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Empowering Themselves:  
A Spiritual Path  
for Shame Bound Older Adults

James J. Magee, DSW

ABSTRACT. This article describes how older adults with life long deficiencies in self-esteem can draw upon their spiritual life as an ancillary source of self-empowerment in the counseling process. It explains how insight into the spiritual dimensions of five age related changes facilitates transcending shame as an older adult. It concludes by noting five stages through which older adults proceed as they find the source of their self-esteem first in God and gradually in themselves.

Pastors and spiritual directors increasingly recognize that therapeutic counseling is needed for those religiously committed older adults whose poor self-esteem seriously diminishes the capacity to enjoy the fruits of their spiritual life. They have seen how such counseling has benefitted many who have endured life-long episodes of depression, anxiety, and shame. Less obvious, however, is the quiet courage with which these older adults draw upon their spiritual life as a source of self-empowerment in the counseling process. This article affirms their courage, and presents a model of the stages through which older adults progress in integrating age related changes, their spiritual life, and their self-esteem.

To clarify this progression, the article elaborates upon four themes. First, it distinguishes between ordinary experiences of

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shame which serve self-esteem and the embedded shame which characterizes the lives of the older adults discussed herein. Second, it describes how diminished self-esteem has skewed the experience of their own spirituality. Third, it explains how their insight into the spiritual dimensions of the age related changes in their lives transforms these changes into opportunities to transcend embedded shame. Finally, the article concludes with accounts of apparently inconsequential, but personally heroic, expressions of self-esteem that proceed from the synergy of their aging and spirituality.

**EMBEDDED SHAME**

For most religiously committed older adults there is a beneficent relationship between shame and self-esteem. Self-esteem is the unquestioned assumption they have of their own worth. It is a continuing, taken-for-granted self-assessment about the kind of person that they see themselves to be. Individuals with hearty self-esteem generally respond to shame experiences as corrective episodes that move them to “shape up,” challenging them to conform their behavior to their own professed ideals.

Self-esteem proceeds from children internalizing what they think is the regard that others, upon whom they feel dependent, have for them. Children’s concern about this evaluation demonstrates that there is already a bond between themselves and their care givers. By accentuating this bonding, early shame experiences help to sustain the mutual, enduring investment of care givers and children in the primary relationship essential to the latter’s self-esteem.

For the older adults discussed herein, however, shame had none of these sanguine functions. They entered adulthood with self-esteem in tatters. They had fused shame and identity as children, and thereafter endured any lapse from standards as evidence that their self was egregiously flawed.

Their descriptions of incidents of embarrassment and shyness poignantly illustrate how these experiences immobilized them. They tell of shame that overwhelmed their cognitive functioning, leaving their diaphragm constricted, mouth dry, tongue stammering, and spontaneous movement frozen save for tremors or fumbling.
They would panic, bow their head, avert their eyes, stoop their posture, tense their muscles, and gesticulate awkwardly, if at all. Their discomfort expressed the conviction that they had failed, not merely at some test of ability or character, but as a person. They were "fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, not fully valid as a human being." They often aggravated their vulnerability by obsessing that their inferiority was exposed to others who scornfully concurred in their damning self-assessment.

Throughout their lives shame-embedded older adults tended to feel uncomfortable with spontaneity, anxious that it might reveal hostility or sexuality. When they heard themselves make a "Freudian slip" or a surprisingly sarcastic remark, they felt once again caught unaware, exposed. They self-consciously scanned their motives and behavior, "unable fully to engage the self in any activity requiring that the greater part of attention be directed away from the image of the self."

Mortified at the indignity of their flawed identity laid bare, they longed for the earth to swallow them up. Because such fantasized escape was illusory, a sense of abandonment amplified the feeling of exposure. Fear of derision isolated them from others, and self-criticism severed them even from themselves. Once the "I" condemned the "me," they could neither grant acceptance to themselves nor accept empathy from others.

Their apprehensiveness about supposed self-exposure to others’ critical judgment had three self-defeating consequences. First, it detracted from mutually caring relationships. Others, who were once their role models for values, they now imagined were taunting them for failing to sustain these values to the letter. Esteemed guides were now competitors against whom they could not measure up. They received praise as patronizing and criticism as confirming some vast discrepancy between their aspirations and their abilities.

Second, it evoked a "shame-rage" against others. A reservoir of anger would burst as a spontaneous rejection of the rejector. The rage protected them from feeling inferior by projecting upon others the responsibility for their discomfort.

