

**WORKING TITLE:**  
**Rethinking Confession:**  
**The Prayer of Self-Awareness and Self-Disclosure**

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Doug Hammack

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O be wiser, Thou!  
Instructed that true knowledge leads to love;  
True dignity abides with him alone  
Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,  
Can still suspect, and still revere himself  
In lowliness of heart  
- *Wordsworth*

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**SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION**



## CHAPTER 1. Rethinking Who We Are

### What Is The Prayer?

“Confession” is an ancient spiritual term, but because it has picked up layers on layers of unhelpful, even detrimental connotations through the years, in this book I will be talking about it in functional terms. “The prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure” is a long phrase to have to say, so we’ll use “confession” as a shorthand.

However, as we’ll see, the way we understand the word “confession,” it no longer evokes profoundly life-changing potential it once did. It no longer speaks to us of spiritual friendship, or trust, or seeing what we had not seen. Rather, it speaks of benign religious ritual at best, or injurious submission to external authorities at worst.

So to help us, in the book we’ll use the terms “prayer of confession,” and “prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure” synonymously, bouncing back and forth between the terms.

The prayer is one of a handful of ancient prayers of detachment, spiritual practices our ancestors developed to help us detach from the lesser parts of life that vie for our attention. In particular, this prayer helps us detach from the universal version of “me” we all create for ourselves when we are young. It is a spiritual practice that helps us detach from homemade version of ourselves, our “ego-as-self, or “false self,” or “lesser self,” or “sinful self” (we’ve called it a lot of things through the years).

The detachment prayers, and this one in particular, are based on the premise that there is daily-life reality, and there is deeper life reality, and we carry both of these realities in us. We’ve also called the deeper life reality a lot of things through the centuries, the “Life of the Spirit,” or the “Fruit of the Spirit,” the “Inner Voice,” the “Inner Light,” and “Inner Life,” the “Indwelling Breath of God.”

The starting point for the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure is that the spiritual journey helps us transcend the former, and awaken to the latter.

I heard an interview with Desmond Tutu some years ago. He spoke of his time under apartheid when he was leading a small congregation in Soweto. Most of his parishioners were poor and uneducated. Most worked in Johannesburg for white employers who, in those years would rarely use their given names. They said their names were too difficult for them to pronounce so they would use some kind of dismissive or diminutive nickname.

On a regular basis, he said, I would remind my community, mostly older women, mostly domestic workers, that when someone doesn't know who you are, when they ask you what to call you, you tell them this: You tell them you are a carrier of God. A God-carrier. Your body is a vessel that carries the very Life of the Divine. You carry the Light, and truth, and wisdom, and fruit of God's Spirit.

That's what our tradition teaches us about ourselves. And that is the founding premise of this prayer practice.

We are made of dirt. Sure we are. We are atomic elements, and molecules, and proteins, and cells, and tissues, and bone and tendon and organs. We are made of the same stuff the earth is made of. But we are also of the same stuff God is made of. We are made of atoms and molecules, but we also carry the breath and image of God, the Spirit and Life of God, the wisdom and word of God, the virtue and fruit of God.

We are God-breath . . . carried around in dirt bodies.

And, our starting place is, in daily life reality, we regularly fall short of the deeper, God-Life in us. We fall short all the time.

We get afraid of all kinds of things. All of us do. We get afraid that our dirt-selves are not love-worthy. We get afraid that our dirt selves are not enough for what we need. We get afraid that life will overlook us in our dirt-self insignificance. We get afraid that love will overlook us in our dirt-self inadequacies.

And when we are afraid we do what fearful people do. We cope. We strive. We push. We react. We try and be what we think we need to be. In the process, we stop drawing from our truest selves, from our Divine center selves, and we begin to depend upon a lesser version of ourselves to make it in the world. We start



working a “*this will get me accepted – or loved – or adequate – or significant – or respected*” version of self.

Which again, is only a limited, inadequate version of self, the homemade version of self we hammered out while still quite young.

It happens to all of us, and when it does, we fall hopelessly short of the deeper-life-reality version of self we all carry within.

And so, the spiritual tradition has taught us a set of detachment prayer practices – practices that help us step back from our lesser selves, our “coping-with-fear” versions of self. When we take up these prayer practices, we help ourselves awaken to our *imago-Dei*, image of God, breath of God, version of self.

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### The Prayer in Three Steps

The prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure is a spiritual practice designed to awaken us to these lesser versions of ourselves, and in the process, to begin to dis-identify with them, transcend them, rise above them.

The regular practice of the prayer helps us look with suspicion upon the instincts that drive us each day. It helps us question the negative thoughts, and feelings, and words, and actions that usually run our lives.

[INSERT HERE]

THE PRAYER IS NOT A ONE-AND-DONE KIND OF THING

IT'S A LIFESTYLE DEVELOPED OVER TIME

NOT LIKE HEARING CHOPIN MP3

MORE LIKE LEARNING TO PLAY CHOPIN

IT'S DEMANDING. MUST BE PRACTICED DAILY, WEEKLY, OVER YEARS

MUST PRACTICED IN COMMUNITY WITH OTHERS ON JOURNEY W/ US

This prayer practice, in a robust and multi-layered way, helps us detach from the stories we tell ourselves. We'll see as we look at this prayer, that when we have an afflictive emotion, it is like the tip of an iceberg. It is a visible demonstration

that indicates a stratified, subterranean layer of thought and belief going on inside us, a layer of feelings, and values, that help shape the reality we believe we live in. Our stories drive our habits, our actions, and our instincts. They are the main shaper of how we live our days, our relationships, jobs, lives, destinies.

However, powerful as they are, for the most part, our stories go on under the surface, beneath our capacity to examine, reflect on, or consider.

But this prayer, helps us unearth this subterranean layer. It helps us bring to our conscious awareness the stories we tell ourselves, and the emotions we tend to ignore, dismiss, or stuff.

The steps of the prayer sound simple.

- Step 1: Pay attention to our negative experiences
- Step 2: Undertake a thorough self-examination
- Step 3: Engage in forthright self-disclosure

### *Mindfulness: Not as Easy as It Sounds*

The steps sound simple, but as we'll see, they are actually quite demanding. They draw us into mindfulness about our interior worlds in a way we usually avoid.

A notable feature of our ego versions of self is that they need our minds to remain mindless. Because they are not the truest versions of who we are, they have to stay under the radar of our awareness to keep going. If we see them directly, we would begin to suspect their validity. But we don't. We usually live our lives following mindless routines and unconscious patterns. We usually shape our daily around deeply engrained, habituated thought and feeling patterns.

We rarely get a window into the inner workings of our lesser selves. They are so ubiquitous in our daily lives, they act like the air we breathe, like water for a fish. The working mechanics of our thoughts and feelings, actions and reactions usually function sight unseen.

Essential to spiritual growth then, is to bring these unseen features of our false selves up so we can look at them. A significant requirement of the spiritual journey is to create awareness of how our habits, instincts, assumptions, and patterned thoughts and feelings shape our daily lives.

*The single most vital step on your journey toward enlightenment is this: learn to dis-identify from your mind. Every time you create a gap in the stream of mind, the light of your consciousness grows stronger. Every time you create a gap in the stream of mind, the light of your consciousness grows stronger.<sup>1</sup>*

The prayer of confession, self-awareness, self-disclosure is the detachment prayer that helps us intentionally bring up the unconscious, unseen, stories we tell ourselves – about ourselves, about God, about the universe, about “The Way Things Are.” Seeing them, we take the first step toward dis-identifying with them.

Our interior narratives are powerfully influential in the lives we live. Our interior stories are particularly difficult to see. Most of the time we would vehemently disagree that they are “*stories we tell ourselves.*” Under the influence of mindlessness and habit, we usually think they are the *one-and-true-truth* about “The Way It Is.”

But this ancient prayer practice helps us see our stories for what they are. Stories.

### *Baggage Around “Confession”*

In the ancient practice, the practice of self-awareness and self-disclosure was called confession. However, it has become difficult to use that word in our time, because over the years what it means has devolved and has picked up some negative, hurtful connotations.

You may have grown up with confession being part of your religious training. If so, and if you were Catholic, when you practiced the prayer you sat in a box, and recounted to a priest all the bad things you had done. At the end, you were told an act of penance or contrition to do so God would forgive your sins. If you grew up Protestant you skipped the priest and the box. You confessed to God directly . . . and alone, by yourself. But you also were trying to recount all the bad things you had done so God would forgive you.

In both cases, the point was to *come clean*. The point was to make sure you weren’t getting away with anything bad (thoughts, word, or deed). The point was to get all your wrongdoing out in the open to be sure God would forgive it.

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<sup>1</sup> Eckhart Tolle, A New Earth  
Draft 4/12/16

Our Christian scriptures say this. *If you confess your sins, God is faithful. God is fair. God will forgive your sins.*<sup>2</sup> I grew up with an unspoken interpretation of that text. I assumed that confession and forgiveness had a causal relationship. In other words, God was faithful, and God was fair, and God would forgive me of my shortcomings, *because* I confessed my sins. The implication was that if I failed to confess something, then God would *not* forgive it. That's a lot of pressure!

Here's what the text did *not* say to me growing up. "God is faithful to forgive sins . . . because forgiveness is simply the nature of God. God will never *not* forgive, because that is not how things are. Forgiveness is to God as shine is to sun. It just is. Of course God is faithful to forgive. God is faithful to forgive the same way that gravity is faithful to pull you toward the earth."

In that interpretation of the text, we don't confess our sins to get God to forgive us. No! There *is* a really good reason to confess, but that's not it.

What I wish I had been taught growing up, and what I taught my children and our community, is that we dig up our sins, and bring them into our conscious awareness, so that we register them, and they don't slip away unseen. We need to *see* ourselves thinking harsh thoughts, or speaking critical gossip, or saying hurtful words, or doing damaging actions. We need to see these things, and bring them to mind . . . because *we* need to see them, not because God does.

When we *see* something inside ourselves, part of us stands apart from the thing we see. That thing stops being the "us" for a moment while we stand outside of it and observe it. That's a pretty simple truism, but its application has profound implications for our spiritual growth.

The prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure is a prayer of seeing. It is a prayer of detaching ourselves from the thing we see in ourselves, standing outside it, observing it, and in the process dis-identifying with it. Again, it is the prayer of seeing.

### *You Are Not Your Sin*

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Jn. 1:9

Before we can take the prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure seriously, there is a necessary and prerequisite understanding. It is this.

We are not defined by our bad actions.

This is good news when you've done something bad. You are not defined by your bad actions.

It's a bummer though, when we've *not* done a bad action, when we've worked really hard to good things. It's a bummer because the corollary spiritual truth is also true. Neither are we defined by the good things we do.

No. We are simply not identified with the things we say or do. We are not defined by our thoughts, or our emotions, or our actions – not the good ones, not the bad ones. At the deepest level, we are *not* our sin. We are *not* our words. We are *not* our actions.

At the deepest level of identity, what we *are* . . . is what Desmond Tutu taught his congregation. We are carriers of God. We are containers in which the Divine Life resides.

Of course, we *do* say hurtful words. We *do* think toxic thoughts, and feel spiteful feelings, and behave badly. We disappoint ourselves. Of course we do. But the starting place of the ancient prayer of confession is never to rub our noses in our shortcomings or our failures. The practice never says to us, "See! It's just what your Dad used to say. You're so bad, you'll never amount to anything." The prayer practice never says what your preacher may have said growing up. "See! Original sin! You can't help being totally depraved. It's just human nature!"

No. that's not the way the spiritual life works. You and I cannot be more precious than we are. Nothing we do, or do not do, makes us un-precious. Our breath makes us precious. It is the breath of God.<sup>3</sup>

That you and I carry God-Spirit in us cannot be taken from us. We never have to bob and duck and weave to hide from our failures and shortcomings. We *do* that.

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<sup>3</sup> Reference *Rethinking* book  
Draft 4/12/16

All the time. However, we do it because we have been taught that our worth is earned. We *do* it because part of us really does believe our failures define us.

But, the tradition teaches us. They do not!

So, we don't confess to get God to forgive us. We don't practice confession to relieve ourselves of guilt, or shame, or humiliation. It often has that effect, but that's not the point. Confession is never about degrading us. It's never about dishonoring us.

We *do* need to confess, but not to reinforce how bad we are, and how badly we need forgiveness. No, we need to confess because we need to *see*. We need to see what's going on in there. What is it in us, that yanks us away from our truest identities, our truest selves?

And one of the things that does the yanking, is *the story we tell ourselves*.

Again, our unconscious stories are powerful, life-governing narratives. Our stories tell us what to think about ourselves, and usually they tell us something bad. Our stories tell us what to think about God, and it's usually deficient. Our stories tell us what makes a good or bad person, or what people have to do to be liked in this world, or what we have to do to make it. Our stories are how our days are decided, governed.

But powerful as they are, they are universally inadequate. They are not the deepest truth or the realest real. What makes a truth a truth, is that it works.

And inevitably, our homemade stories don't work.

Some knucklehead inevitably fails to honor the limits our stories tell us they should, and we start fuming. Some clown inevitably fails to behave the way our story tells us he should, and we become incensed. Because our stories are false-self stories, they are false. Consequently, life doesn't reward them. Life just doesn't conform to falsehood, no matter how deeply we believe it should.

But remember, our stories are no small thing. We have built our lives on them, on believing them, on working them. So when they get crossed it rocks our world.

We get afraid, we get hurt, we get reactionary, and unreasonable, and bigoted, and hateful. We think, and feel, and speak, and behave *badly*.

And, our tradition teaches us, *that's* when we need to practice the prayer. That's when we need to practice confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure. That's when we really need to figure out what's going on inside ourselves, what story are we living out. That's when we need to find out what about our story isn't working for us.

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Our ego versions of self are tough nuts! First, it is difficult for those versions of self to acknowledge that our stories, are stories. "Hell no! This is God-honest-truth. This is *the way it is!* It is *this way*, and it can be no other. Don't denigrate me by calling my insight a mere 'story.'" (*I bet your ego-self can sound like that too.*)

But it is here the prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure helps us. Especially when we combine it with the insights of the enneagram<sup>4</sup>, it helps us penetrate the murky landscape of our inner stories. It helps us navigate the blind alleys, cul-de-sacs, and box canyons of our souls. The prayer is an ancient roadmap to guide us into self-understanding.

It helps us say, "Hey, false-self . . . I see you! I see how you try to cope with your fears and hurts. I see how you entrench in this story whenever you feel frightened. I know you, false-self! I see you!"

"But I also know how you've been hurt. So I can be patient with you. I realize you're just protecting that injury we sustained long ago. I understand you, false-self. I'm on your side. I know you're just shielding that tender, wounded place in our heart. Really. I get it."

"But, we have to move on. We have to stand outside our stories and see them honestly. If we don't, we'll never dis-identify with them, and we'll be stuck right here, in this same place, next year at this time. If we don't see and dis-identify

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<sup>4</sup> Link to enneagram page on our website  
Draft 4/12/16

with our stories, we'll never break free of the automated, reactionary responses that so often govern us."

"So come on. Let's root around in here. Let's see what story we are telling ourselves."

This is the prayer.

It is, in fact, a prayer of kindness. It's not about getting caught with our hand in the cookie jar. It's not about confirming some worthlessness we already believe. It's about seeing ourselves clearly, and dis-identifying with our shortcomings.

It is a prayer of seeing what we had not seen.



## CHAPTER 2. Undercutting the Power of Shame

Unfortunately, in our religion tradition confession has had a traveling companion; shame. We would never say it out loud, but the unspoken implication of confession is that God wants us to grovel. For some reason, God needs us to admit how bad we are. God wants us to admit how deep our shortcomings and failures are. God wants to be sure we don't think too highly of ourselves, to be sure we never get the idea we can do anything good without Divine assistance.

Shame has tainted the prayer through the generations. One of the old time hymns I heard growing up spoke of how God had to send Jesus to die, because I was a worm. Lower than low, my human nature put me on par with a worm. The message was clear. I'm bad, I'm bad, I'm really, really bad – “such a worm as I.”

Our Christian narrative has, through the years, bowed to the universal human narrative. It is a human instinct, to carry shame at the core of our beings. In lessons I've given for our spiritual community<sup>5</sup> I've spoken about how in early human development, we tend to pick up a message along the way: “I'm flawed.” “I'm unworthy of the things my heart longs for.” “I am unworthy of love, or security, or fulfillment, or success.” In another book<sup>6</sup> I spoke of this deeply human experience as our “universal wound.” It was a reframing of the theological term, “original sin.”

Heavily influenced by this universal narrative, our lives become long slogs to cope with its debilitating effect in our lives. We try competing with one another, trying to outdo each other in a bid to earn some personal worth. If we are born with a hard-driving personality, we earn our worth by hard-won victories. We (falsely) convince ourselves that if we outdo enough other people, it must indicate that we're good. Sometimes we even convince ourselves we are immune to this deep shame framework.

If we are born with a more tender personality, we still carry the shame reality inside us, we just battle it differently. We (falsely) convince ourselves that our

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<sup>5</sup> Link to audio page

<sup>6</sup> Link to *Rethinking*

kind and tender actions make us noble, good, and decent. Our good actions shield us from the toxic shame reality we carry deep inside ourselves.

Either way, shame is always there, quietly under the surface, informing how we live our days.

It is from this shame-shaped human reality, that confession calls us from darkness into light. It doesn't try to avoid, or compensate for, our shadow sides. Just the opposite. It teaches us to go *toward* our shadow sides, to look at them, feel them, and experience them. No wonder our carefully crafted ego-selves rebels! Go *at* our shadow side? Unearth it? Expose it? That's crazy!

Ego self is made out of our stories. The idea that our stories are only stories is an existential threat! To tell our ego selves that we are living a *story*, and that it is not even a good one, again, an existential threat.

But there they are, these stories of ours. Sitting under several layers of conscious awareness, motivating our actions, driving our anxieties. They shape our reactions. They control our responses. And if we tell ourselves that they are only stories – stories from which we can *detach* – well, *that* just causes all kinds of internal hell to erupt.

This prayer *intentionally* dredges up the stories we tell ourselves. It consciously digs up the dark side of our homemade self and purposely rummages through our dark fears, dark self-critiques, harsh assessments, and dark beliefs. And as the prayer brings them up, we tell ourselves that these are not *The Way Things Are* – but merely stories we tell ourselves.

Of course our ego-selves don't like the prayer.

We are doing our best each day, to keep our egos above water. Again, they aren't real selves. They don't really work. So it is demanding work to keep them going, to keep ourselves coping. We are on a fool's errand, working like crazy to keep our internal shame at bay. We are working our best to quiet the devilish internal voice that keeps telling us we are bad, or inadequate, or insignificant, or unlovable, or unloved.

So what, pray a prayer that makes it even harder? That's just crazy!

What? A prayer that intentionally pokes at this tender place? “My God, Doug! It’s hard enough just keeping life going. You want me to poke another hole in the boat? Yeah. Not likely!”

So we must reiterate. The necessary starting point for the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure has to be this.

Shame is an illusion.

The prayer can only begin, when we bathe ourselves in the starting assumption that you and I are of God. You and I are in God. You and I are by God. You and I are infused with, and made alive by, the indwelling Spirit of God.

It is difficult to engage the prayer, without internalizing this cornerstone of our religious tradition. It is difficult to engage the prayer until we realize we have no need to hide from the dark parts inside us. It is difficult to engage the prayer until we embrace that darkness is not what defines us.

These notions about our true selves are not just a lick and a hope. They are not just whistling in the dark to keep our fears at bay. No. Darkness is in us. You know that as well as I do. We all have an internal voice throwing our dark stuff up to us with sordid regularity. For some the voice harps on some really bad thing we’ve done. For others it’s a monotonous litany of our mundane failures. Maybe your inner voice taunts you with the mediocrity of your trophy-case. Maybe yours nags you about squandered potential, or the road you wish you hadn’t taken, or the one you wish you had.

But we all know the voice. It is nothing if not reliable.

