Chapter 11
Unforgiven and Alone: Brenda Spencer and Secret Shame

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> *What appears bad manners, an ill temper or cynicism is always a sign of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen. You do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone.*
>
> Miller Williams

Certain types of crime fascinate people because they are perplexing. *Why would a person do such a thing?* The offenders appear to have nothing to gain, neither money, nor status. They are not acting in rage, or jealousy, settling a score or punishing someone who has humiliated them. Their victims seem to be chosen at random. Often the offender makes little or no effort to avoid capture and incarceration. Asked about their motives, they may shrug, or offer a nonsensical explanation.

The premise of this chapter is that the offender *always* has an understandable motive for committing a violent act. They are never simply evil, callous, or "crazy." Often the apparent meaninglessness of the crime is the result of the impetus being a shameful secret that has been closely kept for a long time. This "theory of secret shame" (Gilligan, 1996; Scheff, 2006; Scheff & Retzinger, 2002) suggests that at a certain point in the offender's life the need for the shame to be revealed becomes overwhelming and erupts in the form of violence. Because the person wants the shame to remain secret, even when exposed to the world, the violent act does not target the bully, the abuser, or the molester, but is instead directed at one or more people who symbolically or physically represent the shamer.

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11.1 Theory

Shame is a "self-reflective" feeling, meaning that it is the result of contemplating how one believes that others perceive one, or as Cooley famously stated, "I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am" (1902, p. 27). Wright said that shame "refers to the sudden and painful sense of having failed to live up to one's desired self-image, or conversely, the sense of having become one's undesired or bad self" (1987, p. 239). Charles Darwin, a fine observer of humans and animals, noted that shame was manifested by both groups as a confusion of mind, downcast eyes, slack posture, and lowered head. He was intrigued by the fact that these shame responses were observable in human cultures around the world, both primitive and refined (1872).

Although it does not address shame per se, John Bowlby's attachment theory might be considered as the groundwork for shame theory (Herman, 2007). His work emphasized the centrality of the maternal bond (or what most of us would think of today as the *parental* bond) in the formation of a child's personality, in establishing its capacity for future loving relationships and the ability to experience empathy. Bowlby believed that the infant who was deprived of the bond experienced anger and fear, and enduring damage in social functioning. The likelihood of this deficit leading to a life of crime and violence was a subject he explored in his study of "Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves" (1944). He found that their mothers often held "an intense, though perhaps unadmitted, dislike and rejection of [the child]. . . . A remarkable proportion of the children, for one reason or another, had not lived securely in one home all their lives but had spent long periods away from home" (p. 19).

While Freud avoided the subject of shame, conceivably because acknowledging it would have undermined his construct of the superego and consequently his tripartite model of the mind, Alfred Adler, a contemporary and colleague, described how a child who feels abandoned or rejected will develop an "inferiority complex," which is an idea rooted in shame (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Psychoanalytic theorists of the 1940s and 1950s examined the idea of shame from a variety of perspectives, with Horney expounding a system of development involving shame and pride, Lynd (1999), Piers and Singer (1953), and Tomkins (Sedgwick, Frank, & Alexander, 1995) also making important contributions. While they accepted Bowlby's ideas about the maternal bond, they came to believe that in the second year of a child's life, shame eclipsed anger and fear as the emotion that preserved social bonds, and that this precedence continued throughout the life span. In his stage theory of development, Erikson chose the conflict of "autonomy versus shame and doubt" as characteristic of the second year of life (1950) while also acknowledging that it remained a life-long struggle.

Helen B. Lewis is generally credited with bringing shame to the forefront of psychoanalytic thought among a select group. In her work, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (1971), she concludes, after analyzing transcripts of hundreds of hours of therapy sessions, that patients were often in a state of shame and that this condition was "virtually always" unacknowledged. "Lewis's work suggests that shame is a

haunting presence in psychotherapy, a presence that is usually hidden, disguised, or ignored by both patient and therapist" (Scheff & Retzinger, 2002, p. 13). In her own clinical practice, Lewis found that by acknowledging and discharging shame experiences, patients made better progress and had fewer relapses.

The concept of shame as a seminal factor in human behavior has been embraced by sociologists (Cooley, 1902; Durkheim, 1897; Scheff, 1988), psychologists and psychiatrists (Gilligan, 1996; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992), social workers (Brown, 2006; Fast, 2008), educators (Ashley and Burke, 2009; Morrison, 2006) and advocates of restorative justice (Braithwaite, 2000; Zehr, 2002).

