A Theoretical Framework for Shame and Speech on Campus
Companion to the Toolkit, (No) Shame in Speaking: Resources for Navigating Emotions on Campus

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1.   Introduction

Shame is an often unspoken part of life on campus, including in practices of free expression and norms around speech. Speech on campus encompasses multiple domains. I consider three and relate them to shame: the legal (national or state laws about speech), the intellectual (speech as part of the academic mission, including academic freedom and debate) and the interpersonal (social norms, respect, interactions). Current debates on the boundaries of open expression on college campuses typically aim to adjudicate between two main viewpoints: firstly, the strong legal and institutional protection of free expression (the legal dimension), and secondly the mediation of free expression to maximally include or protect persons who have been marginalized, through setting and then upholding community/ individual wellbeing, norms, and shared beliefs through speech (the interpersonal dimension). In other words, is a university responsible to protect and uphold all speech, or to restrict some speech as part of its mission? This question relates to the complex aims of learning institutions. A university might permit all speech as part of its aim to create and spread knowledge or restrict speech as part of its aim to create and spread only knowledge with a high truth value (the intellectual dimension). A university might restrict speech to protect its students from possible harms or to guide their moral and ethical development (e.g. restricting speech targeting individuals), or it might protect all speech as part of encouraging civic engagement and the development of democratic dialogic capacities. In turning to the place and role of shame on campus discussion, I take these debates seriously and use shame as a theoretical lens through which to focus on the *extralegal* dimensions of free expression and the possibilities generated through an affective approach to free speech.

Shame is a central, profound human emotion strongly linked to social norms and moral expectations, which often functions to marginalize or stigmatize identities or groups. One of the assumptions I will defend is that many persons will likely experience shame in learning: it is a core human emotion in response to the confusing social interactions, personal growth, and failures natural to learning. But shame can be devastating, especially when it indicates that some aspect of one's identity—or at its most extreme one's whole self—is all bad, or when shaming leads to social shunning. In increasingly polarized times, and as affective polarization continues to impact campuses, directly attending to emotion helps to acknowledge differences and the hard emotions underlying the anxiety and fear building on campus.[1] This paper tackles the meaning of shame in open expression and provides guidance for campus community members in attending to the emotional elements of free expression. I argue for a community and context-grounded approach to shame, its relative harms, and the importance of continuing to promote open expression in both classrooms and at the institutional level. When I talk about context and culture, I think about 'context' as the literal university, the institution and the campus on which persons gather to learn. Culture refers to the linguistics, beliefs, values, and practices of different groups—community members will bring their own perspectives on shame to campus. Campuses are set within cultures, but I am mainly considering the diverse cultural backgrounds of individuals who come together on campus.[2]

This framework has two aims. Firstly, to carefully define the relationship between shame and speech as relevant to open expression on college campuses. Secondly, to argue that responses to expression-related shame on campus should be driven not by firm definitions of harm or strict policy, but by a more relational and context-specific process. While shame may be part of legal discourses of speech, I argue for attending to shame primarily in the interpersonal domain, with attention to the intellectual aims of speech in higher education. This does not replace the need for legal protections of speech. I attend to—if not fully reconcile—shame as both a general and widespread phenomenon that impacts open expression in learning communities, and shame as a personally painful experience. Shame can stymie expression, but it is also part of learning and living together—pretending otherwise does no one favors.

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[1] Ben-Porath, *Free Speech on Campus*; Levendusky, *Our Common Bonds*; Ben-Porath, *Cancel Wars*.
[2] For an overview of cultural dimensions of shame, see chapter one in Dolezal, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*.