Through the generations, we’ve given lots of names to the voice; the Accuser, the Oppressor, the Devil, our inner demons. But whatever we call it, we all have it. We all have this very chatty, very talkative, enemy of our souls.

So we must factor into our spiritual lives that we live in a constant state of battle with this very talkative adversary. It often happens beneath our conscious awareness, but it happens. All the time. And the weapon given us by our tradition to rise to this struggle, is this singular truth.

- No matter what we have done, or failed to do...
- No matter how we assess our inadequacy or overcompensate to convince ourselves otherwise...
- No matter how we badger or bully our way forward...
- Or judge ourselves, or beat ourselves up...
- Or turn a blind eye to our shortcomings...
- Or buckle under attack of the accuser...

The voice can never, never, never, overcome the central truth . . . you and I are made in image of God.

We sin. Sure we do. But we are not our sin. Sin is merely an exterior overlay on our Divine Centers. It a mere veneer over the Indwelling Holy Spirit of God that defines our most essential nature. The Divine Center was there first. Our Story tells us so. Our Divine Center was breathed into us at the very beginning. It is what gives us life. It is what gives us being.

And nothing . . . not sin . . . not eating the apple . . . not the Fall . . . not a distorted doctrine of original sin . . . not a skewed belief that we are totally depraved . . . none of it can undercut this truth. You and I are made in the image of God. You and I are made in the likeness of God. You and I are filled with the Spirit of God.

I've said a lot of things that sound scandalous to traditional Christian folk. The one that raises the most hackles is this one. I wrote it on our church's website. "Sin is not that big a deal."

It's not that sin is not a big deal. It is. It's just not *that* big a deal. Sin is not big enough to define you, or to define the spiritual journey. Sin is not a big enough deal to be an identity, a defining reality for us.

Now, the whole reason for the prayer – is that sin is a deal. It causes us a lot of pain. It hurts us. It hurts the people we love. Sin damages our lives, our community, and the society we build together each day.

So yes! Our negative thoughts, words, actions, and reactions will wound us. They're bad. Really bad.

But you know that. You know how harsh words wound us. You know how disrespecting our bodies makes us sick. You know how disregarding wisdom about how to use our sexuality breaks relationships. You know how disregarding justice for all makes our society fragile and hurtful. So our dark sides, our shadow sides, the stuff this prayer asks us to root around in... Yeah. It's bad.

But it is *not* our identity. It's just a toxic by-product of stories we tell ourselves. It's just a toxic by-product of coping strategies we devise to help us survive our existential shame. Again, it's the *veneer* on our true identities. It's a painful veneer, sometimes a very thick veneer, but it's a veneer.

### Wake Up!

So, if our tradition's story is that *God is in us and we are in God*, what is the invitation? How shall we live?

It is the answer to that question that produced this ancient prayer.

Here's how our story invites us to live. Once we realize we are carriers of God, slumbering in lesser, diminished, versions of ourselves, our tradition invites us to wake up!

Rise from slumber! Break free of prison! Be liberated from the confinement of a lesser self! Rise above the power of shame. Go after this interloper, this shadowy dark side. Go after the intruder, the imposter, the trespasser. Go after the dark voice. Look at it. Don't avoid it. It's a paper tiger. It's not us! It's an imposter! We look at it, not away. We look at it, rebuke it, and overcome it.

Once we accept the starting premise of our tradition's story, that we are not defined by sin, we realize that the sin that is in our lives is incongruous. Darkness is a trespassing loiterer inside us. It is not us.

So we screw up our courage and go after it. "What are you doing here, fear? You don't belong! What are you doing here, vice? You don't belong. What are you doing here, self-condemnation? Or immorality, or shortcoming, or failure. You don't belong here! We have to get you out of here!"

*This*, is the starting point of the prayer. We dis-identify with our sin, and shortcomings, and failures, because they are not us

### *A Little Bit of Bible*

The Bible book of James fits into the same category as Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, “wisdom literature.” It is a pretty practical book. It talks about how to live a moral, upright life, virtuous life.

Having been awakened to the reality that the Spirit of the Living Christ is in us, the author tells us, it follows that we are no longer subject to our lesser selves. In that context, he says, there is a prayer practice that will help us. It is the prayer of confession, self-awareness and self-disclosure.

*Confess one to another so you can be healed.*<sup>7</sup>

Create space with one another for this kind of prayer, the author tells us. Together, bring up the shadows in your souls, and see your souls be healed. Practice this prayer, and watch your mind be healed, and your heart, and your relationships, your very lives.

When you shine light on the inner darkness, the inner darkness loses its power.

That’s the way it works. Your inner darkness has always been a poser. It has always been a masquerade version of you. All it takes to unmask it, is to shine light on it. The prayer of confession exposes and dis-empowers the masquerading darkness. The prayer clarifies to ourselves, that we are not our sin. It invites us to see it, and name it, and in so doing, to disempower it.

The prayer helps us move beyond our internal shame instincts. It helps put light on the dark places in our souls, where we have been sucked into believing an untrue truth about ourselves.

So, the ancient wisdom tells us, talk about the dark places in your soul with a trusted friend. Create these safe spaces with your spiritual companions, and you’ll find one of the more effective pathways into healing.

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<sup>7</sup> James 5:16ff  
Draft 4/12/16

Resist the silencing power of shame. Confess one to another, and watch your soul heal. *Looking* at your dark stories helps you dis-identify with them. *Telling* your dark stories and not avoiding them helps us stand outside our internal voice of shame and see that darkness is not our truest, realest self.

As a society, we've been trained to keep our weaknesses to ourselves, to keep our shortcomings hidden away. But the net effect of our training is that one of the most powerful of the healing practices goes unpracticed, except by therapeutic professionals.

We can do better.





### CHAPTER 3. I Was Kind of an Ass

Before we begin to outline the practicalities of the prayer practice, let me tell you a personal story to give you a picture of what the prayer looks like.

Some time ago, our community's minister of spiritual growth introduced a practice to our church council meetings. Before we began our work, we went around the table and asked one another, *Where is your growing edge? Where is life indicating that you have been growing, or where is life indicating that you need to grow? Where is your growing edge?* It's a good question. We learn a lot when we ask it.

In the course of our discussion, we wound around to the foibles of my personality type.<sup>8</sup> There are two of us on the council with the same personality type. One of our blind spots is how we handle vulnerability. We don't like it one little bit. We put ourselves through some pretty demanding internal contortions to avoid it.

I do. When I'm not paying attention to my inner life, I avoid vulnerability like the plague. However, if I ever do stretch myself and admit to, or reveal to another, some point of vulnerability, and if my tentative attempt is not received well . . . it will be a cold day in hell before I ever show a weakness to that person again.

So in our conversation we were laughing at ourselves. I told the council about early in my marriage. Looking back, I don't know why I made a link between asking for a backrub and feeling vulnerable, but I did. Maybe it made me feel needy. Maybe it felt like begging for sex (and by God, there's nothing needier than that).

Anyway, who knows what the internal link was, but I had framed asking my wife Denise for a backrub as making myself vulnerable.

So one day I pushed past my discomfort and asked. And Denise wasn't that responsive. It wasn't a big deal, she just said something like "Nah! Not today." If you'd been watching the interchange, it wouldn't have been a big thing. It was just a "*not in the mood right now*" thing. But when it happened, something

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<sup>8</sup> We use the enneagram as a way to look at the specific challenges to spiritual growth of our personality types.  
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switched in me. I don't think I was even conscious of what I did, but in essence I determined, "I'll be damned if I ever ask her for a backrub again."

Over the years I've had back soreness, but I've never asked. Instead, I went out and bought some "roll on the floor" contraptions. "I'll take care of my back soreness on my own, dammit! I am an independent agent! I am the wizard of back-soreness solutions! I don't need you! (or anybody else – thank you). As God is my witness, I will not be weak. I will not be vulnerable."

It wasn't that conscious of a decision. But it *was* a decision.

So there I am talking to the council, laughing at myself because of all those years going without backrubs. Denise offered many times. I know she would be willing. She's told me she would. But some part of me preferred to protect my personality's blind spot feel good. "My back hurts . . . but my *ego* doesn't!"

What a knucklehead!

After the meeting, I kept thinking about this blind spot. More of my internal world started to pop into conscious awareness.

I began to reflect on a standing conflict Denise and I had been having. It was about the time our kids were getting out the door, and what happens to a lot of couples in their 50s was happening to us. Couples approaching the empty nest often experience a rise of tension in their relationship. And we were. I had been irritable a long time. In fact, I was feeling pretty unhappy with her. I was withdrawn, and argumentative, and hyper-sensitive. I was kind of a pain to live with, really.

I use words well. Try to imagine what it's like to live with me. When I need to, I am able to effortlessly weave words together into a story in which everything is somebody else's fault (ask Denise. She'll tell you.). Anyway, in that time of our life, I was saying a lot of words to her. A lot of them were really pissy words. It had been going on for months at least, maybe a year. There were still smiles in the house, but a lot more scowls than usual.

I think it lasted as long as it did, because it crept up on me slowly. Because there were still smiles in the house, I didn't immediately name what was going. But

several months in, I finally did. Ahh! These are afflictive emotions! I've been on the spiritual journey long enough to know what to do when they show up. It's an instinct by now. I knew it was time to practice the prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure.

Before I could articulate the prayer in three steps, it had long been my practice to tell people about my negative thoughts, words, and actions. Even as a young man, if I noticed myself speaking harsh, cutting words, it was my habit to talk it over with someone I trusted. It has long been my habit to talk to spiritual friends when I misdirect my sexual energies, or when I do things I know are harmful to me or others.

But to talk about them, I first have to know they're going on.

So this thing with Denise had been going on for a while before I realized it. And then Lent arrived. That year I did what I often do during Lent, I set aside some of my habitual practices to help break up my habitual thinking. I started looking inside with intentionality. I started watching myself, observing my thoughts and words. Which made it even worse! I didn't like what I was seeing. It was a pretty dark, angry, and dismal time.

But as I began to intentionally look at myself, sure enough I saw something. I can laugh about now, but it was no laughing matter then.

That Lent was a focused season of self-reflection. I ate differently. I spent my evenings differently. I spent extra time soul-talking with some spiritual friends. We practiced the prayer in three steps several times that Lent.

And over those six weeks, I began to see what I had not seen.

It was the same inner dynamic as my backrub blind spot.

For as long as I have known and loved Denise, I have resisted being vulnerable in front of her. And, it turns out, vulnerability is pretty important for intimacy. It turns out that the intimacy we so deeply long for is directly related to vulnerability.

But for years I have resisted allowing Denise to see my fears or weakness. If I feel anxious, or if I feel needy, she is the last one to know. I have projected to her a singular image of Doug. I am the *completely-sufficient* Doug, the *completely-capable, un-weak, un-vulnerable, un-needy* Doug.

In effect, I shut the door to her nurturing me. I positioned myself as the care-giver, not the care-receiver. I was the strong one, the invincible one, the rock, the unwaveringly reliable one.

Looking back, I can see how off-putting that was. (If you ever meet Denise, tell her what an extraordinary woman she has been to put up with that, and love me through it.)

In our early years together she tried to break through my persona. Many times, she's would tell me how I didn't need her, how I wasn't letting her in. She'd poke around to try and find an entry point. But I wouldn't let her. I never depended on her. I always made sure I was an independent agent, with no need for her.

I was a nice guy (that's part of my cherished self-image as well), but nice or not, whenever she would try to nurture me, I would not budge. It was worth it to me to keep myself from being nurtured, to prop up my self-deluded interior story of invincibility.

I can tell you this story now, but I could not have said it then. I hadn't practiced the prayer enough to see what I couldn't see. That's the way it works, being human. Our instincts are hidden from us. They loiter around somewhere below conscious awareness. If you had said to me, "Hey, Doug. You are being blinded by your need to be un-needy." I could not have heard it. I know that's true because people said those words to me. I just thought they were crazy.

The nature of being blind, is that we are blind.

The story I told myself all that time, was polished and pretty. "I'm doing the good thing here. I'm being the good guy here. I'm being strong, and responsible, and sturdy, and tough, and resilient. I'm protecting her. I'm a good guy."

But then I crossed fifty. After enough years being that good guy, I've begun to resent Denise. Those pissy months, were external reflections of another internal

story I was telling myself. I had unconsciously begun telling myself that Denise did not do much to nurture or care for me.

I began telling myself the story that I'd spent years taking care of her, but she had not reciprocated. I began telling myself that she was the problem, that she was the bad one here.

It had not occurred to me, that she was only doing what I taught her to do.

As an aside, this is a good time to repeat a theme you'll hear several times in this book.

*"Afflictive emotions are our friends."*

When a negative emotional response comes up it is often an external indicator that something really important is going on inside us, below our conscious awareness. Our negative feelings often tell us that something inside is at odds with the fruit of the Holy Spirit, that we have an internal story working at odds with love, and joy, and peace, at odds with the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Afflictive emotions befriend us, when they tell us that now is a good time to look at our interior worlds.

I suspect there is such a thing as true evil in the world. There are sociopaths who intentionally wound people. That's evil. There are systems that are designed to wound and suppress people. So yes. I suspect true evil does exist. But I also suspect that true evil is much rarer than most think. What I suspect goes on, is that when we have negative, afflictive emotions, it is much easier to create a story that points our attention toward some other person or thing. It is much easier to label some external thing as "bad," or "evil," or "the problem."

But afflictive emotions are our friends – if we allow them to point our attention inwardly.

So there I was, labeling Denise as the problem, when in fact it was my internal blind spots making things this way. My own vigorous efforts to keep myself believing I was un-needy had caused my pain. My own enthusiastic efforts to prop up my internal story made me willing to give up being cared for, to give up being nurtured, to forego a life-ally.

So there I was, blaming Denise for the pain my own story was generating.

How sick is that!?

This prayer practice has gotten me out of a lot of blindness holes. I see so many parts of life more clearly than I once did. It's a good practice.

And now, these years later, I'm not super comfortable being vulnerable with Denise yet. I don't always let her nurture me, but I do it more than I did. And now I can laugh at myself when I see myself not doing it.

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The story wouldn't be complete if I didn't tell you how Denise handled things in the end. How she responded helps us understand the flip-side of this prayer practice, the "receiving the prayer" side.

So here I am, digging around in my soul, asking myself why I'm reacting so strongly. I'm doing the prayer practice in the three steps we'll look at. I'm doing it over and over for weeks, because I don't see things clearly all at once. I keep at it. I keep seeing something I hadn't seen, and then I do it again to see more. I keep asking the Holy Spirit for insight. I keep meditating. I keep being quiet. (And I keep being pissy all at the same time.)

And after a considerable time, I see enough of what I have just told you to recognize this isn't a Denise issue. I come to see I'm suffering at my own hand and realize it's my *story* that is causing my pain.

So I made an appointment to sit down and tell Denise about my inner exploration. I tell her about my resentments toward her and why I had them. I tell her about the maze of internal contradictions going on inside me. And when I did, here's what she did *not* do. Here's what she did *not* say.

*"Well, you idiot! That's what I've been trying to tell you for years!"*

Yeah. She didn't say that.

Instead, she smiled and went to her go-to place. She got practical. She asked me for ways that she could care for me. She didn't try to exact a pound of flesh for the hurt I'd caused her. No, she just asked me about food ways to show she cares for me. She asked about sex ways, and sharing-chores ways. She asked for practical ways to be a support and nurture to me.

(A little stiff-necked in more ways than one, I'm still not comfortable asking for backrubs.)

I tell that last part of story as a tip of the hat to Denise's wonderfulness, but for another reason as well. It speaks to the environment required for the prayer practice to become so profoundly transformative of our lives.

This last part of the story speaks to the environment of grace and mercy in which reconciliation can happen. Grace and mercy are essential ingredients for the prayer practice.

We are all locked in blind spots we cannot see. If we could see them, we would have stepped away from them long ago. But we can't. So we suffocate ourselves under stories we can't see or define. It is the environment of gracious spiritual friendship that allows us to look unflinchingly at what's going on in our souls. It is in that safe space, we can look at, and talk about the darkness within.

I hurt Denise. For years, I hurt her. She used to say, "You know, if I ever died, I'm sure you'd do the right thing. You're a *do-the-right-thing* kind of guy. But I'm also pretty sure you'd move right on in your life. I don't think I would leave much of a hole in your life if I was gone."

Yeah. I did that to her.

I couldn't see what I was doing, but my actions told her for years, "You are superfluous in my life. I love you, but you aren't really *that* important to me."

Whether I could see it or not is pretty irrelevant. That is exactly what my actions said day after day, year after year. I let her know we did not have an interdependent, give-and-take relationship. I told her with my actions, "You are allowed to need me. I am strong. I am invincible. Go ahead. Need me. However, I don't need you."

The marital relationship is our best hope to experience the depths of love in our lives. If we don't experience intimacy there, the likelihood is we will never experience it anywhere. And I denied that to Denise. For a long time.

I didn't mean to hurt her, but I did. I didn't mean to tell her she was unworthy to see my heart, but I did. It wasn't my intent to tell her she was unsuitable, unfit, unacceptable, to be invited into the rarified air of a peer relationship with me

I was kind of an ass!

If you had said that to me, I would have disagreed vehemently. Remember, I was the good guy in my story. But good-guy story notwithstanding, that's what I did.

That's the nature of our stories. Because we don't see them, we don't see the toxic effects they have in our lives.

Denise demonstrated grace in my life. It's the environment that makes this prayer possible.

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I read this story years ago. I wish I could credit the author, but all I have are a few scrawled notes.

Imagine you are sitting at the table with your family. You're irritated. Maybe you're feeling overly tired or under-appreciated. And in your state, some trigger puts you over the edge. You lose your temper, yell, use degrading words, throw your cup across the room, and stomp out.

And then you're alone in your room. You feel alienated and indignant. But as you sit there, you slowly return to your senses and begin to regret your harshness. You begin to feel remorse, knowing you've been an idiot. But now you're ashamed, and the idea of going back to your people and apologizing . . . yeah, that's not going to happen.

So you fall asleep. There's a relational breach and everybody knows it.



The next morning you feel doubly bad. You're ashamed. You feel awkward. But you still can't bring yourself to say the words of apology and reconciliation. But when you come to the breakfast table, you find your cup. It didn't break. Somebody washed it. You pour some coffee, and sit at the table.

Nobody is unaware of the awkwardness. Your people are not stupid. You are not stupid. Everyone knows what is going on.

But somebody . . . somebody gracious, somebody merciful, somebody kind, makes a wry smile at you. In the smile they acknowledge the rift, but also make a step toward reconciliation. Nobody says a word, but a truth is spoken. "*You are part of us. Sure you're a jackass, but you're our jackass.*"

And the healing begins. If you dropped dead at that moment, you would die reconciled. Grace does that.

That is so rare. Who does that? Who makes those kinds of reconciling steps? We do. We humans do. Coffee-cup washers do. Wry smilers do. Denise did. Gracious, merciful, *image-of-god* people do

We extend forgiveness in big and small ways all the time. I have always had people like this in my life, and because I have, the prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure has been my life-long practice. I have had people who have created the space of reconciliation, people of mercy, and grace, and kindness, and charity.

And because I have, my soul is being healed.

To practice the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure we must learn to make the prayer. But it is practice we do together, with one another. So before we can make the prayer, we have to learn to receive the prayer.

In the rough and tumble way life usually works, we usually have to receive the prayer from the very person who hurt us. Consequently, we often need to receive the prayer while we are dealing with our own hurt feelings.

So the invitation of the tradition is to create a space of mercy and grace and forgiveness, the environment in which we can confess our sins one to another . . . and be healed.

## CHAPTER 4.

### **The Necessary Environment, or... We're All in this Soup Together**

The prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure is a communal prayer. It is a prayer practiced in community, in the context of trusted, trustworthy spiritual friendships.

A long time ago, Paul helped us understand this environment. It was in a letter he wrote to folks living in Galatia (northern Turkey). He was writing a handful of spiritual communities that were just starting to follow Jesus. In the letter he was having a fight with some folks trying to undercut spiritual freedom in these communities. It was a fight over what religion is.

