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INTRODUCTION

Scorched Earth

In the springtime where I live, the mountains begin to wake from their snowy slumber and burst into bright hues of green hugged by white-gray mists. The wet season here is infamously cold and very brief. The season typically lasts from mid-March to late-May and then the green slowly dissipates into the month of June into dry, high-desert climate.

In May 2020, the mountains were as lush and green as they've ever been. My family and I (along with the rest of the United States) were two months into the unprecedented school closures and mass quarantine. I worked for the local school district throughout this period as the Director of Special Education and also directly supported a handful of students with behavioral or mental health needs. The first month of the closures were now a blur of pure exhaustion, stress, and anxiety. The second month of the closure had slowly begun to feel a little more hopeful. Our incredible school staff and community did their very best to support students of all abilities and it seemed as if we had turned a corner.

It was on a bright mid-day afternoon in May 2020 when I saw a billowing pillar of smoke rising from the verdant mountains. Anyone living in the West is painfully aware how common wildfires are (in the summer and fall months, that is), but not in springtime. This fire was unusual and my stomach sank immediately. While the school closures were going as well as we could have expected, I knew. There was an invisible tension brewing among the kids in our community. I knew the smoke was not the result of a wildfire but a student (a teenager most likely). In fact, I felt deep down I probably knew the student. None of the students with whom I was currently working had a history of arson, but in some strange way, I knew it had to be one of them.

It didn't take long for the pillar of smoke to turn into a raging blanket of fire consuming an entire mountainside. Two days after the blaze was contained, I received a text message from one of our teachers assigned to work with a wonderful (but particularly challenging student) during the closure. The text message confirmed my fear. The fire was started by one of our students and not just any student—one with whom I have been involved for over seven years. I immediately texted the student's mother. A haunting thought entered my mind that moment and has never left: *"When history looks back on humanity, the oceans will be full of mothers' tears."*

My heart broke for this mother. I knew her as well as any school psychologist or district administrator could. We first met at a parent support group. I was newly hired in the district and a support group was being held at the local health department for parents of children with special needs. I sat in a small conference room and heard the story of her child. This mother worked long shifts, lost sleep worrying about her children, had a sophisticated self-awareness about her circumstances, and was seeking help anywhere she could find it. All I could type on my message was *“I’m so sorry. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”* She responded some time later with a vacant *“Thx.”*

Fortunately, no lives or homes were harmed, and heroic firefighters stopped the blaze efficiently. The mountainside, however, was scarred charcoal-black for months. This particular mountainside faced the main road out of my neighborhood. So, every morning for weeks and months, all I saw was scorched earth. The charred mountainside reminded me every single day how this mass school closure (while obviously necessary) was resulting in both literal and figurative scorched earth for so many families.

Clearly, this mother and family’s experience of scorched earth was unique, but many parents have been navigating their own personal “scorched earths” since the pandemic began. Stress, anxiety, and trauma are all factors associated with the global pandemic, and we’d be naive not to acknowledge how each of our families has been affected by them. Each of us experiences and responds to these factors in a wide variety of ways. So, as you casually flip or even deep dive through this guide book, the content has been crafted in a way to help any parent attempting to navigate their version of scorched earth.

A short time has passed since the fire and the mountainside has already begun to heal. Similarly, the student, her mother, and her family are healing as well. I share this story because (a) it totally happened and continues to serve as an uncanny real-life metaphor of how devastating this pandemic has been, and (b) at the center of the devastation was a mother and her kids each searching for help and guidance like so many other families right now.

Moving forward, we need to acknowledge how the pandemic has raised our collective anxiety and stress levels to “eleven.” We need to acknowledge that there are some very dire situations facing families, and families need tools and strategies right now. We need to acknowledge that schools play a critical role in both charging and draining batteries of kids and parents. We must acknowledge how structure, predictability, and routine may be our most effective antidotes to the stress and anxiety we are all facing. Finally, we have to acknowledge (and believe) that healing is possible, hope is real, and happiness is knowing all of this to be true. Now, let’s get busy.

HOW TO BATTLE GUILT AND SHAME

“Forgiveness is not an occasional act,
it is a constant attitude.”

—**Martin Luther King Jr.**

Every single parent training I’ve been a part of has been designed to give parents practical tools to help with the responsibilities, goals, and duties associated with parenting. In fact, when I started out in parent trainings, I foolishly believed that’s all parents needed—tools. It wasn’t until many years into my foray working with parents that I realized tools and strategies are only a small part of what parents needed. What I’ve discovered is, yes, parents still need tips and tools (and even tricks), but they all need to know how to effectively combat feelings of guilt and shame.