To understand this theory, we might imagine that each of us is carrying a shame tank on our back. If we have been reasonably lucky, we may be unaware of our tank until our behavior becomes exceptionally clumsy, inconsiderate, selfish, or aggressive, and we overstep the norms or laws of our community. At such moments, assuming we are not sociopaths, our self-monitoring mechanism dispenses an appropriate dose of shame. If others have been observing our transgression, they might contribute by frowning and whispering among themselves. If our behavior is in defiance of a formal law (parking in a "handicapped space," getting into a fistfight, neglecting to clean up after our dog) a policeman might enter our drama, adding his own king-sized dose of "authority" shame. Suddenly the tank becomes weighty and difficult to support. If we are to return to our normal lives, we must discharge some of that shame. We do so, typically, by processing or confessing the incident with a close friend or loved one; by making a joke out of it; by making amends; by impugning the competence, intelligence, or sanity of those who have shamed us; by going into hiding; or by becoming outraged, or violent, depending on our personalities, the circumstances, those involved and the degree of the shame. While I find the metaphor of the "shame tank" invaluable in evoking the effect of excessive shame, it should be remembered that shame is an emotion, an intangible. The actual mechanics of how emotions are stored, re-evoked, accumulate over time, and are discharged—sometimes in ways ruinous to human life—remains a mystery. Many shaming experiences are healthy because they teach us to obey the rules of the community. For example, being arrested for drunk driving and spending the night in jail may well help us make the decision to stop drinking. However if we have had the misfortune of being born into adverse circumstances, to parents who are alcohol or drug dependent, or whose own shame management systems are not operating properly, we may accumulate a large amount of shame very quickly, simply through knowing that their behavior is wrong, and that we are their children. Other problems such as gender identity issues, learning disabilities, mental illness, or marked deviation from the norm make matters worse. If no one will listen to us, or if we must keep the shame a secret, then it cannot be discharged. The discomfort and alienation become unbearable. Our anger over such circumstances is discharged destructively, through substance abuse, cutting, or suicide when turned inward; through vengeance against the shamer when turned outward. If the shame is secret, the aggression will strike at symbolic targets in order to remain secret. This is, of course, a special case of the defense mechanism called "displacement" which has been discussed at length elsewhere

(Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998; Cramer, 2000; Freud, 1936, etc.). If the focus of the rage is both internal and external, than acts of violence that result in the deaths of other *and* the death of the offender become particularly attractive.

The theory of secret shame does not explain *all* acts of violence. Consider a man who discovers another man having sexual intercourse with his wife and assaults him. His membership in his primary group of affiliation, his family of procreation, has been threatened. His intense discomfort is converted instantly into rage against the one who has caused the rift. The rage is immediately expressed in physical violence. It is still violence as the result of shame, but the shame is overt and obvious. It needs no social scientist to unpack it.

11.2 Method

Examining anything that is secret, be it shame or the workings of the unconscious, presents a considerable challenge. One of the approaches I use is the writing of case studies where acts of suicidal or homicidal violence are the final resting place of the dependent variable, and shame-evoking experiences outweigh other identified risk factors for violence, making them the most likely canditate for independent variable. Thus the technique involves *purposive sampling* as well as *extreme case sampling* (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). School rampage shooters in particular provide an excellent pool from which to investigate the workings of secret shame since the only risk factor they have in common (at least in the most superficial examination) is having been bullied. The major shortcoming of the method is the limited external validity of the results; however with each additional case examined (see, for example, Fast, 2008) the sample size increases and the external validity improves. Or, in plain English, the more examples I provide of people behaving in a certain manner under certain circumstances, the more convincing the argument.

Case studies of historical crimes rely on documentary evidence. Even if the offenders are still alive, they are often unavailable for interviewing, as is the case with Brenda Spencer. The court record of the divorce proceedings was available, as was video coverage of the parole hearing where she first stated that she had been repeatedly molested by her father. My job was made easier by the release of a film by the British documentarian John Dower which contained the first and only interview with Wallace Spencer as well as interviews with Brenda Spencer's mother, her attorney, and relatives of some of the shooting victims. Brenda Spencer's published prison correspondence with Jennifer Furio was helpful in gleaning her thoughts and feelings regarding her crime. Local newspapers such as the now-defunct *San Diego Tribune* provided a real-time account of the shooting and interviews with classmates and bystanders elicited within hours of the shooting. These were all considered sources of good validity. For the general course of events I turned to the *New York Times* archive, generally considered the "newspaper of

record." No item of information was included unless it could be verified by three sources. Conjecture is labeled as such and supported by statistical likelihood as derived from the existing literature on the subject.

11.3 The Case

Brenda's parents, Dorothy Nadine Hobel and Wallace Edward Spencer, were married on December 12, 1954, in Chula Vista, California, a suburb of San Diego, which was developed after World War II to provide homes for returning servicemen. Wallace was 25 and she was 19. Together, they purchased a starter home with a substantial mortgage in a middle-class neighborhood.