Religious traditionalists were trying to bring the Jesus followers back into traditional religious observance. Jesus had challenged the idea that God disapproves of us, and that our sin and failure upsets him, and this troubled the traditionalists.

For them, sin and failure are big problems. To Jesus they weren't the point. To Jesus, forgiveness, and grace, and Divine Love, were givens. That meant that religion's focus didn't have to be on working hard to get forgiven. It was already baked into the system.

Religion had been insisting people jump through hoops (think rites and rituals) to get God to forgive their sin. Jesus was having no part of it. For him, religion could focus on experiencing a deeper, bigger life as we awaken to the Spirit of God that indwells each of us.

The Galatian communities were living in this new freedom, but they made the traditionalists uncomfortable. They couldn't understand how people could walk away from such old and venerated religious instincts. You have to do something to satisfy God's wrath. You have to perform all religious rules and regulations to make sin right.

It appears to have been an argument Paul had had before, because he seemed a little miffed. He hated to see these communities who had experienced the

revelation of Life and Truth and Good News getting sucked back into old religious constraints.

So he wrote them, pounding away on the theme that religious laws, rites, and rituals, are just not the point. The point is to experience *life* and *love* and *truth* and *freedom*. The point is to awaken to the indwelling Divine.

Toward the end of his letter, he wrote a paragraph that points us toward the environment in which we practice the prayer of confession.

*My friends; if someone in your community makes a false step – even a bad one, gently help that one mend and restore. Keep your critical remarks to yourself. There's a good chance you'll slip up yourself before the day's out. So reach out to those who are burdened and share their burdens with them. This is what it means to follow Christ. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.*

*And make a careful exploration of who you are. What is the life you've been given? What is the work you have been given? Live that life, not being either overly impressed with, or overly harsh on yourself. Don't compare yourself to others. Each of us must take responsibility for doing our best within the parameters of our own lives.<sup>9</sup>*

Here's what I hear Paul saying in this text.

We make false steps, you and I. We do it all the time. Trying to get by on a false self, we can't really do anything else. Most of the time we don't see ourselves doing it, but even if we catch ourselves, the first thing we try to do is cover up our false steps. We get upset with ourselves. We push ourselves to shape up and fly right. We beat ourselves up. We shame ourselves. We rebuke ourselves. Often, our hope is that if we are harsh on ourselves, we'll motivate ourselves on the straight and narrow next time.

But honestly, the text implies, does that work for us? It's kind of like telling ourselves to walk on water. As long as we are living from a homemade version of ego-self, religion will *never* work. Our flaws and foibles, our sin and wrongdoing, are just going to happen, and keep happening.

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<sup>9</sup> Gal. 6:1-5 (paraphrase)  
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So we slip up. Of course we do. And we might as well get our heads around that idea that we're going to *keep* slipping up. Count on it

Further, any time we get close to other people, we are going to see one another's slip ups. That's how authentic community works. We get close, and we see past one another's manicured facades. In community, it's pretty easy to see one another's blind spots (much easier than seeing our own).

So, Paul says, you're *going* to see one another's foibles. You just are. So when you do, keep the critical remarks to yourself. They may help you feel better about your own false self. They may help you say to your own false self, "Well, self . . . At least you don't do that!" But in the long run, it's not a spiritual strategy that works.

It certainly doesn't help the person you criticize. And really, are you without your own blind spot? So unless you want to be on the receiving end of a harsh critique yourself, don't dish it out to one another. In fact, do just the opposite. Instead of withdrawing from the one who has stumbled, instead of standing in harsh judgment of him or her, when you see one another on your worst days, don't savor your insight into each other's failures. Don't withdraw in discomfort as many do.

Instead, go *toward* the one among you who has failed. That person is just as burdened under their failure as you would be under yours. That person has been failed by their false self, just like you are. So reach out to the one who is burdened. Help him or her carry the burden created by this illusion under which we all labor.

*That's* what it means to be in this spiritual community. It's not about a bunch of "get God to forgive you" rituals. Rather, it's about standing in solidarity with one another while we deal with our shadow selves. *That's* what it means to be Christian. *That's* what this thing is all about.

So no more with the withdrawing. No more with the judging. No more criticizing. That's just not the way this Jesus-Life works! That's not where our story points us.

### *Our Gift Is Our Curse*

There is a truism we pick up when we study personality theory. For every gift we have, we carry a correlating dark side to that gift. Our gift is the flip-side of our curse. Our strength is the flip-side of our weakness. Each of us have different gifts, which means, each of us have different blind spots, different shadow sides.

This truism is essential for the practicing the prayer. You and I do not have (nor did we ever have) the option for a darkness-free life. Sin-free living was never on the table.

Once we realize we cannot not have a shadow side, all of the bobbing and weaving we do to hide our flaws from ourselves and one another, is rendered unnecessary. The concealing and covering we do to keep weaknesses hidden is exhausting. It is consuming. And it is unnecessary.

We are all in this sin thing together. Which means all that exhausting work we do to hide our shadow sides is unnecessary.

As we saw, the good news of our tradition is the ringing affirmation that sin is not that big a deal. “Good news, people! We are not our shadow sides! Good news, people! Forgiveness was never an issue. Divine condemnation is not a thing! Having to get God on our side is not a thing.”

### *We're All in this Together*

But there's more! “More good news, people! We're all in this together. That particularly holy person, the mature one, the deeply spiritual one, the one you think has got it all together, she doesn't, he doesn't. Every one of us has an imposter shadow side. Every one of us has a dark side masquerading as a self.

Our story tells us we don't have to hide from one another. We don't have to prop up a homemade version of self. We don't have to work so hard to make sure others don't judge or critique us or hurt us. Because we're all in this soup together.

We don't have to get all judgmental to boost our own false selves. We don't have to spend so much energy judging one another's dark sides.

Good news, people! We don't have to reduce the spiritual life to a comparison game. We don't have to work so hard to do better than the next guy. We don't have to recriminate ourselves because we compare poorly to that woman we so admire. That's not the Jesus-journey. Not at all.

Here's the bedrock of our story. We are, every one of us, compatriots. We're in this thing together, the good and the bad. We are all made of Divine breath, and we all carry some version of a lower self.

And it is in this soil that the prayer of confession is cultivated. It is the starting place for standing with one another as we mend and restore. It is how we above our instincts for critical remarks, the compulsion to compare ourselves to one another.

Properly told, the Christian story engenders an environment of trust. It points us toward non-judgment, confidentiality, and safety. It draws us toward spaces where we stand with one another, drawing one another toward our truest selves, our *made-in-God's-image* selves.

Practicing the prayer of confession in a safe and secure environment, we deal blow after blow to the illusion-self, the coping-self, the stuck-and-can't-move self. Few things are as liberating as freely shining light on darkness in us. There is a deep relief when our darkness need no longer be hidden away. Honest, unvarnished candor awakens deep truth in us.

Again, you are not your sin.

Again, your sin is forgiven. It always was.

Again, we're in this together.





**SECTION 2**  
**THE PRAYER IN THREE STEPS**



## CHAPTER 5. Step 1: Pay Attention

In this section we'll outline how the prayer of confession unfolds in three steps.

- Step 1: Pay attention to our negative experiences
- Step 2: Undertake a thorough self-examination
- Step 3: Engage in forthright self-disclosure

### Step 1: Pay attention to our negative experiences

The trigger that tells us it is time to use this prayer is when something goes wrong. Maybe we do something we wish we had not done. Maybe we say something we regret. Maybe a disturbing emotion comes up that cannot be shaken.

Something goes awry. That thing triggers the prayer. Here's why the practice evolved that way.

### That Same Struggle!? Again?! Really?!

Most of the struggles we face we have faced before. Most of the blind spots that cause us to stumble have caused us to stumble before, many times. If you say a negative word, enact a negative deed, or have a negative emotional reaction, odds are you've experienced that pattern before.

That's the way being human works. We are nothing if not habitual. Our strengths are strengths today, and will still be tomorrow. Our weaknesses are weaknesses today, and will be tomorrow. When we're really discouraged about the repetitiveness of our failings we resonate with the ancient author of Proverbs.

*I keep coming back to the same foolishness. I do it again and again and again. I'm like a dog who vomits, and then comes back to sniff it. I come back to the same ugliness in my life again and again and again. What is with me?<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Prov. 26:11 (paraphrase)

When you are feeling bad about how repetitive your failures are, take heart! You're in good company. We human beings, we've been doing it this way for a long time.

The legacy of wise spiritual people gone before us has been to leave us this prayer practice, the prayer of confession.

Think about the last time your emotions got away from you, or the last time you were up at night grinding through your troubles. Think about the last time you were muttering about some idiot in your life.

Now, take the individual characters out of your drama, and look at the pattern. Odds are you've seen the pattern before. You've seen this same tenacious anxiety kick in before. You've been caught up in this same harsh criticism of someone else. You've seen this same fretting and striving before. You've felt this same rejection or self-protection before. Whatever the specifics of your drama, most likely you've experienced it before in different circumstances.

The arguments we have, the hurt we sustain from other people, the sticky situations we get into, they have a recurring quality about them. They just do.

And this is not bad news for us. Not at all. In fact, it's good news.

It means that if we thoroughly address today's issue, if we dig into it deeply enough to understand it, and if our hearts get healed around it, there's a good chance that as we do, we'll be undercutting the power of all the other episodes that are clustered around it, all the episodes that follow this same pattern.

The reason we come back to the same kinds of faults and slip-ups again and again is the habit-wiring of our brains. Once our brains develop a pattern of thinking, speaking, acting, or reacting, that pattern gets set. Once set, we tend to follow it with unquestioning fidelity. We are nothing if not faithful to these instinctive patterns we carry in our heads.

The prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure is the wisdom of our spiritual ancestors to help us break up those repetitive patterns.

### A Caveat

Maybe half of all of the personality types out there have a tendency to hear *self-blame* louder than *self-validation*.

As we've seen, the starting premise for this prayer practice is that when something goes wrong, we look inside ourselves rather than outside. The most effective place to seek a solution to our problems is not with the bad person or circumstance that is causing our pain, but in our selves. I am not unaware that sounds like crazy talk. It is so much easier to focus on the badness of the other than it is to look inside.

But for some personalities it's even worse. Some personalities tend to hear the starting place of this prayer as one more way to beat themselves up, spiritual justification for self-criticism or personal devaluation.

If that's you, hear this. This prayer is surely not that.

Hear again the affirmations in the last couple of chapters. They truly are our starting place.

### Step 1: Pay Attention

It sounds so simple, the first step of the prayer. Pay attention to negative emotions when they arise. Pay attention to negative words and actions when they show up in our lives. Pay attention, and allow negative experiences to trigger the prayer. Again, it sounds so simple.

But our minds are easily distracted. Sure they are. We have things to do, duties to discharge, jobs to go to, things to buy and sell. As we go about the business of living, our minds get caught up in the day-to-day-ness of existing. So when negative experiences arise, our minds are usually running so quickly we don't pick up on them. We fail to give them the attention they deserve.

And that's too bad because if we don't give our negative experiences the attention they deserve, we miss self-awareness, the first part of this prayer.

Interestingly, the most common trigger for the prayer of confession is not our minds. It is not our thought. The most common trigger for this prayer is our *heart*, our feelings, our emotions.

Feelings . . . are *felt*. That's what makes them "feelings." They are actual physical sensations that happen in our bodies. The reason emotion is so important on the spiritual journey, is this. First, our minds are easily distracted by life's day-to-day-ness. But it's more than that. As a species, we tend to edit or reconfigure our thoughts. If a thought is too painful to think, we have an uncanny ability to distract ourselves from it, or reconfigure it to make it more palatable.

We tend to not to think thoughts that are too painful. We tend to retell stories that have too much sting in them. A lot of our mental energy goes into ignoring or reworking difficult truths. When I was being an ass (chapter 3) my brain was working overtime to keep me from seeing how my story was causing my suffering. Our brains are masterful at editing out the hard stuff for us.

But feelings don't do that. They don't lend themselves to editing. Coming from a deeper, more primal part of our brains, they bypass the executive parts of our brains and are experienced in a physical way. Feelings don't run through the pre-frontal part of our brain, the part that has mastered the art of editing thoughts. Less sophisticated, less complex, more primal, they actually do a better job telling us exactly what's going on inside us.

Feelings aren't sophisticated enough to lie to us. They don't sugar-coat for us. They tell us straight. They tell us when some story we just told ourselves isn't working. They tell us when our clever interior scripts aren't true. By producing the physical sensations of anxiety, or panic, or jealousy, or vindictiveness, they tell us when our stories crash into reality. Afflictive emotions are our friends. They tell us something is amiss. They invite us to interior exploration.

Our bodies give us the gift of unvarnished truth. By evoking physical sensations of fear, or dread, or anger, or rejection, they reveal what's going on in us. They tell us our story is a wrath-evoking one. They tell us our internal story is one of suffering injustice. They bring up the physical sensation associated with each story we tell ourselves.

It's a gift our primal brains give us. When we *feel* resentment, our bodies tell us something our minds often ignore. The same with bitterness or hatefulness. Those are hard stories to tell, so our thoughts often edit them out. But not our bodies. Our bodies give us the gift of revealing inner narratives of despair, or gloominess, or lost hope. Our heads can't always handle the truth, but our bodies tell us about our internal experiences of despondence, or dejection, or joylessness.

Our heads will often keep running when we feel weary, but our bodies let us know. We hate acknowledging defeat, or that we are sapped or spent, but our bodies will tell us, if we will pay attention. Our bodies often give us an interior status report, by feeling inert or apathetic. There was an old-time word to describe this, "*acedia*." It means a sense of listlessness or lethargy. As a society, we tend to lump a broad range of feeling under the term, "depression."

That's a hard pill to swallow, to acknowledge that we are feeling hopeless, discouraged, and depressed. So often our minds will ignore it, and keep running full speed. But our bodies don't lie. They give us the gift of honesty, again, if we pay attention. Afflictive emotions give us the same gift our hands give us when we touch something hot. "Ouch!" they tell us. "Something is wrong," they tell us. "Do something! Something needs your immediate attention!"

Confession assumes that negative emotions and actions do the same thing for our souls that pain sensors do for our bodies. "Hey!" They tell us. This thing is hot! Get your hand off of it! Pay some attention here!"

The problem is, we don't like bad feelings. They feel bad (that's some wisdom, there. Bad feelings feel bad!). Our highly evolved pre-frontal cortexes give us the ability to distract ourselves from things that feel bad. Unlike the pain response when we touch a hot stove, our emotion responses can be ignored. We can subvert our painful feelings, maybe turn them into anger. We can retell the story so it's some other person who is bad rather than ourselves. We can grind over our worries in the night hours, making us feel like our hard work actually does something for us. We can distract ourselves. "Hey! a beer would help." Or "An ejaculation would make things better." Or, "I think I'll read a spy thriller."

Our bodies tell us that our souls are needing attention, but we don't like the messenger so we often ignore it. We push it down. We grind things out or distract ourselves.

And because of this well-worn pattern, the prayer's trigger, the negative-feelings trigger, doesn't trigger us. So we don't pull out the prayer.

We run our avoidance strategies for a week. A week becomes a month, and a year, and a decade, and a lifetime. The hand of our soul stays on the stove. We keep the toxic life-patterns in place. We keep doing what we've done.

And then some yahoo comes along and says, "If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you've always gotten." Yeah! Thanks for that pearl!

Without a tool to help us break out of the pattern, our instincts are wired to keep doing what we've always done.

But here's the good news. There is a tool! This prayer practice.

And the first step is this. *Pay attention*. Pay attention to our negative thoughts, words, actions, and feelings. Let them act as a trigger that initiates self-examination. Work hard not to avoid those feelings, and intentionally attend to them.

### *Pay Attention: Yeah, Not That Easy*

In step 2 we begin the actual work of self-examination, but before we can even do that, we have to know something is afoot. That sounds easy, but it's not. There are pretty severe headwinds that keep us from paying attention to our negative experiences. Some part of us believes that it is in our best interests to avoid negative feelings. Some part of us believes it is in our best interests to avoid self-examination.

The false-self, insecure in its very existence, works really hard to keep itself feeling good about itself. It works really hard to maintain a sense of existential security. We certainly don't need, it insists, to be rooting around for stuff to upset internal stability. So again, Step 1 is to beware of our tendency to avoid looking at our



negative experiences. The prayer insists we *feel* our negative feelings, not avoid them, but instead, let them trigger self-examination.

We carry around well-rehearsed, instinctive strategies to keep from feeling negative feelings when they arise. We all bring a certain intentionality to the practice of self-*un*-awareness. Our defense strategies make us resistant to the prayer of confession. We intentionally, albeit unconsciously, ignore, or minimize, ostracize, our negative thoughts, words, deeds, and feelings.

So the first step of the prayer is a tough one. It demands we rewire a whole bunch of unconscious instincts. We have depended on our avoidance workarounds for so long, they become engrained instincts. They become our norms, the way we live, so doing anything else feels foreign. Going *toward* our negative experiences and emotions feels unnatural.

One of the more common avoidance strategies we use to not pay attention to our negative feelings is *busyness*. We go, go, go, all the live-long day. Take time out for navel-gazing? Well that's just not prudent. There just *isn't* time. We've got the job. We've got the kids. We've got real-world things to get done before we fall into bed.

And it's true. We do live lives much busier than earlier generations. Our society *has* accelerated the demands upon us. But what we sometimes don't see, is that this suits us just fine. If technology, or economic factors (things that have accelerated our lives) weren't in play, we would most likely find something else to distract us from looking inside. Busyness is a perfect tool for keeping us unaware of the interior landscape of our souls.

But here's a tidbit. Forewarned is forearmed.

Knowing what's *going to* happen helps prepare us for it when it *does*. So be forewarned. Our unconscious, false-selves are working hard to avoid negative experiences. Our false-selves, founded on existential shame, have a vested interest in *not* seeing darkness in our souls. The false part of us is afraid to see what's going on down there. Anything negative disrupts our fragile (though false) internal stability. Consequently, busyness, or sex, or food, or media, or socializing are common tools to help us stay unaware.

It is in our false self's best interest to keep our dark side under the radar. It is in our false self's best interests to keep us in a medicated state.

But again, be forewarned. The inner shadow doesn't go away just because we don't look at it. The inner shadow is a constant and steady foe of our souls. It is constantly and steadily wearing us down from the inside. It is constantly and steadily damaging our lives, and relationships, and vocations, and destinies.

Avoidance erodes our well-being from within. Avoidance keeps our toxic thoughts and faulty motivations and harmful attitudes, intact. Avoidance keeps the status quo rolling along, wounding our lives, sometimes destroying them. Avoidance damages our marriages, and our families, and our friendships, and our bodies, and our communities.

Avoidance keeps us medicated happy, but it just costs too much.

Again, the wisdom of the practice is to use our negative experiences to call us to the prayer. But before we can do that, we have to pay attention. We have to see our negative experiences.

It's so much easier to use all our attention and energy getting mad at the idiot, and avoiding our own unspoken rules about excluding idiots. It's so much easier to assign blame to somebody else, and not pay attention to my own blindness. Again, blindness is blind. Of course it's easier to see "out there" factors and to disregard those "in here."

### *A Story: The Mark of My Trauma*

Again, the prayer unfolds in three steps.

- Step 1: Pay attention to our negative experiences
- Step 2: Undertake a thorough self-examination
- Step 3: Engage in forthright self-disclosure

I taught our community about this prayer some years ago. After I had introduced the prayer in three steps, but before we had unpacked them together, a friend in our community emailed me a story.

He had suffered a life trauma some years earlier, and he still carries a mark of that trauma. It's not usually noticeable, but it's there. The first week of the lesson I was talking about allowing our negative experiences to be a trigger for this prayer. That week he wrote me about something that had happened the week before the lesson.

Circumstances has forced him into a "pay attention" posture. A negative emotion came up that was so strong, he couldn't help but do so. It was a negative emotion related to the mark he carries of his past trauma. The power with which it came up, he told me, surprised him. It helped him see clearly how fiercely protective he was of this vulnerable, wounded point in his life.

