

Musings on Shame and Idolization

**© Edward Sieveking Emery Ph.D.
16 Armory St.
Northampton, MA. 01060
Sieveking.emery[@]gmail.com**

Abstract prepared for the 2007 Workshop on Humiliation and Violent Conflict, Columbia University, New York, December 13-14, 2007.

Shame is the outgrowth of fractured bonds, whether they are between intimates, within families, between groups, or between self and ideal. Corruption of ideals combines with disillusion to nurture an internal culture of psychic pain that can grow to unbearable proportions. This growth of the negative further fuels the shock of shame as the axes of orientation (that which guides meaning) undergo what Aristotle called a *peripetia*—a reversal or loss of fortune. The *peripetic* shift that grows shame spins the mind into a dense vortex that turns humiliation into versions of violent self-restitution (facilitated by blame, projection, and scapegoat ideologies).

At the foundation of shame is violent mourning. I have come to think of mourning in terms of the degree to which this process occurs through two different schemas for the organization of experience. Mourning can either be filtered through structures of idolatry or what otherwise might be thought of as a kind of iconostasis (Emery 1997, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006).

In mourning through the icon that which engenders humiliating loss is transfigured into the light of a larger sustaining good. The lost ideal is sublated—which is to say, it is both preserved yet raised to a higher level of coherence through bonding with a humbling transcendent meaning. The light of the Other shines forth and one then sees in the face of the other a receptive presence that invokes as a spontaneous gesture an ethical relation, one that compels solicitations of radical hospitality and an infinite responsibility to the other (as elaborated by Emmanuel Levinas). As in the case of an icon in which one is illuminated by a light from beyond, in mourning through the icon self states are opened to a web of benevolent witnesses that sponsor care for damaged linkages. Sensitivity is thus preserved and given the space for recognition. not, as is the case in violent mourning, frozen into inflammatory states of revenge.

The idol, in contrast to the icon, is shaped in response to intolerable mourning. In the Book of Wisdom we read, for example, of the genesis of the idol being shaped in response to a father's unbearable loss of his child. The place of defacing absence is filled with the effigy of the lost object and this effigy, then worshiped, becomes an idol, a substitute representation for the one lost. Idolatry seeks simulacra of purification and is driven by a wish to expiate the defacing ghost of a lost ideal. Mourning through the idol gives rise to cultic ideologies and to what I think of as a dense object mind. In the shadow

of the idol, mind forecloses thought, thickens in the equilibrium of self-cohering assumptions and fictive perceptions. The dense object mind is haunted by taint and damage and searches for restitutive expiation through seeking a good enough enemy. Closure around a definable enemy, especially an enemy that is a malevolent network, is a form of mourning whose dense object mentation is expressed in violent forms of commemorative idolization.

The traumatic of terror involves a form of ecstasy, in the sense that the ek-static is that which goes forth, outside of and beyond self. This ecstatic trauma of terror projects rays of self that are viewed as beyond destruction in the precise moment of their being destroyed. There is a **simultaneous** death and survival of death in the moment of the Real, in the event through which the ghost of shame gone mad tears open the fabric of safety and spreads forth a viral threat of dread. Violent idolizations of mourning sponsor the negative sublime of terror as terror is the perverse ecstasy of shame gone mad. The magnetizing center of terror pulls for ever further forms of repetition and the erasure of temporal difference.

In the face of this specter of threat rare is the person and even more so the collective that can look with calm expansiveness into the eye of the storm and who can find in the knot of terror and the primal scene of trauma invigorating possibilities of self. Who among us can fall without end without fusing with panic? Yet, it is this that the epoch of terror calls forth. We are called to be at home with the uncanny and in doing so overcome the primal split in which we want home to be the place where the uncanny is not. We must learn to live with the ghost that is always yet to come. Living in a world that slips with rapid ease between the pre-modern tribal and the post-modern global, mind must grow an internal civic space that sublates both the speed of change and the pull toward reactive simplifying idolizations. This possibility is shaped through an emergent mode of being that transubstantiates the idol through opening beyond historical densities of practice and cohesion to the communitarian light of witness that shines through the darkness, illuminating the face of shame in a soft transfiguring presence as it turns a heart of stone into a heart of receptivity. It is the presence of this thread of sustaining witness that binds the inflammation of shame and that opens the density of persecution to the hospitality of a beneficent other.

Emery, E. (1997). Mnemosyne: Death, memory, and mourning. **J Melanie Klein and Object Relations**, 15:397-416

_____ (2000). Facing 'O': Wilfred Bion, Emmanuel Levinas and the face of the Other. **Psychoanal. Rev.** 87:799-840.

_____ (2002). The ghost in the mother: Strange attractors and impossible mourning. **Psychoanal. Rev.** 89: 690-194

_____ (2004) An ethics of engagement: Shame and the genesis of violence. **Psychother. Politics Internat.** 2: 229-233

_____ (2005) Faces of democracy: Idol and icon in sacrificial crisis. Paper presented at the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, Koblenz, Germany.

_____ (2006) Specters of democracy: Dense objects and states of mourning. **Psychoanal. Rev.** 93: 145-166