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Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve, by Lewis B. Smedes (HarperSanFrancisco / Zondervan) 1993. 170 pages, hardback, \$16.00. Reviewed by Ken Bussema, Professor of Psychology.

Smedes opens his latest book with a note that it is written for persons with the "nagging feeling that you do not measure up to the person you ought to be" (Note to Reader). It is hard to imagine that there would be anyone who wouldn't fit that description at one time or another. Feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment, as well as feelings of depression, discouragement, and frustration are at the core of our human experience. Joining the list of popular psychological explanations for our struggles, failures, and inability to live up to our potential, shame is beginning to replace the ubiquitous experience of low self-esteem as the source of whatever problems we encounter. Smedes, however, is not merely adding to the hoard of self-help books that often repeat a similar and often superficial message. *Shame and Grace* is a valuable exploration of the experience of shame, both healthy and unhealthy. Unlike other authors who pinpoint shame as the culprit and shamelessness as the solution, Smedes recognizes the validity of feeling shame, as well as the potential healing power of grace for both the shame we rightly feel and the shame we don't deserve.

To help the reader understand the experience and meaning of shame, Smedes first tries to define shame and then to tease out the differences between shame and other related feelings. Shame, we are told, "is a vague, undefined heaviness that presses our spirits, dampens our gratitude for the goodness of life, and slackens the free flow of joy" (Note to the Reader). Shame is the feeling that we don't measure up and probably never will, a vague sense of disgust with self that weighs like "a hunk of lead in our hearts" (15). Smedes, in his characteristic style of using personal stories and vivid images, brings his readers into the feelings and experiences he is exploring. The reader knows what the author is talking about, he has been there, and perhaps takes some comfort in sensing the universality of the feeling.

Smedes moves on to distinguish shame from other feelings. Unlike guilt which arises from something bad we've done or said, the feeling of shame is about our very selves. Shame cuts deeper than embarrassment, a feeling arising when we're afraid we'll look bad; in shame we are convinced we *are* bad. We can be frustrated by our limitations and feel discouraged when we don't feel up to a task; however, shame comes from feeling we're not up to being the person we're supposed to be.

Identifying the core of shame as the persistent feeling

we are not acceptable, not worthy, not the person we should be, Smedes recognizes that the experience of shame comes in a variety of packages. To help readers sense the presence of unhealthy shame in themselves and others, Chapter three provides short descriptions of likely candidates for unhealthy shame. Shame proneness can be found in those who feel overly responsible, approval addicts, and obsessive moralizers. Persons who feel undeserving or in the shadow of impossible expectations are also likely to be experiencing the heaviness of shame.

Having uncovered the many faces of shame, Smedes moves on to explore the roots of shame. Four chapters are devoted to examining family dynamics, social experiences, our own contributions, as well as experiences within the body of believers that contribute to the burden of shame. There is much worthwhile material here unpacking the complicated experience of shame, guilt, and our strong desire for approval and a sense of worthiness. Chapters on "How the church fed my shame," "How our parents can shame us," and "How we shame ourselves" are well worth a reading. It is important to note that these chapters are not designed to point the finger of blame at any particular source, but rather to demonstrate our vulnerability to feelings of unworthiness.

Smedes is not content, however, to just address the many possible sources of shame; an even more basic question cuts through his work: is it always a bad thing to feel shame?

It is at this juncture that I think Smedes's book stands above the other shame attacking efforts of secular authors. Smedes takes a long and thoughtful look at the differences between healthy and unhealthy shame. Identifying healthy shame as a voice from our true self, shame is no longer seen as merely an unwelcome feeling. Shame is a signal we experience that tells us we are failing to be the persons we are meant to be. As a signal that something is amiss deep within our soul, the experience of shame may be the first hope for real healing (31). The heaviness of shame arises out of the conviction that we are not as we were created to be. Smedes is well aware that the interpretation we give this conviction can be easily distorted by unfortunate experiences (e.g. sexual abuse) and that we may locate the source of our shame in the self for all the wrong reasons. Nonetheless, I think he is correct: at the core of our experience of shame is the brokenness of fallen humanity. The only sure way we can be relieved

of the heaviness of shame, the burden of unworthiness, is through the grace of God. Shame can not be forgotten, released, or conquered; it can only be lifted by the grace of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness.