During the early days of their marriage, Dorothy finished her bachelor's degree in business at a local college and took another 3 years of courses in accounting. She opened an office in their home and began building a client list that included a local church, the Del Mar Fair, and the Community Bookstore at the University of San Diego. For 6 months of the year, she was the head bookkeeper at the Andy Williams Open Golf Tournament at Torre Pines, part of the PGA Grand Tour. She became well known and well liked in the community. We know less about Wallace's work history. At some point he became an equipment technician at San Diego State University, where he continued to work until the time of the shooting.

In 1956 Dorothy gave birth to a son, Scott Mathew Spencer, and 2 years later a daughter, Theresa Lynn. Brenda Ann was born on September 3, 1962. In January of 1972, when Brenda was 9, Dorothy petitioned for divorce. According to her account (Dower, 2006) he had been seeing other women and wanted to know if he could move out for a year and then return. Discovering that he had already rented an apartment, she had him served with divorce papers. Because this was the height of the sexual revolution, shortly after the popularization of birth control pills, yet before the advent of the AIDS epidemic, his request did not seem quite as bizarre as it might have in a later decade.

At the time of their divorce they had been married 18 years. She asked for custody of Brenda and the two teenagers, modest child support, and alimony. After a private meeting with the Spencer children in chambers, the judge awarded custody to Wallace. In such meetings the judge typically asks the children whom they would prefer living with. If their vote is not unanimous, all are assigned to the same home to keep the family together. Dorothy got conventional visitation rights, although it is not known whether, or for how long, she maintained contact with her children. Wallace agreed to pay her $200 ($1,000 in today's dollars) a month for 2 years, then $1 a year for 3 years. Wallace, who was 43 at the time, had take-home pay of about $9,500 a year, (about $50,000 in today's dollars) and Dorothy, 37, made about $3,700 ($20,000). She drove a 7-year-old Rambler station wagon, he a 12-year-old Ford pickup truck.

Wallace and the children moved to a blue-collar suburb of San Diego. It was convenient in that it was located directly across the street from Cleveland Elementary School, which Brenda attended through 1974. The proximity was such that the entrance of the school was visible through the small windows in the front door of their new house. In documentary footage from 2006 (Dower), the house where Wallace still lives appears ramshackle, the lawn and yard unkempt, brown, and overgrown.

At her 2001 parole hearing, Brenda claimed that she was subjected to "total neglect" after the divorce. Dorothy said that she often visited her daughter, but Brenda recalls going to her mother's house after school, uninvited, and waiting for her on the front steps, often for hours. It is never clear whether her mother was pleased to find her there. Brenda's attorney said that the mother "became like a stone . . . never went out of her way to be with the kids or to have a relationship with Brenda." He described Brenda's father as "a bitter man who hated the world" (Michael McGlinn, in Dower, 2006). Brenda's attorney described how Wallace began drinking heavily. When police entered the house after the shooting they found half-empty liquor bottles everywhere. In the 2006 interview (Dower), Wallace had only seven or eight teeth in his upper jaw and looked far older than his 55 years. His hair and his neatly trimmed mustache were snow white.

Wallace fell into arrears on his alimony in June of 1973, and in May of 1974 asked the court if he could discontinue payment. He was living in near-poverty at the time, he and Brenda sleeping on a single mattress in the living room. Now *he* requested that Dorothy pay him child support of $150 for the three children.

On some nights Wallace would come home drunk, beat Brenda and sexually molest her. At other times, she received positive attention. He bought her pets, and taught her how to shoot a rifle, an activity he himself enjoyed. He gave her a BB gun. They would go together into the hills and practice target shooting. She became an excellent markswoman. "I went into the desert with her last year to go target shooting," a classmate recalled, "and she killed a lot of lizards and squirrels. She almost never missed" (anonymous classmate, in UPI, 1979, p. 8). Another friend said that Brenda dreamed of someday becoming a professional sniper.

Brenda had been, in her mother's words, "always happy, a very good child, well-behaved, never had any problems in school. . . . That's my little girl" (Dorothy Wallace, in Dower, 2006). Now Brenda began to act out. By her own account, she began using heroin at the age of 10, a habit she continued until she was 27, and a variety of other drugs. She also began drinking alcohol, which was readily available at home (Furio, 2001). When she was 11, a neighbor scolded her for shooting at birds with her BB gun. Excessive truancy and other behavioral problems led to a referral to a school for "special" children. Wallace and Dorothy, called in for a parent-teacher conference, responded with disinterest when told that their daughter was suicidal (Dower, 2006). Brenda was arrested for shooting out windows at Cleveland Elementary School during summer vacation in 1978 and again for burglary in the fall. In December of that year, a few weeks prior to Christmas, her probation officer referred her for a psychiatric evaluation for depression. It was recommended that she be hospitalized as a danger to herself and others, but her father refused to comply (Furio, 2001).

