



Curt Thompson: [00:02](#) The thing that we most long for becomes the place where evil will do its work.

Recorded: [00:16](#) You're listening to The Faith & Work Podcast, where we explore what it means to be a follower of Christ in the workplace.

Dustin Moody: [00:28](#) Hey everybody, this is Dustin Moody, Director of Communications at Denver Institute for Faith & Work. Thanks for listening to The Faith & Work Podcast, I'm joined today Joanna Meyer, our Director of Events and Sponsorships. Joanna, how's it going?

Joanna Meyer: [00:39](#) Hi, Dustin. It's going really, really well. Really well. We're in between events, so I have a little bit of breathing room right now in my schedule.

Dustin Moody: [00:45](#) Yeah, well that's great. Hopefully the breathing room will help you think about this next question.

Joanna Meyer: [00:49](#) Oh, I don't know.

Dustin Moody: [00:50](#) Our podcast-

Joanna Meyer: [00:50](#) You just have questions.

Dustin Moody: [00:51](#) Our podcast topic today is Shame, which everyone I'm sure is excited to hear more about. What do you think of when you think of shame, or do you have an example or an experience from your past where you felt shame?

Joanna Meyer: [01:02](#) Oh, man. Dustin, sometimes I feel like I'm the member of the team that gets to share her inner secrets. No matter what... but yes, I have experienced shame in many areas of life. But I was thinking about an experience that it happened a few months ago at work. I felt I was cornered on something that I hadn't met expectations and it was just this visceral physical response. My face just started to burn, the worst sunburn. I could just feel the heat climbing up my neck and burning in my face and my heart felt like it was starting to pound out of my chest. It was such a tangible expression of how I had felt. I felt I had let somebody down. And I'm sure I'm not alone, I think shame has lots of different expressions, but that physical component is what makes it so memorable.

Dustin Moody: [01:44](#) I should just applaud you for being so vulnerable appropriately at work.

Joanna Meyer: [01:47](#)

Thank you.

Dustin Moody: [01:48](#)

You do always get to share the examples, but they're helpful and they're useful and people relate to them and I think they can relate to the discussion we're going to have today. Our guest today is Curt Thompson. Curt, is a psychiatrist in private practice in Falls Church, Virginia, and he's the founder of Being Known, an organization that develops teaching programs, seminars and resource materials to help people explore the connection between interpersonal neurobiology and Christian spirituality with the goal of leading to genuine change and transformation.

Dr. Thompson, is the author of *The Soul of Shame*, and *Anatomy of the Soul*. Two great books if you're interested in learning more about shame and its impact on Christian spirituality. And he's also the host of *Scatter Course*, that we'll talk about towards the end of the discussion if you're interested in checking more about that. Curt, thanks so much for joining us on the Faith & Work Podcast.

Curt Thompson: [02:33](#)

It's great to be with you. Thanks for having me.

Dustin Moody: [02:35](#)

Yeah, absolutely. We're excited for the conversation and I think one of the things that would help us in the discussion today is just sort of setting a baseline for what we mean when we talk about shame. It seems like people might have different understandings or even backgrounds related to the concept. When you talk about shame, what are you referring to? And more importantly, how can we think about it from a Christian perspective?

Curt Thompson: [02:55](#)

Well, one of the things that I usually do when this question comes up, and it's a completely reasonable question around a definition of this, I usually say, I don't know that having a definition of it is what I work with, but I do work with a description of it. And I like to say that we begin to describe shame first and foremost where it has and actually begins in our experience. And our experience is that it is first and foremost a physical phenomenon. It is a neurophysiologic event that can begin and we can experience it as early as 15 to 18 months of age. It is something that we first sense and we sense it by virtue of what we are receiving through our senses of tone, of voice, of body language, of eye contact. Of a whole range of different things that creates a certain, this what I call disintegrating tone for our bodies.

