

Some of you will remember [this news story](#) from March. Senator Lynn Bayak from Ontario, in a [Senate debate](#) about the over-representation of Indigenous women in Canadian prisons, gave a speech with this thesis:



The screenshot shows a news article from thestar.com. The headline is "Tory senator says 'good deeds' of residential schools were overshadowed". Below the headline is a sub-headline: "Conservative Senator Lynn Bayak has defended the Indigenous residential school system 'in memory of the kindly and well-intentioned men and women.'" There is a photograph of Senator Lynn Bayak, a woman with blonde curly hair, smiling. Below the photo is a caption: "Sen. Lynn Bayak was appointed to the Senate by former prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2011. She is a member of the Senate committee on Aboriginal Peoples. (GOVERNMENT OF CANADA)". The article is by HINA ALAM, Staff Reporter, dated Wednesday, March 8, 2017. At the bottom of the screenshot, there is a partial quote: "Conservative Senator Lynn Bayak has drawn criticism over her comments about Indigenous..."

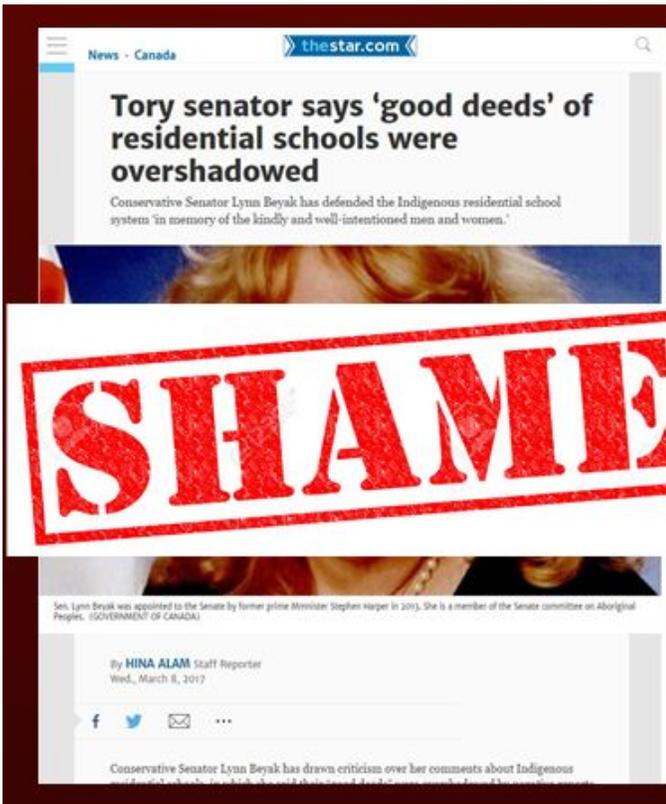
"Today I will take a broad look at several timely indigenous issues...in memory of the kindly and well-intentioned men and women and their descendants... whose remarkable works, good deeds and historical tales in the residential schools go unacknowledged for the most part and are overshadowed by negative reports. Obviously, the negative issues must be addressed, but it is unfortunate that they are sometimes magnified and considered more newsworthy than the abundance of good."

Her comments did not go over well. Politicians on the other side of the aisle condemned her. Politicians in Bayak's party distanced themselves from her. A miniature media firestorm erupted, as public figures called for her resignation or removal. Columnists condemned her comments and speculated about her motives and her character, and made the inevitable Holocaust comparisons. And social media was outraged.

In response, Senator Bayak took up a defensive position, refusing to back down from or apologize for her comments. Political battle-lines were drawn over whether or not she was fit to remain as a senator. She was punished by her party who removed her from her position on the Senate's Aboriginal People's Committee. And that ended in debates about free speech and the right to hold controversial opinions, so that the conversation got lost in the weeds until nobody was paying attention anymore.

