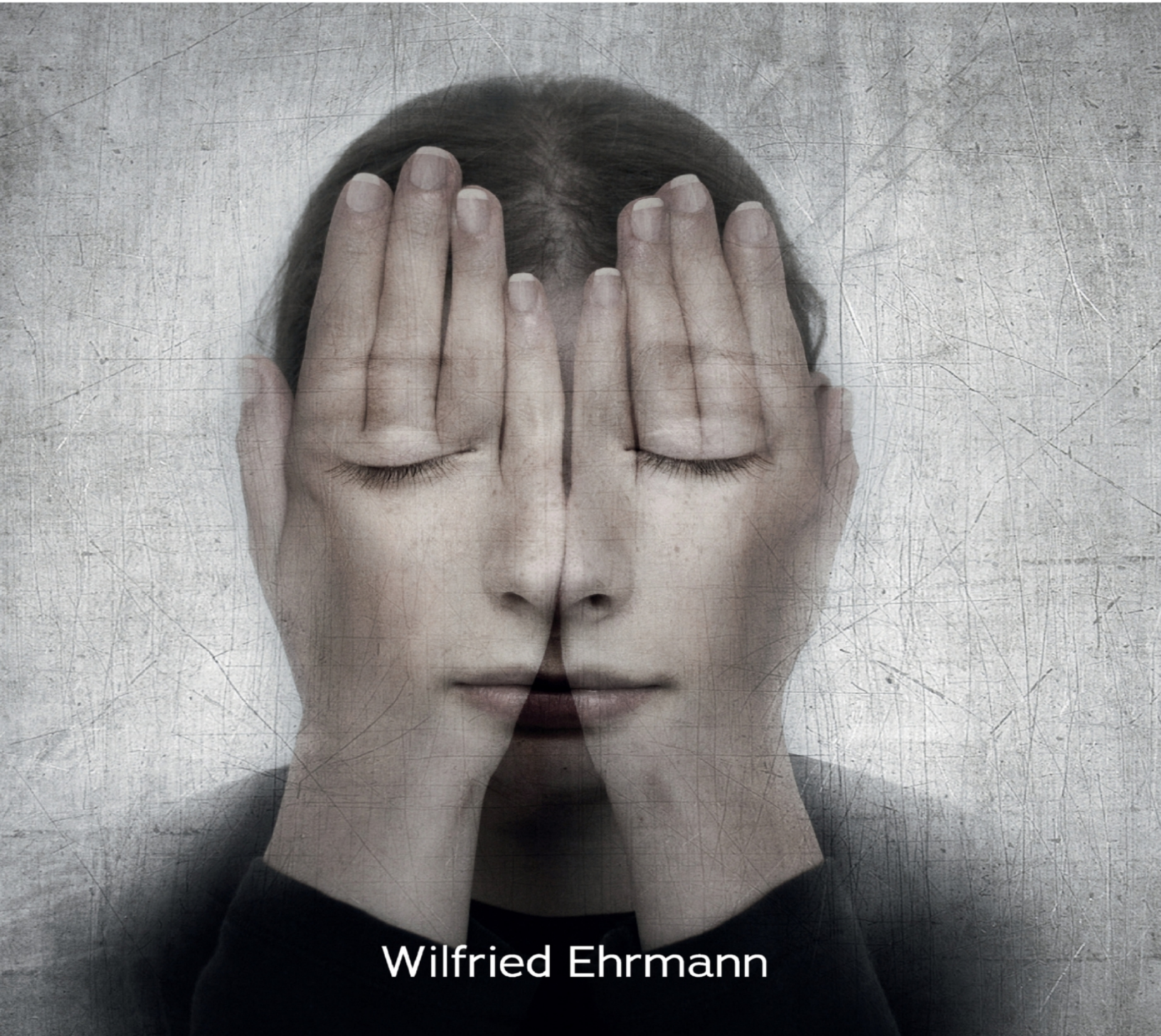


From the Vast Land of the Soul Volume 1

Shame

The Mysterious Feeling



Wilfried Ehrmann

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In the Vast Land of the Soul

Volume 1

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Introductory words

I have never come across a book on shame with this level of detail and holism. Not even Sigmund Freud commented on it in detail. Particularly from a psychoanalytical point of view, this emotion seems to me to be of fundamental importance in relation to our behaviour and our actions. Shame is a co-trigger and cause of many social anxieties.

In this work, the author of the book "The Evolution of Consciousness" (an interesting and also very readable concept on the development of our socio-cultural evolved consciousness) has succeeded in taking a further step towards understanding human beings in their psychological development by dealing with the important topic of shame, which many authors (perhaps out of shame?) have so far avoided exploring to this extent and in this detail.