We have witnessed perhaps, our listeners have witnessed for instance, a dog that appears to be ashamed. You don't have to be a human to look and to know that even lower animals can experience this. And what physiologically happens is at least two fold. One thing is that we tend to have a certain separation or a disintegration of different functions of the mind. For instance, anybody who's been ashamed knows what it's like to have some difficulty. When you're in the middle of feeling ashamed you have a difficulty thinking, you have a difficulty making sense of what you feel. You have difficulty turning your eyes towards someone because the very fact that I'm going to look at somebody actually heightens this sense that I get then of this kind of caving in the center of my chest.

I have a tendency literally to turn my head down, turn my shoulders in and around, turn my body and gaze away from people so that in the same way that my mind and all of its functions. But I sense what I image, what I feel, what I think are being disconnected from one another. At the same time, I as a whole person tend to be disconnected from other people. I turn away from other people. Allan Schore, who is a neuropsychologist tends to liken the physical experience of shame in terms of what happens in a say, centered transmission automobile.

As you're motoring along with the accelerator in play it starts to decelerate. What happens if that car comes to a complete stop without the use of a clutch? While we know that that car doesn't just stop, it stops rather violently. Shame is the neurophysiologic event of what happens when we are just moving along in our daily lives. And this could be a child just at play, this could be someone asking a question in a boardroom. This could be someone offering an idea in a conversation. We are in go-mode. We are moving along.

We are doing so in a way that is relatively innocent and confident and expected, and all at once the engine decelerates. There is a certain sense in which that go-mode is transitioning into a stop mode and this involves different parts of the brain's activity. But the key element any time we move from a go-mode to a stop mode beginning in childhood, anytime we move from go to stop, the thing that we need to have in play is a clutch. And the clutch when it comes to our brains is an interpersonally connected relationship.

Joanna Meyer:

[06:52](#)

Wow.

Even if as a parent I have to say no to a child even forcefully, because that child might be moving into a place of danger. To say no but still maintain connection relationally means that I actually protect that child's brain from the jolting effect of what happens when the brain has to decelerate and no relationship is there. Another simple example is you could be in a conversation with two or three other people at a party. We've all been in this situation where someone is offering a comment here and there and then you offer a comment. And the conversation just keeps going without anybody acknowledging what you've said, we've all been there in that moment. And it's not a very big deal, but my brain experiences my having offered something being in go-mode as being just completely cutoff. It's ignored because there's no relational acknowledgement of that, that I've said anything.

I might have even a minor version of feeling somewhat embarrassed. Somewhat I feel bad because I'm uninteresting and I then come up with all these narratives, of course. When my physicality experiences my narrative, I have to come up with a story to explain this. We would say then that we start to manage our shame by telling stories about it. If you look at the literature, the scientific literature on shame, you'll read literature that tells us a little bit about the neurophysiology of shame. But what's most important about it is for us to recognize that this neurophysiologic event is always taking place in the context of some story that we are telling about ourselves.

And that becomes the real event, it becomes the key element here. And this is where we turn to the biblical narrative when we say, "Look, shame isn't just something that happens to happen to be in the universe." We don't like it, but we have to manage it. It actually is in the biblical narrative one of the things that evil actively uses to disintegrate our human relationships. Primarily then for the purpose not only just of making us feel bad, but disconnecting me from other people in order to prevent and shear off our capacity to create the world of beauty and goodness that God has intended for us to create.

One of the things that we like to talk about when it comes to vocation and work is that shame is not just a way of feeling that, right? We like to say in the business that when I feel guilty, that word that we use, guilt, which is a word that represents a state of mind that developmentally we don't really begin to encounter until we're about three, four, or five years of age. I feel guilty because I've done something bad. I feel shame because I am bad. And that's the story. That's the story

equivalent, if you will, that tracks the neuro-development of these emotional states that are neurophysiologically mediated.

When it gets to the point of being in school or being at work, this effect gets to the point where if I am telling myself, "I'm not enough, I haven't done this enough, I should have done that. I should have done this," over and over and over again, There will be all kinds of ways in which that will minimize, that will truncate, that will shear off my ability to create in the way I was made to create.