What definitely did *not* happen was meaningful conversation about the original topic, the intentions and outcomes of residential schools and how to move forward with reconciliation. Instead, a bunch of people who think similarly to Senator Bayak learned that they had better keep their mouths shut about it, while others (like me) congratulated ourselves for being more educated/intelligent/good than a Senator.

This is a story about shame.



distancing... condemning... removal...
speculation... more condemning...

defensiveness... entrenchment...
punishment... bitterness... distraction...

A series of unfortunate assumptions

1. The Ignorance Assumption
2. The Idiocy Assumption
3. The Evil Assumption



silencing... self-righteousness...

This story caught my eye because of how quickly it became personal. A senator said something controversial, a point of view that I suspect a significant number of Canadians would agree with, and yet almost from the beginning the conversation wasn't about her ideas but about her person. The story wasn't about some *thing* that was said, but about how *some one* who thinks like that is unfit for public service.

This opinion that she voiced was a character flaw, a defect, a Scarlet Letter, that marked her as a person unworthy of public service. She was a "Bad Person" for holding that opinion.

Public shaming is a pretty normal part of the political toolbox these days, and pretty much any part of public life. From celebrities to pedophiles to suspected terrorists, we use shame to reinforce morality and social norms, to preserve status and smooth over conflicts.

And we do this personally, too--shame is an all-too common reality of education, of parenting and family, of church. (Not here, but definitely over there in that other kind of church!)

That's the public side of shame. There's also a personal side.

When I was in kindergarten, one day I had an accident on the playground. Yeah, that kind of "accident." I had to go to the bathroom, but the rules of recess were that you weren't allowed to go back inside after you went outside. Now, in hindsight I'm sure that didn't mean they wouldn't allow you to go to the bathroom if you needed to, but I was a literalist back then. And it was the second and third grade teachers on recess duty that day, and there was no way I was going to approach those towering figures of authority with my personal problem.

So I sat on the swings by myself and hoped for the best. Not a wise move. My intestinal fortitude failed me, and an accident ensued. And not the kind you can cover up by faking a drinking fountain malfunction. The dirty, messy, stinky kind.

I again chose denial, ignoring the whispers in the line to go back inside, pretending normality as I took my seat back at my desk. Of course my teacher noticed the smell. I remember her walking up and down the rows until she stopped at my desk. She was kind about it, but of course everyone was watching as I denied it, watching as she sent me to the private bathroom in the corner of the classroom.

The principal was the only adult male in the elementary wing, so it was his job to help me get cleaned up. Big guy, severely strict Old Order River Brethren man, big beard, suspenders, black hat, the whole deal. The principal of the school, cleaning out my underwear, helping me into the spare pair of navy uniform pants three sizes too big.

It's crazy how many details I remember from that day when I was five. I can still feel the shame of it, the weight on my chest, the burning in my cheeks, the sickness in my gut.

It was a formative moment, not in a good way. It's not a straight line between that incident and my faults today, but it's part of the story. It's not just something that happened to me, not just a poor choice that I made and a lesson that I learned. I internalized that moment, that shame--I am that stinky kid with poop in his pants. Even now, that's a part of how I see myself. A big part of my personality is about needing to control myself, to keep it together, lest I slip up and everyone finds out again just how much I stink (not literally, but on the inside).

Sorry if that's too much information for a sunny Sunday morning. I tell this story because this is how shame works--it was such a natural thing, "accidents" are just part of being five years old... in my case, nobody made a big deal about it or made fun of me...but I felt horrible and I still carry those emotions 30+ years later for this very normal, explainable thing. And I'd bet that you have your own stories of accidents or mistakes that you've made, or times when someone made you feel embarrassed and worthless. And some of them are much, much bigger and heavier than a kindergarten accident.

