

Inside Changing Course by Claudia Black

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Turning Points To Recovery

Excerpts from the book:

SHAME

The Loss of Unconditional Security and Self-worth

Internalized shame becomes the foundation of a person's trauma. Shame is the painful feeling that comes with the belief there is something inherently wrong with who you are. It is the belief that you, or a part of you is defective or inadequate. Words that describe shame are reflective of seeing oneself as "bad," "ugly," "stupid," "incompetent," "damaged."

To live with shame is to feel alienated and defeated, never quite good enough to belong. It is an isolating experience that makes us think we are completely alone and unique in our belief that we are unlovable. Secretly, we feel like we are to blame. Any and all deficiency lies within ourselves. Gershen Kaufman, author of *Shame: The Power of Caring*, said that "shame is without parallel, a sickness of the soul." Shame reflects an internal darkness in one's soul. And it is because of this our recovery truly has spiritual meaning.

Underneath layers of shame you will find that abandonment is at the foundation.

Abandonment, as described earlier, may be emotional or physical. But abandonment is most often experienced through various forms of rejection, rejection that has been colored by parental words and actions, some subtle, some not so subtle. It is useful to visualize a continuum, with acceptance at one end, rejection at the other end, and many shades of emotional unavailability or parental indifference to your needs and wants somewhere between.

The in-between areas encompass the many ways a child can feel ignored or invalidated by the parent's non-accepting or rejecting behaviors. Whether or not the parent's intention is abandonment, the child feels unloved and undervalued. And, remember, the child is reacting to parents whose job it is to protect, care for, and love us. If they reject us in any way, we know in our hearts we must not be worthy.

No one's family is perfect; parents are people who, like everyone else, have weaknesses and faults; they often make mistakes. But anyone who has lived with chronic loss — loss resulting from a mixture of rigidity, denial, isolation and shame —deserves the opportunity to heal.

THE IMPACT OF OUR LOSSES

It is not possible to live with the dynamics of chronic loss and not be affected. While families have many common characteristics, there are all kinds of experiences that create differences. Some of these experiences impact us more negatively than others. There are many variables that create differences in the ways and the depth we feel the effects:

- Age at onset of trauma or loss. The younger we are, the more hurtful it is to us.
- Stigma associated to dynamics. If negative judgments are attached to our experiences, there are greater emotional consequences; i.e., there is greater stigma being in an abusive family than a home characterized by workaholism.
- Connection to outside support system. Connection to extended family, friend's family, extra-curricular school activities, the ability to find meaningful relationships and/or activities outside of family lessens our shame.
- Multiple trauma/shame-related dynamics. For example, to live with both addiction and abuse is more traumatic than to live with just one source of pain.

Usually about this stage in reading there is a tendency to begin saying to yourself, “yes, but...” “Yes, but my dad wasn’t all bad, he did do some good things in his parenting”; or “yes, but my mother did teach me....” In spite of any loss or pain in one’s growing up years, we were given gifts by our parents. Those gifts will be ours to cherish. There is no doubt that we come from families with a matrix of strengths and vulnerabilities.

It is also clear that the survival skills one developed helped to create important personal strengths. To bring about greater predictability in our young lives and defend against the pain, we developed ways of coping that may have brought a resourcefulness to our personalities. Yet we need to be cautious that we do not reinstate the Don’t Talk or Don’t Question rules by discounting the pain, all for the sake of recognizing how strong we are. Please recognize that owning the pain that occurred in our lives in no manner lessens the gifts we were given and the strengths we have developed.

It is important to identify your losses. Until losses and pain are dealt with directly, the resulting feelings, while often masked, are carried into adulthood. Unless we have a chance to learn healthy coping skills, this combination of past loss and pain leads to severe consequences creating even more pain in the present.

PAIN FROM THE PAST

Physical Abandonment

For some children abandonment is primarily physical. Physical abandonment occurs when the physical conditions necessary for thriving have been replaced by:

- lack of appropriate supervision.
- inadequate provision of nutrition and meals. There was a book titled *Potato Chips for Breakfast*, and a talk by educator and lecturer Dan Barmettler called *Macaroni*

at Midnight; these titles poignantly reflect the poor eating habits of children in some families.

- inadequate clothing, housing, heat, or shelter.
- physical and/or sexual abuse.

As children, we are totally dependent on our caretakers to provide safety in our environment. When they do not, we grow up believing that the world is an unsafe place, that people are not to be trusted, and that we do not deserve positive attention and adequate care.

Emotional Abandonment

Emotional abandonment occurs when parents do not provide the emotional conditions and emotional environment necessary for healthy development.