It is very exciting how courageously, authentically and comprehensively Wilfried Ehrmann describes, works on, expands and analyses this topic to make it easily understandable. The readability and the many case examples in the book, not only trigger aha experiences when reading, but also lead to many insights that help us to "understand". Because by addressing experiences and traumas that we have all suffered in some form on this topic, healing becomes possible through recognition and understanding. That is what makes this book so valuable!

Even after my 38 years working as a psychotherapist, this book, surprisingly, has brought me many new insights and thrown light onto my own unconscious shadow parts. Therefore, I consider the therapeutic value of this book on shame to be particularly significant and I am happy to incorporate essential insights from it into my work with clients.

At a time when social anxieties are increasing and the autonomy of human beings seems to be endangered, this book has a special significance because it helps us to recognise the root causes of personal suffering (which even reach far into the prenatal phase of life) and thus to heal them.

The honest self-reflection of the author, who follows a humanistic worldview and who, with objectivity and great sensitivity, repeatedly points to the uniqueness of the human being, is very touching and underlines the intention of this book when he writes: "Where shame recedes, human dignity once again takes its rightful place".

I am grateful that this book has been written and would be happy if others also experienced the release of old feelings of shame when reading it. This book is hard to put down.

Dr Martin Gartner, Clinical and Health Psychologist, Psychotherapist

Foreword

For a long time, the feeling of shame has been given only incidental and secondary attention. It does not even appear in many lists of basic emotions (e.g., Gieler et al. 2010, p. 30). Both psychological research and therapeutic practice, with their diverse methods, have focused very much on the emotions of fear and aggression, and there are a large number of studies, specialist publications and popular books on both topics, while shame has long been confined to a "shameful" secondary role. In the great work of Sigmund Freud, there are only a few scattered remarks on this emotion, and for this reason, too, it led only a shadowy existence in the field of psychoanalysis for a long time.

Only in the last few decades has shame become more of a focus of interest both in research and in practical therapeutic work. Some researchers now describe shame as the main emotion of daily life and the predominant cause of emotional stress, with much stronger effects on mental imbalance than anger, sadness and fear.

The US-American shame and vulnerability researcher Brené Brown once said in an interview: "If I am asked at a party what I do and I want to continue talking to the person, I answer: I am a vulnerability researcher. After five minutes, people usually confide in me about their life story. If I don't feel like talking further, I say I am a shame researcher. That's how you get rid of someone very quickly."

Shame: a topic to run away from? That's understandable, because it's such an unpleasant feeling that no one wants to be reminded of at a party. So why would anyone voluntarily read a book about it? Even though shame is not a nice and pleasant feeling, it plays a very important role in our lives,

with ourselves, in our relationships and in the society we live in. It shows itself in many facets of our lives and interferes with many experiences. It often remains in the background and is easily overlooked. It interferes in our everyday life, determines our actions and influences our mood, often without us noticing.

Therefore, it makes sense to get to know shame better and to understand it better. After all, it is our companion from a very early age, and it can do us no harm to become acquainted with it and possibly make friends with it. We can use our curiosity to uncover many of the secrets of shame while reading this book. However, it may still remain shrouded in the veil of mystery when we put the book aside.

Why write a book about this elusive subject, which is so hard to grasp and often acts from behind?

Writing this book has been a doubly interesting process for me. Writing is always exciting for me, no matter what the subject, with the excitement, the frustration, the breakthroughs and writer's blocks, with the feelings of creative growth and stagnation, and, finally, with the uplifting feeling of holding the finished work in my hands; however, there are also special challenges with the topic of shame. Shame is a feeling that wants to force us to withdraw from the public eye. Those who feel shame would prefer to hide. Writing a book is the exact opposite of this: it drags the author with all his strengths and weaknesses and his subject with all its facets into the public spotlight.

In addition, the task of making public something that is itself reticent, continuously brings one into contact with feelings of shame: Who am I to write a book about it? There are much better writers who have tried their hand at this subject. What do readers think of someone who writes so much about shame? What is my part in the different aspects of shame? Will I succeed in presenting this wide topic comprehensively or will I fail? Will I write concretely and experientially enough and will I meet the

demands of well-educated professional readers? Will I overlook errors in content or typography that will be blamed on me afterwards? Does the book have lengths or incomprehensible passages that will annoy the reader? Have I overlooked essential aspects of the subject? And so on.

