

Failure to adult

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

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I was bequeathed a few of my father's writings, which are precious artifacts to me. Some were written for publication; others are more personal. One of the more personal ones dealt with a simple home improvement project that went wrong. In addition to feeling frustrated, my dad began hearing his own father's voice in his head, berating him for not knowing how to do something so simple. The louder the voice got, the more my dad tried to hammer away at the problem, making it worse and worse, literally knocking holes in the wall in his shame. No matter how he tried, he could not silence the voice: *You should know how to do this. What kind of man are you?*

The people involved are all deceased, which is one reason I feel I can share those bare-bones details. The other reason is this: Don't most of us struggle with shame scripts from time to time? [Brené Brown](#) wouldn't be a bestselling author if we didn't.

Even if your parent didn't speak this language, you have probably picked up some of the basic messages of shame. Brené articulates them as *Not good enough. Who do you think you are?*

Robert and I have been slowly making headway on some long pending home projects. (*Long pending.*) Sunday morning I went on a long run and when I got back I decided to take advantage of my already-sweaty status and tackle the garage. Over the next several hours I sorted a bunch of items for donation, boxed up little-kid toys for the attic, and collected all the outdoor toys into a single place in the garage. As I left for Goodwill with the back of the van piled high with stuff, I proudly announced to Robert that we were probably one weekend away from being able to park our van in the garage for the first time in James's life.

It was an amazing feeling.

Late in the afternoon Robert and I set about putting the boxes of Christmas decorations back in the attic. (Yes, mid-April, and that's not even our record. June 25

is the magic day on which the next Christmas is closer than the previous one, so why bother putting the boxes away?)

As I started to hand up boxes of ornaments and ceramic figurines, I heard him say “Umm ... hold up a second. Yeah, stand back.”

Then down through the hole came a shower of debris: empty box after empty box, large styrofoam pieces—old storage for computer monitors, desktops, and other household appliances we don’t even own anymore.

I began to hyperventilate, and it wasn’t from the dust.

Here I had spent the entire day getting the garage in order, and we were trashing it out again! This wasn’t a rational response, of course. I knew intellectually that one trip to the recycling center would do it—and that’s exactly what happened. And it’s great to have more space in the attic.

But with each cascade of boxes came this voice in my head: *You call yourself a competent adult? Look at this stuff you haven’t dealt with for years! You will never conquer the chaos and clutter in your life. There will always be more—more than you can ever handle.*

I realized that keeping up with the Joneses can take many forms. Some people are lured by the Joneses’ shiny new toys, or the Jones children’s impeccable manners and shelf full of trophies.

My trigger is competence. I often feel like there’s this body of knowledge about adulthood that I somehow missed. Our dishwasher recently started leaking and it turns out we needed to clean the seal from time to time. Where in the heck were we supposed to pick up this information?

As the Internet leaves its infancy and adolescence, we’re seeing more and more studies on the effect of social media on happiness. I’ve read a lot of it and it’s a mixed bag—there are net positives and net negatives. But I do know that Facebook and other sites have given us insidious new ways of comparing everyone else’s outsides to our insides, which is never a formula for a wholehearted life. Our real-life messiness will always lose out to everyone else’s carefully curated personas. Blessed be those who will post the graphic like [this one](#). Blessed be the pockets of radical honesty where a super-capable person I know can say, “It’s April 18 and my

taxes are a mess. I have done nothing. Help.”

I talk to many friends and colleagues recently who struggle with some version of impostor syndrome: *If people found out how screwed up I was, I'd be fired/ridiculed/judged.* A woman and pastor colleague who serves a large church told me several years ago, “I feel like I’m always 15 minutes away from complete embarrassment.”

*Not good enough.*

*Who do you think you are?*

As I continue to reflect on Sunday’s experience of cascading boxes, I’m trying to confront those messages in my head as the shame-poisoned lie that they are. Yeah, life is chaotic, and I’ll never have it figured out. But I’m trying to practice radical kindness toward myself in the process.

Last week at The Well, one of my colleagues quoted that beautiful line from Ram Dass: **We’re all just walking each other home.** That’s what I’ve been trying to hear over the din of *not good enough.*

These conversations need to leave the quiet moments behind closed doors. I hate that our culture doesn’t reward this kind of truth telling. But you know what? We are culture. We have the power to move toward greater authenticity with one another. I hope we will.

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