Brenda made the most of her new criminal status. She spoke like a sophisticated drug user, boasting about being "stoned on LSD, pot, or pills" in class. While watching TV, she would exclaim "All right!" whenever a cop was shot. She often talked about how she wanted to kill cops, to "blow one away." She referred to them as "pigs" and described herself as a "radical." Again the culture of the times must be taken into consideration. These were common catchphrases in the late 1960s and early 1970s among teens who wished to appear tough and antiestablishment (see, for example, Larkins, 1971). Although the radical political movements of the 1960s had dissipated, the culture of dissidence continued to flourish among young people who were born too late to protest for civil rights or the end of the draft. The dissident subcultures were still visible in middle-class high schools in the mid- to late 1970s (Larkin, 1979). Later in her life, Brenda identified herself as having been gay from birth (as opposed to those who adopt homosexual behavior in prison to ward off isolation) (Furio, 2001). Coming to terms with her homosexuality at a time and place when lesbianism was considered "mannish" behavior may have also contributed to her embracing a violent, substance-abusing identity. Her father, the man with whom she was most intimate, had similar tendencies.

Brenda had some friends, but others were frightened by her and kept their distance. One classmate said: "She was nice but she was really crazy. We were nice to her because we were afraid of her. . . . I didn't like her because she always talked about killing things" (UPI, 1979, p. 8). A student from her history class recalled Brenda frequently wondering aloud how it would feel to shoot people.

Brenda's classroom behavior may have appeared more eccentric and oppositional—and her reasoning further compromised—as a result of an injury to the temporal lobe that was discovered during pretrial psychological testing. It was attributed to a bicycle accident; the beatings to the head she received at the hands of her father were not public knowledge prior to her 2001 probation hearing (Dower, 2006). Such injuries are a common precursor to epilepsy. Epilepsy is two to four times more common among violent offenders than in the general public (Treimen, 1986). The prevalence of epilepsy among convicts has been a subject of interest to criminologists for over a 100 years, and has attracted controversy because of its disingenuous use as a legal defense. Current thinking is that:

> brain damage, not epilepsy, increases the chances of violent behavior. Brain damage, especially in limbic areas, can cause paranoia, and frontal damage can cause disinhibition. Paranoia and disinhibition are significant precipitators of violence, especially when combined with a history of childhood abuse. Limbic and/or frontal damage can also cause seizures, but seizures themselves rarely cause violence. Though the presence of seizures can be indicative of brain damage, it is the brain damage, not the seizures, that disinhibits (Pincus, 2002, pp. 209–210).

Brenda may have suffered from *partial seizures*, which are less extreme than the symptoms generally associated with the term epilepsy. Partial seizures involve odd sensations such as deja-vu, or minor hallucinations involving taste, touch, sound, or sight, sometimes accompanied by feelings of fear, anger, depression, or exultation (Devinsky, Vorkas, Barr, & Hermann, 2007). Slightly more severe cases bring disruptions in consciousness. The sufferer may stare into space for minutes at a time,

failing to respond to others, or exhibit repetitious behaviors or bizarre speech. Impaired judgment is another symptom. “Brenda, are you awake?” was the phrase that came to mind when her high school English teacher was asked to recall Brenda as a student (Dower, 2006).

In a letter from prison that was probably composed around 2000, Brenda writes that she is having frequent *grand mal* seizures, which are only partially responsive to the soporific medication provided by the prison infirmary; she drinks coffee constantly to stay awake (Furio, 2001). *Grand mal* seizures are the most violent form of epilepsy, where the sufferer loses control of their body, falls to the floor, and experiences convulsions and spasms. The possibility that Brenda was suffering from *grand mal* prior to her incarceration, and that it went unreported by teachers and parents, suggests a degree of familial and institutional neglect that is hard to imagine.

The neighbors failed to notice Brenda’s progressively more bizarre behavior, or were not overly concerned. One neighbor, interviewed by the press following the shooting, described Brenda as a quiet girl from a nice family who was looking for attention, a bright girl who did not like school. The neighbor’s 5-year-old son often visited the Spencer home to play in Wallace’s pickup truck or help Brenda care for her pets.

Brenda was not *entirely* unsuccessful in school. Her favorite course was photography. Her teacher described her as introverted and undistinguished except for her better-than-average ability to compose an image and her bright red hair. She won first prize, a color TV, in a Humane Society photo contest in October, 1978, 4 months before the shootings. The winning photograph, reprinted in a local paper, showed a man leading his dog through an obedience trial at a neighborhood dog show. Well-composed and full of vitality, it might have been the work of a professional photojournalist.

