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The Shame-Based Family

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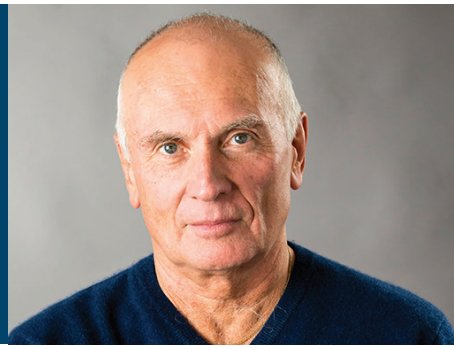

We all know the dreadful and debilitating feeling of "There's something terribly wrong here, and the something is me!" Although far from enjoyable, or welcomed, such a feeling can be helpful. For example, if you act out of integrity, violating one of your core values, what has been described as "healthy shame" can be a wakeup call, summoning you back to yourself. When accompanied by self-forgiveness healthy shame does not turn us against ourselves. Rather, it points to what it means to get right with ourselves. In fact, parents who model healthy shame offer their children an inextricable depiction of living in integrity and exercising self-accountability.

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Parental Modeling of Shame

According to John Bradshaw, "Toxic shame, the shame that binds you, is experienced as the all-pervasive sense that I am flawed and defective as a human being." There are several ways in which shame becomes galvanized in the family system. This results in its members becoming over-identified with feeling shame.

If parents are living with shame at the core of their identities, then children can easily adopt the modeling and feel the grip of shame. Jack and his wife Maryann came in to see me, reporting their concerns about their children.

"We have worked very hard at not shaming our children. We practice self-accountability, promoting acceptance of all emotions, and we exercise logical and concrete consequences to address unacceptable behavior. I think we're doing a great job," Maryann noted, her tone carrying the enthusiasm and conviction of someone giving a lecture on proper parenting. It left me wondering what the driving force behind her zeal might be.

"Maryann, I'm hearing that you and Jack have really done your homework as parents. Tell me more about what brings you here," I encouraged, feeling her readiness to reveal more.

"Well, it's our kids. If one of them makes a mistake, spills juice, forgets to take out the trash or feed the dog, their heads immediately hang in shame. And we're telling them it's perfectly okay, but it doesn't matter. They continue doing a number on themselves. I just know it's nothing we've done!" Maryann exclaimed, with her chin slightly lifted, and her eye contact dotting away, as if something much more attractive got her attention.

"I think you and Jack have been doing a good job parenting. I'm more wondering about the families you both come from. Did shame ever show up at the dinner table?" I inquired, hoping they might have some understanding of their histories with shame. A shroud of silence entered the room, heavy as the early morning fog over the bay.

"Well, both of us were the objects of considerable shaming by our parents. But that's why we've been so determined not to shame our children. I mean, we know what it's like," Jack declared, leaning forward in a manner suggesting a solicitation of agreement.

"How do each of you feel when you make a mistake?" I asked, sensing it was the right question, but not knowing if I wandered down a hornet's hive of denial.

"I need to admit it. I can really beat up on myself. I guess the old shame can still have its way with me," Maryann shared, her eyes moistening and her tone suggesting defeat.

It was clear that Jack and Maryann believed that they could simply relate to their children shamelessly and shame would not take hold of their children. I went on to assure them that they were good parents. I made it clear that for the most part, only good parents find their way to my office. I went on to explain with a measure of empathy, that they were modeling what it meant to live with internalized shame. I added that the greatest gift to their children would be for them to take care of themselves. I recommended several therapists who could be helpful in their own de-shaming process. Maryann acted upon my suggestion and Jack continued to work with me. They were committed to interrupting the internalized shame they were carrying, which led to the de-shaming of their family.

Severing the "Interpersonal Bridge"

In his seminal work, Shame – The Power of Caring, Gershen Kaufman addresses the second way that a family becomes shame-based. "An emotional bond begins to grow between individuals as they communicate understanding, respect, and valuing for one another's personhood, needs and feelings included. That bond deepens along with trust and makes possible experiences of openness and vulnerability. The bond which ties two individuals together forms an interpersonal bridge between them. The bridge in turn becomes a vehicle to facilitate mutual understanding, growth, and change. These vital processes are disrupted whenever that bridge becomes severed." Kaufman goes on to suggest that the forces of humiliation, disgust, contempt, disparagement as well excessive expectations are what severs the interpersonal bridge, replacing it with shame.