2.   Notes on open expression

Open expression, or freedom of speech, is core to many educational philosophies—and to university practice. The University of Oxford, for instance, writes in policy that "Free speech is the lifeblood of a university."[3] The City University of New York's speech overview well illustrates the tension within free speech that I first describe in the introduction: "Balancing the right to a harassment free environment and the right of freedom of expression at CUNY is crucial. Encouraging diverse perspectives while maintaining respect for all individuals fosters a healthy learning and intellectual environment."[4] When a formal law or policy organizing free expression is breached, there will typically be consequences. But from the outset these consequences are complicated by the nuances of speech law and policy on campuses. For instance, in the United States, academic freedom protects the free expression of ideas but does not mean that all ideas are equally valid or valuable as research outputs.[5] Thus the legal, interpersonal, and intellectual dimensions of campus speech can be intertwined. And there are ongoing speech-related conflicts relating to the legal and political landscape—in 2025, that includes book banning, regulation of campus protests and demonstrations, the removal of datasets from publicly available websites,[6] and governmental oversights of students' social media and campus journalism outputs.[7] As this landscape rapidly shifts, students and faculty grapple with the uncertainty of the formal consequences. And the aim to find the balance between the legal and institutional protections (or regulations) of speech on campus and the protections for well-being or against offence does not fit neatly within a strict legal or policy framework.

The philosopher Sigal Ben-Porath has offered one effective way to ameliorate the tension between free expression and interpersonal offences: 'inclusive freedom.' *Inclusive freedom* equally prioritizes free and open exchange—as a necessary condition for the pursuit of knowledge and as a contributing condition to the development of civic and democratic capacities—and ensuring that all members of the campus community can participate in this free and open exchange (in other words, are included). Put simply, *inclusive freedom* suggests that there is no 'free expression' on campuses if some students or faculty are unable to freely express themselves because they are severely undermined, mistreated, or otherwise excluded from the discussion. Ben-Porath focuses on inclusion as a value for fostering community and civic behavior, but it is challenging to define the boundaries of inclusion and harm— and to determine when a focus on protecting speech broadly is more effective for social justice aims.

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[3]   Oxford University's compliance site on free expression.
[4]   City University of New York's overview for free expression on campus.
[5]   For a nice overview of academic freedom and the relationship between academic freedom and the First Amendment, see the American Association of University Professors' website.
[6]   For instance, the removal of data on hate crime statistics.
[7]   For instance, the case of Rumeysa Ozturk who was detained for a college newspaper article.

Students may choose to speak or not speak for a myriad of reasons, such as wishing to not offend others or because they think their contribution will not move the conversation forward.[8] These choices may be grounded in awareness of local and social contexts, as well as personal identity. For instance, Black women on college campuses may recognize and value their right to free speech but worry about how they specifically will be perceived if they speak their minds, due to gender-racial bias.[9] How and why students choose to speak is an important component of the practice of free speech—what makes it more or less possible for individuals to engage in open expression and productive dialogue. Shame is one of these factors. I will now turn from the more legal and institutional approaches to the affective—identifying the relevance of shame in these debates.

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[8]   Niehaus, "Self-Censorship or Just Being Nice: Understanding College Students' Decisions About Classroom Speech."
[9]   O'Neill, "'EXCUSE ME, I'M SPEAKING': Reconceptualizing Freedom of Speech Through A Black Feminist Lens."

3.   Why shame and speech? A theoretical framework

While many scholars have attended generally to the issue of shame in schooling, it remains a contested topic, and there is relatively little work focused on higher education and the role of shame in campus expression.[10] To integrate a philosophy of shame with frameworks for addressing speech issues on college campuses, I draw on several theoretical approaches to emotion in society.

Firstly, how does shame impact individuals, and for what reasons? The philosopher Sandra Bartky observes that shame "involves *the distressed apprehension of oneself as a lesser creature*. Guilt, by contrast, refers more generally to the subject's nature but to her actions: typically, it is called forth by the active violation of principles which a person values and by which she feels herself bound."[11] Shame makes a person feel terrible about herself, and for the reason that she *is* bad, in her identity and her being, because she has acted against either her own values or rules or regulations to which she is held responsible. However, shame can also have a 'pervasive' quality, in which a person feels herself to be negatively flawed without any particular reason or stimuli—this sort of 'chronic shame' tints experience and makes shame possible in any situation; it is most likely to impact students who are marginalized on their campuses.[12] Campuses have many rules and regulations, and typically have their own sets of values related to the aims of academic institutions, which extend to speech practices. But individuals may experience value clashes with their institutions as well, or they may walk through campus with a sense of chronic shame. Thus, the reasons for which individuals feel shame may not always neatly align to one clear moral or value-orientation but could also reflect the challenges of reconciling and assessing different beliefs while living and working on campus.

