

“Sorry”

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24 March 2019

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation.

True story.

A few years ago now, a couple in Guelph woke up one Friday morning to find their digital camera and Xbox console in a plastic bag sitting on their front porch.¹

With it was a note, along with fifty dollars.

Dear Family I Have Wronged,

I’m the one who committed the serious crime against your family, and I want to apologize from the bottom of my heart.

I compromised your feelings of safety in your own home and privacy and that is unforgivable.

I want to promise you it was nothing person[al], and I didn’t go through any of your personal belongings.

I’ve been having a very tough time financially and I made the worst mistake of my life.

I regretted it immediately afterwards...
I can’t put into words how sorry I am.

¹ Jake Edmiston, “Burglar returns family’s stolen goods with apology note. Adds in \$50 for broken door,” *National Post*, 1 August 2012.

Please accept everything I took
plus \$50 for repairing the screen.

I will also commit to at least 15 hours of community service to help partially
atone for what I've done.

This is the first and last time I will ever commit a crime.

If I could do more for you I would
but I can't reveal myself since getting caught
would ruin my life..

Just another reason I'm so ashamed of what I've done.

I've jeopardized your peace of mind as well as my own.

Please find it in your hearts
to forgive the stranger who harmed you.

The couple didn't even know they had been robbed.
They figured they were out walking the dog the night before
when it happened, and hadn't noticed before going to bed.

But, with the letter in hand, they walked around the house,
and eventually found the ripped screen in the back yard.

*

"Confession is good for the soul," the saying goes.

And so it is.

Because without it, guilt and shame can eat us alive,
as the wound of our wrongdoing festers.

As our conscience confronts us to do the right thing,
to make things right, or at least try to get
whatever is haunting us out of our system.

While there are plenty of people
who still seek out a traditional confessional

in the back of a Catholic church to name their sins,
people are finding many more creative ways to confess today.

There's an app you can download to your phone for convenience.

You simply check off the boxes itemizing your offences,
and when done, press "Send"
to receive an automated blessing,
and a note about what prayers to pray as an act of contrition.

Or there's Postsecret.com, where physical postcards
sent anonymously to an address in California,
are posted online each Sunday, revealing the secrets
people have needed to get off their chests.

"The truth will out," it seems,
often because we so desperately need for it to.

I've certainly found that to be true in my work.

Though we, as UUs, don't have much in the way
of formal rituals for confession, the truth is, as a minister,
that I hear confessions all the time.

People speak to me of regret and remorse,
of guilt that won't go away,
and shame they just can't shake.

And I find people seeking a good word, some reassurance,
some words of absolution that will help them move past
whatever it is they have done or left undone,
some reminder that their mistakes
are not the whole of who they are.

Our lack of formal rituals in this regard is, in my opinion,
a serious shortcoming in our tradition.

I feel so strongly about this,
I wrote my master's thesis on this topic in seminary.

In the course of my research,

I learned it hasn't always been this way.

Confessions were a routine part of Unitarian worship services up until the middle of the 20th century.

The confession Catherine shared earlier during the meditation was just one of several included in the Unitarian and Universalist hymnal and service book dating to 1937.

Even back then, there were options between the more humanistic language of the prayer you heard and the more traditional language taken directly from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, from which our pattern of worship has largely evolved over the last four centuries.

But by the 1960s, when our next hymnal was published, we had, by and large, dispensed with prayers of confession.

In a way, it harkens back to the old joke from an earlier era that tried to distinguish between Unitarians and Universalists.

The Universalists, the joke goes, believed God was too good to damn them, while the Unitarians thought themselves too good to be damned.

The truth at the heart of this joke still endures, though I think that is slowly changing, as we take a more nuanced view of ourselves.

By the mid-20th century, a robust humanism had taken hold in many of our congregations, including this one.

With a more agnostic or atheistic outlook, confession was seen as yet another of the trappings of the church that needed to be jettisoned to the garbage heap of history.

And so it was.

And, yet, confession, as the saying goes, is good for the soul. And too good, I believe, for us to abandon it completely.

Whether we believe in some divine being or not,
there is healing to be found in the release
that comes from acknowledging that we are not, in fact, perfect.

New possibilities emerge when we are willing
to face ourselves and see our actions for what they are—
to take an honest look at our capacity to do harm,
or our potential to hurt other people,
to say nothing of the countless ways our lives
in this interconnected web of being
are bound up in systems of oppression
that exploit the lives of unknown others
and do lasting damage to the very fabric of life.

Before the wonders of life
we acknowledge our failures to see and to revere;

before the sanctities of life
we are ashamed of our disrespects and indignities;

before the gifts of life we own
that we have made choice of lesser goods;

and here today seek the gifts of the spirit;

before the heroisms of life
we would be enlarged to new devotion.

Amen.

