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If You Feel Ashamed Does That Mean You Are A Moral Failure?

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If you feel ashamed does that mean you are a moral failure? | Aeon Ideas

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Krista K Thomason

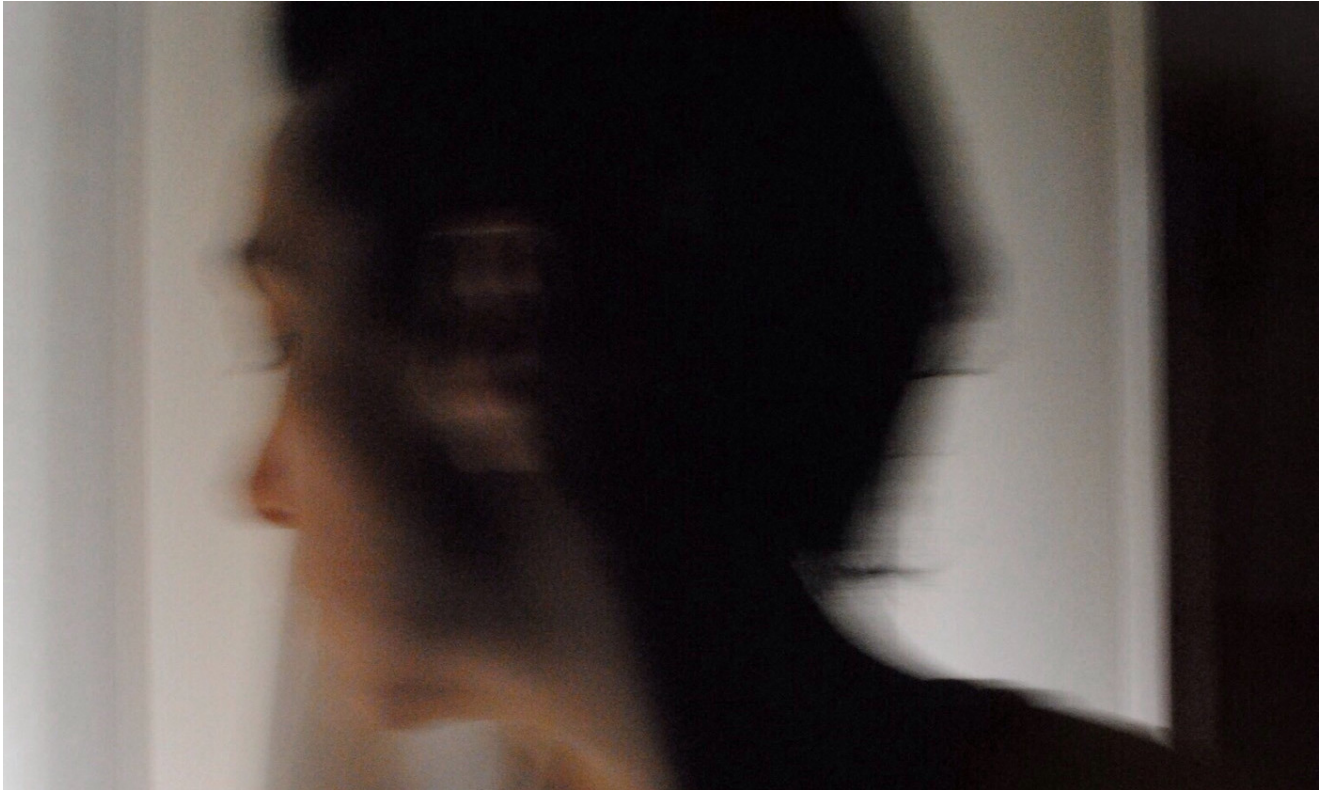


Photo by Alessandra Pace/EyeEm/Getty

The late poet Lucy Grealy's memoir *Autobiography of a Face* (1994) recounts her battles with a rare childhood cancer, which appeared in her jaw. Throughout her adolescence, she went through several rounds of cancer treatment and reconstructive surgeries, which left her with a noticeably misshapen jawline. Grealy felt shame about her face and her memoir helps to illuminate the startling complexity of this emotion. In her memoir, she tells a story of riding horses in a local show:

In practices I always wore a helmet with my hair hanging loose beneath it, but etiquette required that during shows my hair be tucked neatly up beneath the helmet, out of sight ... This simple act of lifting my hair and exposing my face was among the hardest things I ever had to do ... I gladly would have undergone any amount of physical pain to keep my hair down. No one at the show grounds ever commented to me about it, and certainly no one there was going to make fun of me, but I was beyond that point. By then I was perfectly capable of doing it all to myself.

Is it rational that Grealy felt shame? It's common for philosophers who write about moral emotions to think that shame is about failure to meet a valuable or legitimate ideal. Suppose I aspire to be an honest person. In a moment of weakness, I cheat at a poker game. I feel shame about cheating because I have not only failed to live up to this virtue, but also because being honest is a good ideal to aspire to. In this case, my feelings of shame are both rational and good.