Secondly, to integrate shame and speech I invoke a 'social' approach to shame, perhaps best indicated by sociological literature exploring how shame structures social life. This approach to shame indicates how feelings of shame can mediate the interactions between individuals in a classroom or on a campus setting—within an educational-social life:

> "By shame I mean a large family of emotions that includes many cognates and variants, most notably embarrassment, humiliation, and related feelings such as shyness that involve reactions to rejection or feelings of failure or inadequacy. What unites all these cognates is that they *involve the feeling of a threat to the social bond*. That is, I use a sociological definition of shame, rather than the more common psychological one... If, as proposed here, shame is a result of threat to the bond, shame would be the most social of the basic emotions."[13]

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10   For a wide variety of studies of shame in schooling, see: Goodman and Cook, "Shaming School Children" on shame as a violation of children's rights; Crowley, ""It Meant You Were in Trouble" on white racialized shame; Burke, "Difference in Higher Education Pedagogies" on shame as gendered pedagogy; Dar and Ibrahim, "The Blackened Body and White Governmentality" on shame as racialized governmentality; and Higgs et al., "Self-Focused Emotions and Ethical Decision-Making." for an empirical discussion of the impact of shame on decision-making.

11   Bartky, "The Pedagogy Of Shame," 229. Note that individuals can also feel shame and guilt at the same time, and that not all instances of shame and guilt will be easily detached.

12   Dolezal, "The Horizons of Chronic Shame."

13   Scheff, "Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory," 97.

Scheff indicates the distinction between this social approach to shame and a psychological one, which focuses more on the individual effects and experiences of feeling shame. The social approach to shame indicts the relationships between individuals.[14]

Lastly, within the value-negotiations of campus living and the complex relationships that direct social life, shame impacts individuals in different ways, including on their learning. The writer bell hooks attested that "Until the power of shaming is taken seriously as a *threat to the well-being of all students, particularly individuals from marginalized and/or subordinated groups*, no amount of support staff, positive programming, or material resources will lead to academic excellence."[15] hooks' work focuses on the unequal impact of shame and shaming practices on Black students, women, and students of color—those whose experiences may not be reflected in the dominant norms and values, or who may feel inadequate in the social relationships structuring life on campus.

Shame can be a more benign part of learning, because learning is a fundamentally vulnerable process and one that asks a person to question *who* they are and *what* they believe. Students have unpredictable responses to shame, and may feel shame in response to completely different stimuli—because students hold different values and identify different things that matter to them in the campus context.[16] Shame is sometimes used as a 'tool' in discussion and in learning contexts— to ensure that certain norms are upheld (e.g., 'we don't talk like that here'); or in other words to stigmatize certain ideas in each social context. This stigmatization can be in service of community commitments (which may be legally permissible, but nonetheless go against classroom norms), like centering inclusion and acting against e.g., racist, or sexist ideas, or can further those ideas by stigmatizing the voices of marginalized people. Shame can work at a surface level—"do I really want to say this?" or a more profound level—"am I a bad person because I said something I realize is wrong?"

Drawing on these dimensions of shame, and on its relevance to speech, I define shame as a 'self-conscious' emotion: the feeling of being seen and negatively judged for some action, behavior, or element of self by a real or imagined other. Shame can be *all-encompassing* and turn one's total attention to the 'wrongness' of the self. Shame reflects on our *relationships*, our place in *social* life, our (perceived) *identities*, and our *epistemic* capacities—in so doing, it reorganizes our relationships to the people around us and to the content of our discussions. By simultaneously acting upon our sense of self, our sense of community/belonging, and our understanding of *what is said* (as either shameful or not shameful), shame intersects with speech, self-silencing, and equal access to learning.[17]

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[14]   Notably, Scheff's definition also takes a stand on another controversy in shame studies: whether shame can be collapsed with its cognate emotions.

[15]   hooks, "Moving Beyond Shame," 101.