Because more people experience emotional abandonment than physical abandonment, and because it is a more subtle dynamic, the following abandonment experiences may be helpful to understanding emotional abandonment. Two frameworks for abandonment that can simplify the term are:

- 1) Abandonment is experienced by parental indifference to a child's needs and wants, or the parents (or other primary caregivers) are emotionally unavailable on an ongoing basis. They do not offer the support and nurturance a child needs. Therefore the child can neither experience or express his or her feelings appropriately.
- 2) Abandonment occurs when a child has to hide a part of who he or she is in order to be accepted, while others do this to avoid rejection. Having to hide a part of yourself means:
 - when it is not proper in your family to make a mistake.
 - when it is not okay in your family to show feelings, being told the way you feel is not true or okay. "You have nothing to cry about and if you don't stop crying I will really give you something to cry about." "That really didn't hurt." "You have nothing to be angry about." When in the child's experience they are feeling great

fear, sadness, pain or anger. We are not talking about the occasional time a parent becomes frustrated with a child and makes such a comment, but a family situation where there is continual discounting of a child's emotions.

- when it is not okay in your family to have needs. Everyone else's needs appear to be more important than yours, and the only way you even get attention is by attending to the needs of others.
- when it is not okay to have successes. Accomplishments are not acknowledged, are many times discounted, or even used as ammunition to shame a child.

Other acts of abandonment occur when:

- Children cannot live up to the expectations of their parents. These expectations are often unrealistic and not age-appropriate, such as expecting the eight-year-old to remember her dental appointment or the twelve-year-old to be able to manage his younger siblings for hours at a time.
- Children are held responsible for other people's behavior. They may be consistently blamed for the actions and feelings of their parents.
- Disapproval is shown toward children aimed at their entire beings or identity rather than a particular behavior, such as telling a child he is worthless when he does not do his homework or she is never going to be a good athlete because she missed the final catch of the game. Who the child is, is not separated out from what the child does.

Abandonment and Boundaries

Many times our abandonment issues are fused with distorted, confused, or undefined personal boundaries. We experience abandonment when parents have a distorted sense of boundaries, their boundaries and ours.

*When parents do not view us as separate beings with distinct boundaries —
we will experience abandonment.*

They want us to like what they like, dress like they dress, and feel as they do. This is particularly painful during our teenage years when, as part of discovering our own self, we seek out behaviors different from our parents'. This teenage/parent struggle is common to many. Some parents cannot recognize this as part of the adolescent stage, but see it as a personal affront to their image and their own sense of worth. If we in any way express differences from our parents, or make different choices than they would, we know we run the risk of rejection.

When parents expect us to be extensions of themselves, fulfilling their dreams — we will feel abandoned.

How many of us went to the school of our fathers choosing because he had wanted to attend but had been unable to? How many entered into careers that our parents chose for us? How many of us married who we did or when we did because that was expected or desired by our parents? I offer a caution in that having done what our parents expected, wanted, or demanded does not mean that it was the wrong thing to do. It just so often means that the decision was never totally ours. It is the process that is more painful or possibly wrong, not necessarily the outcome.

Judy told how her mother spoke as if it were simply fact that neither of her daughters were to have children due to the possibility of transmitting a terminal genetic disease. "My mom made it clear that it was not an option for me. Because that decision seemed based in her wanting to protect us from pain, and to protect a child from a premature death, it was hard to want to question this dictate. Mom's motivation was sincere. But I was twenty-nine years old when I realized I had never made my own decision about this. Until then it had been my mother's dictate. I realized I had to sit down and separate my life choices from my mother's pain in having a child who died young. I wrestled with the decision for a few years and ultimately made the decision to not have a child. Today, the decision is mine, not my mother's."

Certainly, many people do exactly what their parents *don't* want them to do. Often this is a part of their attempt to be a separate person. We don't marry the person our father liked so much. We don't go to the college our mother aspired to attend. Often we choose to marry the person they would like the least or simply choose to not attend college at all. Again, it is not the outcome that is the issue as much as it is the decision-making process. Instead of choosing freely, we make a reactive decision based in anger.

When parents are not willing to take responsibility for their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, but expect us to take responsibility for them — we will experience abandonment.

When parents hold children responsible for what should be their responsibility, such as telling the child it is their behavior that has caused the break up of the parents' marriage, or it is the child's behavior that creates the stress that results in the parent's need to drink or use drugs, they are expecting something impossible of a child. In effect, they are telling children that they have more power than they truly have, setting them up to experience futility and inadequacy.

When parents' self-esteem is derived through our behavior, when their needs override ours — we feel abandoned.

Henri still feels pain when he talks about how his father publicly gloated over Henri's accomplishments. "Some people told me I should be grateful that my dad even noticed what I was involved in. But there was always something missing about his being proud of me. When I was growing up, I did well in school; I was a very good athlete. I was a student leader and often had my picture in the local paper. My dad came to my events, boasting about me in a way that never seemed real. His boasting was so grand and his need for people to know I was his son was so strong. Yet there was this total lack of interest in me when I was home. When I got home from the ball games, he would already be in bed. He never boasted to me. He never once congratulated me or patted me on the back." What is important to note is that Henri did not get the validation he needed to feel special, important, or of value to his father. What he

believed was that his value to his father was in how he could make his father look to his father's peers.

When children are treated as peers with no parent/child distinction — they are abandoned by their parents.