Shame is a big part of our stories, how we see ourselves.

shame

/SHām/ 

noun

1. a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior.
"she was hot with shame"
synonyms: [humiliation](#), [mortification](#), [chagrin](#), [ignominy](#), [embarrassment](#), [indignity](#), [discomfort](#)
[More](#)

verb

1. (of a person, action, or situation) make (someone) feel ashamed.
"I tried to shame him into giving some away"
synonyms: [humiliate](#), [mortify](#), [chagrin](#), [embarrass](#), [abash](#), [chasten](#), [humble](#), [take down a peg or two](#), [cut down to size](#); [More](#)

Shame is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it is a way of seeing ourselves, as regret, as disgrace, as inadequate, as something to hide, as failure.

As a verb, shame is about making someone else feel that way, so that we can control them and/or avoid or pass off our own feelings of shame onto them.

For many of us, shame is closely associated with guilt. The difference is that guilt is a feeling about an action--I feel guilty because I made a mistake, I did something wrong. Shame goes a step deeper; it's about who I am as a person. I feel guilty because I snapped at my kids yesterday; I feel shame because snapping at my kids makes me a bad parent. At least, that's what it feels like.

Our society tends to define who we are by what we do, so guilt and shame are closely linked. "You Are What You Eat." Guilt and shame, bundled together so unhelpfully. Guilt and shame are also very cultural, so depending on where you're from and what your background is, your experience of shame will be different from mine.

So this is a really broad topic, and we could talk about shame from a theological perspective, or the psychology of shame, or shame and sexuality, shame and family, etc.

I will say that if you'd like to talk more about any or all of those, the WMC Book Club is meeting this Wednesday night to talk about Brene Brown's book [*Daring Greatly*](#), which gets into a lot of this stuff from a social science perspective. Even if you haven't read the book, you're welcome to join the conversation. 7:30 Wednesday at the church.

End of commercial. Anyway, with the rest of my time this morning, I want to look at how we deal with shame from a relational perspective.

Shame because it's such a big part of how we interact with other people.

We're constantly comparing ourselves to the people we're talking to--what does this person think of me? Am I following the social conventions? Am I sharing too much? Not enough?

Some of us get really caught up in those things, spending the whole time evaluating how we're doing so that we walk away without knowing what the other person even said.

Others of us have the opposite problem, not paying enough attention to what we're saying so that our opinions just slip out with unintended consequences.

Some of us are so worried about being polite and not offending that we don't go into any depth.

And some of us are compelled to over-share, to off-load as much of that internal anxiety onto someone else as we dare, because it's just too much to keep inside.

All of those are the dynamics of shame. Conversation is about knowing and being known, and that's risky behavior when both you and I have stuff that we try to keep hidden, weak spots that the other person has no idea that they might be stepping on, and compulsions that we're afraid to acknowledge.

And so we keep our distance, we put up defenses, we tell people what we think they want to hear. Or we divert attention onto someone else's shame, thinking negatively about the other as a way of avoiding our own inadequacy.

In relationships, the primary thing that shame does is create separation.

When we direct shame outwardly, it creates distance between us and them. "You should be ashamed of yourself!" Subtext: "I am better than you, so stay away so I don't get any of your filth on me."

When shame is directed inward, it creates isolation. I'll do whatever I can to keep you from finding out the shameful parts of me. Better to be lonely than to be exposed as a fraud or failure.

If the point of relationships is to know and to be known, shame gets in the way.

Jesus talked about how shame impacts the relationship between God and humanity in John chapter 3.



SHAME

Shame creates separation.

"And this is the verdict, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

~ John 3

comparing... self-analyzing... over-thinking... inattention... defensiveness...
avoiding... distraction... worry... dumping... criticizing...

God is looking for relationship, bringing the light of knowledge and goodness into the world. But we love darkness, at least some part of us, because we're afraid of being exposed. That's shame.

The image that comes to mind is one of those nasty hotel bathrooms from the movies, where someone turns on the light and the cockroaches scatter. Ugh. That's what shame feels like, that the light will expose my true nature as a cockroach so I need to get away.

And sometimes we use shame that way, turning the spotlight on someone else, aha, I knew you were a cockroach! That kind of light is good for getting rid of roaches; but unhelpful for relationships.