"Maybe because of the memory of the past pain, maybe because I'm afraid that the pain will return some day, who knows why, but this part of my life gets all the protection I know how to bring. It gets the strongest guarding and defending I ever do. It gets the most safeguarding, the most watching over."

"But last week something happened. Through a series of converging circumstances, I got into a position I work really hard to avoid. I had to be touched right at the point of my trauma, right at my most protected place. The experience lasted a while. It was six or eight 8 minutes long, and these minutes were torturous. There was no reprieve. There was no way to exit. I couldn't get away. I just had to sit there, my soul in a panic, with freak-out alarms blasting inside. This tender place in my life . . . was being touched!"

"I'm not a cry-er. I'm just not. But there were tears, man. Tears!"

"And then I showed up Sunday for your lesson. And you were laying out the three steps of this confession prayer. I never thought of this area of my life as negative experience. I didn't have to. I am really good at avoidance! I work so hard to protect that place, I never get touched there. I don't really have bad feelings there because I don't allow anything to touch me there."

"But, it turns out, the bad feelings were there all along. They always have been. I just hadn't been letting myself see them."

“But after the lesson I kind of patted myself on the back. Hey, look at me! Last week, I paid attention to my negative feelings. (Step 1, check!)”

“But I did more than that,” he told me. “Advanced pupil that I am, when I came home after the experience, my wife was there. I had to decide, shall I tell her about this thing, or shall I not? I was on the fence. I don’t really talk about this part of my life. I keep a tight lid on it. And on top of that, did I mention? I cried, man! I cried!”

“But I wrestled my discomfort down. I sent the kids outside for a while. And I told her. I told her the whole thing. I did as much self-examination as I could (Step 2, check!)”

“It turned out, she really helped me with that part. She asked me some insightful questions that helped me examine myself even more deeply. I told her what I felt and why I felt it. I told her what I’d been protecting all this time. I told her as much as I could access. I talked about it, man! (Look at me! Self-disclosing. Step 3, check.)”

Afterward, she told me that in all the time we’ve been married, she’d never had that much insight into this part of my life. She had had no idea why I do some of the things I do. “Well duh! I do them to protect this vulnerable area in my life. I assumed she understood. It’s so obvious to me.”

“So even before I heard your lesson on this prayer, I had already experienced how healing it can be. I already knew it is deeply cathartic and therapeutic, because I had stumbled into the experience the week before. I’m still getting my head around the idea that it’s an ancient form of prayer, and it takes some work to think of it as “confession,” but you may be on to something.”

I think we are on to something.  
Let’s look at the next two steps.

## CHAPTER 6. Step 2 (part 1): Eyes that See. Ears that Hear

Again, the prayer of confession unfolds in three steps.

- Step 1: Pay attention to our negative emotions
- Step 2: Undertake a thorough self-examination
- Step 3: Engage in forthright self-disclosure

In the next several chapters we will explore the second step, *undertaking a thorough self-examination*. Self-examination is the heart of the practice, so we'll look at it from several angles.

### *Stupid Car, Burning Up Like That!*

Some years ago, Denise and I moved our children to Raleigh to start our church. When we got here we were flat broke. We were starting a church without knowing a soul in town. We had six months of survival money, and no church-planting money. By the sixth month we barely knew where the grocery store was.

As we were starting this shoestring venture our car broke down. It was a *burn-the-motor-up* kind of breakdown. Borrowing money for a car has always been a cardinal sin in my mind. Paying interest on an asset that depreciates is just crazy. But we were in a pickle so we borrowed the money. We researched Consumer Reports for the cars with the best marks, and borrowed the money.

We discovered that three years before (we were looking for a 3-year old car) Honda and Isuzu had done a manufacturing swap. Isuzu manufactured the Passport for Honda, and Honda manufactured the Oasis for Isuzu. So the Oasis was really the Honda Odyssey. In the year we were considering the Honda Odyssey had all good marks in Consumer Reports. Even though the Oasis was the same car, it was a few thousand dollars less because it didn't have Honda's brand recognition.

So we bought it. We bit the bullet. We went into debt with no debt-paying money in the budget. It was kind of dramatic for us. In the end it worked out well. Just a few months later the church was able to raise my salary above survival money. We paid it off as quickly as we could. And sure enough, the car had longevity! Twenty years later, my son and his new wife were still driving it.

But after we bought it, something happened. I began to see Isuzu Oases everywhere! It's not a common car, but they were all over the road. Right after we bought *our* Isuzu Oasis, hundreds of people in Raleigh rushed out to do the same. Clearly that must have been the case, because I had never seen the car in before and now, just about every day, I'd see a proud new owner who had followed us to buy this off-label car. I guess we started a trend!

Well of course not. The point is this. When we are *alert* to something – we *see* it when it shows up. When we are paying attention, we see things we would otherwise have missed. The thing had always been there. The only difference was that now we were looking.

There is a Taoist saying: *When the pupil is ready – the teacher appears.*

I think what it is saying is this: The truth we need is always present. What we need to know about ourselves is always present. The truth we need to understand about God, or spirituality, or how to make our marriages work, is always there. The truth we need about raising our kids, or developing self-control, or becoming more steadfast, or solving some intractable problem at work . . . the truth we need is always present. The wisdom we need is always present. The answer to our questions is always present.

They are present, but because we're looking for something else, or because we don't think Truth looks like it does, or because we've locked our minds around an expectation of what wisdom should be . . . we're looking the wrong way and don't see it.

We don't see Isuzu truth, even though it's there.

### *A Prayer of Self-Suspicion*

That human dynamic makes this second step of the prayer of confession kind of demanding. Self-awareness is a gift. It is a gift to know ourselves at a deeper level than our interior narratives. It is a gift to see beyond our instincts, beyond our thought-habits, go-to instincts, and instinctive beliefs. It is a gift, but it is not easily attained.

To be able to see the ourselves beneath the layer of conscious awareness requires we awaken from slumber. It requires we develop a healthy suspicion about everything we assume is just how things are. It requires we see what is there, when we are blind to what is there. That's not easy. It requires a posture of skepticism about our most cherished truths. It requires we wonder if they are as true as we think they are. People just don't wonder like that.

So, the first part of *undertaking a thorough self-examination*, is this. We intentionally bring ourselves to suspicion. We require of ourselves the assumption that there is a truth bigger than the one we now hold. We demand of ourselves a posture of watchfulness and receptivity.

The first part of step 2, is holding ourselves in an attitude of alertness, vigilance, and readiness.

It has always been the wisdom of our tradition to begin the prayer of confession with a prayer for help, a preliminary prayer to stir us to watchfulness.

Ours are *habit-and-instinct* brains. It's how we're wired. Odds are, if the truth we most need were to be given us on a silver platter, we couldn't see it. We're usually looking for something else.

We need a special kind of Isuzu-seeing watchfulness.

So our tradition has encouraged us to bring ourselves toward this kind of watchfulness by starting with a prayer for help.

*God, I am having some bad feelings toward my husband. I have enough sense to suspect I don't see the full picture in this situation. It's easy to see how he is the problem (and how I'm not). But I'm being suspicious here, God.*

Or...

*I'm having bad feelings toward the guy at work, or...*

*I'm having anxious feelings over the numbers in the checking account, or...*

*That bad performance review is evoking a sense of dread.*

Again, the first step of the prayer is to pay attention to negative thoughts, feelings, or deeds. We don't stuff them. We don't avoid them. We don't distract

ourselves. This prepares us for step two. This makes us ready to *undertake a thorough self-examination*.

But all my preparation and self-examination won't be worth a whit, if I am blind to what I need to see.

*Help me, God! Help me see. Stir within me the humility I need to be suspicious of my native beliefs. Grant me eyes that can see, and ears that can hear, wisdom that is there, but that I am not accessing.*<sup>11</sup>

Almost 1200 years ago, our spiritual forebears penned a song we still sing. It has informed a rich part of my own prayers of confession. *Be Thou My Vision*. It lays out the initial prayer for Step 2 for our practice of confession. Here's a paraphrase of the ancient prayer.

*Spirit of God that is always in me, may I see with Divine eyes, what I fail to see with ego eyes. May I be alert to deeper truth and see with Divine vision, what I fail to see with ego vision.*

Step one of step two is a prayer for help.  
*Lord, help me see what I so easily fail to see.*

### *Desire and Pay Attention*

In our own spiritual community, we speak of the spiritual journey in a simple, functional, easily-remembered way. We call the journey a two-step dance: *desire and pay attention*. The first step of the dance is to desire something deeper, something more real, something more true, something more beautiful.

Desire, our tradition teaches, is the launch pad for spiritual growth.<sup>12</sup>

The second step of the ancient dance of the spiritual journey, is to pay attention. Having stirred ourselves to desire something deeper, we set aside the distraction of lesser things that vie for our affections. Desiring the deeper thing, we simply pay attention to the always-present movement of Divine Life in and around us.

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<sup>11</sup> Prov. 20:12, Matt. 13:16

<sup>12</sup> Ps. 37



The spiritual life is rooted in a great truth. God *in* us is our hope and our glory.<sup>13</sup> If God is in us, as close as close can be, we don't need to go on a long journey to find God-truth or God-wisdom. All we need to do is sit down, sit still, and pay attention.

It is the way of the spiritual life. What we need is always present if we're paying attention. Desire triggers attentiveness, and everything we need is already in us, because the Holy Spirit of God is already in us.

So the prayer for help with which we begin the prayer of self-awareness is how our tradition encourages us to stir up desire, and marshal ourselves to attentiveness.

Desire and pay attention.

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<sup>13</sup> Col. 1:27  
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## CHAPTER 7. Step 2 (part 2): *Examen*, Stories, and Feelings

Again, the prayer of confession unfolds in three steps.

- Step 1: Pay attention to our negative emotions
- Step 2: Undertake a thorough self-examination
- Step 3: Engage in forthright self-disclosure

As we begin the second step of the prayer, as we undertake a thorough self-examination, we bring ourselves to a posture of self-suspicion. We begin with a prayer for a help, positioning ourselves in the two-step dance of the spiritual journey; 1) we desire, and 2) we pay attention.

The next part of the second step, the self-examination part of the prayer, is to begin internal exploration using some ancient spiritual tools.

### Step 2: Using *Examen* of Consciousness

*Examen* is an ancient spiritual practice that helps in our day-to-day quest for self-awareness. It was originally instituted by Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) several centuries ago. When we make *examen* part of our daily routine, usually at day's end, we help ourselves pay attention. We help ourselves past our dependence on avoidance strategies. We help ourselves see the triggers come when they invite us to take up the prayer of confession.

We practice *examen* by time and space for a simple *end-of-our-day* inventory before we fall asleep.

1. We review our day with gratitude, jotting down the parts of our day we recall.
2. Reflecting on the day, we ask ourselves where the Divine was moving in our lives – and we responded.
3. We also ask ourselves where the Divine was moving – and we were distracted by something else.
4. We imagine our tomorrow, and make a prayer to be more responsive to Divine movement.

It's a simple query, but when we build it into our daily lives, it helps us deepen our self-awareness.

There is a tool I've found that makes the practice *examen* especially helpful. I laminated a bookmark on which are listed the ancient virtues.<sup>14</sup> One of the ways we help ourselves see where the Divine was moving, and we responded or were distracted, is to read slowly through this list. It sounds simple, but over time it is quite powerful. The ancient virtues are virtues, because they make our lives work. Over the long haul, honesty works, dishonesty doesn't. Justice works, injustice doesn't.

It's kind of an axiom that true things work, and false things don't. The virtues work, which indicates there is something in them that touches a deep and true part of the human experience. In our search for Divine movement in our lives, when we reflect on the ancient virtues they act as pointers for our quest.

When we have been impatient, there's a good chance that the Divine was present in our days (the Fruit of the Spirit is patience), but we were distracted by something else. When we experience deep love for others (another Fruit), it points us toward Divine movement in our days to which we responded.

By slowly reading through the list of ancient virtues, we can heighten our awareness of Divine movement in our daily lives.

It's a simple practice. We read the virtues, pausing after each. In the quiet space, we listen for an inner check, an inner affirmation, or a memory of the day that bubbles up. As we sense these, we allow that they indicate an inner nudge of the Holy Spirit. When one of the virtues gives us pause, we simply pull on it like a thread on a sweater. We let unravel, watching whatever comes up in our hearts.

Perhaps we sense an inner nudge around the word "love." As we pause, perhaps a moment will come to mind in which we felt unloved or unloving. The pause makes space for us pay attention, and see something we would otherwise have rushed right past.

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<sup>14</sup> From The Fruit of the Spirit.

Love, Joy, Peace Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Steadfastness, Gentleness, Self-Control.

From the ancient virtues:

Charity, Self-Control, Honesty, Justice, Fairness, Honor, Kindness, Chastity, Generosity, Wisdom, Loyalty, Compassion, Humility, Self-Sacrifice, Diligence, Perseverance, Integrity, Bravery, Modesty, Selflessness

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We might sense an inner nudge around the ancient virtue of patience. A moment comes to our mind's eye in which we were impatient, or in which we were the brunt of another's impatience. Ahh! We sense an afflictive emotion we might have otherwise ignored and hurried by.

It's a helpful practice, simply reading a list of ancient virtues. We make space and time to breathe and listen for inner nudges of the Indwelling Spirit. We make space to deepen our self-awareness, and develop eyes that see, ears that hear.

By taking up the practice of a daily moral inventory, over time we develop the kind of self-suspicion we talked about in the last chapter. It helps us be watchful about the inner workings of our lives. It helps us make space and time to listen within for the answer to important questions.

- How am I doing with peace, or peacelessness?
- How am I doing with contentedness, or envy?
- How am I doing with kindness, or selfishness?"

Keeping the virtues before us, we slow down the busyness of daily life, and see what we would otherwise miss. By taking some moments on a regular basis to reflect on Divine movement in our lives, we hold virtue up as a plumb line in our days, seeing ourselves in ways we otherwise miss.

### Write It Down

Life is busy. Our moments usually get warehoused unseen and unprocessed. By keeping the virtues before us, we more regularly see what is going on inside us, we more regularly see the things our false selves would prefer to avoid.

As we practice *examen*, writing down what we see is particularly helpful. Brains being what brains are, doing what brains do, distraction is always at the door. The noisy thing, the urgent thing often crowds out the important thing, the quiet thing. Consequently, writing things down is a helpful way to keep the important things in our attention.

Again, negative emotions can be our friends. They are the invitation to take up the prayer. However, they don't invite us if we don't feel them. Negative

experiences can be our friends, but not if we don't notice them. Insights can be transformative, but not if we don't *heed* them.

When we write something down, we force our minds into focus-mode. We discipline, and channel, and accentuate, our thoughts and insights. Random thoughts flitting through our heads don't go as deeply as those that are written down.

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So again, in the second step of the prayer, as we undertake a thorough self-examination:

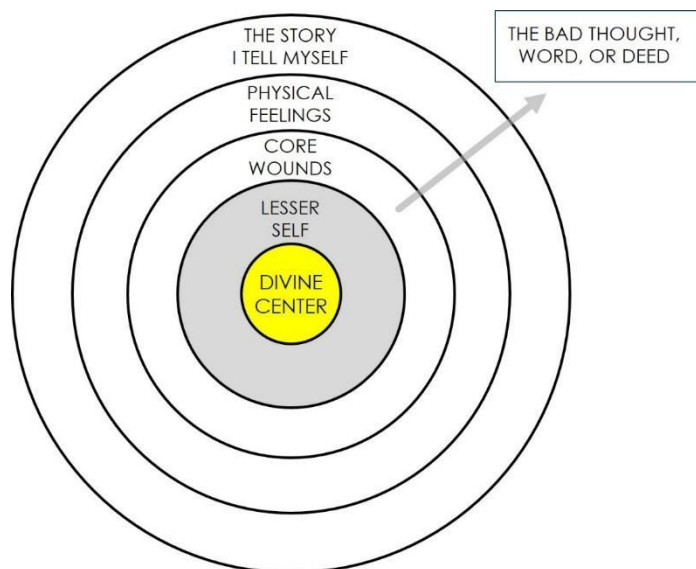
1. We keep the ancient virtues before us.
2. We pause over them, and reflect when we sense an inner nudge.
3. We write things down.

Next, we ask questions. Asking about our inner worlds is the centerpiece of the prayer of self-awareness. We ask about the stories we tell ourselves. We ask ourselves about our feelings.

### *The Inner Divine and the Quest for Self-Awareness*

As we've seen, our questions begin with our negative experiences. As we experience a bad thought, word, feeling, or action, we don't like it. It is afflictive. It is negative. But instead of avoiding, ignoring or distracting, we take up the prayer.

A good way to organize the self-exploration part of the prayer, is to layer our questions to match the layers of our awareness. Because the outer layers of awareness are easier to access, we begin there.



As we've seen, and as the diagram illustrates, our tradition affirms that each of us carries at the deepest part of who we are, the Divine Center, the Indwelling Spirit. However, the tradition also affirms that we carry that Divine Life inside an ego container. Paul called us "treasures carried in earthen vessels."<sup>15</sup>

It has been our experience through the generations, that there is a way to live the human life, drawing from that deep, but it's not easy. The Divine Center is a bigger reality than can be contained in the outer layers of human consciousness. It does not fit in thoughts we think, feelings we feel, stories we tell, or beliefs we hold. When we affirm that each of us is made of the same stuff God is made of, we are affirming that there is a deep part of us that is grander, and greater, and more majestic, than our own minds can contain.

Which means, somewhat counter-intuitively, that full and complete self-awareness will always elude us. When it comes to defining our deepest, realest essence . . . we can't. Transcendent as it is, we are unable to define or pin down the Divine Center at the deepest core of who we are. It is not a definable reality. It is not a reality that will fit into description, image, thought or feeling.

But even so, generation after generation has affirmed that it *can* be experienced. Like the wind that can't be contained, but when it blows can be experienced, we

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<sup>15</sup> 2 Cor. 4:7  
Draft 4/12/16

can experience Divine movement in our lives, despite our inability to define, label, or contain it.

The problem is that we begin our journeys defining ourselves in versions of “me” that *can* be contained in thought, emotion, story, or beliefs. Consequently, the experience of Inner Divine Life eludes us. Consequently, it is very difficult for us to have the experience to which our tradition attests. It is difficult to sense the transformative movement of the Inner Divine.

To our aid, comes this prayer practice. When we begin our quest for self-awareness, the questions we ask ourselves begin in the outer layers of awareness. We start by asking ourselves about thoughts we are thinking, stories we tell ourselves.

However, in order to *look at* our thoughts and stories we must stand outside them. The very act of observing our stories, requires we distance ourselves from them. Part of us needs to disentangle ourselves from *being* the story, or even being *in* the story. The act of asking ourselves questions about our thoughts and stories requires we stand outside them and observe them.

Through regular practicing of the prayer, we train ourselves to more and more deeply dis-identify with our story-lives, our thought-thinking lives, our feeling-feeling lives.

Regular practice of this question-asking prayer helps us awaken to the treasure deep within us, the Divine Center. As we explore, look at, observe, and *dis-identify* with the outer layers of self, we practice not being them.

### *The First Layer of Questions: The Story We Tell Ourselves*

As we've seen, stories are powerful. They sit inside us as a mental map telling us how to interpret our experiences. They define our instincts, telling us what things mean and defining what we should expect from life. They tell us what the universe will do, what God does, what people do. Our stories tell us what happens to people like this or that, what makes us safe, and what endangers us. Stories tell us how to get ahead in life, and how to get left behind.



They are powerful. But most of the time they tick away in the background, unseen and unexamined. They influence everything, but only rarely do we consider or assess them. Rarely do we ask ourselves if they are helpful, or even true.

Instead, we just explode at our spouse, unaware that he or she crossed some boundary our story put there. We usually can't articulate what the boundary was. We just know a surge of emotion erupted and off we went.

