

Humiliation Through Silent Grief in Women: When Words Are Not Enough

© Annette Anderson Engler

Abstract presented at the 2010 Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict,
Columbia University, New York, December 9-10, 2010

Humiliation can be observed through inexpressible feelings of grief, when it seems that words are not enough. Women who are unable to grieve are especially at risk of being overcome by feelings of guilt, shame and humiliation. The silent expression of grief is sometimes ambiguous and can often be associated with a strong sense of *loss of self* and *loss of personal and social identity*. Grief can become so unrecognizable to these women that it may feel as though they are strangers walking through the traumatic events of their own reality. Hence, painful stories become fragmented through inarticulate forms of expression.

An example of how women experience feelings of humiliation is through the grieving process which is accompanied by untold painful or shameful stories. This occurs when women develop an overwhelming desire to “empty out” yet, there is no safe place to store these “wordless” memories. When women withhold the telling of insufferable stories, memories of these events are often filtered through the harbored fear of anticipated shame and humiliation. Many times the thought of sharing painful stories causes some women to disassociate and therefore they store these memories in an irretrievable place within their subconscious where there is no risk of guilt or shame. For some of these women, self-acceptance is devalued and social acceptance becomes the achievable goal to self-hood. It is through inexpressible grief that women often leave particles of their personal and cultural identity on the floor of their shameful fears. Humiliation suddenly becomes a self-deprecating process for which the sense of self is either lost or simply abandoned.

When women, do not give themselves permission grieve, they become culturally displaced. Thus, emotional cultivation and healing is now difficult as they are often absent from their lived experiences. The heightened inability to express human thought and emotions reinforces shame and humiliation and inhibits a woman’s relationship with herself and others.

As a result of these things, a loss of sense of self becomes a nesting place for social and personal suffering. Ultimately, the cultivation process is damaged through the humiliated self that may be projected upon them by others.