Is that what the light of God is meant to do, to scare us into hiding?



How do we move from darkness to light?



comparing... self-analyzing... over-thinking... inattention... defensiveness...
avoiding... distraction... worry... dumping... criticizing...

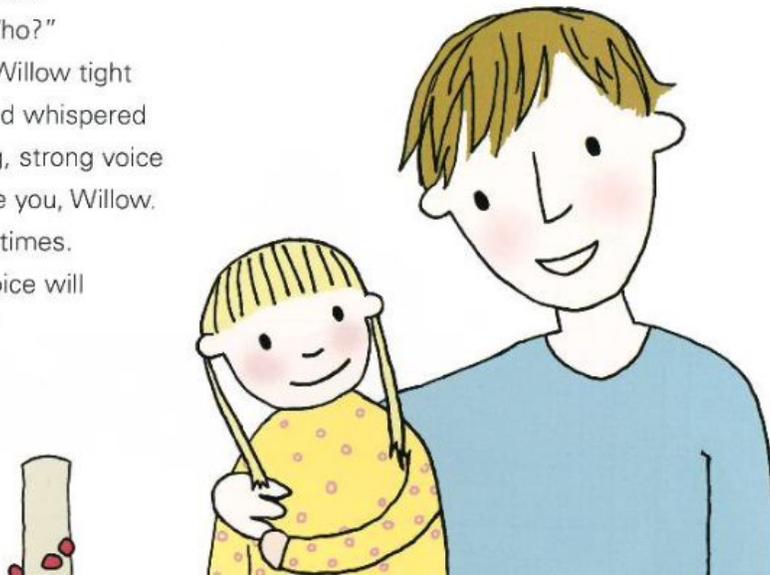
Or is God's love more like the interplay between the light of the sun and a sunflower. With those big giant heads, sunflowers droop in the darkness. But in the light of the sun, they're drawn towards its warmth. The light awakens, it animates, it invites them to turn towards it.

Obviously, we want to be sunflowers instead of cockroaches. And we should want to help others to be sunflowers instead of cockroaches, too.

So what does that look like, to draw others--and ourselves--out of darkness and into God's wonderful light?

We heard one example of what that looks like already in [the story of Willow and her father](#). This is totally Willow's story, her voice, her creativity, her courage in overcoming her fears. Her father stays out of the way, he doesn't push her, he doesn't intervene on her behalf. What he offers is understanding, and unconditional acceptance.

But Dad was an expert at
hearing Willow's whispers.
He never said "What?"
or "Pardon?" or "Who?"
He just wrapped Willow tight
in a big bear hug and whispered
right back, "Your big, strong voice
got stuck way inside you, Willow.
That happens sometimes.
But one day your voice will
wiggle its way out."



Acceptance is the opposite of shame. A gentle presence that knew her as she was, named that she was on a journey towards something better, but that it would come in its own time and way.

That's the kind of love that helped me to deal with the shame of my accident on the playground. There isn't anything that anybody could say or do that could erase that incident, or the reality that parts of me really do stink. But over time, I've learned to listen to those close to me who remind me again and again that they're with me even when accidents happen, that their love is not going away. There is incredible power in that kind of acceptance.

Another example:

When Senator Bayak was under fire for her comments about residential schools, the Anglican Church of Canada responded with [an open letter to Senator Bayak](#). Like many others, they expressed disappointment with her words, and they gave a long list of facts that countered her position. But their tone was remarkable for two things.

For one, they acknowledged that some of what she had said was true, that the history and implications are complex and defy straightforward explanations and solutions. They didn't shut her down, they acknowledged that she did have one piece of a gigantic puzzle.

And beyond that, they named their own failing, their own complicated involvements:

SHAME

How do we move from darkness to light?
How do we call others from darkness to light?