Or, we burn with hatred toward someone who wronged us. Or we make a decision that diminishes us. Or we do something that harms us. And we do these things because they fit our internal stories. We forego opportunities, or step back from possibilities, again, not usually knowing why, not usually understanding the story that dictated our actions. Most of the time we respond instinctively, leaving possibilities on the table, spiritual possibilities, relational possibilities, financial, or career possibilities. Unbeknownst to us, we left those possibilities on the table because they didn't fit some internal, unconscious story we carry.

For most of us, this process goes sight-unseen, functioning well below the level of conscious awareness.

Which is why this prayer practice begins with questions about our stories.

### *The Story – the Feelings – and Back to the Story*

The first questions we ask ourselves are about why we do the things we do, why we say the things we say, and why it happens as often as it does.

The first layer of questions is about why we act or react this way or that, why our words come out with such anger. They are questions about what we're afraid of, or why we feel hurt, or why we're sad.

Stories happen in our heads, a function of the thinking part of our ego-selves. However, as we saw earlier, our minds are masters at editing, distorting, and ignoring what we don't want to see. Our bodies tell us most honestly, what is going on in our inner worlds.

So in our quest for self-awareness, it is not enough to explore our stories. We must also explore our feelings; the physical sensations that reveal our inner worlds more honestly. Our bodies help us know when our story is laced with

shame. There is physical way our bodies register shame. They help us know we're dealing with a betrayal story, because there is physical way to register betrayal. Our bodies have a physical vocabulary that communicates when our story is about discouragement, or being overwhelmed.

As we ask ourselves about our stories, we do well to probe our bodies. We do well to do the work of translating into our conscious awareness, the truths our bodies are telling us. It behooves us to probe those feelings until we can consciously name them and use them to more accurately know our stories.

*Different Day, Same Story. Different Day, Same Blind Spot*

We saw earlier how our blind spots have a recurring nature about them. That's because there is usually some primal drive behind our afflictive thoughts and emotions.

For many, our inner drive is a quest to create safety in a dangerous world. If that is our deep drive, it will still be at work shaping our stories tomorrow. It will be a different circumstance, a different episode, but it will be the same internal drive. For others, our interior drive is the quest to control our worlds so we can keep them arranged as they should be. If that's our drive, we'll be grappling with that same drive tomorrow under some other guise. If we carry a primal fear about being rejected, or abandoned, or found wanting, in some form or another, we will still be grappling with that fear tomorrow.

Over time, as we ask ourselves the self-awareness questions, our interior worlds begin to become familiar territory. We come to know our primal fears, our go-to thoughts, our recurring emotional responses. We become familiar with the primal hurts that shape our stories. We get to know our own particular blend of pitfalls, hazards, and false-self traps.

Thus informed, over time we develop our own list of questions to help us discern what's going on inside us. Our self-awareness inquiry itself, becomes familiar territory.

In the beginning, we get upset when our spouse leaves another dish on the coffee table. Before we become practiced in the quest for self-awareness, we don't know much about the story we tell. We usually just vent. We rail to ourselves, we

rail at our spouse. We vent on anybody willing to listen. We go over all the familiar territory. We protest how wrong the other is. We carp about how unfair the circumstances are. We demonize the other, pointing out how disrespectful he or she is, or what a slob he or she is, all the while highlighting how noble and tidy we are.

But the tipoff that there is something more going on is that a lot of times people or circumstances are just as irritating as our current episode, but those times we don't have such volatile emotional reactions.

In the next section, we'll see an important application of this ancient prayer practice. It turns out to be very helpful when we want to resolve intractable conflicts in our lives. In that section, I'll talk about the "25-3 rule." It's a simple observation about our lives. Twenty-five irritating things happen to us, but as a general rule, only three of them really get under our skin. Twenty-two of them generate an eye-roll or a cross word, but three of them are in a category all their own. When we run into these irritants, we erupt like Vesuvius.

It usually isn't that the three things have an intrinsic worse-ness than the twenty-two. More often, the reaction tells us more about the story we are telling ourselves than it does about the quantifiable badness of the event. More often, our vigorous reactions have more to do with our stories. But also, most often, we wouldn't know that. Most often, we have no idea what story is generating our reactions.

Stories dictate feelings, and thought patterns, and go-to actions and reactions. But they usually do so without our full awareness of what's going on.

So, in this second step of the prayer, we begin with self-awareness questions, and the first one, "What story am I telling myself about this situation?"

### *The Slippery Slope Story*

When she leaves her dish for me to carry to the sink, aware of it or not, I tell myself that she is just like my mother.

I tell myself she is on the slippery slope to the same *out-of-control* lives my family lived when I was growing up. The dish is a signal that I can expect the same kind

of craziness I grew up with. It's going to follow me here, into this relationship. I've seen it before. If people are out of control with something simple like the dishes, they are also out of control with their emotional outbursts, with their money, with their sexuality, with food, and pretty soon the whole damn house burns down!

I tell myself that the dish is a slippery slope to destruction. And I've told her this! I've told her how much it bothers me. I've been hard at work (kindly mind you) trying to stave off impending destruction, but no matter what I say, no matter how many times I grouse about it, she keeps going there.

### *The Disrespect Story*

When he doesn't carry his dishes, he is telling me how little he respects my time, or energy, or fatigue. And if he will dishonor me with the dishes, it's just a hop, skip, jump before he, like my father, will put me in the category of "*oh, she's only a girl.*"

Many have tried to limit my power. Some succeeded. But as God is my witness, never again! And especially in this, my most intimate relationship. My voice will *never* be shut down again. My potential will *never* be limited. Never again. I will never again, set my dreams aside in service to another.

You say it's just a dish, but it means something. It's a dish of *dishonor*. It's no longer a dish, it's a squandered *destiny*. It's no longer a dish, it is a *power differential*.

So sure, I might get really pissy over a little thing like a dish. I might get more obstreperous or hostile than the situation calls for, but that's because the story tells me there's more at stake here than a dish.

If we don't know what's going on inside, when we become punitive, or say awful things, or do terrible things, we do so without any awareness of where our hurtful, toxic, afflictive thoughts and feelings come from. Our reaction might seem really over the top, even to ourselves . . . unless we understand the story we tell ourselves about the dish.

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This kind of thing happens all the time. People react in all kinds of excessive, overblown ways. And when it happens, most of the time we just go with our over-the-top reactions. We don't dig into them. We don't try to understand them. We usually don't understand why we're reacting the way we are.

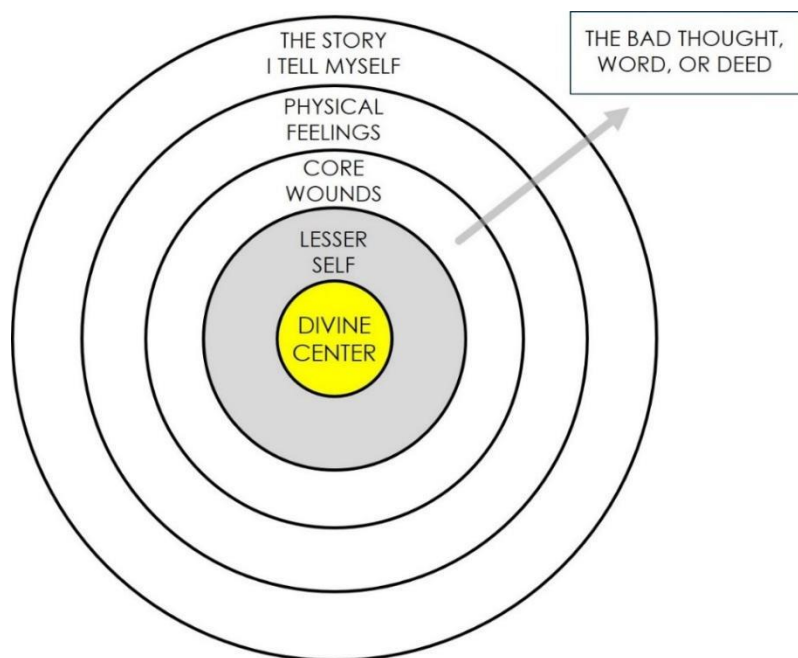
Because, most of us never ask the first question of self-awareness. "What story do I tell myself that is producing this strong reaction?" We usually settle for the most trivial version of the story.

"The other person is bad. The circumstance is bad. The situation is bad. The problem is *out there*. The problem is them."

Vesuvius erupts, and we point at the lava. We don't understand the magma structure under the surface. Anxiety erupts, recrimination erupts, blame erupts, but we have no idea of the story at work under the surface.

### Feelings Help Us Understand Our Stories

Because our stories are tough to see, because our blind spots are blind, it's helpful to ask ourselves about the next circle of awareness, our physical feelings, our emotions.



As we've mentioned, feelings come from the part of our brain that is not sophisticated enough to deceive us. Consequently, feelings can help us backtrack and figure out our stories.

As we try to work out our *dish-on-the-coffee-table* story. The first thing we discern is the *slippery-slope-fear* story. If one area of life gets out of control, it will be a quick downhill slide to utter chaos. Good.

But when we scan our bodies, maybe we find something there. Reading through a list of emotion words<sup>16</sup> the word "*distrust*" nudges us. Pausing and reflecting on the word, more of what's going on inside of us begins to show. The word offers us another self-awareness thread to pull.

There's more to the story we tell ourselves.

"People can't be trusted," we realize is going on inside us. "This is a dangerous world, and we're in it alone. People let you down. You can't count on anybody. I can't even trust my spouse. The dish is about more than a slippery slope. It's about a backlog of significant people who have let me down. It's about a backlog of people I thought I could trust, that in the end, I couldn't."

"And now you are in my life, spouse. You represent my best hope for a relationship in which I can know and be known, love and be loved, trust and be trusted. And the recurring dish on the coffee tells me, 'Nope. Not here, either.' You can't trust anyone, anywhere, ever. People always end up doing what's best for them but not for you. Every time."

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If that story was really going on inside of us, it would be painful to acknowledge. It would be a hard truth to live with. Even a brief consideration of that "truth" speaks to all kinds of ugly implications about how life is going to be. It's a story that tells us the world is an awful place. It's a story that tells us that the thing we most long for, we cannot have.

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<sup>16</sup> Google the term "300 feeling words"

No wonder our brains shield us from stories like this. No wonder, our brains do whatever they can to *not* see this kind of awfulness.

When we have powerful emotional responses, they are often rooted in awful stories we tell ourselves. They are so bad, they conflict us. One part of us believes the story, but another does our best to fight against it. Often, it is the internal energy of our own conflicted struggle that comes up when we are triggered.

Again, no wonder we work so hard not to slow down enough to see what's going on inside us. If we do, it feels like we give it more power over us. Better to turn away and not look.

Self-awareness is no picnic.

Digging into our afflictive emotions is dangerous. The very fact that they are afflictive tells us that what I'll find when we dig into them, will be unpleasant, sometimes dreadful.

But again, prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure is a healing pathway in our tradition. So, the ancients enjoin us, we muster our courage, and prepare ourselves for a thorough self-examination, what the 12-step tradition calls a *fearless* moral inventory, and we go after our stories.





## CHAPTER 8. Step 2 (part 3): Working The Feeling Layer

Again, the three steps of the prayer of confession, the prayer of self-awareness:

- Step 1: Pay attention to our negative emotions.
- Step 2: Undertake a thorough self-examination.
- Step 3: Engage in forthright self-disclosure.

Continuing to look at the second step, in this chapter we look at how we unearth our feeling layers by telling a couple of stories. In the last chapter, we saw how accessing our feelings helps us backfill our understanding of the stories we tell ourselves. In this chapter we'll see how that works in real life.

### A Story

I know a woman who is fiercely committed to living a noble and virtuous life. She is fiercely committed to discerning, and doing the right thing. She grew up in a pretty unhealthy family. Her family had a docile, passive, and deferential ideas about proper behavior for girls. Her natural personality made her an unwitting conspirator in the system. She has a care-giving personality. It's a gift. She is really good at it.

In a *path-of-least-resistance* way, at a pretty young age, she became the caregiver for her family. And they needed a lot of care. They were an ill bunch, ill in their minds, and their hearts, their relationships, and their bodies.

She stayed home longer than most young people do. Her family needed her. It was a sacrificial thing to do. She sacrificed her social life, and her time, and energy, and career, and even love. But she did it because it was "the right thing to do." And that was very important to her.

For several years, she carried a heavy load of duty and responsibility for her brothers and mother. Her father was pretty much out of the picture. Her mother was psychologically and emotionally ill. And her brothers were always on the verge of serious trouble. She held everything together.

For years she filled that role. Even when she left home she was always on call. Living in another state, she still held things together, making regular trips home to

handle crises. She did regular phone counseling for the family, always on call, always the care-giver.

And she did about as well as she could do. She really did give it her best. And she did it cheerfully. She did it willingly. She determined what a good person would do, and was determined to do it.

But some years later she noticed something inside her. She began to have angry outbursts toward her family on a pretty regular basis. By now everybody was older. By now she had her own family, her own life. But whenever there was a holiday, or some other reason to interact, she noticed her tendency for angry outbursts. It was the kind of afflictive emotion we spoke of in the last chapter. It was the trigger that invites us to the prayer of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure.

“It has started to happen every time we get together,” she told me.

And so she took up the practice. She began to dig into the stories she tells herself. And as usually happens, she came up with a story pretty easily.

“My family is selfish. My family disrespects me. My family is foolish. They don’t take responsibility for their actions. They do stupid, unhealthy things, they suffer the consequences of their stupidity, and then they run to me to fix their problems.”

“And the worst part, is that I *do*, dammit. I *do*. I jump in every time and fix whatever they have broken.”

“That’s it. That’s the story I tell myself.”

“So now, it’s clear what I should do. I have to harden myself against my family. I have to become more callous and less caring.”

“Done. I’ve done the prayer practice! I’ve explored the story I tell myself, check! I’ve felt my feelings. I’ve figured out a response to my story, check!”

Except . . . that’s not really the practice.

There are a couple of rules of thumb for the questions of self-awareness.

First, whenever we tell ourselves a story about our situation, and the primary pronoun we use is “them,” or “it,” or “him,” or “her,” odds are we haven’t accessed our deepest or truest stories. We’re not done. There’s more.

My friend’s first story was all about “them.”  
She wasn’t finished.

The second rule of thumb is this. When the primary afflictive emotion is anger, that too is invitation to dig deeper. Anger is a circuit-breaker emotion. It clicks in when we have ignored our more subtle emotions too long. When we have suppressed or ignored them too long, after a while, the build-up won’t be suppressed any longer. Emotion surges. And we have a word for that surge. We call it “anger.” But often, anger is cloaking emotion. It is an overflow emotion. It tells us there was something going on inside that we have ignored too long.

So I told my friend about these two rules of thumb, and she began to suspect that her first run at the practice could use some more work.

Interestingly (and this is not uncommon at all), she had been telling herself that version of the story for about nine years. It was the only story she had to explain her anger toward her family. It wasn’t until our community began to focus on this ancient prayer, that she began to suspect she hadn’t gone deeply enough.

My friend had fallen into the trap so many do, ignoring, even suppressing her emotions. She was good at not paying attention to her feelings. For years she had been rehearsing her shallow story over and over, telling and retelling it to herself. For years she had been reinforcing the emotion-ignoring, anger-circuit-breaking neural paths in her brain. It was very difficult to get her brain to see or feel anything different

Until she took up the practice. And in particular, she began to ask better questions about her feelings.

There is a tool that helps us ask better feeling questions. It’s not unlike the exam practice we saw in chapter seven. We read through a list of feeling words, just like

we read through a list of virtues. We pause after each one, listening for an interior nudge that indicates there is something to explore.

We do this to help us pay attention to the physical sensations we are so accustomed to ignoring. Again, somewhere in our bodies we *feel* optimism. The list helps us pause long enough to recall where we felt it. I often feel optimism right behind my forehead. The same is true for all the emotions. Somewhere in our bodies we feel them. We *feel* rebellion, or admiration, or bravery, or embarrassment, or disgust. Again, the list helps us pause long enough to bring that sensation to mind.

When we struggle to feel, recall, and name these sensations, it gives us access to a deeper part of our internal worlds. And this access helps us fill in the stories we tell ourselves with greater accuracy.

So my friend began to scan her body for sensations. We have a tool we use in our community, our trusty 300-feeling-words list. She got it out and read through it slowly, pausing after each to listen. After a while one of the words pinged her. The word “suffocated.”

“I feel suffocated when I relate to my family,” she told me. As soon as she named that word a memory came to mind. She was in the kitchen cooking for the family. Her mother was in the other room ranting with a fit of emotional craziness. As she cooked, she was racked with worry for her *ne'er-do-well* brothers.

As that image came to mind, she could feel the suffocation she had experienced, but suppressed, back then. She could also feel how that same sensation came up every time she was with her family. Suffocation. Anger had been a coping emotion to cover her sense of suffocation.

The demands of her family’s neediness, the demands of their unhealthiness, the recurring, never stopping, and never-*will*-stop demands had choked her as a young person, and were choking her still. The ever-mounting, never-ending responsibilities had smothered her as a young woman, and were smothering her still.

There at the kitchen counter she felt it, and today, running in the background of so many of her family interactions, it was still there. She was still feeling it.

Even though she was no longer responsible for her family, the feeling of suffocation still informed the story she was telling herself. “I can’t win here. I can’t get away. They will *always* be sucking me dry. They will never get better. They will never go away.”

Of course she felt suffocated.

She had ignored the story a long time. She had ignored her feelings a long time. The emotion wouldn’t stay down any longer and was coming up and out every time she interacted with them. However, it was only when she explored the physical sensations in her body, that she could access her deeper wisdom. Only then did she know what was going on inside her. Her body helped her understand her story.

Self-awareness comes first. Later my friend will be able to ask other, deeper questions. Later she can ask if her suffocation story is true or false. Later she can ask herself if she could walk away from her family or if it is possible to relate to them in non-overwhelming, non-suffocating ways. But first, she has to know what her story is. First she has to see and begin to dis-identify with it.

Later she can ask more questions. Later she can ask why she hasn’t changed how she relates to them. She can explore her idea of “a good person” and ask if it’s true or helpful.

Later she can ask change-dynamic kinds of questions, but the whole process begins with awareness. The whole process begins when our questions help us see, and dis-identify with our stories.

Again, thoughts will lie but feelings tell the truth. We understand our stories more fully when they are informed understanding our emotions.

### Another Story

A while ago, the denomination I had been part of for twenty-five years kicked me out. I wrote a book about the tumultuous shift in worldview our culture has undergone. I suggested some historical ways of telling the Christian story that would work better in the new worldview. They thought my suggestions were heretical. They kicked me out.

Writing it that way sounds much easier than the process actually was. It was a long, drawn out ordeal. I wrote defense after defense. I went to meeting after meeting. I practically re-wrote the book to help them see how what I had said was both historical and part of our heritage. It didn't help. It was a sad year. It was painful. I had a profound sense of loss and underwent no small amount of grief.

The meeting that signaled the finality of the process was in California. The denomination flew me and Denise out to meet with three representatives of the doctrinal committee. It was a long meeting (six hours), and in the end we were still at odds.

I don't know why they insisted Denise come along to the meeting. She didn't write the book. She wasn't the rabble-rouser. But they did. As you can imagine, the episode evoked strong, negative feelings inside her. She wanted to defend her husband. She felt protective of my good name, character, and my spiritual integrity. She had a strong emotional reaction (as I did) to the closed, and narrow-mindedness of the committee. She (as I did) felt indignant that of the three committee representatives, only one had read the book. She had lots of strong feelings. Lots of afflictive emotions. Lots of negative sensations.

When it was over, and it was clear that we would be kicked out, as we drove away we talked over how the meeting had gone.

In our community, after the lesson each week, people in the community speak up. They tell about their lives, ask questions, offer comments. It's one of the best parts of our community life. The Sunday before the doctrinal-committee meeting, one of the people in our community had shared an internal tool that helped them practice this prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure.