Shame is an important part of our inner life that deserves much attention. But it should never be so powerful as to hinder us in our constructive and creative projects – that is one of the central messages of this book. For us to gain clarity and certainty in the mysterious land of shame, it takes a deep and consistent engagement with the subject. That was one of my motivations for writing about and against shame. And that is why I am convinced that this book deserves its publication and its readership.

Some of the details of the approximately 60 case studies in this book, which originate from my therapeutic work with clients, have been changed so that the people concerned cannot be identified. To all the people who have placed their trust in me as therapists and group leaders over the many years of my work, I offer my thanks and appreciation for all that they have taught me in the process of exploring together. I thank my own therapists and supervisors for what I was able to learn about myself with their support.

Shame is a serious subject, quite far from fun and light; however it can often be handled quickly and easily with humour. To lighten things up, I have therefore interspersed a few jokes in this book. We are very human in our shame, and part of that is that we can always take ourselves for a ride.

For the sake of fluid readability, I refrain from consistent gendering and keep changing the assignments. I owe a great deal to the great researchers of shame, especially Léon Wurmser, Stephan Marks, Mischa Hilgers and Jens Tiedemann, as well as to all the other authors who have made important contributions to the discussion of the broad topic. I have processed the broad field of shame with my own linguistic possibilities and shaped it with the experiences from my life as well as from therapeutic

work. In the course of writing, I first became aware of how widely ramified shame is in our lives - on the individual as well as on the collective level. That is why there are some sections in this book that read more like introductions to a publication to come, because there is not enough space for an in-depth exploration. So, some of the subtopics are only touched upon (e.g., the role of shame in society, in communication, in adulthood) in order to at least open up insights into the respective areas. The individual sections in the developmental history of shame also deserved much more space and detail. At such points, the suggestion would be to independently think further and to use other sources.

A special focus of this presentation of the topic of shame is on prenatal development – this is a new territory in shame research. For many years I have been dealing with the early phase of our individual lives with their many exciting aspects and I am always fascinated by the insights we can gain here. They point us towards the high vulnerability and the miracles and challenges from this time, which need to be understood in their effects on our lives.

My wish is for readers to gain more awareness about the influences of shame on their own feelings, on interpersonal processes and on social contexts. May we succeed in contributing more and more to a shame-free world. Where shame recedes, human dignity takes its rightful place. People who live in awareness of their dignity are the best guarantors for an open and adaptive society.

Recognising and understanding our emotional responses allows us to find ways out of protective states and into the energy of growth and creativity. This book is about understanding more about shame in order to develop constructive ways of dealing with it so that it helps us in life instead of blocking us.

Quotations from German texts in this book are translated by the author.

Basic Anthropological and Psychological Assumptions

I would like to begin this book by outlining my conception of the human being, my anthropological and psychological presuppositions, so that it is clear from which background the following explorations are formed. Not every reader has to accept these views, but the ideas and insights presented can also be interesting and helpful if someone prefers a different model of the human being.

I see the human being as a body-soul unity, not as an amalgamation of two fundamentally separate entities. The physical side is spiritual, the spiritual side is physical. Moods that we experience are at the same time hormonal processes in our body, which in turn can be influenced and changed by mental processes. There is no mind without a body and no body without a mind.

Every human being is unique. Nature is not able to produce identical forms and shapes: No raindrop and no snowflake, no bird chirping and no blade of grass is the same as another; so why should one human being be identical to another? In addition, we are not fixed and defined beings, but beings that are constantly changing, learning, growing and adapting. This is also what we need most - recognition for this uniqueness.

We are densely written sheets of paper with empty spaces, we are fragile because many things can easily throw us off balance, and we have infinite creativity and plasticity so that we can cope with so many predicaments

that we get into. Fragility and strength, vulnerability and healing capacity are the poles between which human existence moves.

Human beings are social beings, always part of social units, in constant interaction with other human beings, individuals, groups and larger communities. Therefore, the social dimension is interwoven into every bodily-mental unit, which cannot be understood without it. Social also means political, economic and ecological - we are involved in the fate of those close to us and also those we do not know at all, the nearest and the furthest away. We are part of decision-making processes that determine the directions in which our society and humanity as a whole are going. We help determine whether or not humanity and the diversity of nature will continue to exist in the foreseeable future, and we are affected in this and many other questions by the corresponding decisions of all other people.

We are projects in the making, never finished and never final, just like the world around us, to which we constantly have to adapt anew and which we in turn change through our adaptation processes. Our inner development has a logic, it is therefore supported by a meaning that we learn to understand more and more in the course of this development. This refers to the spiritual dimension, which I consider to be a basic part of being human. Spirituality, in my understanding, is not a detached or elitist level of experience, a particular form of religion or an illusion of self-exaltation, but rather manifests itself in finding oneself wholly. The spiritual vocation is to become the human being we are as fully as possible. It means to realise humanity in oneself to the highest possible degree and to support this task in our fellow human beings.