Dustin Moody: [10:36](#) I'm thinking about the biblical narrative that you mentioned. I'm thinking about the story in Genesis and the creation narrative, and I'm reminded of one of the most depressing questions in the Bible, at least of my opinion, when God asked Adam and Eve, "Who told you you were naked?"

Joanna Meyer: [10:48](#) We just read that this week.

Dustin Moody: [10:49](#) Yeah, we read that this week. Talk a little bit more about, I love how you said guilt is something that I've done. Shame is that I'm a bad person. What can we learn from that biblical account about how shame impacts our relationship with Christ and relationship with God?

Curt Thompson: [11:03](#) Well, I think one of the first things that's important to recognize is that throughout the biblical narrative, the Bible is replete with moments in which it interdigitates the notion of sin with a notion of shame. That's not the only thing that it connects and juxtaposes sin with, but sin and shame often run together. I think of Paul's words in Romans where he talks about how we glory in our suffering because suffering leads to perseverance, which leads to character, which leads to hope. And hope in the latest NIV translation, does not put us to shame. I think about shame as it plays out in the crucifixion motif, for instance. And the notion is that shame shows up early in the biblical narrative at the end of Genesis 2, and then is throughout Genesis 3.

Because I think it is so primally embedded in the nature of who we are and our sense of who we are as human beings. We have a hard time separating ourselves from it. With guilt, it's this thing that I've done and that action is separate from me, but shame is almost like it's in my genes. It's in my chromosome, it's difficult for me to get away from that. And one of the things I think that the biblical narrative points out from the very beginning is that evil does its work, first of all, by isolating the conversation. Evil does not say to the woman and to the man,

he doesn't turn to the man who's apparently not willing to speak and say, "Adam, what do you think about this?" Evil does not say to the woman and to the man, "Hey, let's go get God or let's wait for God to come around so we could have a corporate conversation here. Because I think evil is smart and knows that shame operates in isolation most effectively.

One of the first things that we see in that story in Genesis 3, is the isolating nature of the conversation that takes place between the serpent and the woman. And then even out of that, right? We read that and we hear God coming in the cool of the evening in His walk. And we hear God's questions, "Where are you? Who told you you were naked?" And the very nature of how we hear that question is shaped by our shame. How is it that we hear it as a question that almost feels threatening? "Who told you? What is this thing that you have done?" And so forth and so on.

And like one wonders, what would it have been like if Adam had just said, "This is my issue. Do with me what you will." What if God was really, I believe that He was really looking for a conversation. And this is the other point about shame. We live in a world that insists that we must be self-made people. We live in a world that insists that we must do everything we can to minimize vulnerability, to minimize weakness, never reveal that, play to our strengths and continue to accentuate that. When in fact, some of the most beautiful things that we make, we do so explicitly because we are vulnerable and because we need the help of other people. With shame, we are unable to heal ourselves. We need the presence of other people to come and find us because we are not prone to looking to someone else to help us when we're in the middle of that kind of experience.

Joanna Meyer:

[14:37](#)

Great. I'm just sitting here feeling the gravity of this conversation because in some ways it's like you said, it's so primal. It's just fundamental to the human experience. This is how we manage these feelings of not measuring up and something is wrong with us. And I'm also feeling the gravity of it because I realize that it plays so powerfully through people's daily works. I have a hunch that our listeners probably feel that too. We can all have those moments where we have experienced shame either in relationships with others, but I definitely think in the context of our daily work. I want to ask a little bit more about the sense of relational connectedness being done to people help move through those moments of shame. What does healthy community look like and how can it

help us move out of shame into just a healthy experience of both the goodness and the brokenness in all of our lives?

Curt Thompson: [15:25](#)

All right. Well, I think one thing that is important for us to recognize is that... one phrase I often give to people is we take our family to work every day. We always take our family to work.

Joanna Meyer: [15:41](#)

So true.