"When I'm caught up in a drama," this person had said, "when I'm embroiled in an afflictive emotion when my internal kettle is boiling over, I still want to live in

self-awareness. I still want to know what's going on inside me. Because again, the boiling is less about the situation, and more about the story I tell myself about the situation."

"So here's a way to help me do that. When I have the presence of mind to do it, I take a moment to stand back, and in my mind remove the personalities from my drama. Instead of watching *them*, I watch *myself*. Instead of focusing on the irritating words and behaviors of "those people out there," I try to ask myself about myself. What am *I* doing here? What am *I* feeling. How am *I* reacting?"

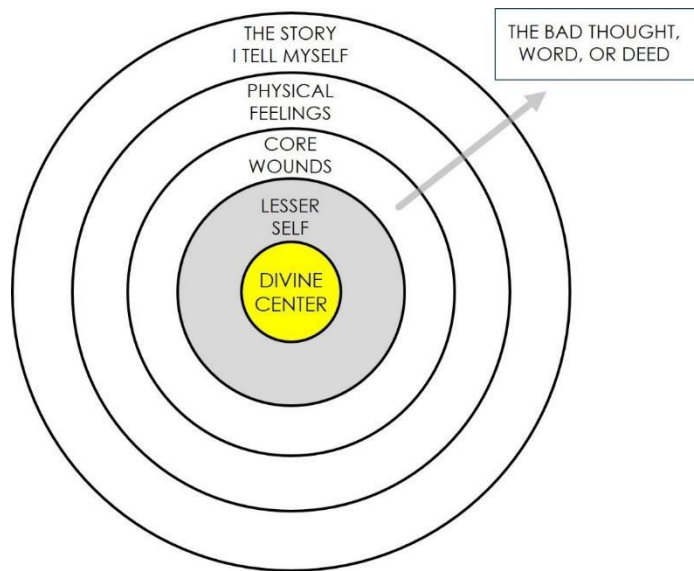
So there Denise and I were, in a six-hour meeting with people telling me how bad I am, and that simple comment kept coming back to Denise. "Take these personalities out of the mix," she told herself. "Watch my own feelings. Watch my own thoughts. Watch my own stories."

And because she had taken that posture, as we were driving away, she had a series of helpful insights into the stories she was telling herself about her worth, about how good people relate to authority figures, about how she often gives away her power. It was a treasure trove of self-awareness, because instead of focusing on *the other* in our drama, she focused within.

It was a keen insight. "Instead of watching *them*, I watch *myself*." It was a clear articulation of this part of the prayer practice, the prayer of pursuing self-awareness.

### *Our Core Wounds; Seeing the Pattern*

Look again at the layers of self-awareness questions we ask. You will notice that beneath the stories we tell ourselves, beneath the feelings we explore, there is another layer, "core wounds." Another term for that layer could have been, "wound patterns."



As mentioned, after we've done self-awareness question-asking long enough, our inner worlds become more familiar territory. Recurring patterns begin to emerge. We start to see that beneath our volatile reactions, beneath our afflictive emotions, beneath our negative experiences, there are core wounds that when touched produce recurring reactions.

Some years ago, a spiritual director taught me three questions I should always ask when I am in the midst of negative emotional reactions. Our personalities, he taught me, tend to draw from one or two of three core energy centers, when we are feeling and acting badly. We could call these three energy centers, common iterations of the false self. Diverse as all people are, we nevertheless tend to share one or two of these sources of our inner pain.

When we dig deeply into the story we tell ourselves, when we dig deeply into our feelings, we often unearth one of these three wounds, one of these three core, motivating fears.

- We fear the loss of power or control, or...
- We fear the loss of affirmation or esteem, or...
- We fear the loss of safety or security.

When one of these core fears gets touched, they touch off a cascade of negative thoughts, words, feelings, or experiences. The prayer of self-awareness invites us to wade deeper and deeper to a core understanding of our inner worlds. When



we do, we usually find these fears. We all struggle with all of them, but each of us tends toward one or two of them more frequently than the others.

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I was recently embroiled in a negative experience. It was a conflict with a friend. It brought up an emotional volatility I don't usually experience. I could point to the external reasons for my emotional reaction, but of course, if I teach this stuff, I have to practice it. Pretty quickly I shifted my focus from the players in the drama, to what my emotional response was telling me about me.

I did the process, I asked the questions...

- What is the story I tell myself?
- What feelings are coming up?
- How do those feelings better inform my story?

And when I had a page or two of notes, I had a couple of conversations with trusted spiritual friends. They asked me probing questions about my interior world, wondering out loud with me about my reaction. A phrase came up in the course of one of those conversations, "the fear of being manipulated." It stood out to me. I didn't have it fully unpacked, but my internal nudge was that there was something there.

And so went back to my document, and did the process again...

- What is the story I tell myself?
- What feelings are coming up?
- How do those feelings better inform my story?

This time, taking the personalities out of the drama, looking at my own internal responses, sure enough, an image came to my mind. I was a young person. I was standing in a room in the home I grew up in. I was having a strong emotional reaction to being manipulated by the self-victimizing actions and words of a loved one.

Looking at my teenage self, I realized I was struggling with a dilemma. On the one hand, my definition of a good person required that I step in to help the victim. My definition of a good person required I surrender my own agenda to serve the

other. On the other hand, I understood that this person was a victim by their own hand, and I couldn't fix what they weren't willing to fix. And overlaid on the whole situation was a longstanding, deep, abiding fear of having power taken from me.

I saw how when someone plays the victim with me, it triggers me. It pokes my deep fear of being manipulated. It pokes my recurring fear of lost power or control. It brings up my deepest emotional defenses. I heard myself say at a significant moment in my younger life, with all the energy I could muster, "I will burn the \$%^# house down before I will ever again allow myself to be manipulated!"

And this friend with whom I was having a conflict, had inadvertently triggered this landmine deep inside my false self. The episode wasn't really about anything he or she had said or done. It was about my landmine, always there, always waiting, always ready to go off.

When that much emotion comes surging up, it is very difficult *not* to point it all at the person or circumstance that triggered it. That *is* the path of least resistance. But when we integrate this prayer into our lives, over time, it re-habituates us. Through regular practice, it trains us to look beyond the trigger, and focus on our internal worlds. With time, with practice, we become familiar enough with the landscape of our interior worlds to know the right questions to ask.

Because I've practiced this prayer as long as I have, as soon as I saw my response, I knew there was a strong likelihood it had touched my fear of lost power or control. The victim-manipulation part was a new wrinkle. I hadn't been able to name that before. But sure enough, there under the surface of the whole thing, was my old friend, my power-control fear.

Our core wounds tend to be the same over our lifetimes. The fear of losing security or safety is a thing for me, but it's a small thing. It comes up a little bit, a few times. But it's not a pattern I see regularly. When I go off like a rocket, the pattern I've come to recognize, is that the wound that got poked, was related to my fear of losing power, or control, or affirmation, or esteem.

And forewarned is forearmed.

Knowing the pattern of our core wounds helps us in our quest for self-awareness. When the fireworks start we have a roadmap. "Ask myself," I tell myself, "About power and control. Ask my spiritual friends, to ask me, about affirmation and esteem. Odds are, they are somehow the source of this emotional response I am having."

What is the story I tell myself?

What feelings are coming up?

How do those feelings better inform my story?

What pattern have I seen, that would suggest a core wound to explore?

The prayer of confession, the questions of self-awareness.



## CHAPTER 9. Step 2 (part 4): Triggers

Before we leave the second step in the prayer of confession, *undertaking a thorough self-examination*, let's talk a bit about the trigger cycle.

### *The Wisdom of the Twelve Steps*

When I was teaching this prayer to our community, a man in our community offered some complementary insight from the twelve-step community. Step four of the twelve, is taking a fearless moral inventory. He told me about a tool that helps him with self-awareness and self-examination.

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### *Addiction: Not Just for Addicts*

This is less and less true the more we understand, but the word “addiction” has a taboo feel about it. For some, it is associated with weekend drug binges, crack-houses, or petty theft to support a habit. Addicts fall down drunk and vomit on themselves. Addicts have a compulsive need to hook up, or visit prostitutes, or frequent swinging orgies.

But the more we understand the brain, the more we realize that addiction is built into human wiring. Addiction is rooted in the dopamine motivation cycle. The things we do; we do to get our brain into a state of “feel-good” equilibrium. When our brains feel bad, the most natural thing in the world, is to do something to bump up the chemicals that make it feel good.

We evolved to do this. People who feel good are more motivated. Motivated people tend to do what needs to be done to survive and mate, and pass their genes on to their children. Through the generations, the genes that reinforce this brain-chemical motivation cycle get concentrated. The chemical motivation system gets wired ever more strongly into each successive generation.

Things that elevate the feel-good chemicals get reinforced. Eating sweet foods will do it. So will high-fat, high starch foods. Our brains kick out feel-good chemicals to motivate us to do these things, and then do them again.

A whole bunch of things elevate the feel-good chemicals. Working hard and succeeding at a goal will do it. Hard work gets us the approval and respect of our social network, our co-workers and boss. That boosts chemicals. So does granting ourselves approval for how hard we have worked.

A couple of beers after work to relax will do it. So will a couple of puffs on a joint, or a pill to relax us or relieve our pain. So will betting \$500 on the NBA finals, or winning an argument, or flirting with the guy at work, or an impromptu roll in the hay in the afternoon. Looking at pornography will do it, as will buying a new pair of shoes.

A thousand things will kick up the motivation cycle in our brains. Consequently, any one of these things is subject to that thing we call “addiction.” It is very difficult, once we’ve experienced the surges of feel good, *not* want to repeat the experience the next time we need to feel good.

And each time we repeat the activity we strengthen the habit pathways in our brains. Each time we repeat the activity, we make it more likely that we’ll do it again the next time. At some point we cross a line where the motivation cycle isn’t working for our well-being, but begins to work against it.

But by the time we realize we are smoking too much dope, or eating too many dark chocolates, or working too many hours, or buying too many shoes, the habit wiring is set. By the time we realize our habits are controlling us instead of the other way around, our brain’s habit infrastructure is set. It steadily draws us back to familiar territory, again and again and again.

We begin to develop a kind of brain-chemical dependency, counting on the thing we do to secrete all those feel-goods. Pretty soon we do the thing we do without much thought or consideration, odds are, too frequently.

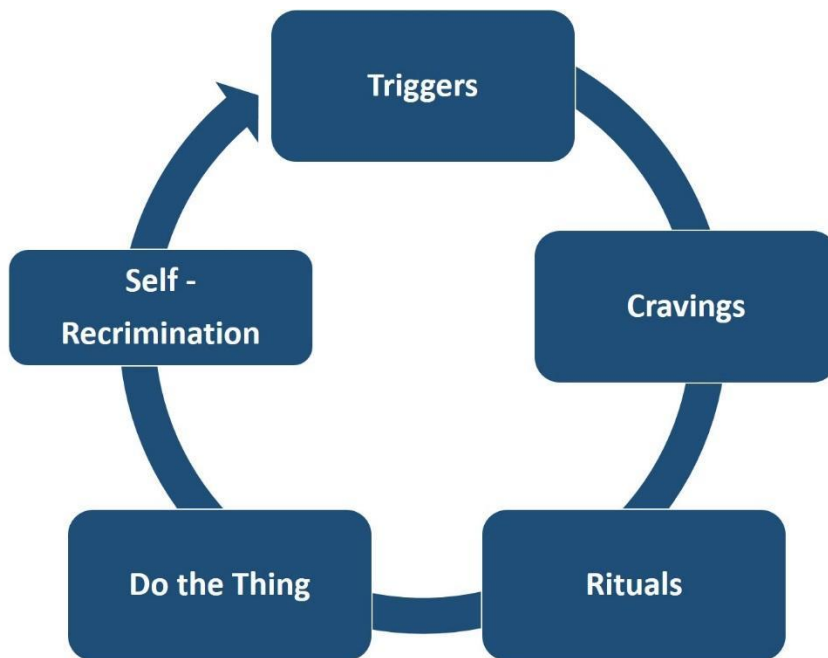
This is a human thing, not a “*those-weak-people*” thing. It’s a “*how-we’re-wired*” thing, a “*we’re-all-like-this, it’s-how-our-brains-work*” thing.

Of course, some chemical motivation activities get into us deeper than others. Opiates and alcohol set the hook more deeply than pot or shoe-buying. But it is the same dynamic, the same brain mechanics.

The wisdom of the 12-steps can help us better know ourselves. It helps us better know our go-to places and default habits. Again, forewarned is forearmed. If we know our go-to places, we can better know what is going on inside us.

### The Trigger Cycle

My friend described for me a cycle that works like this.



Triggers lead to cravings.

Cravings lead to rituals.

Rituals lead us to do the thing to elevate our chemicals.

Doing the thing leads to self-recrimination.

Recrimination is itself a trigger.

Something happens. Maybe it's a sad feeling when the news shows nine people killed in a church. Maybe the kids hit a crisis or we feel stressed by the bills. Maybe we are on the receiving end of a sharp word or disapproving look. Or maybe, we experience an approving look, but tell ourselves a story that we don't deserve it.

Maybe an opportunity presents itself for us to be complemented, but we aren't, and the story starts up that the person hates us, or that we never get a break in life.

Maybe we miss a deadline, and a story floods us about our inability to manage our lives or schedule for success.

Or, it's a bad hair day, or the scale shoots up four pounds and a "*worth-is-measured-by-how-we-look*" story kicks up.

Whatever the trigger, and there are surely a million of them, we get triggered. That's the first step in the process.

If we've trained ourselves in the prayer of confession, if we're paying attention to our afflictive emotions, we can spot the negative thoughts or feelings early on. We will hear ourselves saying the negative word or acting out the negative action. And if we see it and begin to practice the prayer, we stop the cycle in its tracks.

But we don't usually, do we?

We don't usually pull out the prayer of confession quickly enough. We're usually well into the cycle before we catch ourselves. The trigger comes, the story we tell ourselves kicks in, and our brain's need for equilibrium tells us what to do to fix us up.

Wouldn't it be great if early on, built right into our habits, was a go-to place that triggered a good night's sleep, or a conversation with a spiritual friend, or *examen*? Wouldn't that be great?

But most of the time our go-to places are quicker and dirtier. "I need a greasy sandwich!" "I need a trip to the ABC store!" "I need an iPad!" "I need to work through the night and meet that deadline!"

### The Cycle

After our triggers trigger us, it is not uncommon for us to begin acting out certain rituals we have developed that help us get ready to do the thing we do that pumps up our motivation chemicals. Maybe we start with certain music as we



drive to the place we do the thing. Maybe we put on clothing we associate with the thing. Maybe there's a place in the house we go, or a place we sit at the computer. Perhaps we wander downstairs, near the frig or the liquor cabinet. Or we call the friend who does the thing with us.

Rituals get associated with the thing we do.

It is the hard-won wisdom of 12 step movement that after the rituals have begun, the cycle rarely stops. They are the signal that we are *going* to do the thing.

So we do.

Which kicks up the next step of the cycle. After we do the thing, we beat ourselves up for having done it. And our bad feelings about ourselves for being so weak, or predictable, or repetitive, these are themselves demoralizing and demotivating.

So again, to keep us in feel-good equilibrium, our brain has to moderate *those* negative feelings. We need another bump of brain chemicals to help us cope with having already done the thing.

That's why it's a cycle.

So now, here we are, three days into the cycle, or three weeks, or three months, or three years. Our brains are getting us some chemical equilibrium, but the process is costing us dearly.

And the more we are carried into the cycle, trigger cascading over trigger, each wave deepening our habitual use of the thing, the more our go-to thing becomes a habit of ever-increasing intensity. We can't get off the train. And for many, this is a very familiar pattern.

It is to this state of human experience, that this prayer offers a gift.

### *Where the Prayer Helps*

The brilliance of confession, self-awareness, and self-disclosure is that it goes to the best place to stop the cycle, the first step, the trigger.

If it is true what our twelve-step friends tell us, that the cycle can't be stopped after the rituals start, then the best place to break up the cycle is before they do, right at the trigger.

This is what we are doing when we are digging out the story we tell ourselves, when we are exploring our feelings. The self-awareness questions help us right at the point where our triggers kick off this toxic cycle.

I see the cycle in my life. I experience *trigger–craving–ritual–behavior–recrimination–trigger*. I bet you do too. By the time I'm into it, I will have missed what I really needed. What I really needed was more sleep, or a talk with a friend, or to sit down with a piece of paper. But instead I ramp up the energy, follow the cycle, and when it's time for the thing . . . I try to white-knuckle it.

But again, the place to break the cycle is when the trigger is triggering. This is the time to pull out the prayer of confession. This is the time to practice the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure, as *soon* as we feel the bad feeling, as *soon* as we make the cutting remark, as *soon* as we do the bad action.

When we first feel the afflictive emotion, that's when we can actually change the cycle. When the craving for the thing we do kicks in, it is much harder. When the *do-the-thing* rituals start it's too late. By then the deed is done, and we've moved on to beating ourselves up for it.

Afflictive emotions are our friends. They are the invitation to the prayer practice of freedom, the prayer practice of self-awareness. They are our friends the way the "check engine" light on the dashboard is our friend. Our emotional reactions tell us something inside needs to be addressed right away. "Pull over! Now! Ignore at your peril! Quick, before you damage your life, your loved ones, your soul."

When the trigger is triggered, that's the time to call a spiritual friend. That's the time to examine our stories, and unearth our feelings. That's the time to talk with others about what's going on inside us.

Another friend deeply involved in twelve-step groups told me how many names he has on his call list (it's a big number). He told me about the wisdom of using that list when he gets in a bad space. He picks up the phone and starts calling down the list. It usually only takes two or three names before somebody picks up. And when they do, he says, they are always ready to talk.

I asked what they talk about, and he didn't use the same word, but they talk about triggers. They talk about the story and the feelings. Again, he didn't use the words, but they practice the prayer together, the prayer of confession, the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure.

The cycle is the path of least resistance. The path of least resistance is to follow the triggers where they take us. But the cycle does not serve us well.

What a treasure that phone list is! What a treasure to have a safe place to talk about our souls, to practice the prayer.



## CHAPTER 10. Step 3 (part 1): A Network of Spiritual Friends

In the last several chapters, we have outlined the second step of this ancient prayer practice. As we practice it, it bears the fruit in our lives to which Socrates invited us, *to know ourselves*. It bears the fruit in our lives to which Paul invited us, *to have our minds renewed*.

As we pay attention to our stories and feelings we awaken to how our inner worlds are determining our lives. We *see* what we hadn't seen. We begin to dis-identify with our stories, our feelings, our well-worn thought, feeling, and behavior patterns.

Which brings us in this chapter, to the third step of the prayer.

Step 1: We pay attention to our negative emotions.

Step 2: We undertake a thorough self-examination.

Step 3: We engage in forthright self-disclosure.

### Step 3: Engaging in Forthright Self-Disclosure

This third step is informed by the way our brains work. When we say something out loud to another person, our awareness of what is going on inside us goes to a deeper place. As we articulate our stories, we understand them in a different place in our brains, in a deeper layer of consciousness.

### A Trustworthy Community

For as long as our tradition has practiced the prayer of confession, it has been a necessary prerequisite to have a trustworthy community of spiritual friends. To practice the prayer of confession we need safe spaces, trusted spaces, confidential spaces. The environment for the prayer, is the environment of authentic community.

But that's a problem for a lot of people.

Over time, our Western instincts have trended toward privatized lives. Over time, we've become unskilled in the art of authentic community. If the prayer is practiced with flesh-and-blood people sharing the spiritual journey with us, that's

a problem. If we are on the spiritual journey alone, as most Westerners are, if we are traveling alone, the prayer is a non-starter.

Caught up in cultural entrenchment, our instincts take us to individual concerns first, communal concerns second. Even religion has become a private affair that happens between *me* and *my* God. If ever there was a prayer practice to do with someone else, self-disclosure would be it. However, when religion is a private affair, if disclosure is practiced at all, it usually happens alone with God.

