

## **I Confess**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

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There's something about being a minister on an airplane. Maybe it's the unique intimacy of sitting in a chair thousands of feet in the air as you hurtle through the sky. Maybe it's the knowledge that we've all given any illusion of certainty and control over to the flight staff. Maybe it's the fact that I'm *a* minister, but not *their* minister.

But people tell things to ministers on airplanes. Deep thoughts. Weighty secrets. Internal struggles.

This is why sometimes when I'm on a plane and the person next to me asks what I do, I try and come up with a very boring lie.

But more often I tell the truth and end up serving as something like a confessor – no matter the religious or non-religious leanings of my seat-mate.

Sometimes it seems they just want someone to listen to their confession without judging them. Sometimes I think they want absolution. Often I think the two are one in the same: compassionate non-judgmental regard, and that feeling of relief from sin...

We are all human, we've all messed up royally, and we are all haunted by that unspoken question: I'm ok, right? I'm still worthy? Still loveable? I still have a chance to get it right?

Good thing for my seatmates, I am not just any minister. I am a Unitarian, who holds the difficult belief that all people contain the potential for good, no matter how many times we fail to know what is good, and how many more times we fail to do what is good. And I am a Universalist, who holds the difficult belief that human worth is a gift of birth that cannot be given or taken away, and the difficult belief that no one is outside of that greater Love that holds us all.

I think this is what we seek, when we confess, to voice our shame and doubt and still be met with love. We want to know we are not alone. Not beyond care.

I cannot relieve anyone else's sin, but when I'm doing really, really well I can sometimes meet another with a love that holds no conditions.

Occasionally.

OK, I confess, I do not always live up to my Unitarian Universalist faith or these difficult beliefs. But my own shame has been met with love enough times to know its power.

There's something about the drive to confess.

There's something about the drive to confess, and it seems that even our increasingly secular culture has not diminished that drive.

In 1980, a New York artist named Allan Bridge began to feel guilty about the times in his youth he had shoplifted in order to have paint or other art supplies. He reasoned others must carry similar burdens, and he began a piece of conceptual art that would remain a phenomenon in New York for years – The Apology Line.<sup>1</sup>

Bridge created an anonymous, non-religious, phone-in apology service. He set up an answering machine and put out flyers around the city giving the phone number and encouraging the public to call and apologize for whatever it was that weighed on their souls.

People could call and anonymously confess to anything, and could also call to listen to the confessions of others. The response was overwhelming. The Apology line received confessions from adolescents, teens, and adults, for things from the small and mundane to the life shattering. You can listen to recordings from the line. Their voices sound quiet, tentative, ashamed, but also hopeful, hopeful that sharing will lift some bit of what weighs upon their souls.

When she was interviewed about her husband's project by Ira Glass in 1997 for one of the first ever episodes of This American Life, Marissa Bridge had this to say:

"I think that maybe the word apology means something bigger than just saying you're sorry. Or at least, maybe not the word, but the line came to mean to people a place where one could go and bring their feelings, to confess, not necessarily about doing something wrong, but to confess about having a feeling."<sup>2</sup>

The Apology line, she speculated, helped people feel less emotionally alone.

Indeed, the word confession, even in its religious sense, does not always refer to apology or wrongdoing or 'sin,' but to a surfacing of what is internal, a sharing of what is not apparent.

The original religious term had to do with a confession of faith – a statement of belief – rather than an act of penance. It seems to have only been in the last three centuries that the word confession has come to be associated particularly with the act of penance in the Catholic faith.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/48/transcript>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

But defined more broadly as that unburdening of feeling or belief, it would seem that we actually live today in an increasingly confessional culture.

The Apology Line ended by the mid 1990s, but other secular confessional spaces have emerged since then and become far more widespread. In 2003, an artist named Frank Warren created a project that is still wildly successful today, when he encouraged people to anonymously send artistic postcards with secrets on them, to be posted on his blog. Secrets came pouring in, small and shallow, deep and dark. Postsecret, as the project came to be called, has over a million followers across the world to this day.

And of course, for many, Facebook and pseudonymous or public Blogs create a space of regular confession at varying levels of depth. "How are you feeling?" They ask. What's on your mind? And if we answer honestly, secrets can come pouring out. Confessions of our private joys and hidden shames.

We could see that empty status box with its blinking edit icon as today's church confessional, and the general public (or our circle of friends and acquaintances, depending on our privacy settings) as our confessors – hearing us out and doling out penance in the form of comments or the giving and withholding of 'likes.'