The final part of *Shame and Grace* outlines the experience of grace and the process of healing our shame, both deserved and undeserved. Grace, we are told, "turns conventional moral wisdom on its head" (109). Our worth, our acceptance, our being good enough is not dependent on our own success, our potential, or even our skill in surviving dysfunctional families. Grace is a gift, a gift for the undeserving that enables us to be the persons we were created to become, and the peace of knowing that even when we fail to measure up, we are still worthy.

As in his other books, Smedes is well aware that merely stating (or reading) the truth doesn't automatically make

everything right. He goes on to provide specific suggestions for the healing of our shame. Smedes spells out a plan that includes the following: recognizing the core of our shame, living with our shadows, coming to terms with our shamers, and accepting ourselves. The gist of his suggestions are captured in a short statement of faith added as a postscript:

I believe that the grace of God heals the shame I do not deserve and heals the shame I do.

I believe that grace is the best thing in the world.
(168)

Shame and Grace is a book needed by many. In some places the reasoning is a bit thin, but the difficult task of being honest with our feelings of shame is made easier with Smedes's help and persuasive reminder of the power of grace.

God Talk: The Triteness and Truth in Christian Cliches, by Randall Vander Mey (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 1993). 193 pages, paperback, \$9.99. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Professor of English.

That Norman Rockwell family with heads bowed serenely in the booth by the wall was mine. I was the one with my thumb in my eye, making like I had an itch as I put in my moment of silence. While the mom and dad took painfully long with their "Thine is the kingdoms and the power," I was the one looking around discreetly, rearranging my silverware.

No doubt. If Randall Vander Mey, who formerly taught at Dordt College, hadn't described this scene himself in his book *God Talk*, the reader might well create a similar picture of family devotions, years ago, as Vander Mey's family prayed at a restaurant: pious parents accomplishing their duties while a precocious son discreetly assesses everything—including his father's words—and, by slight of hand, makes straight the crooked furnishings of the table in front of him.

In fact; he's still doing it. His family is larger now, of course—his audience here is the family of believers. But there are moments in this book when one imagines him just as open-eyed, just as desirous of rearranging our lives' utensils as he was, years ago, at the restaurant booth by the wall. What he is after in this book is the way in which the Christian community arranges its language—specifically pat phrases such as "In God we trust," "Praise the Lord," "God bless America," and "Lord, I just want to pray."

The book has 42 selections, some of them essays of considerable length, some just a few lines long, some extended arguments, some narratives. In each case, however, the rhetorical posture Vander Mey takes is analysis because he wishes to unpack meaning from phrases we use, some of them so worn they have long ago lost their ability to communicate anything of substance. Vander Mey is after our foibles in this little book, the silliness in the verbiage we so often use to discuss our faith.

At his best, he performs brilliantly, his perceptions bright and vivid, his manner gentle and loving, his style marvelous, but apropos. Some of these essays are meditations in the best sense of the word—thoughtful discourses which bring us closer to God. In "God Told Me," Vander Mey examines the inspiration of a California man who spent five years gluing together a life-sized crucifix from toothpicks, after claiming the work was something God told him to construct. Vander Mey explains how "God told me" can become a license for any kind of eccentric behavior, but instead of ridiculing the toothpick builder he makes room for the man's own energy and inspiration by remembering the Lord's own largess.

"God has a wonderful plan for our life" is the title of another strong selection, this one a reminiscence in which Vander Mey tells the story of a short-lived spiritual revival in the Christian high school he attended many years ago. The story is told engagingly, with the kind of even mixture of earnestness and irony that gives Vander Mey's voice such expressive style. Just as in "God Told Me," he concludes his examination of that revival in a way that points humbly at God's mysterious ways. In meditations such as these, Vander Mey is most accomplished. When he steps back, astonished at God's might or love or power, his readers too are brought to their knees.

His dissection of the novels of Frank Peretti, in "Spiritual Warfare," should be required reading for the hosts of Peretti fans. Although Vander Mey is critical of the popular novelist, he knows very well that some of his students at Westmont College, where he teaches today, are ardent fans, just as are many, many young Christians. The care he shows in working through the problems he sees in Peretti's work is remarkable; his own sense of awe, again, at the end of the essay, is fitting and most