

shame  
unwanted

shame

abandoned

unworthy

shame

failure



SHAME  
*L*ifter

*Replacing Your  
Fears and Tears  
with Forgiveness,  
Truth, and Hope*

MARILYN HONTZ



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
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*Shame Lifter: Replacing Your Fears and Tears with Forgiveness, Truth, and Hope*

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“The writing of *Shame Lifter* cost its author Marilyn Hontz a great deal. In this book, she unzippers her soul to give us a peek at the complexities of shame in her own life. She’ll draw you in by the thorough way she deals with shame, its causes, and the grace, time, and understanding needed to be freed from it. You will want to give this book to many friends who are crippled by shame, for this is a gripping story of pain, hope, and God’s tender healing.”

**Gail MacDonald**

Author of *In His Everlasting Arms*

“Through her personal story, Marilyn reveals how we can play the shame game and lose—or refuse to play and win. I have known Marilyn for twenty-five years, and her life continues to challenge me. This book did it once again in a powerful and biblical way.”

**Sarah Eggerichs**

Love and Respect Ministries

“This book will be truly life changing for many people. Marilyn shares her heart and journey in a way that draws you in and at the same time compels you to look at your own wounds. She equips her readers with many practical steps toward healing. I will encourage many of my clients to read this book to aid in their healing process.”

**Dr. Peter Newhouse**

Family Wellness Director

Winning At Home

“From the first word until the last, I could not put *Shame Lifter* down. Marilyn’s story and gentle spirit will draw you in and soothe your soul. With an understanding heart, she describes the inner struggle of shame and illustrates how it shapes our lives. She also reveals the key that can unlock shame and usher in healing and growth. Her story is powerful, her message life-changing.”

**Dr. Sharon Morris May**

Haven of Safety Relationships

Marriage Intensives and Counselor Training

“*Shame Lifter* will lead you deep into the *truth* of knowing who you really are in God’s eyes. Be prepared to shed the shame of past experiences and rise to new life through the molding power of God’s Word and the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. Marilyn will show you through her own discoveries, if you will listen, the truth indeed shall set you free!”

**Christina DiMari**

Author of *Ocean Star*

Founder of You’re Designed to Shine

“*Shame Lifter* is real yet filled with hope and love. If you or someone you know struggles with self-hatred or shame, I encourage you to read this book. You will experience a ‘lightness’ and delight as the love of God reaches those places that have been hidden in the darkness. I thank Marilyn Hontz for sharing herself and her struggles so candidly.”

**Julie Woodley**

Director, Restoring the Heart Ministry

Writer/creator of *In the Wildflowers* DVD project

## DEDICATION

*In* memory of my earthly father,  
Clifford Andrew Miller,  
and  
In honor of my heavenly Father,  
Abba

*A Story of Two Fathers and Shame*


*“Those who look to him are radiant;  
their faces are never covered with shame.”*

PSALM 34:5

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## IN GRATITUDE

I am thankful for my husband, Paul, who first encouraged me to share part of my story at a Sunday evening church service. He prayed it would help bring healing to people who not only struggled with broken relationships, but struggled within themselves as well. Thank you, Paul: “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement” (Philemon 1:7).

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Amanda, John, and Samuel Drury,  
Abby and Tom VandenBosch, and  
Paul Matthew Hontz.

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Besides my family there were others cheering me on who contributed valuable insights. I am grateful to the godly, professional counselors who took time out of their busy schedules to read all or part of the manuscript: Dr. Dan B. Allender, Dr. Scott Courey, Dr. Sharon Morris May, and Dr. Peter Newhouse.

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## SHAME LIFTER

How wonderfully God used friends as well to weep and rejoice with me while I wrote. These are some of my “weep and rejoice friends” who came alongside and cheered me on—and maybe didn’t even realize at the time how much they ministered to me: Carol Berens, Mary De Witt, Sharon Dryfhout, Sarah Eggerichs, Sharon Fuller, Linda George, Kathleen Hart, Betty Huizenga, Elise Mulder, Jane Seaborn, Lynn Wickstra, Jan Yoshonsis, and the Central Wesleyan Church Pastor’s Prayer Team and Lydia Prayer Ladies. These prayer partners shared over and over, “I’m praying for you. How’s the book coming along?” Thank you!