Our acts of confession in this secular culture have become public and diffuse – airing our laundry for the whole world to see, but with what results?

What happens to a religious-style confession - of belief or of wrongdoing - when it is removed from the structures of religious community? What need does it meet, or not meet? What is it about the drive to confess?

In Catholicism, the intent of the sacrament of confession is to provide healing to the soul and to restore the individual to God's grace, after that grace is lost by sin. In the Catholic ritual, the necessary elements are contrition – deep sorrow – for the sin, disclosure of the sin, and then ritual penance, or the embodied effort to make amends for the sin. This is all done with the priest as intermediary.

Protestant Christianity rejects the need for intermediary between the individual and God and assigns the act of confession and penance to private prayer. Many Protestant churches also include a corporate prayer of confession in their worship, that those gathered to worship may acknowledge their failings and receive God's forgiveness and grace as part of their worship.

Jewish confessional prayer acknowledges the universality of human mistakes, missteps, or sins, by praying confessions communally and in the plural, stating "We have sinned." The Jewish High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in the fall contain deep rituals of confession, atonement, and forgiveness.

Islam incorporates prayers to God for forgiveness as an essential part of Muslims' daily prayers.

Confession is a concept most resonant to the Abrahamic religious traditions, but there are also Buddhist traditions of ritual confession particularly in the Tibetan tradition, as a way toward mental purification.

The history of Unitarian Universalism is rooted in the Protestant tradition, and up until the very early 1960s, our Unitarian hymnal, in keeping with Protestant style, had a corporate prayer of confession in each service. You've heard two such prayers today.

But when Humanism became an important part of our tradition in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of confession was one of the things we left behind.

Unitarian Universalists might rightly ask: What is the point of confession if it isn't aimed toward an Old Man in the Sky standing in judgement? What need for confession, when we reject the description of human nature as inherently full of sin? And isn't confession far too authoritarian of a practice anyway, when we so prize religious freedom?

I grew up Unitarian Universalist with no concept of the relevance of religious confession, at the communal or the individual level.

Indeed, growing up in a religiously conservative town, I saw some of the pitfalls of religious confession from my friends, mostly of the Catholic or Protestant variety.

I saw that coerced confession will rarely yield truth and will never bring restoration.

I saw penance used as a tool to deny or denigrate authentic identity.

I saw the requirement of confession as a source of fear – fear that something about you was deeply wrong or unworthy.

But there's something about the drive to confess, and I also grew up in a secular culture that is increasingly confessional. I see some of its pitfalls as well.

I see how confession outside the context of a defined community offers a false sense of relief without actual accountability to real people and real relationships.

I see the fears of our inadequacy and unworthiness – the very fears we seek to relieve in religious rituals of confession and atonement – I see those fears actually escalating in a world of surface level confessions. We know so much about each others' daily and internal lives – but only the heavily edited, white-washed versions we choose to share in such public venues.

When confession is such a public act, I suspect we each hide even more deeply those things of which we are truly ashamed, feeling more alienated and alone in our broken places.

I wonder, given what seems to be a drive to confess, and given increasingly available means of sharing constantly with one another and with the world, if there is some

need to reclaim a religious form of confession that fits our humanist values and our naturalist worldview.

Can we create a space to unburden the soul that acknowledges how often we mess up AND how undeniably we are worthy? Can we create relationships of accountability strong enough to allow real vulnerability and true reconciliation?

Confession, when in the context of relationship, and when un-coerced, is an invitation to be held accountable, whether to a statement of belief, or to a higher standard after a mistake. Can we be accountable?

Confession, when given in an atmosphere of earned trust and unconditional regard, is an act of true openness and vulnerability, whether the deadly vulnerability of a martyrs' confession of faith, or the painful openness of what weighs on our very hearts. Can we be vulnerable?

Confession, within the worldview of our religious humanism, is a testament to the fullness of our humanity – which is that we mess up all the time, in dire ways and small ones, and our lives are still worthy. Can we truly believe in that unconditional worth?

Confession, when we are gracious and open to one another, is the first step on a road to reconciliation, restoration, and wholeness. Can we start down that road?

I must confess, I'm not sure exactly how we begin to implement such a vision of confession in our Unitarian Universalist communities.

But I think it will begin with building a community where we meet each other with love, no matter what...

Where we hold each other accountable to the good as we discern it, recalling *every* person's inherent worth...

Where we risk sharing more deeply than the Facebook confession box commands...

Where we remind each other every week, and know without a doubt, that we are not alone.