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John Guiniven: At long last, have we no shame?

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

We seldom hear (or say) that anymore, because as a society we seem to have turned our back on rectitude and embraced, or at least accepted, shamelessness. The current scandal involving David Letterman underscores the point.

Threatened with blackmail and with tabloids zeroing in on him, Letterman was forced to admit that "I have had sex with women who work for me." There was no apology or contrition for having created a hostile work environment in which every young woman in his employ must have felt like chattel or a member of his harem.

Instead, his admission came at the end of a skillfully crafted 10-minute monologue complete with humor in which he painted himself as a victim and hero - a man who stood firm against a blackmailer out to destroy his family and who helped authorities bring the villain to justice. The audience laughed, applauded, and was so solidly on his side that it appeared ready to blame the young women instead of their powerful, 62-year-old boss.

It was a situation that cried out for a sense of shame. Instead, Letterman opted for schtick. Except for the humor, his performance was not much different from the many I'm-sorry-I-got-caught statements from the likes of Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards, Govs. Eliot Spitzer of New York and Mark Sanford of South Carolina, Sen. John Ensign of Nevada and, of course, President Bill Clinton.

Perhaps they - perhaps all of us - are incapable of feeling shame, which psychologists Paul Gilbert and Bernice Andrews note "is an involuntary emotion. You either have the capacity for shame, or you don't." Letterman did say he was "a tower of guilt," but guilt differs from shame, according to researchers June Tangay and Ronda Dearing, who say: "Guilt involves condemnation of a specific incident or action - What I did - while shame involves negative evaluations of one's self - Who I am." It speaks to a character flaw.

We are reluctant to entertain negative evaluations of ourselves, our own characters, so we extend that narcissism to our judgments of others. We not only forgive the person who acted shamefully, but we go one giant step further - we decree the behavior itself to be acceptable.

The late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan warned against "defining deviancy down," which legitimizes behavior previously considered verboten and which leads to breakdowns in society. And James Twitchell, author of "For Shame," says "On a social compass, shame points one way, honor points the other. If you readjust shame, you lessen honor."

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell put it more bluntly in a 1995 interview with Time magazine: "Nothing seems to shame or outrage us anymore. We've got to restore a sense of shame to our society."

That won't be easy. We seem more concerned with violations of what Twitchell calls codes of consumption - wearing fur, smoking in public, not recycling - than we do with codes of behavior. Unless we get our priorities in order and respect codes of behavior as the social taproot they are, well, we should all be ashamed of ourselves.

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