I’ve realized that everyday life happenings don’t just stop when you write a book. My dreamy idea of writing a book is to write in a cozy beach cottage on Lake Michigan, a place where you can listen to the waves crash on the shore and watch the seagulls swooping in and out. It’s a place where there are no interruptions, no phone calls—just complete bliss and inspiration. It’s a place where I would be able to hide out until the book was completed.

Instead, however, I wrote in my kitchen and peered out my large bay window every so often to see what our Michigan weather was up to while life continued to happen around me. When I began this book, our youngest daughter was in the process of healing from a broken engagement. A married daughter found out their newborn had some health concerns. Another married daughter was in the process of adoption and had the baby for five days when the birth mom changed her mind. Our eighteen-year-old son went on a five-month missions trip to help with the HIV/AIDS situation in South Africa and set up a computer lab. I was told he would be living in the “rape and murder capital of the world,” but not to worry . . . their residence was in one of the city’s more “secure” neighborhoods.

And then eight days before this book was due to the publisher my husband had a heart attack. No warnings, no clogged arteries, no high cholesterol, but still a heart attack—the kind that’s called the “widow maker.” Thankfully, the Lord spared his life. So I wrote in my kitchen, in real life. The only waves I heard were waves of events that crashed into our house and then slowly receded. This is how life is sometimes.

I have learned some things, though, about these storms of life. It doesn’t matter what you happen to be doing or where you are . . . trials come. They are normal. From my husband’s close brush with death, I’ve



learned that there really is a very thin veil between earth and heaven. We are only a few short breaths away from eternity, and that fresh realization makes me want to make the most of my days. Finally, I've noticed that while God doesn't always prevent the hard stuff from occurring in our lives, looking back, I've seen and learned that He truly is there *with* you. He is your Helper through the storms of life.

Now as the book goes to print, my husband is doing well, my daughter is newly married, my grandson's health concerns are under control, my son is safely back from South Africa, my daughter and her husband have adopted a baby boy, and life goes on. . . .

Above all, I have the highest thanks and praise to my loving heavenly Father, who is there for all of us during difficult and good times.



## INTRODUCTION

# *The Seeds of Shame*

*Shame is a prevailing sense of worthlessness that leads to the false belief I am what I am. I cannot change. I am hopeless.*

—Robert S. McGee, *The Search for Significance*

A vague feeling of uneasiness had been nagging at me all summer. I had been asked to speak at a fund-raising event for a Christian conference center, but even after I'd prepared my talk, the discomfort remained. The committee was hoping my talk would inspire people to give financially to their camp. I felt that pressure, but there was something else too.

Not only was I feeling nervous about speaking, I was already dreading how I would feel *after* I spoke. I knew that as soon as I finished, negative voices would bombard me; not from the audience; no, much worse—negative declarations from my very own self. *Why did I say that? Oh, why didn't I remember to say this? I hope the committee wasn't disappointed. They probably didn't reach their fund-raising goal because I wasn't good enough to inspire the audience to give.* I was all too familiar with these kinds of berating thoughts. They would continue long after the speaking event until I had buried myself under a pile of self-loathing verbal garbage.

Actually, this critical self-talk was nothing new. When I first

started speaking to groups, I tried to explain it away as adrenaline letdown. It was true to a degree; adrenaline always goes way up when you stand before a crowd of people. It's also true that it can come crashing down afterward.

Yet I suspected something else was wrong, and I couldn't put my finger on it. I knew that even if I heard only positive feedback from the audience, the inner pain would not go away. For some reason, I didn't think I could ever measure up to what I thought an audience wanted from me. But I also wondered if I would ever measure up to whom *I* thought I should be.

The speaking event arrived on a sunny Michigan day in August. The spacious dining room was filled to capacity with women seated at round tables, each brightened by floral centerpieces taken from late summer gardens. The numerous large windows gave a panoramic view of the serene waters of Lake Michigan. A deep calmness prevailed on the surface of the big lake. It was a calmness I longed for.

Several of my friends had driven a distance to hear me speak, but even their supportive presence did not still my apprehension. After we were seated, servers set beautifully arranged salads and baskets of warm, fragrant rolls before us. I was hungry but couldn't eat. It was then I realized I was surrounded by happy, chattering women who had no clue of my inward turmoil. Outwardly I appeared confident and totally put together. Just like the lake, my surface appeared calm and peaceful.

I watched the clock as the women ate. The program was running longer than expected. *I'm going to be late getting up to speak*, I bemoaned quietly to myself. I knew the lady sitting next to me was getting ready to take off for a trip to Florida the minute I was through speaking—she had made that perfectly clear. “My husband is already waiting in the car for me,” she had informed

me. I felt pressure and very responsible that she be able to leave on time.