Curt Thompson: [15:43](#)

And what that means is that whatever the social constructs that I grew up with was, and how shame played itself out in that context, I'm likely to A, gravitate toward places of work that reflect that. And B, I will then tend to repeat that when I go to that place of work. What that means then if I'm actually in charge of a workplace, if I'm in charge of a business, it's going to be helpful and important for me to recognize that everybody who is my employee are bringing their families to work. And everybody is going to come with the desire to do good work but always recognizing that shame is going to want to play itself out in some way, shape or form.

The sooner I am as a leader in the workplace, the sooner I am able to with intention acknowledge that this dynamic is in play no matter what kind of work we're doing. That this dynamic is in play and what we really want to do is to create a space where, of course, people are using their strengths and their gifts. But we're also, we're going to have a regular opportunity to give people the chance to name, where are you feeling vulnerable? Where are you feeling you're not doing the work that you really want to do? Where are you worried that you're going to be found out by your supervisor, by your boss, and be discovered to not be enough here? We want to know those things. Because the sooner that you're able to name those things, the sooner you will no longer have to be burning energy protecting yourself against being found out, and that energy will then be available for you to do the creative work that you want to do here.

Moreover, I as your boss, your colleague, your friend, whoever, I'm going to be in a better position to be doing what is necessary to be supportive to you in that place of vulnerability and weakness. But here's the thing. Even as a leader, if I'm the CEO of the company, I actually create opportunities for other people who are my subordinates to grow and flourish when I reveal in proper context of course, relative vulnerabilities that I also feel about my position and about the work that I'm doing. In offering my vulnerability, I also create space for other people

around me even who are my subordinates to do work that enables all of us to do our work that much more effectively.

Darkness, evil, shame has a very difficult time surviving when we are with intention and on purpose. Recognizing that it's going to be in play and then taking steps to with some kind of regular cadence and rhythm, create opportunities for people to name what that is, bringing the light to it. And so as literally to neuro-biologically and interpersonally deepen and strengthen the connections between people and within people's own individual minds in order to create greater opportunity for the creation of the beauty that they're there to create.

Joanna Meyer: [19:05](#)

One thing we often say around here is that when a person is living in Christ and leading in the marketplace, it has the potential to transform any area of their business operations. You're sharing and I'm thinking, how in the world would this change what performance reviews and the feedback process look like in most companies? If people don't understand the scope of integrating faith and work, I just think it can touch anything including how you sit down with a colleague and really talk with them about their growth and their performance. Have you ever seen anyone put these concepts into motion in a marketplace setting and how has it played out?

Curt Thompson: [19:40](#)

I don't know. In our practice we don't... we don't have a large practice. But I would say that in our small practice of clinicians, this is one of the things that we do on a regular basis. We have a bit of a mantra in which we say, "We are really only able to expect our clinicians to offer to others the degree of wellbeing that they are being offered by the leaders in our practice." I can't expect clinicians to do what they're not getting, to offer to their patients if they're not getting the same thing from me. In terms of, again, as we say in everything from the cadence of weekly staff meetings to annual reviews, creating opportunities for people to regularly name the places that they really want to grow, but also to name the places where they are worried, the places where they're afraid, the places where they could name their greatest fears, where do they feel most vulnerable.

I have colleagues in other... most of my work place opportunities come with other clinicians in the sort of kind of work that I do, but I also have a lot of opportunity to work in fields of education. And one of my closest friends is a headmaster of a Christian school here in the area. Some of these principles have been ones that he has put directly into play. Creating a space for teachers, for parent volunteers and

even for students to have the space to name the places where they feel most vulnerable. As we like to say, "If I'm going to be fully known by God and others, I don't just want to be fully known in terms of the things that I'm really good at, but also the places about myself that I am feeling most vulnerable, the places I even might hate the most."