For Christmas of 1979, Wallace gave Brenda a 0.22 caliber semiautomatic rifle with a telescopic sight and 700 rounds of ammunition. Brenda wrote in a letter from prison to her correspondent, Jennifer Furio,

> My probation officer almost had a heart attack [when she heard about the rifle and ammunition]. When she calmed down, she asked me how that made me feel. I told her, “like he’s telling me to go ahead and do it.” Every suicide attempt [by drug overdose] I’d done in ’78 had failed. I’d lived through them. I felt like such a loser I couldn’t even kill myself. He was telling me to get it right.
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> On the morning I did my crime, I sat there loaded and drinking. I kept thinking, “Can’t even kill yourself right. What a loser.” I thought if I ate the barrel of the gun and pulled the trigger I’d probably live, be a quadriplegic and be trapped even worse with dad than I already was. Then I’d be totally at his mercy, I wouldn’t even be able to run. Then I thought if I shot in the air toward the school, the cops would show up. A couple more and they would shoot me . . . and they wouldn’t miss. It would all be over, my nightmare would end. I’d have peace finally forever (Brenda Spencer in Furio, 2001, pp. 121–122).

Brenda claims that prior to the shooting she wrote a suicide note that her father tore up, and a will that has never come to light.

11.4 The Shooting

On the morning of January 29, 1979, children who had arrived early at Grover Cleveland Elementary School were chasing one another around the playground, while a line of cars crept past the entrance, dropping off children with backpacks. Grover Cleveland was a small school: 319 students, 13 teachers, and six support staff. Brenda, now aged 16, was at home across the street. When the first bell rang at 8:50 a.m., she broke two of the diamond-shaped panes in the front door, and stuck her rifle barrel through the cracked glass. The school driveway, bordered by an ivy-covered fence on the left and a wing of the school building on the right, created a corridor that gave her a clear shot from her front door to the school entrance, a distance of 150 ft.

Burton Wragg, 53, the new school principal was standing in the vestibule, welcoming the children and maintaining order, when he heard two gunshots. He rushed outside. He was hit in the shoulder and then again in the chest, and fell into the ivy-covered fence. Another teacher, Darryl Barnes, ran outside moments later and knelt over Wragg's body trying to assess the damage. "There were children running everywhere," Barnes remembered. "He was badly wounded in the chest. I opened his shirt. He appeared dead." When Barnes stood up, a bullet missed him by a breath. "I guess God's hand was on my shoulder," he said later. He scooped up two children, one under each arm, and ran inside.

Michael Suchar, the school custodian, unaware of or indifferent to the sniper fire, came outside with a blanket to cover Wragg to keep him from going into shock. Barnes, who was watching from the window of the nurse's office, described what happened next. "I saw him lean down over Wragg and almost immediately two bullets hit him, spinning him around and to the ground."

Wanda Carberry, a fourth grade teacher with 23 years in the school system, went outside, blew her whistle, and shouted for the children to come in. "The sniper seemed to pick them off easily as they ran towards the school," she told the press. Other teachers followed her lead, rescuing children without consideration for their own safety.

The first police ambulance arrived minutes later. Two patrolmen, hunkered down and shielded from view by masses of ivy, herded the children to safety. One was struck in the shoulder. Principal Wragg and the other victims were rushed to local hospitals. Custodian Suchar was pronounced dead on arrival and Wragg died on the operating table 35 min after admission.

Gus Stevens, a reporter on the *San Diego Evening Tribune* was assigned the story, and began calling the homes nearest the school for information about the sniper. The first call he placed was, coincidentally, to the Spencer home, and Brenda interrupted her shooting to answer it. Did she know anything about the shootings, Stevens asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I saw the whole thing." She told him that the shooter was a 16-year-old kid who lived at [here she gave her address.]

"Isn't that *your* address?" Stevens asked, puzzled.

"Sure," she said, giggling. "Who do you think did it?" And she hung up.

Stevens called back and asked if she would grant him an interview. Brenda explained that she had told her father that she was sick so she could stay home from school. After that "I just started shooting. That's it. I just did it for the fun of it." She went on: "I just don't like Mondays. Do *you* like Mondays? I did this because it's a way to cheer up the day. Nobody likes Mondays." Later she said, "It just popped into my head. About last Wednesday, I think."

Was she alone in the house?

"You think I'd be doing it if someone was home?"

Stevens described her attitude as calm and matter-of-fact. She claimed that she found nothing odd about shooting at people she did not know, but she did admit to being worried about what her father would say.

"My dad's gonna kill me when he gets home and finds out about this," she told Stevens. "He's going to flip. This will really blow him away."

Stevens pointed out that she may have killed three or four innocent people.

"Is that all?" Brenda responded. "I saw lots of feathers fly."

She talked about splitting open people's "skulls with a cleaver" (almost certainly a fabrication), and admitted to her prior arrests. Before hanging up she said, "I have to go now. I shot a pig, I think, and I want to shoot some more."