Finally I was introduced, and the emcee mentioned I would be speaking on “Learning to Listen for God throughout Your Day.” As I walked to the podium I thought, *How strange: here I am talking about God’s voice, yet my own thoughts seem to drown out His voice after I finish speaking at events.* I knew as soon as I was done I would internally hear these kinds of things: *Marilyn, you forgot to mention a certain illustration. Or, Why did you tell the audience about that?*

Even as I spoke, I kept remembering that a man was waiting in his car for his wife to get out of the luncheon so they could leave for Florida. *You’d better hurry up, Marilyn! You don’t want to keep someone waiting. Don’t be a bother.* I finally concluded my talk and noted that I was only a couple of minutes over the time limit. *Good, I thought, now that woman can get out to her car and leave for Florida.*

As I walked back from the podium to my seat and sat down, unexpected applause erupted from the women. The emcee quickly grabbed the microphone. “Thank you, Marilyn, for sharing with us today; you’ve given us some things to think about. It was very meaningful.” I stood up again to speak with the women who lined up near my table to talk to me. One by one, the women graciously affirmed my talk. I was a bit overwhelmed, as I was not feeling comfortable or worthy of their compliments.

Something happened, however, that was forever to change the direction of my life and the way I viewed myself. The very last woman in line said, “Thank you for your teaching today. That was the best presentation on listening for God I have heard, and I’ve heard several messages on that subject.”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew I was supposed to say thank

you, but it would seem too prideful if I just said that. So as I looked at the floor I said, “Thank you,” and then added, “It was nothing.” At that point, the woman gently took hold of my arm. Her touch immediately made me jerk up my head and look into her blue eyes.

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“Yes,” I replied rather sheepishly.

“Well,” she continued, “I mean my compliments when I give them. Marilyn, do you know what your response reveals to me?”

I shook my head no as I waited for her to continue.

“Your response tells me that you live with a *shame-based perspective of life*.”

Shame. I don’t remember anything else she said or, for that matter, what anybody else said that afternoon. The word *shame* lodged in my throat like a vitamin pill that was stuck for lack of enough water.

*Shame*. I thought about that word as I made the hour-long trip home.

Shame. Was it true? Did I have a shame-based perspective of life?

Driving home from that luncheon, I tried to sort through the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt, as I understood it, meant “I have done something wrong, and I feel terrible about it.” I knew I had not done anything *wrong* at the speaking event, yet I still felt awful.

I then went on a deep soul-searching journey, asking God if shame existed in my life because of a breach between Him and me. *God, is there anything I need to make right with You? Did I do something wrong?* Nothing came to mind. Silence.

*Hey, can’t shame be a good thing?* I asked myself. If used appropriately, couldn’t shame reveal something that needs to be corrected? Maybe it was okay that I had this “shame-based perspective of life,” whatever that meant.



At that point I didn't understand the difference between guilt and shame. I had often heard people use the two words interchangeably. Guilt nails you on what you have *done*; shame, on the other hand, hits at the core of a person—*who* you are. Guilt says, “You made a mistake.” Shame says, “You *are* the mistake.” I wasn't dealing with something I had done wrong at the luncheon (guilt). I was battling my own thoughts: *I am not a good speaker*; *I am not adequate* (shame). Healthy guilt has an element of hope attached—an error has been revealed, yet you are hopeful that a positive change will take place as you address your shortcoming. Shame often leaves you feeling helpless—after all, it tells you that something at the very core of your being is defective.

Just as I did not understand the distinction between guilt and shame, I did not realize that there are two kinds of shame. The first, *healthy shame*, prompts you to correct—or prevent—sinful behavior. Good shame reveals that you are not perfect and that you are not God. Healthy shame reminds you that you have limits and that you will make mistakes. It can act like the warning light on your car's dashboard that reads “Maintenance Required.” It can help alert you that something is wrong under your hood. So you stop, pay attention to the warning, deal with it, and move on.

For example, when I was six, I started taking accordion lessons. Not long after, my teacher explained that I would be expected to play “Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes” from memory at my first recital. For some reason (probably because of the title of the song), I procrastinated and hadn't memorized the piece by the time the recital rolled around. Not surprisingly, when I got up to play, I messed up big time. I kept playing the same measure over and over until finally I just stopped

playing. There was dead silence. I was very embarrassed. I knew I was supposed to have had that piece memorized, but I had not done it. Thankfully, neither my parents nor my piano teacher berated me after the recital. In fact, my teacher even gave me a little prize at the end of the evening! Still, the good shame I felt pushed me to be sure I worked hard before my next recital.