And doing so I would say, and again, I don't have all the ways in which they're actually literally measuring this. But we do know that over the course of time my friend was doing this with in a teaching setting has found that his teachers are far more likely than to go on to take the kinds of proper risks in developing a new curriculum and trying new things with their students, so forth and so on. That has just led to ongoing growth both in the teacher's own professional development as well as what they then witnessed in the growth of their students.

Dustin Moody:

[21:59](#)

Yeah, that's amazing. Curt, I want to talk a little bit more about vulnerability and particularly vulnerability in the context of work. And I'll be honest, it's a challenging area for me because vulnerability in itself is not natural probably for most of us, but I feel particularly for myself especially at work. It doesn't feel natural for me to kind of go to my boss and say, "This is a really tough season. There's a lot going on, I feel behind on everything. But it seems that shame is speaking into my work." And I want to read a quote that you wrote in *The Soul of Shame*, as we were preparing for this interview.

And you wrote that, "God desires us to live like He lives. Thus to be created in God's image also refers to our having creative dominion in the world. And to be maximally creative also requires that we are vulnerable. This is not the message that we hear in most of our interactions around the water cooler. We are pressured to do things well on our own and to the degree that we cannot, shame is waiting for us." What are the appropriate areas in practice of vulnerability to combat that shame in the workplace?

Curt Thompson:

[22:59](#)

It's a great question, Dustin. And I think that part of the challenge... I realized that our audience that's listening may or may not be in a position of being able to set the tone in their organizations. To your point, rightly so, what does it mean for me to go to my boss and say, "This is where I'm feeling vulnerable," essentially? The first thing I would say is for your listeners who are in positions of leadership, who are in positions where they are actually in charge of somebody else, this kind of work begins at the top. And this is why we say the gospel

narrative is such a big deal. God does not stand at a distance and ask us to be vulnerable because He created us naked. God actually gets naked, right?

This is the incarnation. This is Christmas, this is crucifixion. Jesus comes into the world and He goes out of the world naked. There is the sense in which God is initiating this. God is saying, "You don't have to be vulnerable, you are vulnerable." The question is, are you actually going to be willing to live according to the way that you're actually made? Practically speaking, I would say that there are some places that people can begin. If I am in a position of leadership, I want to announce an initiate and say to people, to name with people, "This is who I want us to be."

For instance, I would want you not to be going to your boss and saying, "This is where I'm feeling vulnerable." I would want your boss coming to you and asking you that question so that you're not the one who, in the same way that God comes to find Adam and Eve. That Jesus comes in and the first words in John's gospel we find Him when He's talking to John the Baptist disciples. His first words are, "What do you want?" Those are questions of vulnerability God is pursuing.

Those of us who are not as easily positioned in roles of leadership, I would say that the first thing that you want to do then is find someone with whom you do have some semblance of confidence, some semblance of safety in being able to say, "I'd like to talk about where I really want to be better but I'm afraid that I'm not getting to where I want to be. This is what I want." Leading with, "Here's what I want, but here's where I'm afraid that I don't have enough and not doing enough and where I could use help." Beginning with people that we have some sense of confidence with.

And the primary reason for doing this is not chosen just because when I say these things to someone, that person is going to have all kinds of answers for me. Where they're going to say, "Oh, all you need to do is this and all your problems will be solved." The point is that when my brain is less alone with the anxiety that the shame tends to generate, if I'm less anxious, I'm actually more open to two new ideas. I'm actually able to think more creatively and I'm actually more able to take the kind of proper risks that I need to take. This is difficult because as I said, we do live in a world that accentuates and highlights our ability to individually solve our own problems, but the problem is definitely that's not the world we live in. We live in a world in

which problems are most effectively solved by communities of people.

Dustin Moody: [26:24](#)

Yeah. That's true, as much as I hate to admit that in my own work.