Grealy's feelings of shame had neither of these features. The ideal that she failed to meet might be something like an ideal of beauty. Philosophers might argue that there's no reason to care about these ideals. Beauty might be nice, but it doesn't make you a good person. And who's to say what's 'normal' for a face? We might even think that Grealy's feelings weren't actually shame at all. Perhaps she was just embarrassed about how she looked.

What's more, Grealy's asymmetrical face was due to cancer. She was not responsible for the way her face looked nor was she responsible for getting a disease. She hadn't done anything wrong. Since she wasn't at fault for her so-called failure, she seemed to be holding herself responsible for something she had no control over. On both counts, then, her shame may have been irrational.

Even though this response might seem right and even sympathetic, there's something patronising about it. Let's start with the idea that maybe what she felt was embarrassment rather than shame. Notice how Grealy described her experience. She says she would have traded intense physical pain for being allowed to keep her hair down. Shame and embarrassment share some similar features: we blush, we wish we could suddenly disappear. But we have different attitudes toward the two experiences. Embarrassment can be severe, but we sometimes share our embarrassing stories as a bonding activity. Swapping stories of the cringe-worthy moments in our lives works because we are sympathetic to embarrassment in a way that we're not sympathetic to shame. Our shameful moments are things we rarely share with others, if at all. As a writer, it's only years later that Grealy could talk about these shameful moments. At the time, she didn't tell anyone how she felt.

Even if we believe that she felt shame, the reason she felt it is because she was to some extent delusional, or so we're told. She clung to a false belief that she ought to have been beautiful, or she believed she was at fault for her own cancer. Do we honestly believe that she thought in this way?

Let's start with the belief that she blamed herself for her own cancer. How could she even arrive at this belief? She was a child when she got sick. This claim becomes even more puzzling when we think about all the people who feel body shame about a wide variety of things. Shame is well documented in people who have experienced different types of disfigurement, with severity ranging from acne to burns. We are apparently claiming that all of them – no matter how different their cases are – falsely believe that they are to blame for the way that their bodies look.

Surely people tried to comfort Grealy before, by saying to her: 'It's not your fault that your face looks this way.' And surely it makes sense for her to have responded: 'I know, I know. But I feel shame about it anyway.' If we want to persist in claiming that her feelings were irrational, we then have to say that she must have felt responsible *deep down*. Now we're assuming that she was mistaken about what her own beliefs were, and she secretly believed this even when she claimed not to. So she was delusional two times over: once about blaming herself about her own disease, and again about the fact that *she thought* she didn't blame herself.

What about her so-called failure to attain the ideal of beauty? Moral philosophers usually claim that we shouldn't care so much about beauty ideals because they aren't important. What they mean by this is that beauty ideals are not *morally* important: in other words, how you look doesn't determine the sort of person you are. The only 'real' or 'legitimate' ideals that we should care about meeting are ideals of virtue or character. If Grealy describes feeling shame about her face, then it must be because she somehow believed that she was a bad person for not being pretty enough.

This response resembles the one we have about false beliefs about responsibility. As this explanation goes, Grealy (like many of us) had been socialised to believe that her worth depended on how she looked, so she must have 'deep down' thought that she was a moral failure for not being pretty enough. Although she might have consciously or reflectively claimed to not believe this, she must have believed it somehow because it's the only thing that explains her feelings of shame. But this was not Grealy's experience at all. When she entered college, she found a loving group of friends: 'I felt acceptance I had never experienced before and was able to genuinely open myself to the love they offered.' But this acceptance wasn't enough to alleviate her shame: it allowed her to 'compensate for, but never overcome' her appearance. If beliefs about moral failure are at the root of shame, love and acceptance should alleviate it. Love clearly helps, but it doesn't solve her shame.

It's important to ask: what motivates our desire to claim that these feelings of shame are wrong? One motivation is a purely sympathetic one. Sympathetic loved ones just didn't want her to feel bad about herself. We can maintain this well-intentioned desire without concluding that her feelings were therefore wrong. We can comfort people who feel this way without trying to correct their feelings.

The other reason we're tempted to say that Grealy's shame was irrational is because it wasn't moral. Since she didn't feel shame about a moral failing – or something she falsely believed was moral failing – then her shame must have been mistaken. This response presupposes that the only 'real' objects of shame are moral flaws. This is false. People feel shame about a wide variety of things, only some of which are character flaws or misdeeds. It's tempting to think we *shouldn't* feel shame about anything except moral faults but, even if we shouldn't feel something, it doesn't follow that we're mistaken when we do. Just because

an emotion seems bad to feel, we can't conclude that it doesn't make sense to feel. Grealy might have been better off in some sense if she didn't feel shame about her face, but that doesn't mean her feelings were irrational.

If her shame wasn't irrational after all, it might be time to rethink the conclusions we've made about shame. Most philosophers agree that shame is about failing to live up to our moral ideals, but stories such as Grealy's and others' seem not to fit this definition. For example, it's common for people who suffer from mental illness to feel shame. People who experience poverty feel shame because of it. It's also common for women to feel shame more often than men, and for black people to feel shame more often than white people. To argue that all these people must feel shame because, deep down, they feel like moral failures, we're assuming that entire populations are suffering from delusion. Maybe the problem isn't that these cases are irrational. Maybe the problem is that shame isn't about ideals in the first place.