Third, it ultimately retargetted the "shame-rage" against themselves. Attacking others was illogical because others only acted as
the shamed deserve. It was excessive because their anger threatened to alienate others for whom they genuinely cared and thus make their isolation more extreme. To live with this dilemma, they often denied their anger an external target and diverted it inward in the form of depression.

**EMBEDDED SHAME SKEWING SPIRITUALITY**

This same focus upon others assessing their failed self installed in their imagination as children the metaphor of God as Judge. They may resonate to many endearing metaphors of God through their life, but under stress a child's level comprehension of JUDGE clutches them emotionally. One woman referred to Nietzsche's anecdote as an example of her own "flinching" before God's omniscience. According to the anecdote, a little girl says to her mother, "Is it true that God is present everywhere? I think that's indecent." "For me," the woman commented, "it was more than 'indecent.' God was engaged in 'prying and entrapment.' That's all I could think of each time I read in Hebrews (4:12-13) that God 'judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart. Nothing is concealed from him; all lies bare and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account.'"

This clutch at the heart, in turn, distorts the attitude of shame driven older adults toward metanoia, i.e., spiritual conversion. An appreciation of conversion as the graced process of increasingly recognizing God's delight in, and use of, their individuality is beyond them. Instead, they assume that conversion requires a wrenching detachment from the very traits that constitute their personality.

Afflicted with the conviction that they cannot trust themselves, they feel safer when they are rule bound rather than spontaneous and unguarded. Since they view everything as a test in which God must not find them wanting, they sometimes seem wary even of God. For, when the Spirit "'blows where it will,'" it might blow them off the course they have plotted for their spiritual journey.
AGE RELATED CHANGES RELEASING SPIRITUALITY FOR SELF-ESTEEM

The confluence of age related changes is a gift for these older adults, because it has a cumulative liberating impact upon their spiritual life and self-esteem. First, retirement deprives them of the roles through which shame driven behavior accomplished so much. They are now without their principal opportunities to discharge their compulsiveness. The ongoing discomfort of feeling driven but without a "payoff" becomes an incentive to bring their puzzle-ment to prayer and spiritual direction for discernment. Retirement has imposed its own form of detachment—first, from role satisfac tion, and now, from the delusion that such satisfaction can be a substitute for self-esteem.

Second, their new leisure poses the anomaly of having time for devotions of their own preference, of feeling drawn to prayer and of being graced occasionally with peacefulness, yet finding that their drivenness quickly eclipses these graced moments. They know they enjoy their familiarity with God, but feel unable to sustain this enjoyment.

Third, they must confront the frequency with which younger associates attribute wisdom to them. Others expect them to trust their own experience as a source of knowledge about God. They can not avoid asking themselves, "If I am so wise, why am I so anxious? If I trust in God, why am I so hard on myself? (and on others?) How is my own life a parable, a perspective on the truth?"

Fourth, ongoing experiences of life review confirm that they will die incomplete, unfinished. Their long stored, and storied, memories capture the continuity of their identity. In reel upon reel, as it were, their reminiscences portray them playing out the themes that emerge from their wounded self-esteem. Clearly, as older adults they remain their same selves, only now "writ large." Both personal fulfillment and appreciation for the graced consequences of their impoverished self-esteem must reside ultimately with God.

Finally, their cherished—and sometimes troubled—relationships with grandchildren, grandnieces and grandnephews, or children
with whom they are volunteers dramatize that the wellbeing of every generation must also be left to this same God. Older adults know that they often have little influence among younger generations, and that their efforts to increase it may only aggravate problems. Memories of older relatives who interfered in their own lives give further pause.

One grandfather confided, "When I see my grandchildren living out my own failings, I reassure myself with the text [Jeremiah 29:11-13], 'I know well the plans I have in mind for you,... plans for your welfare, not for your woel plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me.' The issues in their lives are beyond my control. I have to entrust them to a caring God."

A SPIRITUAL PATH TO EMPOWERMENT AND SELF-Esteem

Persons with hearty self-esteem feel self-empowered to inform their conscience, heed their intuitions, espouse controversial opinions, and reflect upon their experience as a valid source of wisdom. Throughout their lives, however, shame driven older adults have felt anxiety instead of empowerment at the prospect of exercising these prerogatives. Now, by integrating age related changes and their own spirituality, many find in God the source of self-esteem that they never found in themselves.

The first marker on this spiritual path to dual empowerment—by God, then by self—is their admission that they are unable to sustain either self-acceptance or God's. Once they assent that they are unable to experience themselves, relate to others, and imagine God except through the lens of their identity-as-failed, then, in their frustration, they may act spontaneously. Many fruitfully abandon themselves to the mystics' "cloud of unknowing." Engaged in the prayer of centering, some meditate without thought or image. By rooting themselves in God as the ground of their being, they fortuitously enter a mode where self-criticism is absent.