Many times parents develop relationships with their children in which they are their friends, their peers, their equals. In doing so, they share information that is not age-appropriate for a child. Inappropriate information often creates a sense of burden, or even guilt, and for children that is not fair. To tell a ten-year-old daughter that her father has had an affair cannot offer the daughter any security. The mother may need to talk about it, but that needs to be with someone who has the adult resources to be able to offer appropriate support or feedback. To share with an eight-year-old son the fears related to a situation at work only makes the child feel that his parent is too vulnerable to be available as a source of protection.

Abandonment plus distorted boundaries, at a time when children are developing their sense of worth, is the foundation for the belief in their own inadequacy and the central cause of their shame.

When parents are disrespectful of their children's boundaries and violate them, the message given is that they don't value the child as a person. That message becomes internalized as "I am not of value. I am not worthy." When parents don't acknowledge children's boundaries, the message they give is "You are here to meet my needs," and/or "I am more important than you," and/or "It is not okay to be your own person with individual feelings, desires, or needs." The message also implies that the children have to give up themselves to be available to another. This internalizes to the belief, "I am bad for having different or separate needs, wants, and feelings." "I, in my uniqueness, am not of value." When children experience chronic abandonment with distorted boundaries, they live in fear and doubt about their worth. The greater the clarity a child has around boundaries, understanding who is responsible for what, and the greater a child's self-esteem, the more likely a child will be able to reject, rather than internalize, shameful behaviors and messages.

The following is an example of a young person, Sandi, who, in spite of the fact that she was raised in an alcoholic family, experienced some stability in her early years. As a result, she developed a sense of autonomy and self-esteem, which helped her ward off shame. "Up until I was about eight, home seemed okay. I felt valued, life was fun. Then, as if it was overnight, my dad was always angry. My mom was preoccupied and distant or very sad. It was as if neither our parents had any time for us. Looking back now I realized that something was happening. I just couldn't figure it out. No one was talking about what was wrong. Life just became more and more frightening. I tried to not get in the way. I took care of my brother and sister. I tried to do things to make my dad and mom happy. Nothing I did really made a difference."

One night when she was sixteen and cheerleading at a basketball game, her father showed up so drunk he could hardly walk on his own and created a scene that nearly incited a racial riot. With his arms thrown over her shoulders and her pom-poms tucked under her arms, Sandi was leading her drunken father out of the gym when he began to scream racial slurs at a group of African-American teenagers. "He said things I never heard him or any one else say," Sandi said. "He said things I never knew he thought. Thank heaven this group of kids couldn't reach us. It was all I could do to get him out of the gym. Everyone was screaming and jeering. Well, I got him into his friend's car and off they went. I didn't know why my dad acted like he did — I was so angry at him."

Sandi had the ability to be angry because she had not previously internalized shame and therefore could clearly differentiate who was responsible for what. She had healthy boundary distinction. She knew what took place in the gym was about her father, not her. Because she did not take this incident as a statement about her worth or value, she was also able to access other feelings. With shame we lose the ability to identify our feelings and are more likely to

reinstate the Don't Talk rule. Sandi said she was angry, and then became sad. She could talk about her fear. While this scene was certainly an act of abandonment by her father, she nonetheless had an emotional boundary that protected her self-worth and her autonomy. Sandi's ability to maintain a healthy emotional boundary ("My father's behavior does not determine who I am") prevented her from feeling shamed and personally diminished by her father's behavior.

Linda was born into an already hectic, frightened family. Her first memories were of hiding behind a table in the kitchen, trying not to be noticed, while listening to her parents arguing and thinking to herself, "Just don't let them see me." She spent most of her life trying to be invisible. "In my family there was a lot of arguing, unhappiness, and a lot of moving from place to place. I was the youngest of four and an unplanned pregnancy. My mother let me know right away that she was content with three babies, not four. I felt I came out of the chute needing a protective shield, trying to ward off the hurtful words, the painful glares. I was always in their way, yet I worked so hard not to be. My very existence seemed like such a thorn." When childhood is spent on survival, such as Linda's was, there is little energy left to develop an autonomous or separate sense of self. Linda was chronically abandoned, subject to emotional boundary abuse; as a result she experienced and internalized shame.

When we are abandoned by our caretakers we do not perceive that they were bad people or what they did to us was bad. As children we cannot reject parents, because they are so desperately needed. Instead, we take the burden of being wrong or bad onto ourselves. In doing this, we purge the caretakers of being wrong or hurtful, which reinforces a sense of security. In essence, outer safety is purchased at the price of inner security.

Abandonment, plus distorted or undefined boundaries as you are developing your worth and identity, creates shame and fear.

This truth bears repeating because it defines the root of our pain. What we must understand now is that our abandonment experiences and boundary violations were in no way indictments of our innate goodness and value. Instead, they revealed the flawed thinking, false beliefs, and impaired behaviors of those who hurt us. Still, the wounds were struck deep in our young hearts and minds, and the very real pain can still be felt today. The causes of our emotional injury need to be understood and accepted so we can heal. Until we do, the pain will stay with us, becoming a driving force in our adult lives.



Describe the ways you experienced physical and/or emotional abandonment in your growing up years.