[16]   Eve Sedgwick, writing about the work of Silvan Tomkins on affect, describes how shame has no "proper" object, or in other words, shame can attach to many different things, including other affects. For example, feeling afraid in the classroom could be shameful. Affects have a special kind of "freedom" which makes them unpredictable (*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 19.)

[17]   The focus here on the extralegal dimensions of shame on campus does not discount the importance of legal protections both for speech and for access in the classroom, e.g. to interpretation, learning aids, or other needs that make participation and learning possible for all.

It is possible that shame can be both supportive and destructive to open expression. Because shame manifests as judgment upon one's whole self, it can materially impact speech—if a person regrets a statement in class, shame might whisper that they are too stupid to speak in class again. Because shame reflects upon a sense of norm and value, it can again materially impact speech—a person might withhold a statement because they know it would be at odds with the prevailing values of the class, or that it would put another student at risk of harm. Along with a more general sense of self-consciousness as well as other factors like empathy, shame may help individuals to recognize that others' opinions do matter (inasmuch as ignoring or putting others down is seen as shameful). More open expression itself may also support a reduction of shame by encouraging a culture of discussion in which mistakes are acceptable, ideas can be "tried on" and there is a reduced fear of ostracization. At the same time, shame is culturally specific and overlaps with forms of structural discrimination that put some individuals at more risk of shame than others are.[18] And in some cases, shame may be a form of harm or a part of a greater speech-related harm.

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[18]   For a clear case to understand shame's social and cultural dimensions, see Dolezal, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*.

4. Thinking about shame and harm in speech

Harm is challenging to define in the college context, where students are intended to grow rapidly and challenge themselves. One account of harm is Eamonn Callan's frame, in which a classroom is "dignity safe" for a social group if individuals can participate fully without risk of *humiliation*. Humiliation indicates, in part, an experience of 'shaming' and dignity safety reflects that a person feels reasonably welcome and respected (included in the interpersonal dimensions of speech). Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injury, or the harm one suffers when one is not able (excluded from) to contribute to shared knowledge, typically shows that women and minorities are rejected as producers of knowledge (excluded from the intellectual dimensions of speech). For thinking about shame, the definition of harm by adrienne maree brown is useful: "Harm is what needs healing," it is a wound or profound injury.[19] Students may experience shame as profound or harmful, and they may need healing—as will be discussed in the following section, because shame reflects negatively on one's whole sense of self. But when linked with Callan and Fricker's frames, a more subtle picture of harmful shame in the classroom arises: shame may *be* harmful, but if students remain able to participate and to be recognized as knowledgeable, their access to *inclusive free expression* is not harmed.

Shame is not always harmful to one's ability to participate in free expression. For example, a student may feel real shame after their peer disagrees with them on an interpretation of a literary text: the harm they feel can be recognized, but nonetheless disagreement will be part of discussion. Shame may more literally restrict participation but still be necessary to upholding broader protections of inclusive, free expression: for example, a student could feel shame after their professor tells them that they are speaking too much and should make room for others. But there can be shame that is harmful, and is harmful to discussion: for instance, if a student feels shame and no longer wants to speak in class after their classmate remarks that their ideas are "basic" and "uninteresting." Finally, there can be instances in discussion that are just plain *wrong*, or breach social and community norms, without causing shame: if a student calls another student by a slur in class, no one in that situation must *feel* shame for that to breach the tenets of inclusive freedom. Theoretically, we can recognize both the potential for harm and hold firm that not all experiences of shame are deeply wounding to one's ability to participate in class. This distinction is key because discussion is likely to be uncomfortable and challenging. Not all shame will be experienced as a form of harm: shame may be painful, but it might also be part of epistemic or emotional growth.

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[19] Brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us*, 28. Thank you to Sarah Ropp for introducing me to this work and situating it within a larger conversation on dialogue and discussion. More information is available on Dr. Ropp's website.

These considerations of harm must be situated within the hierarchy of the classroom or of the institution. Community members hold varying social positions, which thinking along the lines of both 'epistemic harm' and 'inclusive freedom' can mean that how they are perceived when they enter the classroom or walk onto campus may impact their access to open expression. Focusing on both elements of harm—the wounding to one's self concept, self-esteem, or social status that can accompany shame—and wounding of one's access to open expression invites a more relational and context-specific approach to adjudicating speech debates that can include recognition of these hierarchies on campus.