These basic assumptions do not claim the rank of absolute truths; rather they are models that have proven to be practicable and meaningful for myself and for my therapeutic work with people. They largely coincide with our everyday experiences and our naïve, i.e., not theoretically thoroughly reflected self-understanding. In our behaviour, we almost always act as if

these basic assumptions formulated above were valid. Only when we talk about them, i.e., on a meta-level, can we question and cast doubt on them. But the ramified issues that arise from such meta-reflections are not the subject of this book.

Feelings

We humans are sentient beings. Everything we experience externally and from outside, all visual, acoustic and haptic stimuli are translated into inner experience and connected with a certain sense of self. We see a blue sky and feel different than when the sky is grey. We hear a song and feel sad, and another time pleasantly touched. We wake up in a bad mood, and neither the brightest weather nor the most beautiful poem can change our minds. Our inner world is just as rich as our outer world, and both dance with each other at every moment, sometimes one leads, sometimes the other.

Feelings are mediators of information. They give us information about our inner state, always in relation to the current external influences. We only need to turn our attention inwards (away from the things that interest us at the moment), and it becomes clear how we, i.e., how our organism is doing at the moment. Are we awake or tired? Are we balanced or tense? Are we attached to something from the past or the future that does not allow us to be fully here and clouds our mood?

When we have gained more experience with being attentive to our feelings, we manage to use this channel of information even better. We can ask ourselves what the feeling we are feeling at the moment wants to tell us, what its message is. In this way, we use our inner sense to come into harmony with ourselves when we have lost ourselves, to transform an imbalance that we notice back into harmony.

We can also go a step further and ask about the background and origins of our feelings. Our body has a memory that goes back a long way, even if it is

not exact, and can also provide information about our beginnings. It is always worthwhile to use this source for self-knowledge. Why is this feeling occurring right now, what triggered it and where do I already know this from?

Attention to the breath is of particular importance every time we turn inwards. We can tell from our breathing whether we are relaxed or stressed, whether we are feeling well or suffering from something. Breath awareness brings us completely into the moment.

A Model for our Emotional Landscape

If we want to learn to navigate better in the realm of our feelings, a map is of great advantage. We know a large number of different feelings, some of them stronger and some weaker, lighter and darker, clearer and blurrier, more pleasant and more unpleasant. Our emotional experience is rich in facets and nuances. The more attention we pay to our inner experience, the more varieties of our emotional life we get to know and the more we can value an orientation guide.

I like to use the following model to classify feelings, which is compatible with the polyvagal theory presented in Chapter 3. I start from two different basic states of our inner constitution and of our nervous system. One is when we feel safe on the outside and connected to our resources on the inside. I call it the growth state because in such situations we can strengthen our reserves and at the same time be productive and creative.

The other state is when we feel threatened from the outside. It is called the protective state. We defend our survival, which is in danger (real or imagined), with the reflexes of fight-flight behaviour. To do this, we have to draw on our reserves and mobilise them in the most efficient way. Other functions, such as empathic communication, are put on hold.

The growth state is associated with feelings such as joy, pleasure, curiosity and interest, which are primarily pleasant feelings. The protection state activates feelings such as fear, pain, anger, shame and disgust, which we experience as unpleasant. These feelings are supposed to motivate us to change the situation that triggers them for the better as quickly as possible. So basically, we always want to move from a protective state to a growth state.

This model has the advantage over other classifications of feelings, which, for example, distinguish four or more basic feelings (fear, joy, sadness, anger, etc.), that it assigns the feelings functionally. It also makes the intuitive juxtaposition of "good" and "bad" feelings understandable. It is true that all feelings have their purpose, so there are no unnecessary feelings, because they help us to adapt better to different situations and to maintain our ability to act under changing circumstances. But we attach different values to these basic emotions: We want to increase the growth feelings and decrease the protection feelings. This is how most people see the path to a fulfilled life: I should be fine, i.e., the growth states should prevail.

The model can also clarify for us when we fall into a protective mode without appropriate cause. This process, with its many variations, is responsible for most of the disorders from which we suffer and with which we cause suffering to others, and we will encounter it again and again in this book.