You see, there is a silent war being waged on parents every single day perpetrated by the destructive duo of guilt and shame. It is nasty warfare and particularly devastating because it is silent. It is silent because it takes place in the hearts and minds of parents. It is devastating because it wreaks havoc on our parenting. In fact, if parents were superheroes, guilt and shame would be the supervillains. There is not a single parenting tip, tool, or strategy that will work effectively unless we all enlist in the fight against guilt and shame. In order to effectively combat guilt and shame, we must know our enemies and why they are so destructive when it comes to our parenting. The famous Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu provided us with some solid, thousand-year-old wisdom before we enter battle:

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.”

Ready to know thy enemies? A lot of brave men and women have sacrificed their parenting skills to deliver the following intelligence briefing. All we can hope is that good soldiers like yourself can take this intelligence and apply it to your own parenting.

GUILT

Guilt is an uncomfortable feeling—a sting, alerting us to things we’ve done in comparison to our values. The feeling of guilt is our internal “I-know-better-but-didn’t-do-better” alarm. From this perspective, guilt isn’t all bad. However, most of us don’t conceptualize guilt as an alarm; we conceptualize guilt as a judgment. It is critical for us parents to accept the former and reject the latter. In an effort to help, University of Houston scholar and modern-day podcast guru Dr. Brené Brown expressed a statement I really think articulates the guilt-as-an-alarm concept:

“I’m just going to say it: I’m pro-guilt. Guilt is good. Guilt helps us stay on track because it’s about our behavior. It occurs when we compare something we’ve done—or failed to do—with our personal values.”

When we consider guilt as an alarm and not a judgment, we open up our parenting practices to some real and authentic growth. When we consider guilt as a judgment, we slam the door, lock it, and throw the keys in the river. The guilt-as-an-alarm concept has the potential to not just relieve some of the pressure we feel as parents, but it may even help catapult our abilities to a new level. I’m going to share two examples from parents I’ve worked with to illustrate the contrast. The first example is going to illustrate the pain and despair that can enter our lives when we conceptualize guilt as a judgment. The second example is going to illustrate how conceptualizing guilt as an alarm can lead to growth and positive change in families.

GUILT GRENADES

Rebecca was a single parent of two teenage boys. I met Rebecca through a parent support group I was facilitating to help parents manage aggressive behavior in their kids. She had just started a new job and expressed how guilty she felt for actually enjoying work more than coming home to “parent.” Most of the parents in the group acknowledged this sentiment. Work can be a place where our skill sets tend to match the challenges we face. Parenting can be a domain in our lives where our skill sets do not match the challenges we face.

After we commiserated with Rebecca, she began crying. (If you ever want to witness empathy at work, attend a parent support group. Parents just “get each

other.”) Rebecca was immediately comforted by the parents sitting beside her and other parents even began crying with her. These feelings are real for so many parents and they rarely (if ever) get to express them. One particularly enlightened parent in the group named Darlene gave some comforting and sage advice to Rebecca (and to each of us): “*Rebecca, you have a job because you care for your kids. You enjoy your job because you’re good at what you do. Life has given us plenty to worry about; we shouldn’t go on worrying about our blessings; we should be counting them instead.*”

Rebecca heard Darlene’s words that night, but in the weeks following, I’m not sure she listened. Like many of us, Rebecca was holding on tight to a “guilt grenade.” The strange thing about the guilt grenade is that we’re the ones pulling the pin. V. Mark Durand, optimism researcher and author of the brilliant book *Optimistic Parenting* (2011), has been attempting to help parents avoid this self-sabotaging behavior by engaging in the simple activity of *disputation*. Disputation is a basic exercise wherein we challenge our own beliefs. Why challenge our beliefs? Well, sometimes what we believe can be harmful. Sometimes what we believe can be helpful. When we challenge them, we can find out which is which.

We engage in this activity by asking ourselves the following two questions:

1. Is what I’m thinking *really* true?
2. Is what I’m thinking useful?

The group (including Rebecca) participated in this activity. Here are Rebecca’s responses:

1. I really do enjoy work more than parenting. When I go to work, my opinion is valued. When I attempt to parent, my opinion is not valued. So, yes, this is really true. I truly feel guilty about this.
2. I don’t know how to answer this. I don’t have any help. My boys hate me and I would hate me, too if I was my mom.