The Shame Collage

The third infusion of shame into the system happens by way of what Bradshaw calls, *"the interconnection of memory imprints which forms collages of shame."* (*Healing the Shame that Binds You*, p.11) This process takes place as a particular behavior receives ongoing disparaging reactions. For example, if a child hears contemptuous overtones when asked about homework, that same child is likely to feel shame when an innocuous, non-shaming question is asked about homework. When shame is internalized, it becomes difficult to discern whether something toxic or not is heading your way. Internalized feelings of shame can easily become generalized and attached to other questions having nothing to do with homework. Children can begin to feel shame associated with a variety of questions related to domestic chores. Now being the recipient of any inquiry can elicit shame.

We've been examining the three ways shame gets instilled into a family. Let's look more closely at some of the characteristics of a shame-based family.

Characteristics of a Shame-Based Family

Parents have internalized shame. Inevitably, the leaders or parents will be carrying internalized shame. When that happens, unlike Jack and Maryann, the parents will be both modeling living in shame as well as verbally and non-verbally shaming the children. Each family member will be a stranger to feeling okay about themselves, not having a genuine felt sense of their essential worth as human beings.

The family mandate. The mandate of the shame-based family is the contemptible self must remain hidden.

Fear drives this imperative to safeguard against others witnessing how truly unlovable family members are. The fear condemns everyone to living with an inconsolable feeling of vulnerability.

Developing a false self. With the actual self becoming a fugitive sequestered to some undisclosed chamber of the psyche, a false self is fashioned for worldly encounters. This imitation of the self is limited to *pleasing, impressing, avoiding, and dominating*. The job of the false self includes monitoring and inhibiting the genuine expression of emotion, desires, needs and values.

The damage of absenteeism. It's too easy to think of absent parents as simply not available physically. However, parents make a devastating declaration when they announce that their genuine selves will not be available. When children can't fine the authentic self of a parent, they are not able to create what Kaufman referred to as the "psychological bridge". That is, they cannot "create a vehicle to facilitate mutual understanding, growth and change." When the bridge cannot be constructed, children face life with an insurmountable level of insecurity and instability. They no longer feel safe and likely feel abandoned. They will likely require similar restorative therapeutic support as children whose parents stepped out of their lives. They attach the best they can to the parent's false self, leaving themselves with a significantly compromised psychological scaffolding.

Becoming externally referenced. When family members are convinced that they do not possess the internal resources needed to engender something redemptive, they wait for something from the external world to save them. Someone might want to date them, hire them, include them, befriend them, or even marry them. However, their longings are of no avail, for even if love is coming to them, they can find ways to disqualify the offering, like "the person doesn't really know me," or "there must be someone who would be a better fit for me." It can be an arduous journey before they discover they are the only ones who can restore their essential goodness.

Developing compensations. The ego naturally attempts to compensate for shame's sting of feeling worthless. One form of compensation is perfectionism which does not possess the power to lift a person out of the depths of self-loathing. Compulsive caregiving is another compensation, in the hope that someone will validate one's elusive credibility as a good person. Sometime, a compensation shows up as excessive striving as deservedness is allegedly measured by copious levels of exertion. "I must be okay; look how hard I'm trying." Another compensation is self-righteousness, a flawed attempt to restore a longing for feeling acceptable.

No-talk rule. Once the false self of parents is allegedly in charge, members of the family feel increasingly out of control. An imperative to suppress the expression of honest emotion, desires, needs and on occasion, actual family rules, dictate how people relate. It's an erroneous strategy aimed at restoring some measure of stability to the system.

Boundary violation. Once the "psychological bridge" has been severed, empathy in the system atrophies. Family members suspend monitoring what they say to one another. With emotional boundaries being easily violated, respect for individual preferences and needs withers. Withdrawal and avoidance are employed as boundaries causing an enhanced level of estrangement.

Anger. Anger is the only emotion tolerated. It can be used as a boundary, pushing people away. It is typically employed as a strategy to move away from feeling vulnerable. It's not unusual for family members to express more anger as they increasingly feel more vulnerable.