Sharing the spiritual journey with others is uncommon. Few of us have trusted spiritual friends deeply embedded in our lives. After several centuries of individualist instinct, not many have a network of spiritual friends. Consequently, few live in the environment in which this ancient prayer can be practiced.

Step three: forthright self-disclosure. Yeah, that can be a problem.

Lacking the proper environment, the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure has all but died out.

If we practice it at all, it has to happen in a non-religious context. If we practice it, we have to move it to a more formal context, a counseling office, a twelve-step groups, in a box with a trained religious expert.

Carl Jung once observed that modern psychotherapy arose partly in response to the void that developed in Christian community. When Protestants privatized confession, the community stopped struggling together with our deepest internal concerns. Religion became a place to keep our distance from others.<sup>17</sup>

We could restate Jung this way. When Western Christianity absorbed the instincts of Western individualism, we surrendered our communal spiritual practices. We lost the instincts and skills necessary for authentic community. We abandoned the spiritual practices that only work in the context of trusting, loving, authentic community.

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<sup>17</sup> Jung quoted in Larry Crabb. *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships*, 1997, W Publishing Group, a Division of Thomas Nelson Inc., P.O. Box 141000, Nashville, Tn, 37214, FIND PAGE NUMBER

In particular, we lost the prayer of confession. We lost the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure.

This many years later, if we would restore the practice, it will require that we *also* restore the environment of spiritual community.

Step two, the prayer of self-awareness is only half of the practice. We can only go so deep into our own awareness, without the participation of spiritual friends.

### *Restoring Community: A Network of Spiritual Friends*

The prayer practice itself, is one of the best ways to re-stitch the torn fabric of spiritual community. In the church I lead, we have normalized the practice of groups of two, three, up to six, gathering for the express purpose of practicing the prayer of confession.

We begin by establishing some ground rules. Everybody agrees that what is shared together is protected with careful, diligent, committed, confidentiality. We don't gossip. We don't talk about the things we share together.

We also agree that it is not our job to fix one another's problems. Ours is not the purpose of achieving desirable outcomes. Rather, we are simply trying to create the environment in which we can practice the prayer. The gift we offer one another, is not to solve each other's problems, but to create a safe, listening, probing space. The space itself helps us dig more deeply into our own awareness of our stories, feelings, and wounds.<sup>18</sup>

And as we practice the prayer together, not only do we deepen our self-awareness, we also rebuild our network of spiritual friendships.

### *A Story*

In 1995, I moved to Raleigh from California. When I did, I moved away from my network of spiritual friendship. All the people I trusted, and who trusted me, were no longer available to me. The prayer practice had been an essential ingredient in

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<sup>18</sup> Note. A couple of great books that underscore how powerful simply creating that environment can be:

*Time to Think* Nancy Kline

*A Hidden Wholeness* Parker Palmer

Draft 4/12/16

my spiritual life, so I had to quickly rebuild a network. My strategy was simple. As soon as I realized there was an afflictive emotion that needed some disclosing, I'd look at my calendar. "Who's next on my calendar that I *might* be able to trust? Ok, it's them."

Then I'd show up. I'd talk a minute about confidentiality and not being responsible for outcomes. Then I'd launch in to self-disclosure.

At first, the process surprised a lot of people. They weren't expecting the preacher-man to have problems. They *sure* weren't expecting him to show up and *talk* about them. But before long, two things happened. First, the practice became normalized in our community. Second, I had a network of trusted, trustworthy spiritual friends.

### Self-Disclosure

As soon as we have done the work of step two, and as soon as we have enough of a spiritual network, we launch into step three, *we engage in forthright self-disclosure*.

At that point, it's as simple as arranging a time to meet, bringing our notes, and starting to talk. If we have done step two well, step three is pretty easy. We just talk about the things we wrote down when we were asking ourselves the questions. We talk about our stories, our feelings, and our patterns of core wounds.

Remember in chapter seven, how important it is to write things down? Here's why. In step three, our notes help us remember the things we saw as we were asking our self-awareness questions. Odds are, it's been several days since we did our internal digging. If we wrote things down, the third step is as simple as talking from our notes.

*"This is the negative thing I saw myself doing. These are the negative words I heard myself saying. These are the negative thoughts or feelings I've been having. This is the story (or these are these are the stories) I have been telling myself. And as I have explored my body for feelings, I unearthed and*



*named this emotion, and that one, and this other one. They in turn, led me to see this deeper layer of the story I tell myself.*

*“And you know, I’ve done this thing several times now. I saw a pattern I’ve seen before. I see myself carrying this core story, these core hurts, this pattern that shows up again and again. I’m getting to know the territory in there. This episode touches this wound that I’ve seen before.”*

That’s it. That’s the prayer of self-disclosure, right there.  
It’s easy, if we’ve done step two well.

But it’s not really easy, is it?

First, step two is really tough, so even with our best effort, we probably haven’t dug as deeply as we need to. Second, even if we have, it’s hard to see our own blind spots. They are, by definition blind. Nobody is good at the prayer when we start. Especially our early attempts are stilted, incomplete, unnatural, and usually less insightful.

But it has been my experience that even when we’re not good at it, our stilted, stumbling, awkward first attempts, still profoundly awaken our souls. It’s a good prayer!

### Fear

Self-disclosure is frightening. Anybody with a lick of sense worries about how people will handle what we tell them.

When I had just moved to Raleigh and didn’t know anybody, I had an experience. Email was relatively new, and spam was a new thing. I got a link that opened up a series of naked-lady pictures. I like looking at naked women. It’s kind of a thing with me. Anyway, after it happened three times in a couple of weeks I realized it had the potential to become an unhealthy thing in my life. It had the added negative side-effect of harming my relationship with Denise.

It was a negative experience. You know what comes next.

What's going on inside me? What's my story? What are my feelings? How do my feelings inform a deeper understanding of my story?

Check.

But remember, I didn't know anybody in Raleigh yet. And sex is kind of a private thing.

But my commitment to this prayer is fierce, so I decided to unload on the next hapless guy who showed up on my calendar. But even so, I'm not immune to embarrassment. So instead of talking (and having to look him in the face), I wrote out my story, my feelings, my core issues. We were playing golf together. On the fourth hole, waiting for the foursome ahead of us, I pulled out the paper. "Here, I said. Read this." That's about as brave as I could be. It was brave enough.

He read my paper. He gulped. What ensued was a deeply bonding conversation about how our souls thrive.

Fear is a thing. We all have it. And it is a problem when it keeps us from this practice, especially the self-disclosing part.

### *Again, We're All in This Thing Together*

An unforeseen consequence of our society's hyper-individualism is that we don't naturally understand what we said in chapter two; "We're all in this soup together." When we're isolated we don't see that every one of us has a shadow side, we don't see each other grappling with the darkness in our souls.

We don't all struggle with the same curse, but not one of us doesn't struggle with *some* curse. But isolated as our culture has become, we often create narratives in our minds, assuming that the people who look so together and wonderful, really are. We tell ourselves they must not have shadow sides like we do or that theirs are better than ours.

Which makes self-disclosure that much harder. We doubt ourselves. We have a sense that I, and I alone, carry this tragic personality flaw. I, and I alone, carry the guilt of this great sin.

One of the benefits of my job as a minister is that a lot of people feel comfortable talking about their shadow sides with me. For almost thirty years I've been hearing people's stories. I have been years and years since I have been surprised by a deep, dark story somebody tells me.

Our shadow sides *aren't* surprising. We all have them. The prophet Isaiah said as much a long time ago. He called us sheep; dumb, stumbling sheep. Every one of us follows a way we think is a good one, but we all lose our way, all the time. Every one of us.<sup>19</sup>

Hearing stories these many years I've come to realize that our fear about telling our shadow stories, come from the illusion that we carry our onerous load alone. We labor under the illusion that a shadow-free life was ever an option. We believe others must be living without a dark side. We believe that a sin-free life was ever available to us, and that some other people must be living it.

Fear. It really gets in the way.

### *You Can't Trust People*

Another common fear that keeps us from the prayer of self-disclosure is that people will react badly when we tell them our dark stories.

We fear what people think of us. We fear that if we talk about the parts of our lives that aren't pretty or tied up in a nice bow, folks will reject us. Or, they will tell others how bad we really are. If we reveal a vulnerable place in our lives, we fear others will use it against us.

We fear losing a friend. We fear people backing away from us like we had a contagious disease. We fear being alone forever. We fear that if people knew who we really are, they would reject us. "I mean really; *I'm* disgusted with me. Of course others will be!"

We fear revealing our failures will give people power over us. We fear armed with our inner failures, people could threaten our security, or that they would withdraw their affection.

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<sup>19</sup> Is. 53:6

And in truth, that could happen. I've seen it happen. Not very often, but it has. I wrote the rest of this chapter to try and make sure it doesn't.

### *Is it Worth It?*

People can abuse our self-disclosure. Even if we agree to confidentiality, even if we commit to guard and protect one another. It can happen. Again, not very often, but it can happen.

I learned this prayer when I was 22 years old. I've learned it more deeply since then, but I learned the general outline decades ago. Since then I've endeavored to *never* hold in a secret because I was afraid of telling it. I've endeavored to *never* hold back a bad action, thought, or word because I was embarrassed of it.

This many years later, I can't think of one thing I haven't talked about because of shame, embarrassment, or fear. I've been ashamed! I've been afraid! Many times! But I really do believe I haven't held anything back because of fear, shame, or embarrassment.

In that time, twice I have disclosed something that was used against me. Twice. Two times something I said in confidence was shared with other people. Twice my disclosure was shared with people I did *not* trust, by people I did.

When it happened I felt embarrassed. I felt betrayed. I felt my power was somehow diminished and I was less accepted by the experience.

It happened.

As I was writing this, I did a little math. Over a lifetime of working hard to hold nothing back, for thirty-five years, 365 days each year, probably some variant of this practice every ten days, so probably more than a thousand disclosures . . . and *two* have gone badly.

Most of my disclosures have seemed pretty routine. They didn't unearth anything powerful or profound. They were pretty humdrum. But many times, my life has been revolutionized by the prayer. Through the practice I have seen growth, and

healing, and awareness. My life has been fundamentally rewired many times. It has profoundly changed my relationships, my career, my life, my destiny.

Let's estimate that only 25% of the times I have practiced this prayer, have I gained a deeper insight into my life and soul. I suspect it is a higher percentage, but let's be conservative. That would mean more than three hundred times, my life has been deeply enriched by the practice. Three hundred times my perspective has been altered. Three hundred times I have seen what I hadn't seen, heard what I hadn't heard.

And in exchange, it has gone badly twice.

Yeah. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

### *Making Better Friends*

But again, it shouldn't have happened twice.

If your concern about self-disclosure runs deep, if self-disclosure feels like a real threat to your well-being, I would suggest something I said to each of my kids during their freshman year of college.

Leaving home where we had focused on authenticity and self-awareness, each in turn was disappointed at college. "You ruined us," they said. "People spend their days doing stupid, boring, stuff. They gossip. They don't keep their word. They are emotionally unprepared for friendship."

And as they recounted their negative social experiences, I said to each in turn, "Hmmm. Sounds like you need better friends. Sounds like you need people around you who are trustworthy, emotionally healthy, virtuous, and who help you move forward instead of dragging you backward."

With spiritual friends, that's doubly true.

In our hyper-individualistic society, the skills required of good friendship don't happen naturally. Trying to cope with our interior pain, many of us *do* gossip. We *do* judge one another. We *are* uncommitted, and uncaring, and untrustworthy.

We *do* create pecking orders, and put one another down so we can feel better. That stuff happens all the time.

And if it happens to you . . . you need better friends.

To practice this ancient prayer, we need good friends.

### Building Spiritual Friendships

But before you run out to find some “good” friends, odds are you won’t. Usually we have to *build* good friendships. Usually, we have to wade into the relational mess that is our world, and start *being* trustworthy. We have to resist gossip. We have to tear down the pecking orders we live in. To make good friends, we have to *be* accepting, and affirming, and committed, and encouraging.

My mother had an expression growing up. “To have a friend, you need to be a friend.” To have deep, trusting, spiritual friendships, we must *be* the very thing we want.

So that’s where we start. We start by being good friends. And as we do, we watch to see who gets on board with us. We watch to see who resonates with our effort, who we begin to trust.

We start by *being* a spiritual friend, and then watch who comes with. And when someone does, we begin to *work at* spiritual friendship.

We rarely *find* spiritual friendships. We usually *build* them. We build them by *being* kind and caring and listening, and then begin to travel with whomever reciprocates.

### Grace

And in the process, grace is really important. Grace is how we allow one another to mess up. When we get relationship wrong, we talk about it. We talk about the things that hurt us as we extend forgiveness for the past. We work hard to get to the other side of our hurts, and in the process teach one another to be safe.

We *build* our spiritual friendships.

As I'm writing this, my wife's family has just moved to town from the other side of the country. As they were considering the move, it made me happy. My brother-in-law has become a good friend through the years. I'm happy he is in town.

But it didn't start that way.

You may have noticed; preachers don't have a very good reputation. It didn't used to be that way, but it is now. Preachers are like multi-level-marketers, always on the prowl, always trying to get people to *do* something. Or, they're trying to get something *from* folks (usually for free).

My brother-in-law had experienced preachers before I came into the family. When Denise and I bought our first house it was a real fixer-upper. And my brother-in-law was a contractor. He could see me coming a mile off. The preacher-man is going to try to get me over there to build his house for him. And he said something along those lines.

That not being my intent, I was pretty offended. "Who does he think he is, telling me I'm a mooch. Damn him!"

I considered nursing my offense. "Sure I'll go to family holidays . . . but that's it for him!"

But I didn't do that. Instead, I told him about my hurt feelings. And he was about as gracious as gracious can be. He explained his experiences with preacher guys. And I completely understood.

Today, when my shadow side shows up, if my brother-in-law is around, I can talk to him about anything. He has become a spiritual friend very dear to me. We have taught one another how to be trustworthy with one another's disclosures.

If we had not extended grace to one another, if I had backed away, I'd have missed out on one of the more enriching relationships in my life.

To have a rich network of spiritual friends, we usually have to teach one another to be the kind of spiritual friends we need. To have a rich network of spiritual friends, we usually have to extend grace to one another while we're learning.

### *Spiritual Community and the Prayer*

Again, the prayer unfolds in three steps, the third being self-disclosure. Of course spiritual community is important to the third step. But it has been my experience that it is just as important for the other two.

Way back in step one, when we are paying attention to our negative experiences, spiritual community is just as important. Again, negative experiences are really easy to ignore. It's easy to blow right past our triggers instead of letting them invite us to the prayer.

However, when we build community and soul-talking into the fabric of our days, we are much less likely to miss these important cues when they come.

In our community, many have built recurring soul talk into their lives. Many have a rhythm of getting together with spiritual friends and asking one another questions. Many build space and time into their lives to respond thoughtfully to the question, "How are you?"

With the rhythm built into our calendars, when a negative emotion shows up, it is much more likely that we will end up talking about it. It is much less likely that it slips away unseen, unaddressed.

When a spiritual friend asks how I am, it is my habit to pause, take an inventory of the last days, and respond carefully, thoughtfully, reflectively. Often as I do, I hear myself saying something I wasn't consciously aware of. It is often as I respond to my friend's question, that I first become aware of an inner tumult I'm carrying. If there's a bad feeling in there, I often feel it when I'm answering their question. I'll say something like, "You know, I've been feeling anxious in the night hours lately," or "I'm upset with Denise," or "I'm stressing about this thing or that."

And hearing myself, I'm invited to the prayer practice. Hearing myself, I'm invited to look at something I had been avoiding. Even if I don't recognize the invitation



at the time, later, perhaps in the night hours, I will re-hear the conversation. “Hmmm,” I’ll muse to myself. “Did you hear that, Doug? It sounds like we’re feeling some negative feelings, speaking some negative words. What do you suppose is going on?”

The best invitations to the prayer practice, are often regularly scheduled conversations with our spiritual friends. When we build time into our lives to talk about our souls, we build in the reminder to take up this prayer practice.



## CHAPTER 11. Step 3 (part 2): Priests Receive Confessions

So again, this prayer is a *communal* practice. We practice it with real-live, flesh-and-blood people. We practice it in our network of spiritual friendships. This means we have to begin the prayer before we begin the prayer. We begin the prayer with friendship-making and community building.

### *Beginning the Practice Before We Begin the Practice*

The prayer can begin at a parenting group when we talk about raising our kids. It can begin when we laugh together about our idiosyncrasies. It can begin any place we begin to build trust and affection with others. In that context, spiritual friendship slips up on us when we're not looking. In the space of growing trust and affection, a day comes when we share more than we would have. When we do, something deeply human resonates in us, something communal, something connected.

And if a newly budding spiritual relationship doesn't blow up in our faces, if nobody harms us, it feels good. It makes our lives better.

"Here I was thinking I was a bad parent. Here I was thinking it was *my* crazy kids, or *my* crazy family, or *my* crazy self. Now I realize parenting is just tough! I'm not in the struggle alone."

The environment in which we practice this prayer often sneaks up on us, maybe on a camping trip. On the surface, it looks like we're playing corn-hole, or cards, or cooking together, but under the surface, trust and affection are growing. It looks like we're just learning about one another's lives, and people, and struggles. But as we discover our commonalities, the environment is taking shape, the environment for the prayer.

I pay close attention to how networks of spiritual friendship form. In our own spiritual community, those most embedded in the environment often got there in surprising ways, usually with people they would not have chosen. Natural affinities don't usually dictate how the networks form.

Usually, people stumble into a group of some sort. They say things that rub each other wrong. But if they hang in there and work it out, they begin to see a bigger picture than one another's foibles. They begin to see the treasure hidden in earthen vessels. Over time, as we saw in the last chapter, folks usually *train* one another to be their spiritual friends.

The prayer begins long before the first step, long before we see our afflictive emotion. The prayer begins in spaces where we laugh together, and speak freely together, and talk about our vulnerabilities, and let one another peek into our lives.

The prayer begins when we let ourselves be seen. Sometimes it starts with an invitation to lunch, or a meaningful engagement on social media. Sometimes it begins at coffee, or working together at church. The prayer begins, before the prayer begins. It begins when we make space for trust and affection to develop.

### *The Listening Partner in the Prayer*

We finish this chapter with some remarks on how to be a best-practice listener to someone processing the prayer, how to be the receiving partner of the prayer of confession.

I said earlier that if we've done step two well, step three is as simple as setting a time to get together. And that's true

But a lot can go wrong.

Communal prayer is risky.

The risks are not unsurmountable, but they must be surmounted.

### *Priests. All of Us. Priests*

A long time ago our religious tradition took a wrong turn. We inadvertently created two classes of Christians, a professional class, the "*go-to-seminary-and-preach-on-Sundays*" Christians, and a "*rest-of-us*" class.

- Priests, ministers, pastors, deacons...
- And the rest of us.

We've called the rest of us, "the laity." We attend church. We give our money. We volunteer in lesser roles, but we are a second class of Christian.

We took this wrong turn way back when we got in bed with the Roman Empire. A lot of things went wrong at that point, but one of them was our two-tiered-Christian system.

That's when we lost sight of our core truth, that every one of us a priest. Every one of us. Peter taught us as much in our ancient texts.<sup>20</sup> The Reformers affirmed it again five hundred years ago with the battle cry, "*the priesthood of all believers.*"

It's our truth. We are all priests. Every one of us.

We're good at all kinds of different things. Speaking on Sundays is only one way to be a priest. Visiting the sick, or helping the poor, are just a few ways to be priests. There are as many ways to be priests as there are Christians. We are all priests.

But influenced by this historical distortion, in our spiritual communities, we've tended to reserve certain jobs and obligations for the professional class.

I bring this up because if you grew up Catholic, or if you've been to the movies and seen a scene with somebody in a confession box, you're familiar with the idea that the priest is the only one really qualified to receive confession.

But no. The job belongs to all of us. In fact, it is an obligation Christians carry, to receive the prayer of confession from one another.

We are priests, all of us. And one of the things priests do, is receive the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure.

So, it behooves us, as we take up our duty, to learn a few things from the professional priest class who have been practicing all this time without us.