- Radical companionship
- Embracing complexity
- Vulnerability

We say this as leaders in a church that ran a number of these Schools. We say this as leaders in a church that has members who are Indigenous and non-Indigenous, survivors and staff, settlers and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. In 1993, Archbishop Michael Peers made an apology to Residential School Survivors on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada. Among his expressions of remorse for what had happened to so many innocent children he said "I am sorry that we tried to remake you in our image... We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God."



Anglican Church of Canada

There was nothing good: An open letter to Canadian Senator Lynn Beyak

I don't know if Senator Bayak ever saw or responded to what the Anglican Church wrote. To me, this was a helpful way of holding up truth and light without shame. Rather than condemning her or giving ultimatums, they offered their story and invited her into it:

We've been humbled by the complexities and weight of this truth, and we invite you to join us in working it out, together.

Another story is told about a white guy who was travelling in Africa. He'd been there a while, and as can happen, he was getting tired of being immersed in a foreign culture. Particularly, one day he was crammed onto a bus with a bunch of Africans, and he was overwhelmed with the, uh, aromas of humanity. And he was having some rather unpleasant thoughts about the other people on the bus, making a few generalizations, about what smells he associated with various cultures and skin tones...



And then he had a thought, and somehow had the courage to ask it out loud on a bus full of African strangers: “What do white people smell like?” The answer came immediately: chemicals. And he thought about all the soaps and sprays and lotions we put on ourselves; fair enough, white people smell like chemicals.

Instead of feeling shame for his racist thoughts, this traveller responded with curiosity, and both defused his frustrations and learned something new about himself.

Go ahead and tell that story next time you’re in a conversation with someone that is headed in a racist direction--ask them what white people smell like? Or some other way of bringing curiosity into the conversation. You don’t have to condemn or correct someone to stand up for what’s right. Asking questions, being genuinely interested in why someone thinks what they think, those often more effective ways of bringing light and inviting change.

Another alternative to shame is about identity.

The best movie I’ve seen in the past couple of years is the Disney movie, *Moana*. Don’t shame me; it’s fantastic. :)

SHAME How do we move from darkness to light?
How do we call others from darkness to light?

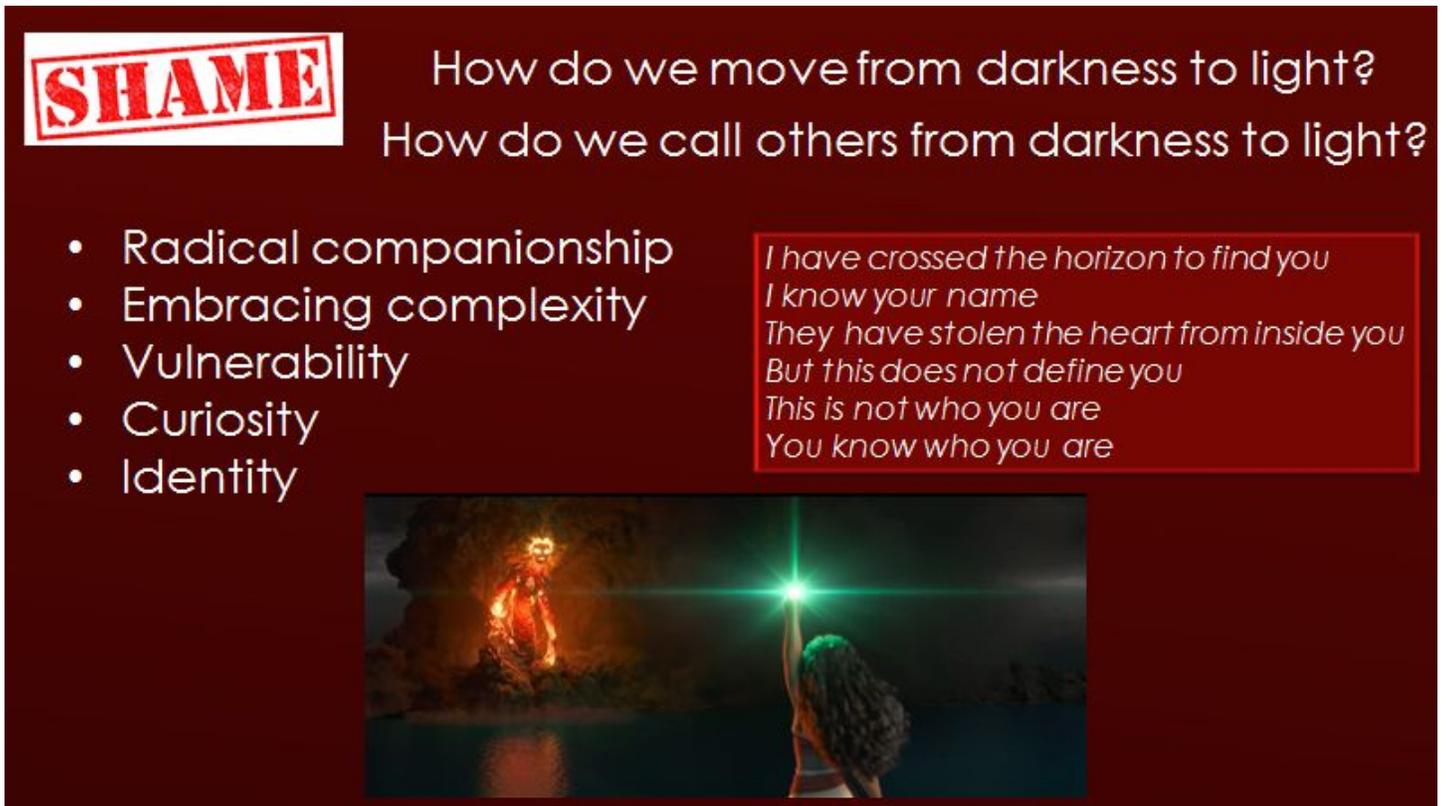
- Radical companionship
- Embracing complexity
- Vulnerability
- Curiosity
- Identity