Rebecca pulled the pin on the guilt grenade. Every parent in the group (myself included) witnessed the explosion. Rebecca’s beliefs were harming her self-worth and her ability to cope with the challenges of being a single parent to two teenage boys. Rebecca no longer needed a parent support group; she needed some intensive therapy to help her learn new ways to cope with guilt and her diminishing self-worth. This scenario was a heartbreaking (and an all-too-familiar) progression for those of us working in community mental health capacities. We attempt to offer free parent support groups and even a little counseling, but so many parents need more. Of course we attempted to set Rebecca up with more intensive services, but the mental healthcare system is not very convenient for busy parents. Taking the

precious little time in our lives to focus on ourselves when we may already be pulling the pins on guilt grenades is inherently difficult. The best we could do was follow up with her children to help reduce the stress (if any) coming from the school setting. This was not ideal, but I guess it was something.

A SHOT IN THE ARM, YOU KNOW?

Lindsay was a single parent of three. We met for the first time at a school meeting known as an IEP Eligibility meeting. A few weeks prior, she had requested a psychologist to conduct an evaluation for Trent, her first grader. Lindsay and her school team wanted to know more about his intellectual abilities (problem-solving, memory) and independent living (social, self-help skills). I was the psychologist assigned to the case. These types of evaluations are pretty routine for school psychologists and they're always kinda fun. Basically, we present kids of all ages and abilities with some standardized questions, puzzles, and situations to work through. We make observations and attempt to understand both the strengths and weaknesses the child possesses. Trent was a blast to work with. He was happy, motivated, and curious about the strange puzzles and objects in my testing kits.

The results of my evaluation presented the profile of a little guy with some obvious strengths in his ability to engage with peers and adults socially. He had no problems navigating his home and school environments, and he was more than capable communicating his wants and needs. The evaluation did reveal that Trent was really struggling with his short-term memory, which had a significant impact on his reading and math skills. I presented as much at my meeting with Lindsay and Trent's school team. Lindsay was grateful for the information and had a bunch of really great questions. I don't remember them all, but one question stuck with me:

"Just be straight with me: Is this my fault? Where did I screw up?"

I was taken aback and felt a little embarrassed if my explanation prompted any feeling of responsibility of Trent's learning difficulties on Lindsay. I responded with, *"Oh God no, Lindsay. This is nobody's fault. Not Trent's, not yours. This happens. Kids (and adults) learn differently. Trent and his school team are just going to need more strategies to help him. We're going to give you some strategies, too. Trent is good to go! We love finding out this stuff; it's what we do. We're all going to work together. This stuff happens across child development; it's super common and it's nobody's fault."*

Lindsay began stoically wiping away some tears. She looked at her hands on the table and then looked back up toward me and said, *"Since Trent was a baby, I had an intuition that something was a little different. I have felt so guilty that I never told anyone."*

I am so relieved to be able to finally know. I want you all to know I am actually happy. I am actually excited. I'm ready to tackle this. This is a shot in the arm, you know?"

You could not wipe the smiles off our faces at that meeting. Lindsay had been harboring guilt for a long time. The school team (myself included) sat in awe as we witnessed a parent reject the guilt of her past and commit to a better future. Lindsay didn't know it, but she was kind of on a stage for all of us. In Act 1 of the meeting, we witnessed the progression of worry and despair. In Act 2, we witnessed courage, and then, in Act 3, we witnessed a standing-ovation-worthy performance. It was as if Lindsay just needed some permission to not feel guilty. When she got that permission, she was ready to tackle the world, and guess what? She did.

Trent blossomed and while he certainly continued to face challenges across literacy and numeracy, he had Mom in the corner every step of the way. If Trent's school team missed a step, Lindsay was there to rally. If Trent wasn't pushing himself, Lindsay was there to rally. When Lindsay needed someone to rally for her, she would not be shy in her requests. You see, Lindsay used the sting of guilt as an alarm, not as a poison. In fact, one could argue it was a shot in the arm for all of us, you know?

BREAKING THE SHAME CYCLE

I will be referring to two super negative, soul-crushing cycles for all parents in this book. This section is dedicated to understanding one of those cycles: the Shame Cycle (and how to break it). The other cycle will be covered in the Discipline 101 section.

As devastating as the feeling of guilt can be, hopefully Lindsay's example illustrates how we can flip the switch on guilt and use it for a positive, motivational fuel. I wish we could do the same with shame, but unfortunately, shame is not "flipable." In fact, shame is just a black hole. Shame can suck each of us in and trap us into a cycle of pain and misery. As parents, we have to recognize shame as our greatest nemesis. The famous Austrian psychoanalyst Carl Jung referred to shame as the "soul-eating emotion." As scary as all of this build-up is, the scariest part is how easily shame can trap us. Allow me to share a personal example to illustrate:

In March 2020, the Springer home was not unlike thousands of other homes across the United States. My wife and I were home with our four school-age kids. In my role as a director of special education, the first week of the closure was full of stress and anxiety. The second week of the closure was full of awe as I witnessed (remotely) principals, teachers, and special educators jump into action like an online army of special forces. In my role as a father, the first week, I was pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed working from home. I thoroughly enjoyed "taking five" with my kids, eating lunch with them, and watching what they were learning

from their teachers online. My wife and I laughed (and despaired) at how bad we were at teaching our own kids—and then, it happened: Shame crept into our veins and our brains.