Joanna Meyer: [26:29](#)

I was sitting here thinking, "You're not supposed to get teary during podcasts, Joanna," But this is such potent content. I think about in our life here at Denver Institute, how this has played out and I can hear feedback and start experiencing shame pretty quickly in my work. And Brian [Huguley 00:44:45], who I report to has learned that. And it's fascinating because when he gives feedback he'll always frame it in context. We were doing a post event review recently and he said, "Okay, I want you to hear that this was a great event." And he always frames it, "This was good, you have no reason to be ashamed." And then he'll say, "But here's something I noticed." And it's amazing just how that framing of he's relationally behind me and supporting me. The overall impression was good, it was great. I'm able to hear the feedback and really run with it so much better. I think if a person who's a supervisor can follow Brian's example just in that simple way, that's a powerful way towards breaking the shame cycle.

Curt Thompson: [27:28](#)

Right, right.

Joanna Meyer: [27:28](#)

I have a question for you, a little different. I have been thinking a lot about women in work lately because that's one area that I help lead here at the Institute. And I'm curious to know how shame shows up differently for men and women, if it shows up differently.

Curt Thompson: [27:45](#)

It's a question that I'm often asked and I would say that functionally, neurophysiologically and so forth fundamentally that way, we don't really know that there are any differences in terms of what we actually experience in our bodies in between us and other people. I do sense that sometimes any particular way in which we are engaging the world that we sense is really valuable. The thing that we most long for becomes the place where evil will do its work. For instance, if I, this is true when we've done survey work, when we explore it. If I were to talk to 50 men who are adults married, if they do or don't have children. If you were to ask them what is the single most important worry that they have, and it doesn't matter how effective they are in their work, they could be superstars in their work. They will tell you that they worry. If they're not doing well

enough at their job they'll say like, "I'm worried about my job that I'm not doing well enough."

And if they're doing great at their job, they'll say, "I think I'm worried that's something is probably going to go wrong with my work." They're worried about being able to provide, to produce, and in that sense being competent in that way though it is actually always ultimately about connecting them to relationships. Being competent in that way would be a way that they become aware of how easily they can become ashamed around performance, around competence.

With women who are often more relationally aware, meaning that they tend to think in terms of relationship more so than men tend to think in those terms. Not because one is more relationally-driven, because ultimately I think we're all deeply relationally-driven. They might be more shamed because they may have some greater sense of acuity. Some acute awareness that they're going to be cut off relationally from someone.

Now, I just want to say those are just surface level ways in which men and women might be different in many cases, but not all. I know many women who are highly effective folks, who are in CEO positions who would say the same thing about making sure that they can provide, they would say that same thing. I think what's most important is that people be aware that this phenomenon in whatever way it presents, that it is in play at all times potentially and it's helpful for people to be able to identify, what are the ways in which shame is most likely to try to get my attention? What is shame most likely to do to interrupt my sense of being okay as a person?

You hear all kinds of reports recently, especially, there is a growing proportion of women in the workforce. And with that growing proportion of women in the workforce, you also have the other storyline that comes right behind it, which is, what do we do about childcare? Right? And who takes on the felt burden of, "Am I enough to make sure that my child will have enough?" Well, it's not surprising that we hear more stories from women because they are often primary caregivers to children about, "How I am not able to be enough for all of these different people and to do all these different things."

Joanna Meyer: [31:37](#) Amen.

Dustin Moody: [31:37](#) Yup.