While Stevens was on the phone, other staff at the *San Diego Evening Tribune*, alerted to his strange interview, contacted the police. They, in turn, fed questions to Stevens that he relayed to Brenda, yielding information that would later result in her being arrested without additional injuries.

Now that police knew the source of the shooting, they evacuated the children, who had sought shelter in the school gym, out an exit on the opposite side of the building. The children boarded buses and were driven to the auditorium of Pershing High School, three blocks away, where they were reunited with their anxious parents.

A trained hostage negotiator contacted Brenda by telephone around noon. Why had they taken so long to reach her? Brenda asked. The reporter had found her hours ago.

The negotiations were difficult because, unlike other hostage situations, Brenda had everything she needed. There could be no bargaining for food, drink, an escape vehicle, or amnesty. She was, after all, in her own home. The negotiator kept her engaged for the next 3 h, trying to establish a relationship of trust.

An edgy crowd had gathered beyond the barricades that surrounded the house. Onlookers shouted, "Shoot her!" and urged the police to storm the house. "As long as she talks," SWAT team members countered, "we wait."

Brenda's classmates at the high school, many of whom had little brothers and sisters at Cleveland Elementary, were appalled, not by the fact that she had murdered the principal and the custodian, but that she had shot at and wounded little children. As one of them commented, "You don't hurt kids. That's like setting fire to the church. Kids are sacred."

A little after three o'clock, at the prompting of the negotiator, Brenda emerged from the house, placed the 0.22 rifle and a pellet gun on the driveway, and went back

inside. Next he convinced her to give up her ammunition. After she had placed several hundred rounds on the driveway, she was cuffed and led to a police van parked nearby. She was driven to police headquarters and from there to Juvenile Hall, where she was confined. She had fired 36 rounds at the school, killed two middle-aged men, wounded eight children, and terrified the community in a way they would remember for the rest of their lives.

At 8:30 the next morning, Carl M. Cannon, a *San Diego Union* reporter, knocked on the door of Brenda's home, hoping to interview her father. Peering through the window, he could see Wallace Spencer sitting in a straight back chair in the living room, staring into space. He ignored the reporter. Later a sign was taped to the door: Wallace was "in shock and agony over the events of yesterday . . . and would appreciate being left alone."

On October 1, Brenda traded a guilty plea for 25 years to life at the California Institute for Women at Frontera, an adult facility in Chowchilla, five hours north of San Diego. While in juvenile hall awaiting sentencing, Brenda shared a holding cell with a 17-year-old named Shiela McCoy, who had run away from her home in Arizona. Shiela was soon released to a halfway house. She found the rules too oppressive, and sought shelter at the Spencer home where Wallace, now living alone, took her in. Shiela so closely resembled Brenda in appearance that one of the deputies, catching sight of her, called Brenda's attorney to find out why she had been released from prison prematurely. Shiela soon became pregnant with Wallace's child. When Elsa Norbeck, Shiela's probation officer, found out about it she asked the DA's office and the San Diego Police to investigate whether the union might be considered statutory rape, or contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The judge was not pleased. He ordered Shiela to make a choice: she could either marry the baby's father or return to jail. When Wallace learned of the decree, he proposed. They were married on March 26, 1980, in Yuma, Arizona. Shiela's parents indicated their consent by signing the license, as required by Arizona law. Soon after Shiela gave birth, she fled, leaving Wallace alone to raise his new daughter. When interviewed by Dower in 2006, Wallace revealed that the child was still living with him and attending UCLA, majoring in sociology (Associated Press, 1980 p. 2).

11.5 Discussion

To understand cases such as this, it is useful to return to the shame tank metaphor. While all kinds of shaming events may fill the tank, the secret shaming events are the most dangerous. They cannot be discharged because they cannot be spoken about. Shame is discharged through confession and secret shame cannot be confessed. Brenda had experienced a variety of secret shaming events. Her parents had divorced and her brother, sister, and mother had abandoned her to the care of an uncaring father; her father had engaged her in an incestuous relationship and then presented her with what appeared to be a suicide weapon; she was "questioning" her own sexuality and gender preference; and she was suffering from an undiagnosed

disease (some type of epilepsy) with symptoms that mimicked insanity. These were all events that she could not disclose, noless process.

Let us consider the divorce first. While we cannot say with certainty that Brenda experienced shame, we do know that children of divorcing parents typically report strong feelings of anger, which they have difficulty expressing, as well as shame about being different and alienated from their peers (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Additional shame came in the form of a drop in socioeconomic status following her move to a smaller, more ramshackle home and problems of integration in a new school where most of the other students already knew one another. Teachers may have made an effort to welcome her but children of this age group are likely to bully and ostracize new comers (Craig & Pepler, 1998; Eslea & Rees, 2001). Less attractive boys and girls at the cusp of adolescence find integration into school groups particularly difficult (Cunningham et al., 2010; Pellegrini & Long, 2007).