While my illustration of good shame was from a silly example of childhood, I am concerned about a lack of *good shame* in our culture. The number of babies born outside of marriage, marital affairs, and cheating—whether on tax forms or in the classroom—are all increasing. Unfortunately our culture has a growing tolerance toward these practices. Thousands of years ago the prophet Jeremiah gave a sad commentary on his culture: “They have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush” (Jeremiah 6:15). We are losing our ability to blush as well. Healthy shame ought to lead us toward repentance and restoration, healing and forgiveness. Good shame, then, does have its place.

What I’m talking about in this book, however, is another type of shame. It’s an unhealthy, destructive form that author John Bradshaw calls toxic: “Toxic shame gives you a sense of worthlessness, a sense of failing and falling short as a human being.”<sup>1</sup>

The results of toxic shame are serious and long lasting. “People affected by it judge themselves, rather than judging their actions. If they make a mistake or do something wrong, they judge themselves as bad, rather than judging their actions as imperfect. They live in terror of unexpected exposure—of others seeing them as they see themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

These were the vague feelings of inner torment I experienced not only every time I got through speaking but in other situations as well. Unfortunately, toxic shame lingers and eventually becomes a part of who you are and what you do and don’t do. It paralyzes you so you don’t think you can move on.



When I returned home from the luncheon that day, I ran upstairs to the solitude of my bedroom and fell on my face before the Lord. “Please, God, show me if there is shame in my life.” Instantly a painful memory surfaced—one I had never shared with anyone except, in part, with my husband. An unpleasant memory from when I was five; a memory I had buried but couldn’t forget. It was a secret I had carefully hidden behind a heavy door in my heart for many years. I was still pushing against that door with all my weight to keep it closed.

God came that afternoon, so to speak, and slowly pulled me away from that closet door and gently took me into His arms. I was so tired of trying to keep it closed. I didn’t want that door opened, but I couldn’t bear putting my weight against it any longer.

He was reassuring and tender as He held me and spoke very clearly to my heart.

*Marilyn, it is hard for you to receive compliments. You do not feel like you are ever good enough. You act as though you are “affirmation-deficient”; no amount of affirmation fills you up. You are afraid you’ll be abandoned. You feel overly responsible for other people.*

At that precise moment, I knew—my outlook on life *was* shame-based. Toxic shame was the reason for my continual vague feelings of uneasiness and inadequacy. The Lord began to reveal to me the secret stash of shame I had carried for many years. He invited me to remove the tinted glasses of shame that blurred and darkened my vision of whom He had called me to be. Gently, the Lord helped me crack open the door of a carefully covered secret memory I did not want to deal with. . . .





Can you relate? Do you ever have a vague, bogged-down feeling that something is wrong with you? Do you ever feel that while you've been told God loves you, He certainly must love others *more* than you? Do you sense that you can't measure up to what people or God want from you? Do fears torment you and keep you from being a confident person?

Perhaps you feel a rush of anger whenever you feel put down so you lash out at the person closest to you. Or you might down an entire half gallon of ice cream after listening to your boss go on and on about how you should improve your time-management skills. Maybe you berate yourself for minor mishaps. Say you accidentally back into a neighbor's mailbox. Even after paying to have it replaced, you *continue* to feel bad about it and indulge in self-berating thoughts. *Why wasn't I paying more attention when I backed out of the driveway? How could I have been so dumb?* And every time you drive by that now-repaired mailbox you wonder how you could have been so brainless to make such an obvious mistake. By way of contrast, people who do *not* view life through the lens of toxic shame may back into a neighbor's mailbox and while they feel bad, they can fix the mailbox and then move on. They do not *continue* to degrade themselves.

Toxic shame can take an outward event (like hearing a critical comment or backing into a mailbox) and turn it *inward*. It causes you to focus on yourself in a negative way. Instead of recognizing that you accidentally hit a mailbox, toxic shame can make you believe that you are a *mailbox hitter* and always will be. If you make a mistake while presenting a workshop for your company or church, you tell yourself, *I'm not a good presenter. I'll never be able to speak again.* You believe the internal message and refuse to give another presentation—even though you are very capable.