- Curt Thompson: [31:39](#) And we would want to say that men don't think about those many different things because they're just as worried about the one thing that they have to do.
- Dustin Moody: [31:48](#) Yup.
- Joanna Meyer: [31:48](#) That's it, exactly. We had a local pastor who is doing survey of women in her congregation. She did kind of an informal focus group asking them about how they experienced work. And even though those women were in a wide variety of roles with differing levels of responsibility, that sense of how do I accommodate two very valuable callings of valuing my career and my creative potential there, and also my commitments to relationship and home, were constantly at play to a degree that you didn't see the men. The men could be a little more compartmentalized. Like, "Now I focus on work and I'll feel distinct pressures there." But for women it was like there was always static in the background. If she was at work, she was thinking about how she wasn't worried... if she's worried about measuring at home if she is at home, she was worried about not kind of measuring up and fulfilling her calling it work. And I think that's a little different kind of static maybe than some men experience.
- Curt Thompson: [32:40](#) Right. And I also think though that this is where, for instance, like the work that you all are doing, one of the ways that it's so important, the work that you're doing is it has been some time since we had rigorous theologies of work developed, right? I mean, it's not like the work that you do is to kind of commonplace theology that's taught in 90% of the churches across the country. Why the work that you're doing is so crucially important is because it's raising our awareness and curiosity about what is the role that God has for work in our lives.
- And how does that then help us understand the role that work is intended to provide for the flourishing of relationships? And what does that mean for us to then bring males and females together in marriages and then with children? What's the grand purpose for all that? I think that the fact that we're even having this conversation is going to be such a benefit for so many because somebody needs to be doing the hard work of thinking about, how do we offer a biblical perspective on all these kinds of things?
- Joanna Meyer: [33:58](#) So fascinating.

Dustin Moody:

[33:59](#)

Curt, before we wrap up, I'd be curious to hear a little bit more just briefly. You've talked a lot about the role of vulnerability. A lot of your work you talk about the power of knowing and being known. What are some of the other practices, healthy practices that people use to face shame and to deal with it and to move on from it?

Curt Thompson:

[34:16](#)

Well, I think one of the things that when we talk about this notion of knowing and being known, those are kind of broad brushstroke phrases. When it comes right down to it, I think the things that we emphasize are, A, are people on a regularly cadenced basis having embodied interchange with others with whom they can actually put all their cards on the table? I think that's the first thing that I can say, that's one thing. The second thing I would say is that shame has a really difficult time operating in a world in which we are being encouraged, actively encouraged to create.

Asking questions such as, "What do you want? What's the next beautiful thing that you want to make? What is the dream that you had?" Actually pushing the envelope in that way, inviting people to take risks and letting them know that you're going to be with them in that process of taking those proper risks is another way for actively doing that. We like to talk about how any time I'm involved in doing my own personal creative work, whether that is whether I'm learning to play a new instrument, whether I'm taking, or learning a new language, these kinds of things. Creative work is in and of itself always an act of vulnerability.

Because at the end of the day, if I'm an artist, I don't just paint and then put my painting in the garage. I want people to see it. If I'm a musician, I'm going to be playing this. Actions that actively put my creativity on public display is going to be an act of vulnerability. Combating shame is about if I'm in an organization, I'm going to want to find a way to get anyone and all to have to practice taking something that they find to be new and developmentally a little risky and I want them to present that to their peers. I want them to present that to other people. Like, "Oh my goodness, what if they don't like it?" Exactly. But we want to create an environment in which people are learning actively that the whole notion of being vulnerable with the very work that you do is something that we welcome in order to strengthen that, in order to make sure that shame doesn't ever get the chance to have a foothold on what you're doing.

I love it, I love it. Curt, could you tell us, I want to take this down just to grassroots level for first steps that people can take. What do you think are some of the simple, simple steps people can take if they're beginning to see that they experience shame in their life? They would love to see God work in this area. How can they begin to move towards experiencing God's love and grace more?

Well, again, this is where the hard work is. I mean, as we like to say, "Evil is the second smartest force on the planet and it knows its craft really well." Part of the difficulty with shame is that I don't easily have things that are accessible to me to cure this ill. It's going to be hard work. And by hard work I don't mean impossible work, but I mean it will be effortful. One of the first things I would say is it's important for us to be practicing seeking out relationships, one or two others with whom we can on a regular basis begin to tell our story effectively, and to tell our story in a way that of course, is going to be vulnerable. And that I would say is the first thing that when people really want to move past shame, the first thing that we have to recognize is that I cannot do this by myself.

