

Unmasking School Shame: the Impact on Sense of Self

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Memories of reading and writing difficulties in school

Recognizing that beliefs about the self – how we “see” ourselves – are held in images in the mind that are usually subconscious, I decided that a critical first step in addressing the experience of shame would be to bring these images to light. The following series of drawings captures the essence of the experience of school shame more powerfully and effectively than words alone. They are the result of several activities that I led during the *Journey to Wholeness* class for some of the adult learners whom I had previously interviewed for my research on the experience of reading and writing difficulties as a child. They document the long-lasting damage to sense of self and feelings of self-worth.

After presenting an overview of the impact of shame on sense of self and how it shapes beliefs and behavior, I put on some music, gave the learners pastels and asked them to draw their experience of difficulty learning to read.

While reviewing the tape of this activity, I was struck by the fact that while they were drawing, the four of them were carrying on a lively conversation, joking, teasing and telling stories.



The question was:

How did you feel having a reading and writing problem in school?

These are the images that began to emerge

Even though the conversation was light-hearted, the pictures reveal another story. I ask them to tell me about their drawings.

Patty starts first.

She points to a drawing of a smiling child on the far left side of the paper, saying, *“This is me, believe it or not, in my slimmer days.”*

Next to the smiling child is a small stick figure with a frown. Referring to that image, she says, *“This is my inner self, banging myself against that red brick wall. OK? And this is the rainbow on the other side with all the other kids here.”*



Then there’s this lady (next to the rainbow) – in fact, I can still remember her. She was showing one of those projector things where they blocked out all the words. And she was saying, ‘Don’t worry. You’re doin’ good, you’re doin’ good.’ And I can still see the whole screen and everything, and the words.

But she had a smile on her face and she was saying, ‘You can do this. You can do this.’ Even though I felt like I was hitting a brick wall, it was the kids on the other side that kept saying, ‘You can do it! You can do it.’ So I felt like it was going to be a hard task, but I had a cheerleading group on the other side that made me keep going for it.”

I asked Patty if they helped her get over the brick wall. Her response was, *“They did to a point. What they did was help me learn how to fake it until I got brave enough to go out on my own and just do it. I guess you could call them creators of Hell. Or you could say creators of heaven, let me put it that way.”*

It seems that she’s not sure if the world she stepped into was heaven or hell.



Donna joins in.

“This whole black area is how I felt when it came to reading and writing. The white part is me (in the center), and this yellow with all the bright colored dots is the other interests I had outside school that I liked to do. The gray around it I’m not really sure. But, somehow, it ties in.”

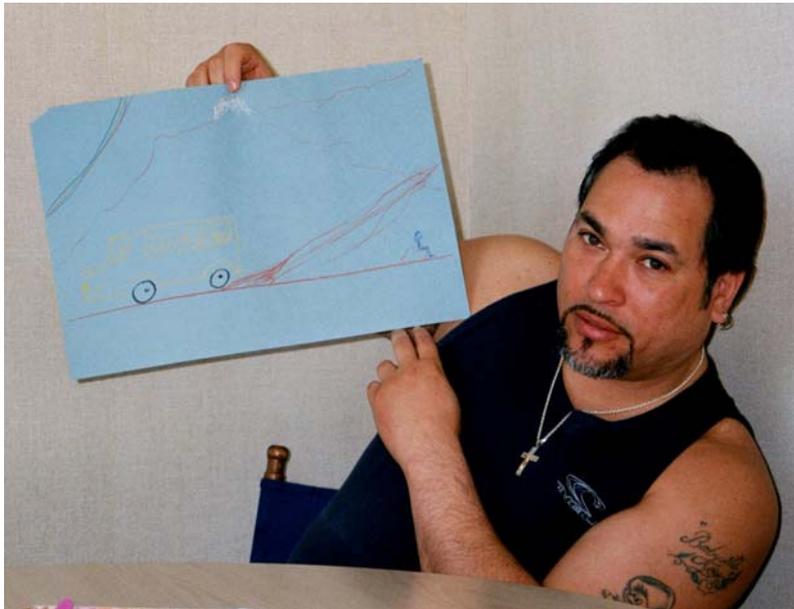
I commented that it seems almost like the gray area is a protection zone between her and the darkness. She agrees and comments that *“It’s like a crossover; it blends the white into the black.”* She adds that the black represents how she felt about all of her school experience – homework, school, and tests. She reiterates that the brightly colored area means everything she enjoyed doing that wasn’t related to school, because she didn’t like going to school.