Repairing Two Bridges

It is important to understand that healing is very available for those raised in a shame-based family. Essentially, it means repairing the bridge to the authentic self as well as the bridge to trusted others. Let's look more closely at the psychological infrastructure supporting repair.

Repairing the Bridge to the Authentic Self

1. **Sychological education.** Coming to understand that your family of origin was not what you may have thought of as normal, but rather shame based. Hence, you are not damaged goods, but you are likely continuing to carry several psychological patterns learned in your family. While growing-up in that family, there was no way to know and feel your essential worth as a human being.

2. **Developing an interior welcoming. Learning to shamelessly welcome your emotions, desires and needs is a crucial pillar in the reconstruction of this first bridge. Initially, it is just about letting yourself to be aware of who you are emotionally. Your acquaintance with your emotions strengthens as you develop a felt sense of them in your body. This experience** could be fear felt as butterflies in the belly, sadness expressed as heaviness in the chest or anger reflected by tightness in the shoulders and jaw. Personal power unfolds as you offer an earnest greeting to the more vulnerable aspects such as hurt and fear. What can occur in your interior world may reflect what happens in the external world. For example, we know that a society is as strong as its capacity to integrate its most vulnerable members - children, the elderly, the disabled - as well as remaining open to whom may feel marginalized. So, it is in the internal world. As the more vulnerable parts of the self are assimilated, a robustness will be restored to your sense of being, known as personal power.

3. **Opportunity to grieve.** As you open to your emotions, it can be a time to grieve the losses of the past. Don't do this alone. At least sit with one trusted person who understands what it means to address loss. Your losses will include feeling understood, feeling loved and accepted, feeling secure and safe, being comfortable making mistakes as well as being a recipient of kindness.

4. **Interrupting shaming voices. Most of the shaming** voices you carry don't belong to you. It's likely they are introjected from the past. This means you internalized parental shaming directed at you. You can stop talking to yourself the way your parents addressed you. Practice holding the message, "That's not my voice and what it says about me is not true."

5. **Giving shame back. You did not emerge from the womb believing there was something wrong with you. The shame you carry doesn't belong to you. You can write a letter to your parents that you don't necessarily intend to send. In the letter describe the toxic accusations that w**ere hurled at you. Let the parent know those indictments don't belong to you and you're giving them back.

6. **Make peace with being imperfect. In a system where there is ongoing assault on your strengths and weaknesses, honoring your imperfect humanity is almost impossible. It is only too easy to believe everyone else is fine and that the gods simply forgot to furnish you with desirable attributes. Initially, defining your humanity** as imperfect might be baffling. One of the best ways to make peace with your imperfection is to apprentice to making mistakes compassionately. Allow one mistake at a time to be a statement of your humanity and not your flawed character.

7. **Shamelessly accountable. A shame-based family merges shame with accountability. Hence, if you're accountable for some action then you are the deplorable person who blundered. It is a spiritual practice to de-shame accountability. The new mantra sounds like, "I am the good** person who is accountable for my mistakes. Being accountable means that I acknowledge what I did. I make restitution whenever possible. I only feel healthy shame when I violate one of my core values."

8. **Building self-trust. You** learned in your family not to trust yourself. Why would you ever think of trusting a defective human being? Besides, not trusting yourself helped to deter you from saying or doing things that could easily leave you

vulnerable to toxic scrutiny. As you can recall that your perceptions of yourself have been unscrupulously distorted by the system you come from; you can begin to hold that you are trustworthy. Trust for yourself begins to build as you engender two beliefs: first, you believe you will allow yourself to know your truth without self-incrimination. Your truth being your emotions, your desires and needs, as well as your beliefs and values. Secondly, you come to believe you will be kind to yourself. Kindness is a measure of interrupting self-shaming thoughts as well as behaviors not contributing to your general welfare.

9. **Repairing abandonment trauma. This trauma configures around the belief that you were abandoned or forgotten because you are not worthy of being remembered. This belief is typically accompanied by despair, anguish, and the loss of faith that being loved is possible, as well as an unregulated nervous system. I highly recommend somatic therapeutic interventions such** as EMDR and Somatic Experiencing. As repair strengths, the initial belief explaining how you were forgotten is replaced by, **"I was forgotten by my parents because they did not know how to remember themselves."** I highly recommend working with a practitioner well-acquainted with the power and healing potential of the above statement.