Shame is bound up in *who* we are and not so much with *what* we do. Author Stephen Seamands writes, “Shame, though it may be triggered by something we have said or done, is about our *being*.”<sup>3</sup>

Many avenues lead to this destructive kind of shame. If you struggle with it, you may have had parents who were shut down emotionally and could not affirm you as a child. You may have been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused. Perhaps you experienced an extremely humiliating and embarrassing situation and were teased about it. Or someone made fun of your body and to this day you can still hear their hurtful comments. These types of experiences breed shame. When this type of shame is stuffed deep inside rather than addressed, it becomes internalized.

Once this toxic shame is internalized, it runs on autopilot. It can be triggered without anyone doing anything to you. Your own thoughts set it off! This toxic shame expresses itself as inner torment. Continual negative self-talk can be a dead giveaway that toxic shame is present in your soul.

Just as shame has many sources, it also manifests itself in different ways. Some people will try to dull the pain through addictions or eating disorders. Others will fly into uncontrollable rage over the smallest slight. Some will sink into depression and withdraw from others. Then there will be those who are so afraid of making a mistake that they fall into the pit of perfectionism. Sadly, “some studies have determined that shame can be a key factor in suicide attempts.”<sup>4</sup>

If you struggle with feelings of inadequacy, perhaps, like me, you were not aware of or able to identify the root of these problems as shame. Until now! Dear reader, I long for you to recognize unhealthy, toxic shame in your life. Why? Shame seeks to paralyze you. Shame shuts down your insides. Shame

cuts you off from truly giving to and receiving from others. But there is good news. Once you are aware of shame, you can reverse the atrophy. There is a cure! Perhaps you don't struggle with shame but know someone who seems in bondage to an addiction or seeks to live as a perfectionist or is at an emotional standstill in life. Now, maybe, their struggle has a name—*toxic shame*.

The story that follows shows how shame can take root early in life and then, if left alone, grows effortlessly and stubbornly as a weed. Like a weed, it grows inconspicuously at first until later, when it stands taller than the life around it. In my own life, this harvest of shame produced bitterness and negative self-talk. Its most beguiling fruit, however, was that of lies—internal lies. Shame set me up to believe lies about myself—lies from the enemy of my soul. It can do the same to you.

If you or someone you love is struggling with shame, I hope my story serves as a helpful illustration. Obviously, your circumstances will be different than mine. Your shame may have very different roots, and it may not produce the perfectionism or inadequacy that mine did. Yet I suspect that the fear, anger, and disappointment we often feel inside is similar.

This is also a story of what I've learned about pulling out the root of shame and allowing forgiveness, truth, grace, and hope to grow in its place. In fact, I've included "How about You?" questions and action steps, called "Shame Lifters," at the end of each chapter to enable you to identify the ways shame shows up in your life and then take steps to resolve it. Even if you decide not to do the questions and Shame Lifters, I encourage you to at least read through them since other illustrations of shame and hope are scattered through them.

If you're not battling shame personally, these exercises may enable you to be a shame lifter and foster healing in a friend's

or family member's life. In addition, turn to the appendixes on pages 189–197, which will help you recognize whether shame is a problem for you or someone you know.

While writing my story was often painful, my hope is that you will see some aspect of your story in mine and then draw even closer to the God who longs to be your ultimate Shame Lifter.



ONE

## *Fears and Tears*

*Human beings are born with just two basic fears. One is the fear of loud noises. The other is the fear of falling. All other fears must be learned.*

—Ronald Rood, American naturalist

Fear took hold early in my life. It clung to me like maple syrup sticks to your hands after you eat pancakes. I tried over and over again to wash away the fear with my tears, but it didn't work.

"You're always crying. Quit being a crybaby," my father would often say impatiently. "What is the matter with you, anyway?"

I was dubbed "Crybaby" early on and lived up to my title. I found the more I cried, however, the more my father distanced himself from me both physically and emotionally. Crying never really achieved what I had hoped for, but I couldn't stop myself.

One night when I was four years old, I awoke in my bed and was immediately consumed with a fear of the darkness. I went to my parents' room, stood by their bed, and cried. Nothing they said calmed my fears. "Marilyn, go back to bed," my dad said more than once. Finally, he threw back the covers on his side of the bed and started toward me. I felt a firm grip on my upper arm. My dad pulled me down the hallway to our bathroom and snapped on the light. He shoved me toward the sink. The cream

tile counter with its dark brown, spotted markings came sharply into focus. The ribbed, frosted windows on either side of the sink glowed from an outdoor light that cast distorted, prism-like patterns on the counter.