While she couldn’t really describe the meaning of the grey area at the time she did the drawing, a month later, when I came back to take another photo, she commented that it was how she felt trying to deal with the blackness – to bring some of the white color into the black. The symbolism seems clear. White appears to represent her pure self or essential self. The grey feels bland, lifeless and colorless – a kind of buffer protecting the bright and whole self. Then we talked about the symbolism of the color black, representing:

- grief
- death
- terror
- the unknown.

All of these terms seem to fit for her. She says that she was a happy and active child who loved to learn before she went to school. Once she started first grade a part of her died. She began to run away from school, but they didn’t believe her when she said she hated school because she couldn’t read. She had done well on aptitude tests in kindergarten. The teachers, and eventually her parents, thought she was faking it. The principal accused her of being lazy. This once happy and vibrant child is overcome by a kind of darkness and grief that is unspeakable. She can not understand what is wrong. She tries to run away and hide.

Enrique speaks up next.



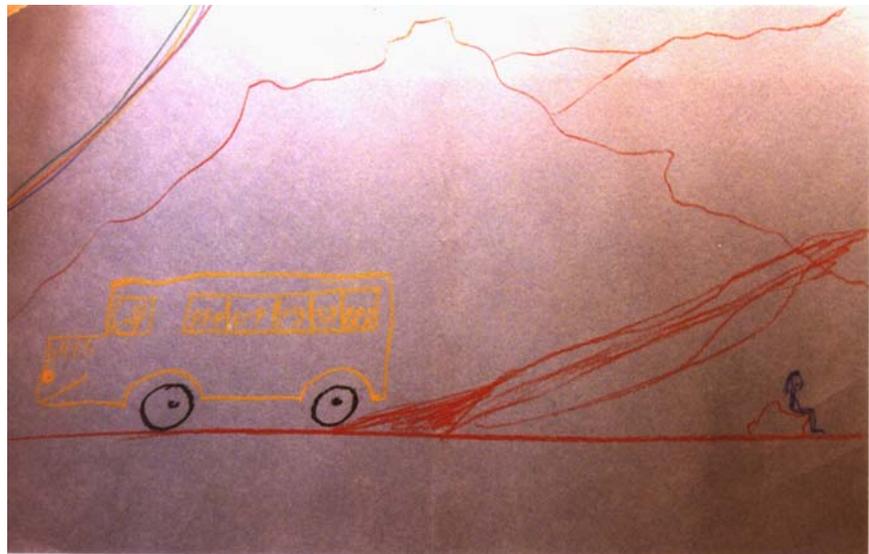
“Well, this is a bus -- a happy bus. This is everybody on the bus, and I’m back over here because I missed the bus. So I just sat back and watched everything go by. I let my whole world go by.”

“I had nobody there.”

I noticed that he is facing away from the bus. He says, “Yeah, I’m facing away from it, because I don’t want to see it. Now I’m watching everything else go by and there’s nothing going on.”