The basic plot is that Moana is trying to save the island of her people. The goddess Te Fiti was the sustainer of life across the Pacific, until her heart was stolen by the demigod, Maui. Without her heart, Te Fiti is unable to protect the islands and so everything is dying. So the story is about Moana finding the precious stone that is the Heart of Te Fiti and journeying across the ocean to return it.

But when she gets there, she finds that the island of Te Fiti is gone and her way is blocked by this awful lava monster named Te Ka. At first Moana and her friend Maui battle Te Ka, and aren't exactly winning. But then Moana notices something. She sees the mark of Te Fiti on the chest of this monster Te Ka, and she begins to understand.

Video Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyxMk9fvtBA>



SHAME

How do we move from darkness to light?
How do we call others from darkness to light?

- Radical companionship
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*I have crossed the horizon to find you
I know your name
They have stolen the heart from inside you
But this does not define you
This is not who you are
You know who you are*



The opposite of shame is identity, knowing who you truly are.

Do you hear the echoes in this from the Psalm 103 we read earlier?

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...
S/he does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
as far as the east is from the west,
so far s/he removes our transgressions from us...
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
For s/he knows how we were made;
s/he remembers that we are dust.

God knows who we are, and our shame does not define us. Or them.

[Henri Nouwen](#) pushes this one step further:

“Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.”

~ Henri Nouwen

That’s a huge transformation from where we started. Shame is not something to use as a weapon targeting others, Shame is not the pieces of our self that we’re desperate to hide. Shame is actually the path to healing, healing for ourselves and especially healing for others. Leaning into our shame, embracing our woundedness, this is how we come to healing.

That’s a path that demands great courage. It’s a vision that requires great imagination. It’s a way of relating to the world that asks for great compassion. We’re not going to get there today, or tomorrow. But it’s a journey worth taking.

Creator God, Source of Life, you search us and you know us. You have made us in your image, and you have called us “Good.” Help us to see ourselves as you see us; help us to see each other as you see us: Worthy and Beloved.

Amen.