Basic feelings are also sometimes distinguished from substitute feelings or superficial or mixed feelings. We can assume that we begin our lives with a simpler repertoire of feelings that becomes more and more differentiated as we grow up. In the course of the development of cognitive competences through the development of the cerebral regions, children acquire a more complex emotional life, which they need to be able to move well in the adult world. Secondary or mixed feelings thus always contain cognitive

components and are more strongly connected to thinking. In this book, both the basic feelings and a number of secondary feelings are discussed in relation to shame.

Even as adults we notice that in stressful situations we are reduced from complex to simple basic emotions. This is because on such occasions the higher brain functions retreat and our ways of reacting become more primitive. This observation fits with the fact that stress is associated with survival. To safeguard ourselves in extreme situations, our evolutionary heritage leads us to forego differentiated thinking and let our actions be guided by feelings alone. Where there is real danger, this strategy can save our lives; but where we only imagine that there is danger, it can do a lot of damage. Our reactions overshoot the mark and interrupt social relations.

Returning from a state of protection to a state of growth is an important task for all of us. This book helps to identify the shame issues that prevent us from returning to a balanced sense of self and flexible social competence. It also shows ways in which we can always find our way from shame to dignity.

In the Vast Land of the Soul

Now the journey into the vast land of the soul begins with shame as our guide. It has been a faithful companion from our earliest beginnings, through all phases of our lives, and it will continue to be with us until the end. The journey requires some commitment and courage, because it also makes us aware of the dark sides of our soul. Every step into new spiritual territory is worthwhile because it makes us more open and gives us a broader view.

As we go on to learn about the various forms of shame, its defensive strategies, its cyclical nature, the webs it weaves, the poison it can instil and indications it gives us, we should always bear in mind one simple view. We are, as the Roman poet Terence put it, human beings and therefore

nothing human is alien to us. Most likely, we know all the shapes of shame, just as we have within us all the feelings discussed before. Even though some of the shadowy areas described in this book may seem repulsive and condemnable to us at first glance, we should honestly consider whether we do not also carry traces of these attitudes within us. It could be a sense of shame that prevents us from admitting our own inclinations and tendencies in these directions.

So, before we point the finger at others with the indignant gesture: "But you really can't be like that!", we should rather remind ourselves again and again: Our fellow human beings are also only human, just like ourselves. The more we can lighten up and embrace our darker sides, the more we are open to ourselves and the people around us.

1. Shame – The Mysterious Feeling

Introduction

Shame exists wherever there is a 'mystery'. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

Shame is a complex feeling that runs through our soul like a fine web, with sensitive sensors that constantly scan our surroundings for possible occasions for insecurity and report any imbalance inwards. Most of the time it creeps unnoticed into our experience and it irritates and confuses us. For many it is a constant companion, for others barely perceptible or effectively repressed. Whenever it becomes active, we suffer from it and often do not know how to deal with it or how to free ourselves from it.

We will therefore look more closely at the various aspects of this enigmatic and ambiguous feeling in the following chapters. What we explore within ourselves will help us to find out when shame gets in our way as an obstacle in everyday life. Finally, we will also learn ways in which we can free ourselves from the clutches of excessive shame.

When we talk about basic emotions, we usually think of a handful of them: Joy, fear, anger, sadness, disgust. Shame does not usually appear on this list. In a comparative study on the importance of feelings, it came in a remote 32nd place among Californian respondents. For many, shame is the most uncomfortable feeling, precisely because it is shameful to feel shame. That is why it is so readily overlooked, denied, ignored and repressed. We

know that anger fades, that sadness eventually subsides, that we can overcome fears and that disgust disappears with whatever triggers it. But we don't really know how to get rid of shame once it has a grip on us.

The experience of shame is unpleasant because we feel smaller, weaker and more vulnerable. Shame is associated with the fear of pain that might be inflicted on us. That is why in German the word "Peinlichkeit" (=embarrassment) contains "pain", the torment, the anguish we suffer from shame.

And when shame becomes stronger and more powerful, it can really upset us and even shake us to the core. We experience that we want to sink into the ground with shame or lose the ground under our feet. Shame can confront us with an overpowering and destructive horror. We can freeze with shame, lapse into paralysis and become incapable of action. After all, massive and persistent shame has made many people sick and even driven them to suicide.

Examples:

A child hears from his mum: "You cannot sing". The child is ashamed and decides never to sing again. Even when, much later, the adult is complimented on her beautiful voice, she shies away from singing in front of others. Her mother's shameful words still prevent her from developing her creative talent.

In an training group, the question was asked who was able to work on the most topics with a previously explained method. A man came forward who obviously had achieved the record. Only later did it turn out that a woman was even better, but a sense of shame had forbidden her to outdo men. She had inherited this from her parents and the culture she grew up in, and this imprint got in the way when it came to standing by her own achievement.