

Shaming and Blaming



Brian Manternach

INTRODUCTION

YEARS AGO, I ATTENDED A LECTURE given by a prominent voice pedagogue. During his presentation, he asked those of us in attendance to stand up and point to the lowest area in our bodies that we believe the diaphragm reaches during inhalation. I stood and pointed to my lower belly. Then he encouraged us to look around the room and check our answers. I noticed some people with answers similar to mine, others who were pointing to a higher area in their bodies, and a few who decided not to venture a guess. After some time passed, the presenter shook his head and chuckled. He asked us to sit down and proceeded to explain, in a tone that I heard as rife with condescension, the “physical impossibility” that the diaphragm could descend to the lower abdomen. It felt to me like those of us who were wrong were being scolded. I quickly wished I had been one of the people who had decided not to stake a claim on the issue. Nevertheless, the tone for the presentation was set and I kept my guesses to myself for the remainder of the talk.

That day, I learned something new about the respiratory system that I have never forgotten. I also learned how it feels when you offer what you believe to be an educated assumption and are ridiculed for doing so.

SHAMING

I have thought about my experience in that presentation many times in the 15 years since it happened. Primarily, I wondered why I reacted so strongly and had such a visceral objection to that method of teaching. Am I just too sensitive? Does my reaction say more about my own insecurities than it does about the way this particular pedagogue delivers information? I understand the importance of acting on the best knowledge we have at any given time. I also understand that, since no one can know everything, we have to be OK with being wrong once in a while. This presentation certainly highlighted at least one anatomic fact that I did not know. Why was I not just grateful to have the new information?

I started to gain some perspective on this experience as I began to explore the work of author and “shame researcher” Brené Brown. Brown, PhD, LMSW, is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, but is likely best known for her frequently viewed TED talks and for authoring multiple books that have reached number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Her popular work clearly has struck a chord in mainstream culture.

Brown defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging.”¹ When we experience shame, she says, we are steeped in the fear of being ridiculed or diminished. We are afraid that we have exposed or revealed a part of us that jeopardizes our connection to others.²

Looking back at that presentation, I wonder if the pedagogue intended to shame those in attendance. I wonder why he did not simply say, “It’s a common misconception that the diaphragm descends into the lower abdomen when we inhale,” which would have presented the information without publicly calling out those of us who did not yet know that. Is there justification for the tactic he chose?

Brown addresses this question, describing that much of her own formal education emphasized the notion that “You CANNOT shame or belittle people into changing their behaviors.”³ Through her research, however, she has come to amend that belief. Now she proposes that shame and humiliation can indeed be used to change behavior. But the problem she discovered is that those behavioral changes do not last. In addition, shame inflicts pain that has the potential to scar both the person *using* shame and the person *being* shamed.⁴

Brown acknowledges that some researchers believe that two types of shame exist: “healthy shame,” which can serve as a motivator, and the more negative “toxic shame.” Brown, however, disagrees with this concept, noting that her own research has not yet revealed any aspect of shame that could be seen as healthy. “It didn’t take very long for me to reach the conclusion that there is nothing positive about shame,” she says. “In any form, in any context and through any delivery system, shame is destructive.”⁵

EMBARRASSMENT, HUMILIATION, GUILT, OR SHAME?

Part of the confusion regarding what people believe to be healthy shame may come from mistaking it for embarrassment, humiliation, or guilt. Although these words are often used interchangeably, Brown believes they have important distinctions.

Embarrassment, she says, is a less powerful, more fleeting emotion than shame. When embarrassed, we

recognize that what we are experiencing is normal and we may even find humor in the situation (like walking out of the bathroom with toilet paper stuck to your shoe).

Humiliation ups the ante when compared to embarrassment, but it does not yet reach the emotional impact of shame. Brown cites Donald C. Klein, author of “The Humiliation Dynamic: An Overview,” who writes, “People believe they deserve their shame; they do not believe they deserve their humiliation.”⁶ Those experiencing humiliation may become indignant or even angry, but their emotions are not as traumatic as when they feel shame because they believe their humiliation is unfair or unwarranted.

Guilt and shame are both emotions of self-evaluation, according to Brown, but they have notable dissimilarities, as well. She points out the relative consensus among shame researchers that the difference lies in feeling “I did something bad” (guilt) versus “I am bad” (shame). As she says, “Shame is about who we are and guilt is about our behaviors.”⁷

Brown uses the example of cheating on a test to further demonstrate the difference. People who feel guilt after cheating may say to themselves, “I should not have done that. Cheating is not something I believe in or want to do.” This could impact future choices when confronted with additional opportunities to cheat. People feeling shame, however, may instead say to themselves, “I’m a liar and a cheat. I’m a bad person,” which can lead to paralysis or to continued destructive behavior.⁸

Arts and media consultant Beatrice L. Thomas, who regularly presents on artist development and cultural equity, operates from a similar perspective. Thomas’s belief that “shame stops the action” has led to establishing a formula for positive behavioral changes that is intended to avoid paralysis: guilt + motivation = responsibility.⁹

Problems arise, however, due to what Brown calls “term confusion” between guilt and shame. When people do not know the difference, they may actually be shaming someone in an attempt to motivate, which, as she reveals, often has the opposite effect.

