendency to dismiss their wound, not see it in others or themselves. Well meaning people really miss what it means to the person himself or herself to have this inner wound of shame. This is a place where the person feels "defective" or feels "There's something wrong with me." Someone may say, "She doesn't seem upset" or "That doesn't seem so hard." And this is a place for a kind teacher or parent or therapist to say, "Yeah, it may not seem so hard from the outside, but I wonder what she feels on the inside." And then gently, with great care, begin to unpack the person's inner world so that the other can see their shame and reach across from their own shame, reaching into a place of great love.

The heroine sees the Phantom first in his kindness to her, and then she sees how he has harmed people and sees him in his cruelty and his acting out. She says, "I did love you. Now I'm confused." He proclaims how bad he is, which allows her to look deeper. When she looks deeper, she sees his pain. When she sees his pain, she sees it from a non-judging place. She does not poke him in that painful place, but she does not ignore it either.

For her to really see him allows him to step out of his shame. He breaks into tears. He is seen for the first time. He goes from the emotion of shame into the emotion of grief, and finally the freeze that shame has had on him begins to unravel as these two emotions begin to unwind. We are deeply touched.

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