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Shame On You!

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Стыд и срам!: You ought to be ashamed of yourself!

Although I have spent most of professional life plumbing the differences between the Russian language and English and — through and along with language — between people who grew up in Russia or Russian families and people who grew up elsewhere, there is nothing that drives me crazier than when someone begins a sentence like this: Русские or американцы, англичане, французы, тайцы...(Russians — or Americans, English people, French people, Thais — are) and then puts in an adjective: добрые (kind); щедрые (generous); открытые (open); гостеприимные (hospitable); честные (honest). Or whatever. It drives me crazy because for every adjective I can introduce you to five Russians, born and raised in Russia with

Russian blood running through their veins, who are not open or warm or hospitable or honest or whatever.

Now that's not to say that there aren't national differences. Of course there are. But I think they are differences in values, not characteristics. People in different cultures place qualities, attributes, and behaviors in different places on the value scale. For example, it's not that all Russians speak beautifully with perfect grammar (whatever that is). But it is true that Russians tend to value speaking "well" (whatever that is) more than, say, Americans do. It's not unimportant to many Americans, but probably being successful is more important than good grammar.

Therefore, what happens to you when you live in a different culture and speak a different language all the time is not that you acquire new characteristics, but you find shifts in your value scale.

Which is a really long way around to this: In English I very rarely say: I'm ashamed of myself. But in Russian I do all the time.

I'm still trying to figure out if I actually experience shame more or just express it more. But if in English I'm uncomfortable, I feel really bad, I'm regretful, I'm sorry, I feel awful about it, in Russian: Мне стыдно! (I'm ashamed!)

In Russian, the unholy trinity of shame consists of стыд (basic shame) позор (stronger, includes disgrace) and срам (old-fashioned shame that is also slang for genitals).

Most of the time, shame is not discussed as much as it is shouted about accusingly. The classic phrase is: Как вам/тебе не стыдно?! (Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Shame on you!) But that's not all. Стыдно! (For shame!) Позор! (What a disgrace!) Срам! (How despicable!) Стыд и срам! (What a low-down, dirty shame!) Ни стыда, ни совести нет! (You have no shame, literally, you don't have any shame or any conscience!) Имей совесть! (Don't you have a conscience, literally have a conscience!)

The verbs from these nouns are interesting... which is code for: not entirely what you expect and easy to mess up.

Стыдить is the verb for shaming someone. В школьном диктанте я написала «пожалуста» и учительница стыдила меня перед классом (In a school dictation I spelled the word "please" wrong and the teacher disgraced me in front of the whole class.)

Стыдиться is the verb for being ashamed. This can also be shouted: Стыдись! (You should be ashamed of yourself!) But not only people can feel shame; certain emotions can be ashamed, too: Вы исповедуете такую точку зрения, что любовь ничего не стыдится, всё дозволяет, всё прощает и так далее? (Do you preach that love knows no shame, love permits everything, forgives everything, and so on?)

With позор, you use the reflexive verb pair позориться/опозориться when you've done something disgraceful, embarrassing or humiliating. Like this poor guy: В кино вся твоя бездарность налицо. Когда тебе, наконец, надоест позориться на всю страну? (Your complete lack of talent is obvious in the movie. Aren't you sick of humiliating yourself in front

of the whole country?)

Позорить, however, doesn't follow the pattern of стыд-стыдить-стыдиться (shame-to make someone ashamed-to be ashamed). Of course not; that would be too easy. So позорить doesn't mean to make someone feel ashamed; it means to bring shame on someone or something. For example: Не позорь свою семью (Don't dishonor your family.) Although this sounds fine in Russian, sometimes this is hard to say in English without sounding like a self-satisfied pilgrim in "The Scarlet Letter": Не позорь себя! In the 17th century this might have been: Do not bring shame upon yourself! But today, maybe it's: Don't demean yourself!

And срамить is also curious: it has both meanings — to bring shame upon someone or something and to make someone feel ashamed. Sheesh. An example of the first meaning is this: Срамить офицерский мундир наш командир не позволял никому (Our commander wouldn't let anyone bring dishonor to the uniform of an officer.) An example of the latter is this: После моей кражи пирожка, соседка-торговка вернулась домой и, дождавшись прихода мамы, начала срамить меня (After I stole the pie, the pie seller, who was my neighbor, came home, waited until my mother got in, and then began to curse me out.)

But срамиться is back to the normal pattern, to do something shameful: Я не подам заявку на конкурс, не хочу срамиться (I'm not going to apply for the competition, I don't want to disgrace myself.)

If you don't like any of the above, you can confess your deep shame and embarrassment with a variety of colorful expressions. Several involve eyes: Когда комиссия пришла разобраться, все врачи сидели тихо и прятали глаза (When the commission came to investigate, all the doctors sat silently and couldn't look them in the face, literally "hid their eyes".) Мне было так стыдно, не знала куда глаза девать (I was so ashamed I didn't know what to do with myself, literally "what to do with my eyes".)

Another expression involves a tell-tale blush. Слышал, как мой ребёнок орал на всех, и сразу кровь бросилась мне в лицо. Как же он смог так себя вести? (I heard my child screaming at everyone and turned bright red with shame. How could he behave like that?)

Or you might just want to die from the shame of it. Он зашёл в спальную в тот момент, когда я читала его дневник. Я была готова сквозь землю провалиться. (He came into the bedroom just as I was reading his diary. I wanted the earth to swallow me up.) Я сказала бабушке что-то очень грубое. Она была шокирована, а мои родители сгорали от стыда (I said something very rude to my grandmother. She was shocked and my parents just about died from shame.)

The thing is, even if you feel ashamed or humiliated for what you did, sometimes it will be even worse if you don't admit it. At the dacha when you borrowed your neighbor's vase without asking — стыдно как! (What a disgrace!) — and then broke it, you have to fess up and buy her a new one. There's a saying for that one (of course there is): Стыдно сказать, а грех утаить (It's embarrassing to say but a sin to hide.) That's pretty good advice.

And with that, I'm going to go and examine my conscience.

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