Brenda's older siblings moved out of the house soon after the divorce, abandoning her to their father. Incest is a statutory crime, usually classified as a felony, involving sexual intercourse between first-degree relations (father and daughter, brother and sister, etc.), and in some places and times second-degree relations (cousins) (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Laws against incest are common to every culture. In the eyes of the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1969) the restriction constitutes the basic social contract. Mead (1972) believed it preserved the social order. All cultures view it with "horror and dread" (Herman & Hirschman, 1977, p. 735). In parts of the United States it is punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

In another prison letter, Brenda has this to say about her father's behavior:

> My father had done everything [to me] that a person could do to another person. The beatings, the touching, the emotional abuse, all from the one person I should have been able to trust the most or go to for safety. He was the one doing all the things you are supposed to protect your kid from. I got no help from counselors at school, no help from anyone. So I came to the conclusion that it would never stop. This was life. This was how things would always be (Brenda Spencer, in Furio, 2001, p. 121).

Brenda's attorney, interviewed by Dower, implied that perhaps the incest was not too objectionable because Brenda had been reported to rumple her father's hair, and he would treat her like a "pet" (Dower, 2006). Herman and Hirschman explain how mistaken he was:

> [Father-daughter incest victims] were "daddy's special girls," and often they were special to no one else. Feelings of pity for the fathers were also common, especially where the fathers had lost social status. The daughters not only felt themselves abandoned by their mothers, but seemed to perceive their fathers as likewise deserted, and they felt the same pity for their fathers as they felt for themselves. . . . Most women expressed feelings of fear, disgust, and intense shame about the sexual contact and stated that they endured it because they felt they had no other choice. . . . The victim feels overwhelmed by her father's superior power and unable to resist him; she may feel disgust, loathing, and shame. But at the same time she often feels that this is the only kind of love she can get, and prefers it to no love at all. The daughter is not raped, but seduced (Herman & Hirschman, 1977, p. 748).

What could she do as a 9-year-old to protect herself or extricate herself from the situation? Despite frequent encampments on her doorstep, her mother remained aloof from the situation. Dorothy Spencer told Dower that she suspected that sexual and physical abuse was going on but did not call the police because of the lack of evidence. She did not try to get custody of the children, she claimed, because of the expense of hiring a lawyer (Dower, 2006). One is reminded of Bowlby's 44 young thieves whose mothers often experienced "an intense, though perhaps unadmitted, dislike and rejection of [the child]" (p. 19).

The foremost task of adolescence is the formation of an adult identity (Erikson, 1950). Identity consists of a number of dimensions including finding a domestic partner, adopting an ideology and spiritual beliefs, choosing a vocation, and discovering one's own gender preference. In a letter from prison, Brenda states:

> I have been gay my whole life. Maybe I was born gay or it was because of how my father treated me, I don't know. In prison it's considered a "genetic queer" as opposed to a "generic queer." Genetic queers have been gay their whole lives (Brenda Spencer, in Furio, 2001, p. 121).

Despite tectonic shifts in the way Americans think about homosexuality, in the mainstream it remains a shameful behavior that must be concealed if one is to survive the gauntlet of adolescence without beatings, bullying, and mockery. It is a profound source of secret shame. According to recent statistics, LGBQT teens attempt suicide two to four times as frequently as their heterosexual peers (Centers for Disease Control, 2008; Kitts, 2005) and the true figure is probably far greater since many gay adolescents remain closeted.

If no pro-social identity appears available to a child, then an antisocial identity may be preferable to the ghost-world existence of what Erikson refers to as "identity diffusion" (1950). With each arrest, and the eventual transfer to a special school, identification with the criminal culture became more enticing. The fear that her talk of guns and killing instilled in her classmates was easily misread as respect, while the reputation that she developed among the teachers and administrators may have been a welcome recognition. The popularity of the iconic image of former socialite Patty Hearst participating in a bank robbery only 4 years earlier, wearing the black beret of the Symbionese Liberation Army and wielding an M1 carbine rifle, suggested that an act of disproportionate violence might win the sympathy of the nation for a neglected little girl.

Wallace bought Brenda the rifle and ammunition soon after learning at a school meeting that she was "suicidal." What was she to make of this gesture? Before her parole board in 1999, she said: "I asked for a radio and he bought me a gun. . . . I felt like he wanted me to kill myself. . . . I had failed at every other suicide attempt. I thought if I shot at the cops, they would shoot me." This "suicide by cop" scenario is common among school shooters (Fast, 2008).

Brenda was left with three alternatives: join the gun-loving, society-hating, substance-abusing, predatory culture of her father; end her own abuse by killing her father; or end her own discomfort by committing suicide.