Nonetheless, the basic examples presented here are not comprehensive and it can be challenging—and unproductive—to taxonomize shame for the purpose of law or institutional policy. When shame coincides with harms like epistemic injury, it can double down on exclusion or marginalization of individuals based on social identity. But legalistic and historical accounts of freedom of expression argue the fight *for* freedom of expression often began with marginalized views and voices, and to restrict freedom might end up backfiring.[20] These perspectives emphasize that laws and institutional policies must focus on protection for free speech broadly. Shame is an extralegal dimension of open expression, and protections for individuals, wellbeing, and moral and ethical orientations are better addressed through a focus on classroom practices, community relationships, and institutional norms. Where laws and policies negotiate formal courses of action to breaches, a focus on norms and relationships invite more reparative and flexible responses that accommodate the dynamism of the emotional dimensions of speech.

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[20]   *See* Chemerinsky and Gillman, *Free Speech on Campus*. One example shows a misfiring of an attempt to regulate shame like in current legal efforts in the US to protect (white) children from feeling guilt while learning about American history as described in an overview of legal efforts up to 2024 (Natanson, Tierney, and Ence Morse, "Which States Are Restricting, or Requiring, Lessons on Race, Sex and Gender.").

5. What to do about shame?

I argue that for the purposes of supporting open expression and inclusive freedoms, shame should be recognized and discussed, but it is not well suited to legislative or policy interventions but is more suited to the interpersonal dimensions of speech with attention to the intellectual aims. Shame can be treated normatively (institutions can, for instance, agree to a normative commitment to take shame seriously) but it is challenging to make broad normative judgments about shame (e.g. to say that all X types of shame are harmful or unacceptable). However, this is not to say that individuals from different political backgrounds are not trying to litigate shame in different contexts, for instance at the K-12 level through legislation meant to prevent guilt and shame for students (mostly white students) by banning teaching of ideas like critical race theory.[21] Because shame indicates something deep and personal about speech—what do *you* think is shameful—and social agreements about expression—what do *we* think is shameful—efforts to address it are better focused at the level of interpersonal relationships and community norms. Some elements of shame and shaming should be recognized in practice, and I argue that formal and explicit *attention* to shame can provide a new outlook on the tensions around free speech and open expression on campuses—in both classrooms and at an institutional level. Instead of focusing on strict boundaries of harm or the challenges of intent versus impact, orienting towards the role and place of shame in philosophy of speech centers the norms underlying speech practices and the relational components of speech.

At the cutting edge of research on shame, scholars are looking at more nuanced and complex ways to understand and respond to shame. Dolezal and Lyons raised a call for 'shame sensitive practice' in service-oriented fields.[22] There are three principles of shame sensitive practice. The first is simply to acknowledge shame, for individuals and within an organization, and to indicate different experiences of shame and shaming. The second is to reduce active shaming of both individuals and of collectives[23]—for example, on campus, an individual teacher could avoid ridiculing a student in class for getting an answer wrong, and the university could refrain from publishing student grade data within a certain time-period so that no group of students is marked as 'underperformers.' The third is to address shame: practicing thoughtful empathy towards individuals, supporting 'shame resilience' by fostering trust and community on campus, and recognizing and combatting systemic roots of shame, such as the 'deficit mindset' towards some students in the USA.[24] 'Shame sensitive practice' thus has an important role to play in increasing freedom of expression and strengthening campus communities through continued attention both to the affective qualities of expression, and to the rules and community agreements that can sometimes create shame but also protect the educational mission.

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[21] For example, one case in Alabama: Moseley, "Alabama State School Board Passes Resolution Banning Critical Race Theory."

[22] Dolezal and Gibson, "Beyond a Trauma-Informed Approach and towards Shame-Sensitive Practice." They situate their work in medicine, which is not a direct correlation to education spaces, but the principles help move forward the conversation in this context.

