

The Need For Shame

Forty-five years ago I started my first job. I was a freshman in high school, growing up on the west side of Chicago. Rosario Geraci, like many of the people in the neighborhood, was an Italian immigrant. Eager to be an American, he learned English and wanted to be called Russell. Eager to succeed in his new country, he opened a tiny grocery store on west Chicago Avenue. His two sons helped him operate the business, and as they went off to college and my three brothers and I grew up, we became steady employees of Geraci Food Store.

The store had two aisles and a wooden plank floor. For the starting wage of 50 cents per hour I waited on customers, sliced lunchmeat, scooped fresh ricotta cheese into containers, swept floors, stocked shelves, delivered groceries to elderly customers for dime tips, and unloaded delivery trucks—no mean feat for a 14-year-old greeting 60-pound 12-packs of sugar speeding down a ramp. From 3 p.m. until 6:30 p.m. every weekday and from 9 a.m. until 6:30 on Saturdays I wore my battleship grey smock with pride.

I learned a smattering of Italian but never learned how anyone could like the blood tongue or head cheese I sliced for their sandwiches. I mastered a cash register (which probably weighed more than I did) and could ring up purchases faster and more accurately than any modern day electronic scanner. I experienced the art of marketing by pricing cans of soup at 3 for 57 cents—and was astounded by how easily that would prompt customers to buy three cans when they might only need one or two. I easily understood that if the groceries cost \$3.46 and the customer gave me \$5.01 the change would be \$1.55—I did not need a calculator to perform that mental task for me.

I was polite to customers no matter how unreasonable they might have been... although in those days they were rarely unreasonable. But they were often short of cash. No one had a credit card in his wallet, but that does not mean one could not get credit. Russell would extend credit to customers to tide them over until payday. The process was simple. We would write the family's name on the cash register receipt and hold it until the person came back in a few days to pay the bill. But those "tabs" were not hidden in a drawer. Instead, we had a small board with plastic strips hanging on the side of the milk cooler behind the counter. We inserted the register receipts under one of the strips, where they remained until the bill was paid. Any customer who chose to look would see dozens of tabs on the wall—and the names were clearly visible. If the Gianetti family owed Russell \$6.50 for groceries, everyone knew it.

We had no official name for the collection of credit reminders, but it was essentially a "wall of shame." If you were on the wall, you did your best to get removed as soon as you could. My own family was on the wall from time to time, and I always felt relieved when it came down.

In the 1950s and 1960s there may not have been an abundance of cash, but there was an abundance of morality. People were embarrassed to be in debt. A mortgage or a car

payment was one thing, but being unable to buy groceries meant you could not support your own family. Shame was attached to that inability. Americans were ashamed to be poor, ashamed to be alcoholics, ashamed to have children out of wedlock, ashamed to have a criminal record, ashamed of cheating on school tests, ashamed of drug addiction, ashamed of going on welfare, ashamed of collecting food stamps, ashamed of being on the government dole.

Today, there is little shame to be found anywhere. A celebrity intentionally exposes her breast during a Super Bowl half-time show and calls it a “wardrobe malfunction.” Her now-dead brother grabs his crotch during his performances and earns millions. Two female singers engage in a passionate kiss on an awards show. An actor jokes about his drug use on a late-night talk show and is applauded. A Wall Street manipulator neglects to fail his taxes and is made Secretary of the Treasury. An activist organization advises an undercover pimp and prostitute on how to defraud the banks and the government and then demands additional funds from the government to continue its operations. A woman takes drugs to get pregnant and gives birth to eight children she cannot afford to raise. A high-priced hooker sleeps with a governor and gets her own newspaper advice column. A young woman has five children with five different boyfriends. A politician takes a private jet to travel from city to city to preach to others about their unacceptable “carbon footprints.” Legislators pass trillion dollar spending bills with no regard for where they will get the money to pay for them. Politicians promise health care legislation will reduce the cost of insurance premiums when they know full well it will raise those costs. A baby is aborted just days before its anticipated due date. A smooth-talking con man lies his way into the White House.

Shame serves a purpose. People should be embarrassed by actions they should not have taken. But today, few actions have shame associated with them. It has become an anything goes society, where everyone can act as he wishes and no one is permitted to judge anyone else. How in the world is it acceptable to have an organization called the North American Man Boy Love Association? Why are its members not in jail?

Today, virtually nothing is considered unacceptable—other than perhaps being a Christian, a Jew, or a conservative who believes in small government and balancing the budget. What used to be admirable is now scorned. Fidelity is now ridiculed. Responsibility is now ignored. Accountability has now disappeared. Morality is becoming non-existent.

A civilization which lacks shame will not long survive. We need the return of shame—fast.

Don Fredrick
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