10. **Reparenting yourself. We normally think of abandonment as taking place between two people. However, survivors of shamed-based families easily get caught up in a torrid stream** of self-abandonment. They forget themselves as they were forgotten. They forget to encourage themselves, forget to eat, rest, play and access the support of a friend. A key is to remember the vulnerable child who was shamed and who is still with you. These psychological parts of ourselves don't go away or die. I recommend the use of my **BEND** model for reparenting yourself. You can give yourself a new parent by adopting the skills suggested by the acronym. **"B" stands for effective Boundaries,** ones that can be strong enough to supply protection and porous enough to let love in. **"E" refers to Encouragement.** Let your inner child know you believe in him or her and that they are well worth your attention. **"N" denotes Nurturing.** Come to know what truly nurtures you - walks in the forest, playing, hot baths, being held, coffee with a friend or a day at the beach. **"D" stands for Discipline.** Here, I draw from an ancient definition of the word *discipline,* which is "discipleship." Hence, come to know your allies, those trusted others who are committed to knowing you, loving you and believing in you. Call them in for help and support whether the task be something custodial or emotional.

Repairing the bridge to others.

As you learn to build bridges to trusted others, remain mindful of a prevalent cultural seduction. This temptation comes in the way of an extroverted culture's infatuation with flares of exuberance, suggesting the alleged presence of a meaningful human encounter. That's not to say demonstrations of jubilation cannot create bonding. It is just that the relational story is larger. We begin with the question, what constitutes the refined material needed for a sturdy interpersonal bridge?

1. **The refined material.** The refined material for the bridge to others is the bridge to yourself. When encountering others, the only thing in your control is the connection to the authentic self. Relating to others meaningfully is not mostly about being with them, it is mostly about being with yourself in their presence. The more you trust yourself, the more discernment you bring to allowing your truth to come forward. Building a bridge to the authentic self is the prerequisite to all relationship building.

2. **Mindful of the false self.** Pleasing, impressing, avoiding, and dominating are natural expressions of the false self. We do these to support of survival which gets amplified in a shame-based family. The key is not to make a big deal about these fabricated expressions of the self. Simply, get to

know when they are present and decide to go with it or let it go. It's important to appreciate how much the expressions of the false self have served you, exercise them now with more intention when you need one. Recently, a relatively new friend turned to me at a dinner party and said, "I've been noticing my attachment to impressing you," a glow of shyness shown in her rosy cheeks. I felt gifted and thankful to receive her truth, which eclipsing her false self. You don't need years of psychotherapy to cope effectively with the faces of the false self. It does call for a willingness to risk while refusing to shame the outcome.

3. **Building trust for others.** Trust must be earned. I recently heard a gentleman proudly declare his willingness to trust whoever shows-up in his life. I suggested he may not be doing anyone a favor by trusting without discernment. "Do you believe that it makes a favorable statement about you that you're so willing to magnanimously offer your trust?" I asked, noticing a glimmer of pride reflected off his face. "Well, I'm at least giving people a chance," he offered, attempting to build a case for the viability of his approach toward trust. "Actually, I believe you can give people a chance without quickly deciding they deserve your trust. You can remain observant without drawing quick conclusions, allowing for an informed expression of discernment. Without discernment, there's a risk of setting people up to fail, not being deserving of your trust while making you unnecessarily vulnerable to being hurt," I explained, wondering if he would be willing to loosen his grip upon the alleged meritorious act of trusting without discretion. "You make it sound like distrust is some kind of good thing!" he exclaimed, his lips tightening, and his brow furrowing, and eyes squinting, suggesting he was hearing the unbelievable. "O course it's a good thing. If someone demonstrates a tendency to lie to you or be consistently unkind, then you should distrust them," I offered, wondering if Frank might open to a new perspective. "Okay, I think I hear what you're saying. People gain my trust when I have enough experience with them, I have some experience hearing them telling me the truth and being kind to me," he responded, with his gaze softening and his torso leaning forward. "That's right, giving yourself time to gather enough information to make something approaching an informed decision. You can still be the guy who enjoys trusting, but doing it because the person has earned it," I encouraged, hoping he could see it wasn't necessary for him to sacrifice his love of trusting. "How do I know how much time to give someone before I make a decision?" he asked, his desire to understand being palpable. "Frank, that's a great question. One approach is to pay attention to what impresses you and what turns you off when you meet people. If you're easily impressed by beauty, intelligence, social status, or charisma, then slow the process down. You'll run the risk of trusting a bit too quickly. If you're turned off by someone's accent, type of work, or where they live, then slow down. You may be distrusting too hastily," I rejoined, in the hope that Frank could see what might influence his offerings of trust.