“If you are going to keep crying, I’ll give you something to really cry about,” my dad said. As he pushed my head over the sink, he grabbed a bar of soap and shoved it in my mouth. Over and over he washed my mouth out with the soap. The biting taste repelled me, and I cried harder than ever. I do not remember what happened next, but I do remember this: I was very frightened of my father. Just as the frosted bathroom windows contorted the outside light that was reflected onto the bathroom counter, so my father’s actions that night distorted my view of him even more.

I knew deep down my father probably loved me. After all, didn’t all daddies love their children? But I didn’t feel close to him. In spite of my fear of him, however, something in me longed to please him, and I desperately wanted his approval.

My dad faced huge pressures during my early years. He was a pastor and was gone from home a lot. At the time he washed my mouth out with soap, he was planting a new independent church without receiving an income. He was also working in the early morning hours at our local post office to provide for my mom, older brother, and me as best he could on his meager income.

About this time my parents decided that taking a vacation to visit relatives in Michigan would provide a break from all the stress of church planting. I was five and my brother was thirteen the summer we took that trip from our home in Southern California to Battle Creek, Michigan. By the time we neared the desert town of Barstow, California, I was crying. There were no seat belt laws in that day, so I stood up in the car and leaned over the front seat.

“I want to ride up front,” I announced through my tears.

“No, Marilyn,” my dad said. “You need to sit back down in your seat.”

“But I want to sit up by Mommy,” I explained.

“No,” was his firm response.

I melted into more tears. My crying continued until the car abruptly stopped on the right shoulder of the road. At that point my crying abruptly stopped as well. *What was happening?* I wondered. The next thing I knew, my dad had gotten out of the car, walked around to my side, and opened the door.

“Get out!” he ordered.

I hesitantly got out and stepped onto a very deserted desert road. My dad reached in the car and pulled out my little suitcase and set it on the road next to me. He then walked back to his car door, got in, slammed the door, and drove off. I watched in utter disbelief as I saw our car getting smaller and smaller on the road until I could no longer see it. I wailed uncontrollably. I was so frightened! I truly felt like he would never come back and get me. I don’t know how long I was left there, but I was certain there was no hope of seeing my family again. Sometime later my dad returned for me.

Thankfully, I don’t remember any other cars passing by, and I was probably not left there for long. Still, the memory lingers. My dad may have come back for me physically, but emotionally he had left me alongside that desert road.

A new level of fear began to grow in me, and I would wake up crying in the night for my mother even more often. While I could not express it at that time, what I was feeling was fear of abandonment. *What will happen to me if I get left again?*

My fears continued to increase after our trip and into the fall when I started kindergarten. I was so fearful of getting left again that my mother needed to reassure me over and over again that

my dad would remember to pick me up from kindergarten. (My mother didn't have a driver's license.) It was at that point I developed my biggest fear of all—that my mother would die and leave me. She was my stabilizer in life, and I clung to her as much as possible.

Shame, mixed with fear, was beginning to send down new and stubborn roots into the soil of my very being. I felt shamed for being called crybaby and a fraidy cat by family members and others. Shame had the incredible power of taking those two phrases and weaving them into the fabric of my life. I believed and internalized those phrases until they became *me*. Instead of “shame on you,” I picked up the mantle of shame and it became “shame on me.”

Something *was* making me cry. I was carrying a deep, dark secret. It left me fearful, overly sensitive, and worried. Also, the fear of being left alone followed me just like my shadow did.

What *was* the matter? I couldn't talk about it. So I cried instead. It seemed the more I cried, however, the less it helped; but still I couldn't quit. Tears were somewhat like a comfortable addiction—crying felt good and temporarily relieved some of my anxiety, but it never quenched my soul pain.

My kindergarten teacher observed my tears as well. She informed my mother that I was fearful, lacked confidence, and cried easily. I overheard her tell my mom this as I sat nearby playing on the rug in her classroom during a parent-teacher conference. Later I asked my mom what the teacher meant by her words about me.

“Well, honey, your teacher said you are capable of doing the schoolwork, but many times *you* don't think you can. You need to have the confidence to go ahead and try.”

Could I tell my mom at that point about my fears? Could I tell her that because she couldn't pick me up from school,



I was extremely afraid my dad would forget to pick me up after kindergarten? No, that sounded silly.