One octogenarian centered herself by addressing God with each breath as "Father/Mother." She had chosen this mantra because it
also evoked her troubled relationship as a youth with her parents. She was deliberately overlaying God with her parents’ role toward which she felt powerful ambivalence. Her mantra asserted her hope that God would enable her to appreciate how the sources of her personal talents abided, ironically, in the entanglements of her family relationships.

The second marker covers an indefinite period during which they elaborate upon their daily centering meditation by reflecting later upon the distractions that occurred while they were trying to remain centered. One woman, for instance, looked in these distractions for metaphors about God and herself. On one occasion, a barroom scene from a television movie had emerged upon her prayer. During her ruminations about the scene, she recalled a line from John Masefield’s poem, *The Word*:

> And may we find, when ended is the page,
> Death but a tavern on our pilgrimage.

“Soon enough she would imbibe at this tavern,” she thought. Then, in a graced moment, she let herself converse with God, imagining God as a fellow patron, as the bartender, and as the proprietor.

The third marker is the readiness to “own” their past, to rummage through it, entering, rather than avoiding, memories holding painful associations. This readiness is a liberating disposition for persons with meager self-esteem, because it gradually supplants feelings of victimization and blame with discernment that their parents, grandparents, and others in their extended family bore the same problems of self-esteem that have troubled them. In return, they can appreciate the almost scripted inevitability of these issues continuing across the generations and playing out in their own life. In this spirit, at a party celebrating her eightieth birthday, the honoree good naturedly identified “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” with her “family tree,” and interpreted “original sin” as a metaphor for the cumulative effect of the poverty of self-esteem that each generation had transmitted to the next.

The fourth marker is a growing trust, however halting, in their own experience as a source of truth for them. One childless wid-
ower, for instance, spoke of the impact that his close association with his brother’s family had upon his understanding of God. His brother’s daughter had dropped out of college because of a cocaine addiction. To support her addiction, she had prostituted herself and stolen money and heirlooms from her grandmother. Never, however, had her parents ceased to love her. They had forgiven her, whether or not she was contrite, even while they practiced “tough love” for her own good and theirs.

The parents’ unconditional love became the widower’s salient metaphor for God’s love and forgiveness. He tried to respond love for love, transcending the shame that had scourged him with a lifelong fear of the Judge-God of his childhood. With ironic good humor he brought up the theme of shame himself. “I am embarrassed to admit that my brother’s love was larger than the love I had allowed God to be. I read in Ezekiel (16, 62-63), though, that my chagrin is itself the felt gift of God catching me unaware:

For I will re-establish my covenant with you, that you may know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be covered with confusion, and that you may be utterly silenced for shame when I pardon you for all you have done, says the Lord God.”

Trusting in their own experience as a source of truth and of metaphor for understanding God is a moment of self-empowerment for these older adults. For, now they are recognizing their truth, arising out of their life and sometimes without confirmation from significant others. Though they acknowledge that their understanding is distorted and incomplete, this is the God they trust in, love, and intuit as adults.

The final marker is the challenge that the sequence of empowerment—first by God, then by self—makes to their faith itself. Some older adults who have proceeded to the point where they draw upon their own experience as a source of truth now have a meta-experience, i.e., they are aware that they are finally empowering themselves while they do it. This awareness elicits the challenge: Is self-empowerment simply an assertion with which individuals impose meaning upon an otherwise meaningless existence?
Do individuals fabricate belief in God as a source of empowerment because they are too pusillanimous to empower themselves?

It may seem ironic that the flush of self-worth should evoke these questions. When these older adults answer them by affirming their religious commitment, however, their decision to believe is now an inner directed choice, and less a function of their socialization. To a degree they could not have imagined, their belief is truly theirs.

**CONCLUSION**

The spirituality of these older adults is no quick fix for self-esteem diminished by embedded shame. Under stress they are vulnerable to all the dysfunctions that characterized their life history. There is a synergy of age related changes and spirituality, however, that they bring to counseling, and it is a continuing source for self-acceptance and for feeling the surety of God’s love.

By drawing upon this synergy, these older adults can use counseling to empower themselves, to trust their own intuition, and to achieve a modicum of accurate self-knowledge. Unknown to others, they are living more consistently toward the limits of their courage and their trust. In the midst of risk, they are more at peace.

**REFERENCES**