4. **Remaining a student of effective boundaries**. A verbal or physical boundary is what you do to separate yourself from another. Purpose separation might be safety or to confirm your unique needs or views. The degree to which a boundary provides a level of separation is one way to understand them. Permeable boundaries allow for very little separation, while non-permeable ones furnish a great deal of separation. Semi-permeable boundaries provide a fluid level of separation depending upon how much separation is needed. These boundaries are adjusted to be more permeable when you're in the presence of what is benign, acceptable, or valued, such as offerings of kindness, support, and love. They can be modified to be more non-permeable when encountering what is deemed as threatening, harsh, or unacceptable - such as sarcasm, ridicule, or shame. Regulation of semi-permeable

boundaries is accomplished by exercising discernment, which is guided by a quality of self-trust. The more you trust yourself, the greater the likelihood that your discernment will reveal what's nefarious and what's favorable. Becoming skillful with the employment of semi-permeable boundaries is very advantageous because they allow you to benefit from what is loving and kind and protect you from what may be toxic. Shame-based families tend to operate with very permeable boundaries within the system, and amongst its members, who get to say and do whatever moves them, often flaunting a cavalier attitude about being unkind. However, because of the shame and vulnerability experienced by family members, non-permeable boundaries are employed when encountering anyone outside the family.

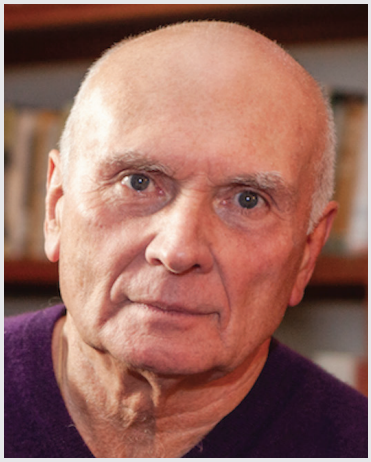
5. **Getting Messy.** Survivors of shame-based families rely upon shame to cope with relationships when then get messy, resulting in things getting messier. The messy ingredients may include someone feeling hurt, scared, forgotten or angry. Relationships also get messy when there is some form of conflict. Messy happens when people feel lost and bewildered, or when any level of meaningful change is occurring, even events like marriages and funerals. When something messy shows up, what sits just beneath the shame is fear. Again, we see the importance of the bridge to the authentic self as we construct a bridge to others. Survivors will need to increase their ability to feel fear, acknowledge fear and calm themselves to effectively deal with what is messy. Being adept at both speaking and listening to the fear of others calls for an aptitude for holding tension. We can say that the hallmark of coping with messy is being able to hold tension without resorting to utterances of shame. I recommend several steps regarding holding tension. First, notice where the tension sits in your body. Secondly, bring your breath to where the tension sits and remain focused upon that area. If it feels right, verbally acknowledge the tension to a trusted other. If you find you're getting a bit immobilized, then move your fingers and hands gently, or get up and take a walk. The frozen reaction occurs because what's happening is a reminder of some historical messy situation accompanied by shaming. Use your eyes for grounding by simply looking around the room at different objects.

