



The road from shame to Pride



VICKY BEECHING
OPENS UP
ABOUT HER
JOURNEY
OF SELF-
ACCEPTANCE

As this issue's theme is Pride, I've been reminiscing about the first time I attended the London march a few years ago. On a deeper level, I've also been thinking about my long personal journey to finally reach a place of pride in my

own gay sexuality after a lifetime of being told by the church that it was shameful.

While it's great to focus on the celebratory nature of Pride, I think it's also worth taking a moment to explore the opposite end of the spectrum – shame – and talk about the ways this toxic emotion affects many of us in the LGBT+ community.

I'm guessing most of us reading

this magazine can think of one time, or perhaps countless times, when we've been made to feel ashamed of the ways we are different to the majority of society. Perhaps you're lucky and have never felt that way – if so, fantastic. But through the emails that pour in via my website's contact page, I hear from people around the globe who are battling with this damaging emotion.

It's different from guilt in a crucial way: guilt is feeling bad about something we've *done*, whereas shame is feeling bad about *who we are*. As author and academic Brene Brown puts it: "Guilt is: I'm sorry I made a mistake. Shame is: I'm sorry I *am* a mistake."

Professor of clinical psychology PL Wachtel points out that "the roots of the word shame are thought to come from an older word, meaning 'to cover'". It's like a cloak that can engulf us, making us hide who we really are. We become muted. Dampened. Made invisible.

And as we carry that heavy cloak around, we expend precious energy that could be spent living a meaningful life.

Shame vastly reduces our ability to connect with ourselves and with others. If you're hiding large parts of your heart and identity, it's impossible to let people in and make deep relational ties. Conversely, self-acceptance is amazingly liberating. It is healing and transformative for the person – and for those around them.

My own journey has been one of slowly embracing my gay identity; becoming more and more comfortable with it over time. This wasn't because of any internalised homophobia in me; it was simply due to years of external criticism from Christian teachings. As I've accepted myself, everyone around me has seen, and benefited from, the difference.

I've realised that if you harbour shame about who you are, you can't allow anyone to properly

love you. On some deep level you can't receive their love as you don't believe you're worthy of it. This affected me hugely during my teens, and throughout my adult life until a couple of years ago.

It's good to finally feel more able to let people in. I'm always known as a warm and friendly person, usually smiling, and always very welcoming to people. But there's a big difference between that and totally taking your guard down to let people super-close. Intimacy can be scary when you aren't at peace with your own identity.

Winning the "shame battle" has allowed me to create much deeper friendships – and explore romantic relationships too – as I'm finally able to drop the walls I'd built around my heart. As Ayn Rand writes in *The Fountainhead*: "To say 'I love you' one must know first how to say the 'I.'" In other words, if we're not "at home" with ourselves and able to love who we are, we can't enter into intimate relationships.

Back in 2013 and 2014, I observed the Pride In London march shyly from the sidelines. I didn't come out until August 2014, so I was still in the closet. Watching the march go by in a flurry of energy, colour and noise, there was something infectious about the self-acceptance and celebration I witnessed. People carrying banners, dressed in rainbow-coloured clothes; proudly standing up for their right to love and live.

In 2015, I was out. So I felt able to join the march and carry a banner of my own. And in 2016 I was there again – funnily enough, with my face covering the side of a double-decker bus, as I was on the cover of *The National Pride Guide* magazine. So I saw myself go from shame to a level

of self-acceptance that I could never have imagined. To me, it showed how much healing had taken place in my heart.

I feel like a totally different person these days; finally comfortable in my own skin (on a good day, at least!). Whereas shame creates walls that go up around our hearts, self-acceptance and healthy pride do the opposite: they enable us to let people in; to become vulnerable in a beautiful way.

Vulnerability is often thought of as weakness, but in reality, it's a strength. Brene Brown writes that: "Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity." Without it, we'll struggle to create any of those things. She also points out that it's "the glue that holds relationships together. It's the magic sauce". She's so right. I'm learning to be more vulnerable and finding it's worth the risk.

It can take years to erase the "tapes" that play in our heads, filled with the negative messages that we've heard over a lifetime. To be honest, at times, shame still comes back to haunt me and some of those tapes continue to play.

Because of this, I've decided to be very selective about the places I go to, and the people I see, as some of them have a predictably shaming effect. For example, some churches are just too difficult to attend. If they slip an anti-gay message into their sermon, I can feel the hard work I've done to reach a point of self-acceptance coming under attack. Only fully LGBT-welcoming churches feel safe to me now.

Socially, I try to minimise the time I spend with people who are non-accepting of same-sex relationships, purely for my own sanity and

wellbeing. I've been thinking how I can accomplish this online too, as I spend so much time each week engaging with social media. I get incessantly trolled about being gay and Christian, which can re-start some of those "shame tapes" playing in my mind if I'm not careful.

Last month, after an especially unpleasant dose of cyber-abuse I decided to take a few weeks offline. I won't let the trolls drive me off those platforms forever, but for reasons of self-care, sometimes we all need to remind ourselves to step away and take a break.

Every year, at least a handful of non-LGBT people moan: "Are Pride marches really still necessary?!" and to that I'd say a resounding "yes". When I was in the closet, it was transformative to glimpse a community marching past me, knowing that someday I could join in and belong. And the self-respect I saw on display showed me that I, too, could come to love myself wholeheartedly.

This year at Pride, I hope someone might be watching nervously from the sidelines – just like I was in 2013 and 2014 – and that as our smiles and banners pass by, they'll see a contagious self-acceptance that gives them hope. In part, we march for ourselves, and in part, we march for those who stand and watch us. We take to the streets because we're committed to kicking shame to the curb.

Whether you attend a Pride event this summer or not, may you feel flooded with support, community, and self-love. And may you always be immensely proud to be yourself; the one-off, totally unique, once-in-a-million-lifetimes, you. 🌈

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