Remarkably, she accomplished all three of these goals, albeit symbolically. She got drunk, shot a gun at a public institution, and swaggered in front of the press; she killed two middle-aged men as probable proxies for her father; and she ended her own life, for all intents and purposes, by getting herself confined to a tiny cell for the rest of her life. She did not kill any of the children, although her shots seemed to be of lethal intent. Because she was a skilled markswoman shooting at close range with a rifle, one must wonder if she unconsciously let her aim drift off target. Did they represent herself, or perhaps her lost childhood? Did she have the same reluctance about ending their lives as she had about her own?

Let us return now to the theory of secret shame, and make its utility explicit in understanding this case. We have reports of deficient parental bonds, maternal and paternal, from the age of 9 on. Bowlby identifies poor maternal bonding in infancy as a predictor of antisocial behavior; we simply do not know about Brenda's early life. We do know that from the age of 9 on, she experienced a sequence of events that resulted in an unusual accumulation of shame of many types: parental divorce, abandonment by mother and siblings, conduct disorder, loss of social status, expulsion from a regular school, undiagnosed epilepsy, violent paternal abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse in the form of touching. She had no pro-social means of discharging her shame. Her father interfered with her psychiatric hospitalization (a situation where she was likely to reveal his intimacey with her). According to one of Brenda's prison letters (Furio, 2001) he often told people that she was a liar and could not be trusted. Even 20 years after the shooting, he badgered her during a prison visit about keeping confidences in her letters and phone calls. While she had many ways of accumulating shame, she had few ways of discharging it, no best friends or confidants, no religious practice that involved confession or atonement, no church youth group advisor or teacher to take her under their wing, no therapists. Her most shameful secret had to be protected at all costs, and one cost was a high degree of social isolation. Abusive men usually become adept at keeping their victims socially isolated.

How then to discharge shame, rage, and self-hatred while keeping it secret? The answer, as we have seen in school shootings and similarly baffling acts of domestic terrorism is the unconscious choice of symbolic targets for the expression of violence. Consequently, the gender, age, and body type of the victim is often significant in understanding this kind of crime.

One might well ask, what difference does all this make? People have been killed—good people, people with families who grieve their loss, people who selflessly served the community. Innocent children have been maimed and traumatized. Surely the killer must be made to pay for the crimes. We might feel the same resentment for cancer, or a deadly virus, but it would not cloud our determination to find out as much as possible about the true nature of the virus, whether it is air-borne or blood-borne, what are the risk factors, how can we prevent its spread, or cure it, or cut it out of the body. We will never really put an end to suicidal or homicidal violence until we fully understand it, and in order to do so we must bring shame into the open, and understand its properties, just as we would any other factor that threatened our children's health.

11.6 Conclusion

Brenda Spencer has now been incarcerated for 30 years at a cost of about three quarters of a million dollars to the American taxpayer, for a crime she committed when she was 16 years old, based on a decision made by a brain that was damaged and less than fully formed, following 7 years of physical and sexual abuse by her father.

I am familiar with two incidents of forgiveness, or at least forays into forgiveness, in the history of American school shootings. The first was that of the writer Gregory Gibson, whose son was killed by Wayne Lo during a school rampage shooting in December of 1992. Gibson and Lo have continued to communicate with one another in an attempt to make sense of the terrible tragedy of Lo's crime (Glaberson, 2000). The second exception occurred in 2006, after students were taken hostage in a one-room schoolhouse in the Amish village of Nickel Mines in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The shooter, a 28-year-old man who drove a milk truck, released the boys but kept the girls, ultimately killing five of them and wounding others before killing himself. They were all younger than 13. Members of the community, including relatives of the slain girls, reached out to the family of the killer with messages of comfort and forgiveness (Herman, 2007).

For centuries America and the United Kingdom have had a tradition of retributive justice. *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. Rather than helping offenders discharge the shame they have accumulated, so they can become reintegrated into society, we heap more shame upon them until they are crippled or crushed by the weight of it. It is no wonder that the United States has more people incarcerated than any other nation on earth (Liptak, 2008), that the building of new prisons is its biggest rural growth industry (Bonds, 2006; Huling, 2002; King, Mauer, & Huling, 2004), that the recidivism rate is so high and success rates with violence reduction so very low (Richard Gilligan interviewed in Jarosewski, 2006).

While the parole board seemed mildly intrigued by Brenda Spencer's account of her parents' divorce, her sexual and physical abuse, the neglectful and indifferent attitude of her parents, and her father's lethal christmas present, their final response was to shrug and send her back to prison for another 10 years. One incident in particular seemed to convince them that she was not sufficiently rehabilitated to join the world outside the walls and barbed wire. After a prison love affair went sour, Brenda tattooed her chest with a red-hot paper clip: "Unforgiven and alone."

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