[23] One important caveat here, which goes beyond the core focus here of speech in the more relational sense, is that shame and shaming has a power dynamic. Shaming is sometimes an (if not always valid) option for groups of students or faculty seeking change at the institutional level, like what Cathy O'Neil describes as "punching up" shame in *The Shame Machine*.

[24] Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt."

There are different approaches to this aim, which might be balanced in different ways depending on the context and the situation. Universities can focus on protecting students from experiencing painful shame by holding group conversations about free expression, developing bottom-up responsive community norms, and providing support options for students who feel shamed or uncertain about their access to self-expression. They can recognize that shame is likely to be a dimension of speech-related disputes that might be organized by policy—like bullying. They can focus on avoiding and addressing shaming on campus that impedes access to discussion, while building support options for processing shame.

Teachers can think about how to make failures and discomfort acceptable in the classroom—to recognize that sometimes there will be heated moments in discussion, and that sometimes persons will make mistakes in what they say, but that there are options to continue discussing and learning after these cases. Faculty development might focus on the balance between shame's educative role in supporting appropriate social interactions and shame's 'mis-educative' role in shutting down productive conversations. Institutions and individual faculty members cannot adjudicate every classroom norm, but they can recognize shame as part of the dynamics of classroom expression. No one can predict every form or experience of shame, but by opening a broader discussion, campuses can continue to focus on knowledge production without overlooking the affective dimensions that shape campus life. Ideally, recognizing and acknowledging shame on campus recognizes and acknowledges that persons can and will hurt each other in the pursuit of knowledge—but that we can also follow empathetic and restorative paths through those instances.

Focusing on 'shame sensitive practice' also demands real attention to shame from institutions without focusing on a legal or policy approach to adjudicating speech disputes on campus. When navigating the sticky emotional realities of campus life, focusing on practices that recognize individual and group experience without rejecting or reducing the broader principles that drive campus life. In fact, shame sensitive practice on campus can acknowledge the various purposes of educational institutions and work to align those principles with practices that focus on trust, community-building, and effective learning—not patterns of shaming and stigmatizing that send some voices into hiding. In this respect, the other face of shame and expression would suggest that encouraging more voices and more expression could help to ameliorate a culture of speech-related shame. The one area in which there might be useful policies at the institutional level is a focus on reducing active shaming—following Dolezal and Lyons' call to 'avoid' shaming. Institutions can also consider the 'discourses' of shame threaded throughout their institutional policies—what is talked about as unacceptable, and what happens when a person does something unacceptable. I suggest that downstream, attending to shame can forward a more reparative and less punitive approach to institutional policy. This 'extra-legal' dimension of free expression provides another path forward through the murky waters of dialogue and discussion in the USA in 2025.

6.   Conclusion

Shame can restrict speech and impel curricular or normative boundaries. Across diverse definitions of harm, shame certainly has the possibility to cause harm, but in other cases it may be a more benign if complicated experience for an individual, or an unavoidable part of learning and growing in a campus community. Shame may also be a feeling that helps individuals recognize their responsibilities to others and to hear their voices. Lastly, more restrictions on speech can compel more shame by making more perspectives shameful or unacceptable, instead of open for discussion. Because of these nuances, I suggest that instead of aiming for strict guidelines to respond to shame, campuses can focus on practices that acknowledge shame, reduce instances of shaming, and address shame when it happens. I argue that attending to shame can highlight the limits of a legalistic approach to open expression on campuses and the profound need to recognize the material impact that shame has on individuals as learners and participants. This does not mean that all shame is a form of harm, but that different instances of shame can be recognized and acknowledged in relational, not legal, ways. It also means that in cases where shame intersects with bias, bullying, or retaliation, campuses and classrooms can make space to respond to shame while still following formal protocols for those breaches. Thus, I argue for a focus on developing contextually relevant practices that attend to shame in its nuance and work to sustain a robust space where both expression and diverse identities can thrive. I have argued that shame and open expression work like two sides of the same coin. Where shame stymies open expression, the stymying of open expression can multiply shame. Shame is a challenging part of human life, but when addressed in community, we can unite to include more voices in conversation, instead of standing apart in silence.

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