Shame whispered thoughts into our minds like: *“You aren’t good at this. Your kids are going to fall behind. Why don’t you know more about grammar and syntax? Why is a basic schedule so hard for you to implement? You can’t even get your second grader to sit and attend to a single thing at home.”*

Every shameful thought that crept in wasn’t just the sting of guilt, but the noxious gas of shame. Like any noxious gas, shame works quickly on its victims. The feelings we had of hope and togetherness were destroyed in seconds. Remarkably, the destruction of hope wasn’t even the most harmful effect of the gas. Once we submitted to the shame, we attempted to counter the shame by overcompensating and actually becoming more indulgent and permissive with our kids. Instead of networking with our kids’ teachers to get pointers and tips, we began caving on our morning routines. Our teenage kids were sleeping in way too late and our youngest kids were up in the morning zoning out on screens. Now, it’s worth noting, from the outset of the closures, my wife and I did grant ourselves a little bit of grace, just as we encouraged other parents to do the same. Our indulgence and permissiveness came later in the game, when we knew better. This was when we began to lose our battle with shame. We entered the cycle because the more indulgent and permissive we became with our kids, the worse our parenting got, which (painfully) led to more shame and the cycle just went on and on.

Our children became conflicted because on one side, they enjoyed the indulgence and permissiveness, but on the other, they were desperately craving more structure and routine. Our kids toggled back and forth from acting like spoiled brats to attempting to parent us! It got ugly. It was about three months into this fog of the shame cycle where we hit rock bottom. We knew we were in the Shame Cycle. As it turns out, our awareness of the existence of the Shame Cycle was the first key in breaking it. My wife and I had a tiny advantage over the Shame Cycle because we knew (a) it existed and (b) we knew there was a way to break it. How? Forgiveness. Shame possesses no arsenal, no defense strong enough to fend off our ability to forgive. Who do we forgive? Everybody, but honestly, we’ve got to start with forgiving ourselves. Parenting is the most complicated responsibility most of us will ever face because so much emotion is entangled in the process of caregiving for children. It doesn’t matter if they’re our biological kids, our adoptive kids, our stepkids, or our grandkids! None of us are fully equipped to navigate the emotional landmines buried in these relationships. I wish I could explain exactly why these relationships act like exposed nerve endings of emotion, but really, it’s just because they are of value. When we prize these little (and even grown adult) children so highly, it is impossible to not be emotionally invested. Additionally,

there are most likely some deep, subatomic-level attachments we can't even begin to understand when it comes to our progeny. Honestly, it's so complex, it's not even worth attempting to explain. All we need to know is that (a) parenting is hard and mostly a ton of work, (b) parenting is rewarding (some of the time), and (c) parenting will be complicated forever because emotions (and relationships) are complicated.

When we accept the complexity of parenting, we just need to take it easy on ourselves. If we think (even for a second) that some parent or family has all this complexity figured out, that's the shame gas talking. Trust me, nobody has the complexity figured out. So, we actively need to forgive ourselves when we are not at our best. (In fact, it's silly to attempt to be "at our best" all the time anyway.)

As with all things parenting, even forgiveness can be difficult for us. One key component to making forgiveness less difficult for us is to understand that it requires a short memory. In sports, this type of short-term-memory forgiveness is critical for high performance. If a ball is dropped or an error made, elite athletes simply forgive themselves and move on to make the next play. The sting of failure can be crazy brief—if we allow it. When athletes focus on their mishaps instead of moving on, their careers are short-lived. It is no different with parenting. Mistakes are going to be inevitable. In fact, we can just plan on a few every day. The trick is learning from our mistakes and trying to do better the next opportunity we get.

In summary, as parents, we will only win the battle against guilt and shame by leveraging guilt as our internal alert system to areas of improvement in our lives. We will rely on the powerful weapon of forgiveness by actively forgiving our partners, our kids, and most importantly, ourselves. In this analogy, I am purposefully conceptualizing forgiveness as a sword more than a shield. In other words, our forgiveness must be active every single day, not merely a defensive act. We must fight daily to forgive in order to keep shame at bay. Finally, please understand there will certainly be times when we can indulge our kids just for the fun of it. There will even be times where we should step back and be permissive of our kids' choices or behavior. The trick is just not allowing ourselves to be indulgent or permissive in response to our shame, that's all.