Could I tell her that my teacher frightened me when she yelled at the class and how I thought she wasn't very kind? Could I tell her about a girl in my class named Donna, who accidentally wet her pants during school? The teacher made an example out of her. First she announced to the class what Donna had done. Then she made a pair of panties out of paper towels and tape and held it up for the class to view. Donna was red faced, and I was humiliated for her. I didn't ask why Donna wasn't at school the next day or any other day after that. I felt her embarrassment. I knew why she never returned to school.

Could I also tell my mother about that *secret thing* that had happened to me months earlier, which had frightened me more than anything else? No! I decided not to share the fear that was troubling and paralyzing me. I didn't want anyone to find out my secret. It would be safer that way. And so I cried and rocked myself to sleep each night. Those were the only ways I knew how to cope with my growing fears. My tears were simply voicing the unspoken fearful words of my fettered and cheerless heart.

## HOW ABOUT YOU?

1. Can you identify with having an emotionally distant parent? If so, how has that impacted your life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Do you remember ever being shamed as a child? If so, how would you complete the following sentence:  
I felt shamed when I \_\_\_\_\_.

## SHAME LIFTER

3. Psalm 39:12 (NLT) says, "Hear my prayer, O LORD! Listen to my cries for help! Don't ignore my tears." (By the way, *ongoing* tears may be an indicator that something more is going on inside.) How do you typically express your hurt? How might you bring your shame or disappointment to God?
  
4. Have you ever felt hindered by hurtful, destructive words or names that were said over you as a small child? What were some of them?
  
5. Do you now have freedom from those words, or do they still have their paralyzing grip on you today? Explain.
  
6. Are you dealing with any past or current fears? In what way?
  
7. In Isaiah 41:13 (NLT) God promises, "I hold you by your right hand—I, the LORD your God. And I say to you, 'Don't be afraid. I am here to help you.'" What hope does this passage offer you?



## SHAME Lifters



- Identify a secret that you have been holding on to or an ache that just doesn't go away.
- Why do you want to keep this secret hidden? Why do you think the ache persists?
- Identify a person you could safely confide in. Pray for the courage and wisdom to bring this secret or hidden ache out into the light.

*Dear heavenly Father,*

*Thank You for listening to my cries when I call out in the “darkness” of my soul to You. You cry with me and take note of my tears (Psalm 55:17; 56:8).*

*Thank You that You do not leave me by the side of the road in my daily struggles. You are there for me. You are emotionally and spiritually connected to me! Even if I don't recognize Your presence, You do not leave me—nor are You ever in the process of leaving me (Hebrews 13:5). You will not, nor cannot, leave me as an orphan (John 14:18). Over and over You speak peace to my heart and say, “Do not fear; I will help you” (Isaiah 41:13).*

*Thank You that Your name for me is “beloved.” Your words never wound to destroy me. You speak only healing words of conviction, comfort, and encouragement. You value me and treat me with dignity.*

*Heavenly Father, You love me with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3)—the kind of love I know so little about, but desire to experience more. Thank You! In the name of Jesus, Amen.*

## FATHER'S LOVE LETTER

My Child . . .

You may not know me, but I know everything about you  
. . . *Psalm 139:1*

I know when you sit down and when you rise up  
. . . *Psalm 139:2*

I am familiar with all your ways  
. . . *Psalm 139:3*

Even the very hairs on your head are numbered  
. . . *Matthew 10:29-31*

For you were made in my image  
. . . *Genesis 1:27*

In me you live and move and have your being  
. . . *Acts 17:28*

For you are my offspring  
. . . *Acts 17:28*

I knew you even before you were conceived  
. . . *Jeremiah 1:4-5*

I chose you when I planned creation  
. . . *Ephesians 1:11-12*

You were not a mistake, for all your days are written in my book  
. . . *Psalm 139:15-16*

## APPENDIX B: Recognizing a Shame Lifter

Careful when disciplining  
Shares truth bathed in grace  
Suggests what you might want to do, not what you “should” do  
Builds you up in private and in public settings  
Covers and protects you  
Listens without interrupting  
Believes in you and dreams with you  
Uses “I” statements  
Encourages  
Refrains from negative facial or hand expressions  
Recognizes that sarcasm is a form of inner anger  
Recognizes your needs and asks to help  
Will not tell you someone is better than you  
Makes you look good in front of others  
Says only the best about you and does not divulge secrets  
Lets you be you without controlling you  
Talks to you on a “peer” level instead of talking down to you  
Does not make fun of your words or actions  
Puts up safe boundaries  
Sees and notices you  
Forgives you and does not bring up your transgression again  
Reminds you that you are royalty of the King  
Communicates that you are loved, valued, treasured—the best!

