

Occasional Note #4

Shyness as a Portal to the Soul

Dear Gang,

I want to write a short occasional note on shyness, because over the years I have seen again and again that this experience is misunderstood in work with people and tends to get confused with embarrassment and shame. In fact, it is quite different from these, and when allowed to exist in its own right, it opens the doorway to the soul **and** to deeper contact with the other, be this the human, or the natural, surroundings, or both. In this sense shyness is a powerful moment of spiritual connection – one of aliveness, sensitivity, and contact – and when it is welcomed and allowed to fill out, and when the therapist, or parent, or friend, also touches this place in him/herself as a way to resonate with this experience and confirm it, the soul's being – in fact, both souls' – is right there, embodied.

The problem is that often just the opposite happens, and this starts early. The child, instead of being received in this experience of shyness, is told to "not be shy" and is criticized for this vulnerability and openness, or for not being able to speak, or relate, or perform, or whatever. This amounts to a soul wound and results in an experience of embarrassment and shame, which becomes associated with the shyness. Thus, soon, whenever the child feels shy, s/he tries to hide it and feels ashamed to be shy. The experience of shyness, thus, becomes a liability rather than an asset.

Further, the person begins to form a reaction formation in his/her personality to compensate for this shyness of which s/he feels ashamed, and this identification is often the very opposite of the true experience, or it is a disguise to throw the observer off the track and defend against this shyness being recognized and then shamed. For example, I at one point came to realize that my adolescent identification as "life of the party" was just such a defense and compensation. Also, I have worked with a number of people over the years who had very extroverted personalities behind which was this quivering shyness and soul sensitivity. When in the course of our working together it inevitably peeked out and I welcomed it, there was a double take and usually a burst of emotion and confession that "yes, indeed, as a child, I was the shyest in the family and this was a very painful experience for me". This is a very beautiful moment in working with people, and always the soul and its qualities are right there behind the shyness. The pain is not in the experience itself, but in how it was received and treated. I have seen people develop very tough identities, or very aggressive ones, to hide this quivering portal to the soul, or identifications that are slothful and uncaring, or cynical. Of course, not all identifications mask shyness, but I have found that in doing psycho-spiritual work, this is a wound to keep an eye out for, and that there is massive confusion about the experience of shyness and little recognition of its connection to the soul.

You can see this connection to the soul most easily in children, before the personality disguise is fully in place, and, if you catch a child at a shy moment, and

welcome it, you will see a flower open before your eyes. Wise parents and teachers know how to approach such a child and wait, to hold the field of awareness open for the quivering, the not being able to speak, the wanting to hide, and in that welcoming presence, you see the child change course and come out rather than go in and away. Then his/her presence is an invitation to you to come out also and let go of whatever identifications are masking your own soul sensitivity, and together you have a moment of profound and exquisite contact.

As children, this shyness is expressed without realizing it when we are with animals we love, or in Nature, or in places where we feel safe. There is a spontaneous openness, awe, and wonder that we experience that brings us intimacy with ourselves and the other beings simultaneously, be they a dog, hamster, oak tree, or geranium. You see this in children busy building a sand castle at the beach, or wandering in a garden, looking at the bugs and flowers. You see it in children playing make-believe with dolls, or sticks. It is a natural state of selfhood, permeability, and connection. Usually this happens when the child is playing, or exploring, alone, but good friends can participate in this intimate union also. More often, however, the relationship with another human being creates difficulties and the permeability disappears behind whatever identifications are used to cope and survive the interpersonal situation. Sadly, it is among humans that the soul is most often wounded and the shyness shamed.

What to do? Start by honoring your own shyness and letting it be. Let the quivering and the desire to hide and the loss of words be and stay present to this experience until it opens into the soul. And honor it in others, so that they begin to trust those moments for what they are and don't flee them into defense. Again and again I have seen shyness transform into soul when I have allowed myself, and/or the people I was with, to experience it directly without shame and embarrassment and to feel the difference.

This is the fifth occasional note I have written over the course of the last year, and, because I am going to Europe and Russia to teach in the next month, you will not hear from me again for a while. As before, I encourage members of the network to respond not only to me, but to the whole group, in order to foster our dialogue and to be in touch with each other about kindred interests. I have really enjoyed sending these notes to you, and will continue to do so in the future.

Meanwhile, I send you my love and thanks.

as ever Tom