

The Healing Practice of Confession

By:

[Aaron Murray-Swank](#)

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When my mother was dying of cancer, I became acutely aware of the gaps and barriers in our relationship. One night, lost in a turbulent sea of emotion, I sat down at the dining room table and started to write. I wrote -- almost automatically -- for about an hour. In a letter, I poured out my regrets, my feelings of sorrow, and my desires for the relationship I had hoped we would have. Along the way, I visited and revealed places in my own psyche that had been frozen by years of ingrained patterns. When I was finished, my head was still whirling, but I noticed that a small space had opened. I had more "breathing room," and I believe that space helped me be more present to appreciate the brief time I had left with my mother.

While I would not have called it so at the time, my letter was a confession. For many people, the term "confession" conjures images of a dark wooden booth and whispering one's sins to a priest through a screen. However, confession is really just an expression of remorse about the past and hope for the future -- the process of telling our story. Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison has remarked on the importance of narrative, observing that, "it is words that enable us to make some sense of our existence by allowing us to stand aside and narrate it." Regardless of our particular religious or spiritual beliefs, don't we all have personal stories of failure and redemption?

As a psychologist, I have studied practices of confession for the last seven years and have learned that these practices are found across diverse times and cultures. In fact, noting the widespread nature of confession, scholars have observed that there is a human "compulsion to confess." What my colleagues and I have discovered is that this compulsion is profoundly healing physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

"Opening Up" Is Good for Your Health

About 20 years ago, James Pennebaker, professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, began a series of studies that scientifically examined the effects of disclosing personal thoughts and feelings. Participants were randomly assigned to either: (a) talk or write about a difficult, traumatic, or upsetting event (disclosure); or (b) write or talk about a trivial topic (a comparison control group). While the disclosure process produced immediate feelings of

distress, participants who engaged in this process experienced a number of benefits over time, including improved mood, reduced symptoms of psychological distress, fewer illnesses, and even improved immune functioning. Furthermore, Pennebaker and others found that the health effect is greater when people are less inhibited, disclose more deeply, and when their disclosure helps them form new meaning or insight on their experience.

This research focused on what happens when people "open up" about things they have been holding inside, but it did not look specifically at spiritual or religious confession. To the spiritual mind, confession takes on an added significance, since the story that is told is ultimately concerned with reconnection to the sacred. Spiritual traditions, through sacred rituals, view confession as a process of returning to God or to transcendent spiritual values that have been neglected when our words, thoughts, or deeds have gone astray.

Spiritual Confession in the Lab

In an attempt to understand spiritual confession from a scientific perspective, I began working with Kenneth Pargament, professor of psychology at Bowling Green University, to design an experiment focused on writing as a form of spiritual confession. We wanted to compare the effects of a spiritual confession, a non-spiritual confession, and a placebo condition. In this study, 45 participants were randomly assigned to complete one of three activities: spiritual confession (writing a letter to God), secular confession (writing a letter about regrets), and a control writing condition. Participants also completed assessments of their moods, feelings of guilt, psychological symptoms, and spiritual well-being immediately before writing, immediately after writing, and then two weeks later. Those in the spiritual and secular confession groups tended to write about important, meaningful, and deeply emotional topics such as guilt about having an abortion, regrets about relationship conflicts, and religious struggles. It was humbling to read these expressions of the human heart.

As we expected, participants in both confession groups felt significantly guiltier immediately after writing. However, there was a surprising difference in the groups two weeks later -- those who wrote letters to God felt much more guilty, whereas those who just wrote about their regrets felt much less guilty. At the same time, participants in the spiritual confession group reported feeling closer to God, having experienced more spiritual growth.

To understand these findings, it's best to compare our study with spiritual confession as it naturally occurs. Unlike traditional spiritual confession, our experiment did not include a "confessor" -- someone whose role was to hear the confession. Religious thinkers such as Carl Jung and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have reflected that the act of sharing with another human being may be a critical ingredient in the healing powers of confession. In addition, our study did not provide any opportunity for "reconciliation." In most confession, there is some form of "absolution" offered where the individual is assured of forgiveness and receives some form of

acceptance. In short, our study underscores the important and powerful effects of confession. It suggests that guilt and spiritual growth may be important components of the experience, and raises a variety of questions about confession that we plan to pursue in future research.

Healthy vs. Toxic Guilt

Confession can have a "dark side" for individuals and for society. On an individual level, people can get caught in negative cycles of guilt and self-blame, which can be fed by confession. Some religious traditions have referred to this phenomenon as "scrupulosity," or an overactive conscience. How can people avoid getting stuck in this kind of cycle? William Sneek, a psychologist and Jesuit priest, suggests making a distinction between "healthy guilt" and "toxic guilt." Healthy guilt, says Sneek, is felt in proportion to the harm done. Healthy guilt is not fixated on the self, but reaches outward to address the harm that one has caused.