There is also, it should be said,
something incredibly freeing in being able
to simply acknowledge that we are human.

And then being reminded
that we are more than our mistakes—
that we are creatures of dignity and worth,
even when we may not feel that to be true.

This is not to say that absolution is easy, or forgiveness a given.

There is rarely a get-out-of-jail-free card in this life.

In Buddhism, confession doesn't cause the consequences of one's actions to disappear, but it can bring relief.

It sets one on a path to living in a more noble way, because there's been an open acknowledgement of the error of one's ways.

In Judaism, one must be forgiven by the person who was harmed before ever seeking forgiveness from God.

On an individual, human level, one must apologize, ask for forgiveness, and then work to make amends to the satisfaction of the other.

And, even still, the person who was harmed may decide not to forgive. That is their prerogative.

Though, after a few rejections, a rabbi might be called on to intervene and persuade both parties to reconcile.

One of the things I admire in the Jewish tradition is the collective nature of the prayers of confession.

Praying together through the long and, shall we say, very comprehensive list of sins on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, there is a little something for everyone.

It's not that everyone or anyone has done everything on the extremely long list.

But it's that, together, the people recognize the list to include the full range of human shortcomings.

And they hear an invitation to be honest about their own in the mix.

In Islam, confession is a private matter

between a person and Allah.

There is no outward expression of remorse to an imam,
but instead a personal prayer of repentance,
a renewed commitment to return to the commands of Allah.

If one has harmed another, restitution must be made.
And, so, what of us?

What practices do we have at hand?

Again, as I said, not many.

At King's Chapel in Boston,
the oldest church in North America
to have adopted Unitarian theology,
the congregation uses their own prayer book,
which they have adapted
from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer
over the past 250 years.

Starting in 1785, the appointed lay leader of the congregation,
who wasn't yet ordained, began revising the prayer book
to adhere to Unitarian ideas that were taking root in England.

Most of the references to the Trinity were tossed out.

Over the years, in subsequent revisions,
the congregation has edited the psalms
to make them, well, less awful,
and they've softened the prayer of confession.

What I love about their confession is that it is reciprocal
between the minister and the congregation—
that it is radically democratic compared to the notion
that only a priest can hear confession or offer absolution.

To begin, the minister kneels before the church and prays aloud:

“Beloved of God, I confess to you and to almighty God
that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed;

that I have not served God with all of my heart and mind and soul;
and that I have not loved my neighbour as myself.
I therefore ask your prayers for me.”

The congregation then responds with a prayer for mercy and forgiveness,
before speaking the words of the same confession for themselves.

When they're finished, the minister prays for mercy and forgiveness for them.

I must say that there are certainly weeks in my life as your minister
when I wish I could offer up such a prayer to you all—
to acknowledge that there are things done and left undone
that I truly wish were otherwise.

Just because we've thrown out the language
doesn't mean that the need
to name our sins and shortcomings has gone away.

The closest thing we have related to this around here
is a ritual that plays out in staff meeting each week.

After one of us lights the chalice in my office
and offers a meditation reading, and after we each check in,
we turn to a time of what I call “Wins and Fails”—
which, sometimes, becomes “Wails”.

We share with each other the things we think went well over the prior week.

Often we lift up praise for the good work
that others in the congregation or on staff have done in recent days.

And then we turn to our fails.

It's our chance to come clean.
To express to one another our mistakes and our struggles.

To acknowledge that something
didn't go the way that we had hoped or planned.

To explain how we are trying to make it better.

This is often the longest chunk of our agenda.

By lifting up our fails, we often invite conversation
about what really matters,
and about what we need to do
in order to make it right, or to return to right relationship.

As it turns out, confession is good for the soul,
and good for tending the soul of our staff team.

Because of this openness with one another,
because we are able to risk vulnerability with each another,
we continue to deepen in our understanding and trust of one another.

And this is why I think it is important
that Unitarian Universalism revisit our relationship with confession.

Because without it, we are stuck
with an “onward, upward forever” theology
that does damage by fueling perfectionism among us.

Without rituals and language to draw on, we can struggle
to repair our relationships when hurts arise.

And we have less access to the grace and graciousness
with one another that helps us to heal and grow and flourish.

Confession is good for the soul,
and it is good for the soul of community.

And, so, I invite you now into a time of reflection,
and a time of prayer.

Please turn to #637 in your hymnals
and join with me in the words of the Litany of Atonement.²

Let there be a pause between the words I speak and the response,
so that the weight and gift of each phrase
might settle upon our hearts.

² Words of Robert Eller-Isaacs.

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference, *we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible, *we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause, *we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others, *we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone, *we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit, *we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For losing sight of our unity, *we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness, *we forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love.*

Beloved, may we begin again in love,
this day and every day,
and may it be good for our souls.

Blessed Be.