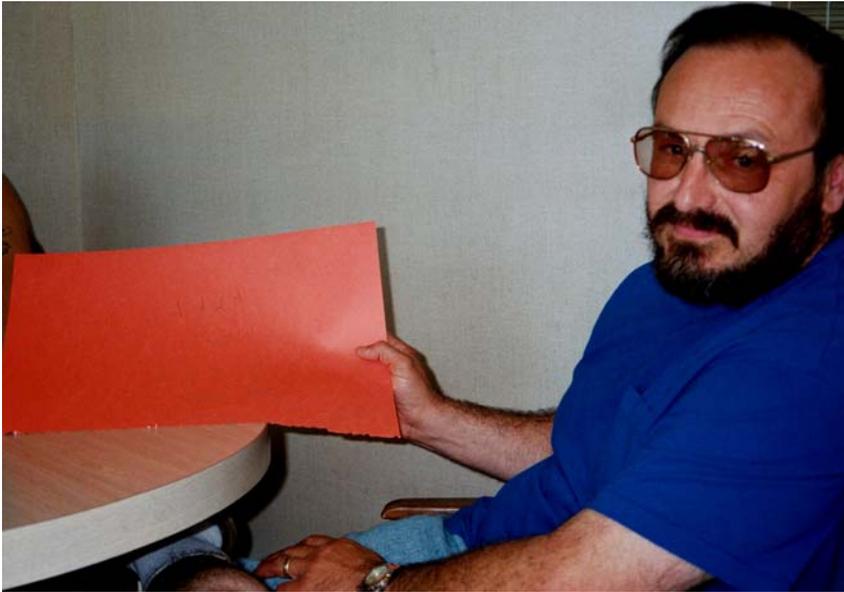
I asked if there is a rainbow above the bus and he explains, “Oh yeah, that’s the other side of the mountain. That’s where they’re going. Oh they’re goin’ to the other side of the mountain!”

“See, over here, I had a flash flood. I had a disaster on this side, and these guys... they’re on their way.”



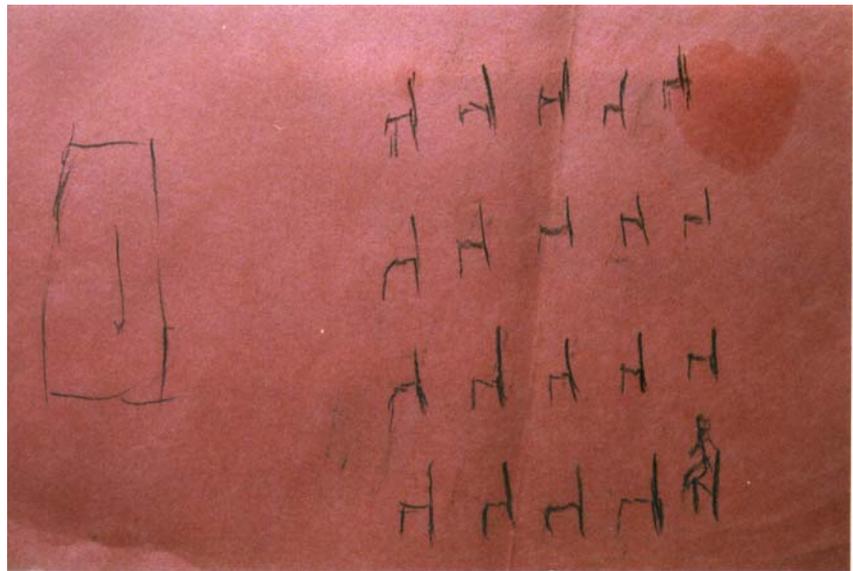
The symbolism of this picture is stark and telling. While everyone else is on the bus with big smiles on their faces - even the bus has a smile on it, Enrique is sitting on a rock, isolated and alone, and the world has passed him by. This graphically shows the isolation, hopelessness, and emotional pain associated with long-term shame. Everyone else on the bus has a happy future ahead of them. “They are goin’ to the other side of the mountain.” Meanwhile, Enrique has a disaster, a flash flood, coming down the mountain between himself and the bus. If we consider the symbolism of a flood, water often represents the emotions. He has a flood of emotions and they run over everything. The pain of this experience is still so devastating that he can barely speak about it today.

Ray begins to describe his drawing.



He had more difficulty coming up with an image to draw because he is less of a visual thinker. He's happy that an image hits him at the last minute.

"This is me in a classroom. I was always in the corner trying to hide so nobody could ask me anything. That way the teacher can't find me and nobody can say anything to me. I was always trying to hide."



Even though this seems like such a simple, straightforward image, it is a compelling illustration of a major response to shame and the fear of exposure – the need to hide, disappear, or become invisible in any way possible.