I would say, who are the two or three people that you would consider beginning to pursue who to ask the question, "Hey, I'd like to tell you my story. Would you be willing to do that with me? Would you be willing to exchange your story with me? I really want to do this because I want to get better by combating this thing called shame. Because I want to be better as a spouse, I want to be better as a worker. I want to be better as a person of faith. I want to be better at the life that I'm living." That would be the first step.

The second step is, we have a lot of shame practices. We have a lot of things that we do almost addictively, habitually and that are automatic in our life that are shame-based. The next thing that I would say is that we give people an exercise, it's called a shame inventory. And this is not one of the more enjoyable things that we ask patients to do. And we ask them to just take a three by five card. And I want every time you are going through your day, anytime you sense image, feel, think or have an impulse to do something in which you feel shame, I just want you to take a three by five card out and make a mark on it.

Like your one, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. And the purpose of this is not to unpack the shame. It is not to understand it, it's not to figure out where did it come from and why did I have that response. Because when we start down that

rabbit hole, we just get ourselves wrapped up into further shame. The purpose of this exercise is to interrupt the neurobiological feedback loops where in which I start to feel this and then do go down a rabbit hole and find myself there for a long time without even being aware of it.

The more I interrupt this system, the less opportunity shame has for extending itself into my internal mental habits. I had a guy come to me once after giving him this assignment and he said, "Curt, by 10 o'clock in the morning I had filled up two sides of two or three by five cards. And he said like, "Actually, I have work I have to do. I don't have time to fill up this card because that would be my full time job. Just monitoring how much shame has walked in, banging around in my head." And I said, "Fine, I want you to keep your job." But the point is that we keep our friends close and we keep our enemies closer. The point is I need to be aware of, I need to wake up to just how subtly and how frequently shame is in play for me. That's the first step. Then these become the things then that I talk about with this person to whom I'm sharing my story.

And then the third thing I would say is that when I'm sharing my story with someone, I invite people to really consider what is it like to consider that if you were to share your story with Jesus, if you were to consider to share your story with God. That the response that we get even before we share our story, the response that God leads with is likely not that of, "Repent because you're really screwed up." But the response that God's leads with, "You are my daughter. You are my son whom I love and in whom I'm well pleased." What is it like to begin with that? What does it like to imagine hearing God, seeing God, sensing God say this.

Shame as we remember is not an abstract or intellectual concept. It is not something that I just happened to believe about myself. It is an embodied neurobiologically, interpersonally embedded phenomenon. And I'm not going to combat it just because somebody says, "Think differently." Just because somebody says, "You don't need to be ashamed about that." That might not be unhelpful, but I need to sense it literally in my solar plexus. I need to feel it in my face, in my hands, that when the part of me that I hate the most has been revealed to you, that what I see on your face and hear in your voice is one who is not going to leave the room in the face of hearing the story that you've just heard.

We don't often have many experiences in which we can remember that kind of an encounter with someone who's saying, "Curt, even with these things that you hate the most, you're my son whom I love and in whom I'm well pleased." Let's have our conversation beginning with that. These are things that we must practice as we as St. Paul would say, "Work out our salvation with fear and trembling." These are not things that we're going to hear on a podcast one time and then hopefully somehow this is going to magically transform our life. These are things that are part of our daily habit, daily diet, daily workout routine in the same way that we work out anything else if we're going to become effective at it.

Dustin Moody: [43:37](#)

Curt, thanks so much for joining us today. I want to give a little plug. If anyone listening wants to learn more about shame and learn more about Dr. Thompson, you can check out our free course at scatter.org. It's called, Leaving Shame Behind. The course is brief, it's based on a talk that Curt gave a few years ago at a Denver Institute event and it includes a group discussion guide as well as a group leader outline. You can learn more and sign up for free at scatter.org. And I also want to give a plug for two of your books, *The Soul of Shame*, and *The Anatomy of the Soul*. We'll have both of those linked from our show notes page. Curt, thank you so much for joining us on Faith & Work Podcast.

Curt Thompson: [44:09](#)

Thanks so much for having me. It's been a pleasure.

Recorded: [44:15](#)

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