So, what did I experience in the diaphragm lecture: embarrassment, humiliation, guilt, or shame? Brown’s definition of shame, noted above, can serve as a checklist. Fear of being ridiculed? Check. Feeling diminished or seen as flawed? Check. Feeling exposed and unworthy of acceptance or belonging? Check.

As a young teacher still in graduate school, I was afraid that my peers in the room were judging me for my ignorance. As a beginning pedagogue trying to gain as much understanding as I could, I was kicking myself for not already knowing what was presented. As someone who had spent years studying the voice, I was cursing my teachers for not having made this piece of information clear. As it turns out, these are all textbook responses to shame.

SHAME TURNING INTO BLAME

Brown believes that shame typically results in three primary “byproducts”: fear, disconnection, and blame.¹⁰ The first two are directly tied to each other; as Brown succinctly states, “Shame is about the fear of disconnection.”¹¹ As mentioned above, shame brings about a fear of being ridiculed in a way that jeopardizes connection and worthiness of acceptance. Naturally, we most fear becoming disconnected from those closest to us, like partners, family, and friends. But this fear also extends to other members of our communities, such as doctors, colleagues, and, notably, educators.

This fear of disconnection then tends to manifest itself as blame. As Brown says, “When we are feeling shame and fear, blame is never far behind.”¹² She points out that blame is sometimes turned inward and used against ourselves, while other times we strike out and blame others. Because shame also can induce feelings of powerlessness, we especially may lash out at those over whom we feel we hold power. Brown offers that this may include our children, our employees, or even those we encounter in customer service roles.¹³ Logically, that may extend to our students, as well.

Relational-cultural theorist Linda Hartling outlines the strategies of disconnection we use to deal with shame. She states that, in order to cope, some of us “move away” by withdrawing, hiding, silencing ourselves, and keeping secrets. Some of us “move toward” by seeking to appease and please. And some of us “move against” by trying to gain power over others, being aggressive, and using shame to fight shame.¹⁴

As a teacher, I feel shame when I do not have satisfactory answers or directions to help guide my students. I sometimes think, “Who am I to take their money when I am not able to help them as they deserve?” In those times, when I am engulfed in the frustration these situa-

tions elicit, I admit that there is an inclination within me to lash out. Surely, I have thought, if a vocal technique or approach has worked for me and has worked for other students whom I have taught, it must be the student’s fault if this same technique is not leading to their immediate success. I may believe this assessment even more strongly if the technique in question was presented to me by a beloved mentor or is advocated by prominent pedagogues in our community. Certainly all those people cannot be wrong, and certainly I am not the one failing here. When these thoughts swim around in my head, I risk defaulting to the blame game.

I have written in a previous column about a student in my studio who was having difficulty in a particular part of her range due to a yet undiscovered vocal pathology.¹⁵ Thankfully, she was able to receive an accurate medical diagnosis, treatment, and voice therapy that successfully addressed the issue. My student then revealed to me that this vocal issue had been nagging her for years, dating back to when she was under the instruction of a previous voice teacher. When I asked my student how her previous teacher had approached the problem, she said, “She just told me that I wasn’t working hard enough.”

If shame leads to blame, as Brown posits, it is possible that voice teachers who use blame in the studio have themselves been shamed in the past. What, then, are the ways teachers are often shamed, either by themselves or by others in the voice community? In what ways are they made to feel diminished, flawed, or unworthy of connection and acceptance? Teachers may feel shame if they do not have immediate answers to every technical problem that arises in the studio. Teachers may feel shame if their students make positive improvements or performance shifts in master classes with other teachers. Teachers may feel shame if they, or their students, develop voice injuries. Teachers may feel shame for not having sufficiently illustrious performing careers. Teachers may feel shame for not holding tenure track academic positions. Teachers may feel shame for not having a thorough knowledge of voice science or voice acoustics. Teachers may feel shame for not knowing how far the diaphragm descends in the body.

SHAME RESILIENCE AND EMPATHY

How can we avoid shaming and blaming? Brown encourages developing “shame resilience” by working to

recognize shame when we experience it, constructively moving through it, and consciously maintaining our authenticity during the process.¹⁶ The key to shame resilience, she says, is to practice empathy.