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Pet. 2:9

### *We Are Priests. We Keep Confidentiality.*

When we practice the prayer, we are acting in a priestly capacity in one another's lives. And even the law has recognized the sanctity of confidentiality in that context. Our legal system takes priestly confidentiality seriously enough, that a court will not compel a priest to reveal something shared during this prayer.

Professional priests hold what is given them in confession in the strictest of confidence, and so must we. Professional priests take a vow never to reveal what has been confessed and will go to jail before they will reveal a confidence. There is a reason for this high bar of protection. Without trust, the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure is a non-starter. If people don't feel safe in the process, we simply don't take up the process.

When we practice the prayer informally with one another we don't do it under legal protection. However, even though we don't do it in a box, we are nevertheless obliged not to talk about things we tell one another. We treat the things shared with us during the prayer with the same gravity professional priests do.

### *Be Careful*

It's a little trickier when the prayer is practiced informally. It is sometimes tough to know if you're practicing the prayer in a given moment. What starts off as a chat move into the prayer practice almost seamlessly. It's sometimes hard to realize the shift has happened, when we moved into telling our stories, feelings, and core issues. It's hard to know when the intentional practice of self-awareness and disclosure begins.

So as a general rule, it's just a good idea not to talk about personal things that are shared with us. Or, it's a good idea to adopt an "*ask if we can share*" rule.

I do that a lot. People tell me a great story, or share a thought, or an insight, an experience. I have developed the habit of asking, even if I think there is nothing confidential there. Confidentiality is so important for the prayer, we do better to err on the side of asking, on the side of carefulness.

Mistakes in this area are very damaging, very costly.

In the early years of hearing people tell their stories I missed the transition into the prayer a few times. As I said in the last chapter, I've heard a lot of stories. The things people think are dark and ugly, I've either done myself, or see how I could in the right circumstances. Things people think are deep and confidential things, I often see as pretty normal, everyday stuff. In the early days I wasn't as cautious as I am today. I hurt some people that way. But I learned quickly. Breaking confidence is something we *never* want to do.

Again, in spiritual community we never, never, never, speak about a confidence shared with us by one another. Not with our good friends. Not with our spouses. We just don't do it.

If sharing a juicy tidbit is just an irresistible temptation for you, excuse yourself before confidences are shared. "I'm sorry, I'm just not ready for this. I don't trust myself to keep confidences yet." It's an embarrassing admission, but it is far less painful than the alternative.

### **WE ARE PRIESTS. WE LISTEN CAREFULLY**

**ADD IN A SECTION HERE (MAYBE A WHOLE CHAPTER)**

**WORK THROUGH IT W/ CC TEAM.**

**QUESTIONS PROBING W/O LEADING**

**ACTIVE LISTENING (REFER TO NOTES FROM TIME TO THINK AND A HIDDEN WHOLENESS)**

**HOW TO PREPARE PEOPLE BEFORE THEY SHOW UP FOR THE PRAYER**

**FIGURE OUT FROM CC TEAM...**

**WHAT ARE THEIR QUESTIONS AFTER READING?**

**WHAT ARE THEIR QUESTIONS AFTER THE TRIAL/ERROR STAGE?**

**WHAT DID THEY SEE NEEDED TO BE IN THIS SECTION/CHAPTER?**

*We Are Priests. We Encourage.*

When you have coffee with someone and they check their texts, isn't that irritating? When you reveal something important and the person you share it with quickly changes the subject, it feels bad doesn't it? When a person's body posture conveys disapproval, you probably do what most do. You quickly shut down. You stop sharing your soul-story.

In the sensitive, frightening, vulnerable environment of self-disclosure, it is really easy to discourage one another. Without ever saying a word, we can shut one another down.

But you also know that when you take a risk and talk about your inner world, if someone leans in, if their facial expressions look inquiring, if they nod as you speak, and repeat back what they heard you say, it is very encouraging. It creates the environment that invites a deeper disclosure.

As we've seen, this prayer is hard work. Digging into our interior worlds is an important, and demanding process. The process is sacred, powerful, transformative.

And when someone has undertaken this demanding work, and when they are willing to disclose their inner worlds to us, we hold a sacred duty.

A posture of encouragement, reassurance, and affirmation, creates a sacred space. It is a space in which the indwelling Holy Spirit is invited to work in our lives. It is a space that awakens us to Inner Light and Life of God. As simple as affirming, encouraging words and body posture can be, they are a sacred duty.

As a culture, we aren't always encouraging listeners. Being the receiving partner in this prayer sometimes demands we push against our habit of speaking instead of understanding, telling our stories, instead of drawing out another's.

As a society, we are trained in the arts of boredom and distraction. We are trained in the art of listening little, and offering advice a lot. When someone tells us their story, sometimes it feels almost instinctive to tell our own. It informs, doesn't it? It's a way to share and connect, right? And yes, reciprocating with our own story can be a charming and endearing way to connect with others.



However, during this prayer, our work is not to build camaraderie. Rather, our listening work during the practice is to make a sacred space for our partner to do the work of self-awareness and self-disclosure.

So we don't tell our own stories. And we don't distract our partner. Instead we offer non-verbal encouragement that our partner is not alone, that they are understood, that we relate to their struggle, that we get them.

We get better at encouraging one another in the practice, when we offer our own confession. If we've done the practice, we know what it means to grapple with our afflictive thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds. We know what it means to work hard to understand the story we tell ourselves. We know what it means to flail about trying to get in touch with a feeling word that is deeper than "angry."

Humility is an essential ingredient for encouragement, an essential ingredient for receiving a confession well. It is also a natural by-product of doing the practice ourselves. Having done our own confessions, we know what it is like to be that other person. We know what it is like to struggle to understand our own afflictive lives.

Some part of us knows how to hear a confession. Some part of us knows how our body language affects others. We know not to interrupt. We know not to jump in and fix somebody's problem. We know not to do these things, because we know how it feels to be on the receiving end of each of them.

The humility and patience required to listen well is born of suffering our own failures. It is born of grappling with our own afflictive emotions. It is born of looking with unvarnished honesty, at our own shame, our own condemnation. It is born of having undertaken the prayer practice ourselves.

We know how to be encouraging. "You're doing great. Keep it up!"  
We know how to encourage. "Is there anything else?"  
We know how to encourage. "This is really good. Good for you."  
We know, because we know what it feels like to be encouraged.

We are priests.  
We encourage.

It's what we do.

*We Are Priests. We Affirm Ancient Truth*

Again, if you're familiar with confession in a box, you know what the priest says at the end of a confession.

"Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace."

Those are formalized words, but they speak to an important truth. In the informal setting we practice the prayer, we make the same affirmation. We don't say the words as a formal signal that it's time to go, but it is an important part of the practice. Hopefully it happens naturally.

We've said many times. Here it is again. At the center of who we are, we carry the Light of God. The deepest essence of our being can be no more precious than it is. We carry the very nature of God. God is in us. Also again, there is never a question of God forgiving us. God is to forgiveness the way shine is to sun. Divine un-forgiveness is not a thing.

Those truths notwithstanding, we sure do feel all kinds of guilt when we fail. We sure feel shame. Forgiveness is never up for discussion, but we sure *feel* like it is.

So part of our priestly duty when we receive a confession, is to circle back to the ancient affirmations. We don't do it in formal language. We usually do it in the most conversational of ways, but we find our way of affirming...

*Your sins are forgiven. You can be at peace.*

*Even if you feel guilty, forgiveness is never withheld. It just is.*

*While you're feeling like a heel, know this: You are not your sin. You are something much deeper than the negative thought, word, or deed that triggered this prayer.*

The ancient wisdom of receiving this prayer, encourages us to always find a way to reinforce these ancient affirmations...

*Our flaws and faults are a veneer. They form an outer layer of our being.  
Our truest nature is of God's image, God's life, God's breath, God's Spirit.  
Divine Life is the centerpiece of our being.*

If, as our prayer partner digs into his or her story and feelings, he or she realizes their failure was fear driven, we gently affirm that courage, and strength, and peace, are within us . . . because the Holy Spirit of God is in us.

If they complain that their flaw is a habitual one, if they are discouraged at how long their struggle has been, we gently affirm the ancient truth that light overcomes darkness, that goodness prevails, that the day is not over.

We do this because it is always easier to see these great truths for one another than it is to see them for ourselves. When we are immersed in our circumstances, our emotional responses, we often cannot see for ourselves. But we can see for one another.

And so, the receiving partner simply speaks the ancient truths, the truth of the tradition, the truth of the saints and sages, the truth of the sacred texts.

Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.

God within you is *greater* and *deeper* and more *real* than any afflictive thought, feeling, word, or deed.

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We are priests.  
We keep one another's stories in confidence.  
We encourage one another.  
We affirm the ancient truths.



## CHAPTER 12. Penance

I didn't include penance as one of the steps of the prayer of confession. It's not exactly part of the prayer, but it is tangentially related.

When people confess in the box, you've seen how it ends. The priest says something like, "Say 10 'Hail-Marys' or 10 'Our-Fathers'."

So let's think about penance a bit as we conclude. Like confession itself, the practice is often misunderstood and distorted.

### *What Penance Is Not: Punishment*

One of the distortions is this: the practice gets mixed up with the idea that people can somehow make up for our sin. We get the idea that by offering a prayer, or performing a deed, we can punish ourselves enough to pay for the bad thing we thought, or felt, or said, or did.

As you gathered by now, this isn't very helpful. In fact, it pretty much corrupts the word's original intent beyond recognition.

It's human instinct to connect crime and punishment. It's easy to see how the same connection can creep into religious practice. If we voluntarily inflict punishment on ourselves, if we make some outward expression of self-humiliation or self-inflicted pain, we'll make up for bad things we've done. Crime and punishment.

So in most people's minds (and even in the dictionary), penance is associated with punishment, abasement, or self-humiliation. It's a distortion that goes hand in hand with our distorted ideas about God. Even if we know better, we carry around a visceral sense that God is slightly angry at us. We know the party line. God is good. But our gut sense is that God plays nicey-nice on the surface, but is one big smack-down just waiting for the right moment.

Again, we know the party line. God is all about forgiveness. But our religious instinct is that God withholds forgiveness unless we are really serious about

turning things around, unless we really feel bad about what we've done. So to show God how serious we are, we do something to pay for our bad behaviors. We say a prayer, give some money, maybe some self-flagellation.

In this book we keep coming back to the idea that forgiveness just is. It's a hard truth to internalize. Deep in our guts, we carry a sense that God is a smiter. Our visceral sense really *isn't* that God is good and we are safe. We tend to think of God as stern, just, and holy. We tend to think of ourselves as prodigal children, screw-ups. Even if God lets us squeak by on this one, he won't on the next.

So a noble sacrifice has a certain appeal. It proves to God how serious we are. It shows God how sorry we are about our badness. It shows our commitment to do better next time.

In the past the church has been complicit in this corruption. We have actually *told* people that if they do this thing or that, *then* God will forgive them, *then* God will approve of them, or like them, or let them into heaven. Shame on us.

#### *What Penance Is Not: Somebody Else's Job*

A second distortion that has encrusted the practice of penance is the idea that someone else can figure out penance for us. We often think penance is the priest's job, or some other religious professional. It's up to them figure out for us what we should do to make up for our badness.

Which just doubles down on bad theology.

Once we buy the idea that God withholds grace, affection, approval, or forgiveness, once we buy the notion that to get it back we need to do something, then it makes a kind of perverted sense that we would need a God-expert to be our go-between.

If God is that kind of harsh, there's a lot riding on us getting things right. So it makes sense to defer the negotiations to someone with a collar, or robe, or degree, or ordination. If anybody can negotiate favorable terms for us, it will be the expert.

Toxic distortions.  
No wonder we don't practice it any more.

### What Penance Is

Here's what we've said. When we have had a negative thought, or speak a hurtful word, or react with a spiteful or harmful action, there was something going on inside us we need to know about.

After working the steps of the practice, after engaging spiritual friends and digging more and more deeply into self-awareness, hopefully, we *understand* what triggered us. Hopefully, we understand what goaded us into our negative experience.

Hopefully, we better understand our interior worlds, our go-to responses under stress, and *why* we scream and yell, or *why* we medicate our pain with a substance. We understand the source of our hatred, or worry, or judgment, or criticism.

And it is this new-found *understanding*, that is the basis for the practice of penance.

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Notice the similarity between the words "penance" and "repentance." Penance is connected to the idea of regret. It speaks to *feeling bad* about our negative thoughts, deeds, feelings, and words. It is also connected to the idea of "turning it around," the word "repentance." It is about stepping back from our thoughts, deeds, or words. It is about going another way, a better way.

Once we *understand* our interior worlds, we are forewarned and forearmed.

Which would be all we need, were it not for the way our brains work. As we've seen, our brains are nothing, if not wired for habit. We've seen how once we follow a thought pattern once, it's much easier to follow that same thought pattern again. And after following it twice, and a third time, and a twenty-fifth time, it becomes a *habitual* thought pattern, a go-to thought pattern.

Once we've medicated our pain one way once, and then twice, and then twenty-five times, it becomes our habitual pattern of self-medication.

Afflictive emotions, and thoughts, and words, and deeds, are habitual. Once we have them, it is much more likely that we will have them again. And when we do, it's not long before our habits run our days.

And while the prayer practice helps us understand what's going on, habits still die hard.

That's where penance comes in.

Penance is a strategy we employ to break up our habitual, go-to patterns.

Once we see *how* we got sucked into our bad actions, words, or failures, penance helps us challenge the habit pattern that got us there. Penance is a way we challenge thought and emotion and action habits. Penance is a thing we *do* to help us root out routine, unconscious, go-to patterns in our lives.

An act of penance may be very simple. It may be as simple as a sincere apology. It may be as practical as making restitution for a harm we caused.

It may be more involved. It could be a season set aside to focus on studying a growth point in our lives. For example, we may employ a month of reading on the virtue of temperance, to help us think about our habitual intemperance. Penance might be six weeks of daily meditation, or three days of fasting, or a year of counseling. Penance can be a sustained activity designed to break up our thought-habits.

When we finish the three steps of confession, penance invites us to ask ourselves if there is something we can *do*, some project for our souls, to promote growth in the area we see ourselves struggling.

### A Story

One day Jesus ran into Zacchaeus, a tax collector who was cheating his neighbors. Zacchaeus had been collaborating with the occupying force of Roman oppression.



His job was to act as an agent of foreign exploitation, working against his family, friends, neighbors, and countrymen.<sup>21</sup>

When Jesus ran into him, he never said anything about earning God's forgiveness. Forgiveness was a given. "My friend Zacchaeus," he said, "Who nobody will forgive his crimes, I forgive them. And Zacchaeus, I'm coming to your house for dinner. You are my friend."

But when Zacchaeus understood what was going on, what happened next was instinctive. Once he had enough self-awareness to break free of his old thinking, he wanted to break up the habit patterns.

"Here's what I'm going to *do*," he said, "I'll give it all back. In fact, I'll give back more than I took. I'll *do* something to challenge the greed and selfishness into which I've fallen."

Instinctively, Zacchaeus knew that if he wanted to grow, he needed to *do* something, he needed to make things right, he needed to challenge his habits. That's what penance does. It re-habituates us.

Penance invites us to think through internal change. It invites us to ask ourselves, and one another, "Is there some action I can undertake to help me re-habituate?"

### Another Story

I really like to think of myself as a good guy. And one of the little strategies I employ to help me think those comforting thoughts, is to never think about my actions using bad words. It's a clever tool my brain uses from time to time. I bet yours does too.

One bad word I *never* use to think about myself is "hate." No. That's something bad people do. I never think of myself as a person who would hate. That's what neo-Nazis do. That's what homophobes do. Not me.

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<sup>21</sup> Lk. 19

Instead, I use the word “frustrated.” That’s a much nicer word, don’t you think? “Frustrated” means that some *other* knucklehead is behaving badly. Not me. “Frustration” means I’m a little impatient with the bad person. But clearly, the bad person is not me. The word comes with the added benefit of implying *righteousness* in my indignation. That’s usually the meaning I prefer to assign to my experience. I like telling myself that I’m justified in my strong negative feelings toward that person.

It’s a clever tool, this careful word selection.

But I’ve been on the journey long enough to see it for the thinly-veiled mind-trick it is. Through the years I’ve come to doubt myself whenever I feel “righteous indignation.”

There are times when I have hatred in my heart. I don’t even like writing those words down. But it happens to be on my radar as I am writing these words. I’ve been through some rough days, some difficult struggles. I saw myself telling myself a “righteous indignation” story. My doubt kicked in. I’ve been asking myself a bunch of awareness questions.

In the process, an old memory was kicked up. Many years ago I had a boss who was a knucklehead. He was pinning me in, limiting my power. For my personality type, that’s the worst thing someone can do. And this boss (in my mind) wasn’t qualified to be able to tell me what to do. But there he was doing it – and doing it obstinately.

And (I cringe to write it down), I hated him. I felt the hatred just above my belt, way inside my gut. It was a physical sensation and I had to honestly acknowledge it. From time to time, he and I would erupt in shouting matches. He wouldn’t back down and neither would I. I’d walk away all puffed up in my righteous indignation . . . and I’d hate him.

Whether he was right or I was, is really immaterial. The point was, I had *hatred* in my heart. Whether I called it that or not, again, immaterial. My soul was being poisoned by my own hatred.

Even in my huffy state, I could see something was wrong. As much as I wanted to tell myself a story about how my virtue and uprightness shone like the noon-day sun, the story I told myself didn't matter. My emotions were telling the truth. I was a hater. I was hating.

So I did the three steps. I paid attention to my negative feelings. I undertook a thorough self-examination. I engaged in forthright self-disclosure.

And I saw what I didn't want to see. I saw how my story was a thin veil of self-justification. I saw my feelings evoking a go-to habit of gaining power and control. I saw the whole ugly thing.

But even seeing, I couldn't stop feeling the hatred. It was an engrained feeling habit, a go-to emotional response. Every time I would come into the office, I'd walk by his door, and there it was, in my gut. Hatred.

Until I hit on a way to practice penance.

It was a relatively simple thing. I had a whiteboard in my office. On the left side, I had marked off a narrow column to write down the things I was holding before God in prayer. Every time I sat at my desk I'd look up at that column. I'd pray about something there, something in my personal life, something with my family, something on my job. The whole practice took less than ten seconds, but it happened several times each day.

My act of penance, was to put his initials up on that board. That meant that every time I sat down at my desk I prayed for him. I held him before God, his job, his family, his own inner struggles.

It wasn't easy. Remember, I hated him.

But I did it. Every day. Every time I sat at my desk. Several times each day. Again, it was only a few seconds each time, but every time I sat down, I made myself do it. It was a thought-disrupting strategy, a habit-breaking strategy, an *inner-world-upsetting* strategy.

Within a few weeks, surely less than two months, something changed inside me. I don't know how it happened, but I began to love this guy. None of our conflicts went away, but my hatred did.

That simple action, by rewiring my thought habits, changed me. My thoughts had been habituated to think about how stupid he was, how bull-headed he was, how wrong-headed he was. The simple act of praying for his well-being shifted my thoughts focus to how human he was. Several times each day, I thought of him in the context of his own struggles, his relationships, his hopes and drives. I saw him as human, just like me.

After a while he was still a jerk, but he had become *my* jerk. He was still bull-headed, but he was *my* bull-head. Over the next six years he became a dear friend. He is a friend I don't see much. He's on the other side of the country. But whenever I see him, I am flooded with that same deep affection.

Penance is not punishment.

Penance doesn't make up for some bad thing we do or think.

Penance doesn't appease God.

Penance is not a spiritual fine somebody else levies against us.

But, we can work together to create simple strategies to undercut our go-to habits. We can work out plans together, that challenge our go-to thought patterns, our go-to actions and reactions.

It is not one of the steps of the prayer, but it a critical part of the follow-up to the prayer of confession, the prayer of self-awareness and self-disclosure.

**STILL TO ADD: CONCLUSION TO THIS SECTION**