6. **Getting messy with relational breakdowns.** Building bridges to others certainly happens when we are attuned to them and experience genuine resonance. Being attuned means that we are letting go of whatever has our attention and tuning in to what the other is presenting to us. It may be an idea, an emotion, or some desire. Resonance occurs as the emotions of two people come into sync, reflecting, and encouraging of one another's emotional state. Conflicts and other forms of relational breakdowns are what's messy when attending to interpersonal bridges. When we experience relational breakdowns with no resolution, and are left feeling accused and blamed, we lose faith that attunement and resonance are even possible. One way to attend to the messiness of relational breakdowns is to adopt a protocol called *Problem Ownership*. Unfortunately, in a shame-based family, problem dis-ownership is the norm. That is, whenever someone has a problem, they hand it off to another family member via accusation, blame or ridicule. Some years ago, pioneers in the Human Potential movement, like Thomas Gordon, took the issue of problem dis-ownership quite seriously. These trailblazers decided that the relational mess gets out of hand because there is no clarity about the actual problem and who has it. **They decided that in many cases, the real problem is an unmet need; and the person with the problem is the person with the unmet need.** A simple emotional review easily reveals who has the unmet need. It is the person talking about needing or wanting something and have feelings like frustration, anger, and discouragement because the need is not being unmet. Of course, if we speak in code, suggesting that the problem is the other's insensitivity, their carelessness and

non-cooperative behavior, then it is more challenging to identify the real problem and who has it. Messiness becomes a bit less messy if two people can by in on *Problem Ownership*. Let's look more closely at an example of the person with the problem speaking and the person to whom they are addressing. Imagine that Jack believes he has an agreement with Bob to be picked up by Bob at 6:30 PM for a 7:00 PM meeting. Bob picks up Jack at 6:50 PM, thus they both miss the first twenty minutes of the meeting. Jack understands that he has the unmet need or the problem of not being picked up at the agreed upon time. Jack's description of his problem will include several key points. **First, Jack reflects the agreement he understands he had with Bob – "My understanding is that we agreed you would pick me up at 6:30 PM for the meeting." Secondly, Jack describes in concrete terms the consequences he experienced due to being late for the meeting – "It was important for me to hear the minutes of the last meeting, which I missed and to see what openings still existed on the finance committee." Thirdly, Jack describes the emotional impact resulting from being late for the meeting – "I feel angry and frustrated about getting to the meeting late." Lastly, Jack describes his request of Bob – "I'm requesting that you either call me when you know you'll be late or simply keep our agreement."** The protocol of *Problem Ownership* also involves Bob listening to Jack. Folks raised in a shame–based family can find it challenging to listen to someone non-shaming and non-blaming about their problem. What makes it so difficult is that they hear shame when there is none. If they hear that someone has a problem with their behavior, they hear shame. If they do enough emotional work, then they might be able to hear and respond to what is being said. **When that's the case, then we would hear Bob offering the following – First, simply reflecting what he hears: "Jack, I'm hearing that when I was late picking you up, you felt angry and frustrated about missing the start of the meeting." Note, that Bob does not include an interpretation or analysis of what Jack said. Bob continues, "And I hear that you want me to call you if I know I'm running late, which I'm willing to do."** We are simply looking at the bear bones of the protocol. In real life more may need to be said such as Bob being unaware of the starting time of the meeting or even that there was a specific agreement. The key is to stay clear of blaming or shaming as well as justifying and explaining with the initial response to the person owning the problem. Folks raised in a shame-based family will need to practice repeatedly, not only to acquire the skills but to engender the faith that a simple breakdown can be addressed without someone getting hurt.

Those of us raised in shame-based families can, with help, restore a connection to our essential goodness. You are not basically flawed! You've been living in a shame story whose narrative can be redeemed. You will likely need to give back the shame that doesn't belong to you. Parents who feel out of control often resort to shame in a desperate attempt to control their children. They can also simply model how to live with shame.

Do what you can to interact with people who do not relate to themselves or others with the arbitrary use of shame. You may even ascribe fraudulence when encountering compassion, authenticity, gentleness, and acceptance. Just notice your suspicions and continue to spend time where these new energies appear to thrive. Exercise your discernment, no one will be perfectly gentle or compassionate. You will eventually discover whether the actions you witness are either genuine or pretense.



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Dr. Dunion has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. He is a wholistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma. He is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Dr. Dunion represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, Dr. Dunion created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is also the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Dr. Dunion established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. Dr. Dunion has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, he offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

He has published five books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home; Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind; Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be; Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy;* and *Temptation in the House of the Lord.* Dr. Dunion's latest offering due to be released in 2020 is *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate.*

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