Brown defines empathy as “the skill or ability to tap into our own experiences in order to connect with an experience someone is relating to us.”¹⁷ As a skill, empathy requires intentional practice—it cannot be assumed to be innate or intuitive. It also necessitates understanding our own feelings and emotions if we hope to connect with others on an emotional level.

To this end, teachers who have experienced shame can draw upon those remembered feelings when extending empathy to their colleagues and students. If my experience is anything to go by, a single instance of shame can produce emotions that can be tapped into even years later.

Author Lynn Holding stresses the importance of empathy by referring to it as “a cornerstone of a civilized society.” It is, therefore, essential to the work we do in the voice studio and must be purposely honed. As Holding states, “Art and empathy have this in common: both are among our noblest attributes, yet both require deliberate practice.”¹⁸

CONCLUSION

As a complement to the story at the beginning of this column, I once had a conversation with a college professor who explained to me the exercise she uses each year on the first day of the voice pedagogy class she teaches. She says to her students, “Please raise your hand if you believe that, when you drink a glass of water, that water passes by your vocal folds.” She smiled as she was telling me this story, recounting how, when the majority of the students inevitably raise their hands, she takes on a serious expression, lowers her head, sighs, looks up again and says, “Well, we have a lot of work to do.”

I wonder how it would feel to be a student in that professor’s pedagogy class. I wonder how willing I would be to raise my hand or venture a guess if I knew it may elicit such a stern, disappointed response from the teacher—and on the first day of class, no less.

Recalling the diaphragm presentation once more, given that the presenter could not possibly know how each person in attendance would react, is it fair for me

to criticize him? In writing this article, I checked in with the friend who was with me at that presentation to see what he recalled from the event. He clearly remembers being there and feeling as though the presentation was informative. He also remembers the diaphragm question and, although he does not remember if he had been correct or incorrect in his own response, he remembers being put off by the tactic that seemed designed to embarrass some of the attendees. Clearly, people can respond differently to the same situation. As Brown describes, “shame is a highly individualized experience and there are no universal shame triggers.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, that experience reminds me to err on the side of empathy when I am teaching. This does not mean I avoid high standards, withhold honest assessments of students’ abilities, or promote the fragile mindset that being wrong is the end of the world. It does, however, encourage me to intentionally and diligently work to create an atmosphere where students feel supported in taking big leaps, where they can be genuinely receptive to constructive critique, and where they feel absolutely free to fail in the most glorious ways.

Brown asserts that we are biologically wired for connection. She admits that it may sound overly optimistic to believe that we can create a “culture of connection” simply by making different choices, but she insists it is possible. “Change doesn’t require heroics,” Brown says.²⁰ In the voice studio, change may be as simple as ensuring that our language is free from any phrases that may be received by our students as shaming or blaming.

NOTES

1. Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't): Making the Journey from “What Will People Think?” to “I Am Enough”* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, LLC, 2007), 30.
2. *Ibid.*, 20.
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 62–63.
6. Daniel Klein, “The Humiliation Dynamic: An Overview,” *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 12, no. 2 (1991): 93–121, as cited in Brown, 15.
7. Brown, 13.
8. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

9. Beatrice L. Thomas, "Pathway to Richer Relationships" (Zoom Lecture, University of Utah Department of Theatre, April 13, 2021).
10. Brown, 31.
11. Ibid., 20.
12. Ibid., 23.
13. Ibid.
14. Linda M. Hartling, Wendy Rosen, Maureen Walker, and Judith V. Jordan, "Shame and humiliation: From isolation to relational transformation," *The Complexity of Connection* (2004): 103–128, as cited in Brown, 89.
15. Brian Manternach, "Hesitant to Refer," *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 5 (May/June 2017): 545–546.
16. Brown, 31.
17. Ibid., 33.
18. Lynn Holding, *The Musician's Mind: Teaching, Learning, and Performance in the Age of Brain Science* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2020), 305.
19. Brown, 71.
20. Ibid., 285.

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A recipient of the NATS Voice Pedagogy Award, he has given presentations for the Voice Foundation, PAVA, VASTA, Summer Vocology Institute, University of Utah Voice Disorders Center, TEDxSaltLakeCity, and for NATS at chapter, regional, and national conferences.

An associate editor for the *Journal of Singing*, he is also a regular contributor to *Classical Singer* magazine. Additionally, he has written articles for the *Journal of Voice*, *Voice and Speech Review*, *VOICEPrints*, *College Music Symposium*, *NATS Inter Nos*, and the *Music Theatre Educators' Alliance Journal*. He also contributed a chapter to *The Voice Teacher's Cookbook* (Meredith Music, 2018).

Manternach has made solo appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and Sinfonia Salt Lake, among others, and his stage credits range from Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* to Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus* to Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

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