## MY PRAYER FOR YOU

Thank you for taking the time to read *Shame Lifter*. As I wrote and prayed over this book, I prayed for you, the reader. I've asked the Lord to use this book to help lead you toward healing or to enable you to come alongside someone who is hurting. I prayed this book would help you see the destructive damage that toxic shame can do. I also prayed that you would be freed from anything that holds you back from becoming all that Jesus has in mind for you. You do not have to stay locked in shame.

Remember that the enemy of your soul, Satan, loves to come and snatch away any seeds of truth the Lord plants in the soil of your heart. I will continue to pray that the seeds He sowed will remain and will produce an abundant harvest of peace and truth.

Victory over shame *is* possible. As I travel around speaking, I hear many stories from other people who are fighting hard to remove their shackles of shame. One that especially touched me came from a young woman whom I first met as a teen. Today Sarah Bokma is a wife, mother of four, and songwriter. Here's her story in her own words:

When I walked down the aisle as a bride it was anything but a grand day. Our daughter was nearly one, and I was four months pregnant with our son. I was not a pure, beautiful bride, and my heart was broken with shame. I didn't get to shop for the wedding dress of my dreams; instead my dress was made from ivory yellow fabric. As I walked down the aisle on my dad's arm, I felt embarrassed, judged, and so ashamed I wanted to cry rather than rejoice.

I have been married ten years now. They have been years of healing and grieving. I finally understand the bride that I am to Christ—that because of who I am in Him, He now

says to me, “Daughter, put on the white dress of redemption. Wear it with pride—and walk down the aisle of life on your heavenly Daddy’s arm. You are pure, you are Mine, beautiful, radiant Bride.”

Sarah longs for people to know just how much God treasures them. She wrote the following song as a testimony of the Lord’s grace to her. She hopes it might speak to you, or a special woman in your life, as well.

**Daughter Wear White**

Pure daughter  
Nothing in your past can hold you back  
You are pure  
You are mine  
Beautiful, radiant bride  
Daughter, wear white.

I have taken off your rags  
Removed your shame  
Shed all your old ways  
You’re sheltered by my Name  
You are glorious to me  
I am enthralled by your beauty  
You are free, you are light  
Unblemished in my sight.

I have dressed you in light  
Robed you to shine  
Lifted you from the mire  
Displayed you as mine  
You are glorious to me

I am enthralled by your beauty  
You are free, you are light  
You are free, free to shine

All that's been stolen has been returned  
All that was lost, redeemed  
All I designed you to be you are, My Princess!\*

Truly, when we have a breakthrough in our life and are “dressed in his light and robed to shine,” our heavenly Father must smile, throw back His head, and laugh with joy for His child. Oh, how He loves you!

“Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces” (Psalm 34:5, NLT).

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\* Words by Sarah Bokma; music by Paula Davis Stitt. Used by permission.



## ENDNOTES

### Introduction

1. John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame That Binds You* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communication, 1988), 10.
2. Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse, “Dealing with Shame and Blame,” [http://www.asca.org.au/survivors/survivors\\_shame.html](http://www.asca.org.au/survivors/survivors_shame.html).
3. Stephen Seamands, *Wounds That Heal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 44.
4. Robert S. Vibert, “Avoiding Responsibilities in Life,” <http://www.shiftnaction.com/node/2050>.

### Chapter Two: Loved like Crazy

1. Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein, *Raising Resilient Children* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 11.

### Chapter Four: Neglected

1. Rick Richardson, *Experiencing Healing Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 123.

### Chapter Five: Loss after Loss

1. “Leaving on a Jet Plane,” words and music by John Denver, 1967.
2. William E. Mann, ed., *Augustine’s Confessions: Critical Essays* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 108. This is found in Augustine’s *Confessions* IX, 12.

### Chapter Six: My Other Father

1. The Institute is now known as Jerusalem University College.
2. If you’d like to read more about how to hear God speak to you, see my book *Listening for God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004).

### Chapter Seven: Seeing the “Give” in Forgiveness

1. Sandra Wilson, *Hurt People Hurt People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 2001).
2. C. H. Spurgeon quote taken from Nancy Leigh DeMoss, *Choosing Forgiveness* (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 18.

### Chapter Eight: Forgive and Reforgive

1. Karl Barth, *Prayer*, ed. Don Saliers (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 55.