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The lessons of shame and guilt

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A boss was chastising his subordinate about transgressing some sacred values the organisation upheld. He began by telling the erring employee that what he had done was incorrect. The employee apologised, yet the boss continued to berate him. At some point during the pulling up, the boss said, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

At a coaching session where the subordinate was participating, he brought up this subject with his coach. The coach listened to the employee and asked him what he was feeling as he recounted the incident. The employee said he was feeling a mixture of guilt and shame.

The coach then explained the difference between shame and guilt. "Shame," he said, "Says you are bad. Guilt, on the other hand, says that what you did is incorrect or bad. The distinction is important to appreciate as shame is a condition that is foisted on you by another and therefore impinges on you as a person, while guilt is a state that reflects transgression against our values, and is therefore about an act that I have performed and not about me as an individual."

Often times, guilt can be got over since it is the act that has caused one to feel so. Shame, on the other hand stays with the individual and is difficult to shake off. While guilt is specific and can relate to act or deed, shame is less specific. Thus when I am ashamed, I tend to devalue myself for I believe that I am bad. Guilt being of an act can be overcome with effort.

Both shame and guilt however, carry within them positive possibilities, and as existentialists often say, shame and guilt place us on the threshold of authentic engagement. They make us aware that we have the freedom to self-correct and thus in the process the choice to act responsibly.

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