

standing  
naked  
before  
God

*The Art of Public Confession*

MOLLY  
PHINNEY  
BASKETTE



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# INTRODUCTION



## How Confession Saved Our Church's Life

*Your problem is how you are going to spend this one odd and precious life you have been issued. Whether you're going to live it trying to look good and creating the illusion that you have power over people and circumstances, or whether you are going to taste it, enjoy it, and find out the truth about who you are. — ANNE LAMOTT<sup>1</sup>*

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Last year I wrote a book called *Real Good Church: How Our Church Came Back from the Dead and Yours Can, Too*. I charted our congregation's slow, steady return from the brink of death. Our miraculous growth has been manifested in the scads of millennials in our pews, the buzz of babies in the back of worship, the wild games of tag that happen in our sanctuary during coffee hour. Where once we were a graveyard, now we are a three-ring circus.

A unique feature of our church is our liturgist program. Our liturgist doesn't read scripture, or otherwise parrot another person's words.

Instead, every week, throughout the year, a different person makes a public confession of sin and vulnerability. You heard me right.

When I arrived at First Church, this program was already in place. In a congregation of about forty active members, about ten would regularly take the stand. Now that we are a congregation of about three hundred, there are eighty people who are willing to tell their story. The waiting list to serve as liturgist is twenty months long.

*Real Good Church* was a book about the two hundred different things our congregation did over many years to slowly, gracefully grow. But still people keep asking me: what's the *one* thing you did to turn things around? When they ask, I insist that all two hundred are important. But when they persist, I say this one, *this* one thing is the most important—to make space for telling the truth about our lives.

Sin has fallen out of favor in mainline Protestant churches. In a kind of backlash against the perceived severity and bigotry of the Catholic and fundamentalist churches, many of the people in our pews have left behind, have denied ourselves much that is helpful, liturgically and theologically. “It seems so *negative* to talk about sin” is what I often hear. Maybe, I respond. But: better out than in. I want my sin where I can see it in the clear light of day. It is much less of a threat there—I can track its movements.

Bringing our sins and slipups out where everybody can see them means we can laugh at them. The monster in the closet at 2 A.M. is terrifying, but in the full sun of morning, it is a house mouse, with antics.

My spiritual director often reminds me that the root word for diabolical, *diabalein*, means “to separate, to tear apart, to compartmentalize.” When we cannot truly, fully be ourselves in most of the places we go and with most of the people we know, when we are different people on Saturday night and Sunday morning, our lives are diabolical. The root meaning of the word “integrity” is “wholeness.” The gift of religious community and the gift of confession is the gift of being able

to be a whole person again—a person whose parts are all in the same place at the same time: integrated.

One reason some fundamentalist sects have grown, sometimes exponentially, when kinder, easier churches have declined and died, is because they have asked their followers to do hard things. They have made religion akin to a great adventure. Challenged to heroic tasks, their people found out what they were really capable of.

We in the mainline churches can learn from their methods if not their ends. My church asks people to give 10 percent of their income to church and charities—and many of them do, even though we live in the most parsimonious area of the country. Our church asks people to evangelize, and they do (even one member, a singer-songwriter and a recovering agnostic, who back when she was still a closeted Christian lied and told her Saturday night musician friends that she had an early dentist appointment on Sunday morning. But now she is *integrated!*).

And most importantly: we ask our people to tell their truest stories, in church, every week. It has made all the difference in our lives.

For decades in the mainline Protestant church we have settled for something less than total truthfulness. We have not asked each other to do hard things, like give generously, or serve sacrificially, or reveal our wounds. But if we don't ask each other, and ourselves, to do these hard things, we will never find out what we're made of.

## PART II



### RUN TOWARD THE DARKNESS AND SHINE<sup>33</sup>

#### *An Anthology of Confessions*



IN CONFESSION THE BREAK-THROUGH  
TO COMMUNITY TAKES PLACE. SIN DEMANDS TO  
HAVE A MAN BY HIMSELF. IT WITHDRAWS HIM  
FROM THE COMMUNITY. THE MORE ISOLATED A  
PERSON IS, THE MORE DESTRUCTIVE WILL  
BE THE POWER OF SIN OVER HIM, AND THE  
MORE DEEPLY HE BECOMES INVOLVED IN IT,  
THE MORE DISASTROUS IS HIS ISOLATION.  
SINCE THE CONFESSION OF SIN IS MADE IN  
THE PRESENCE OF A CHRISTIAN BROTHER,  
THE LAST STRONGHOLD OF  
SELF-JUSTIFICATION IS ABANDONED.

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER



## NINA

*Nina got to know First Church through performing with friends at the Broadway Nights that the choir used to host. She's also active in the community theater group that used to operate out of First Church. Although she still considers herself a practicing Catholic, Nina feels a deep resonance with the community and the spirituality of First Church, and every time she goes there, she's really glad she came. Nina and her husband, Al, are both totally blind.*

*Now is the time we bring our own stories before God.*

In 1990, my life completely bottomed out. I flunked out of grad school with a terminal master's degree, keeping me from the PhD that would have allowed me to fulfill my dream of becoming a Russian literature professor.

Within months of each other, my dad had his first stroke and was diagnosed with colon cancer. And, as if two kicks from the universe weren't enough, the man whom I'd unrequitedly loved for years suddenly got married, to someone else. So my romantic and professional dreams were shattered almost simultaneously. I also had an undiagnosed but debilitating anxiety disorder that was threatening to overwhelm my life.

Sometime in 1991, I started feeling a strong desire to move to Boston. For a long time I'd wanted to live somewhere with great public transportation, and I hesitate to call this inner voice mystical or intuitive. But there it was: a strong urge to restart my life here, despite the fact that I knew few people here and had no prospects.

I loved it here, but the first year wasn't easy. My anxiety disorder was filling my days, and nights, with obsessive thoughts. It had been with me for years, but became truly virulent now that I was essentially alone, with no structure to my life. I was trying to move forward, meeting a lot of people, looking for work, and participating in activities.

But I couldn't even get a good night's sleep. So on the morning of Saturday, June 19, I fervently prayed for help.

And help came quickly. That night, I went out with a group of friends for Chinese food. The person sitting across from me was my future husband, Al. I'd met Al before, but never really considered him as a romantic partner. But that night, we hit it off.

### *Prayer*

### *Silence*

### *Assurance of Grace*

Through my relationship with Al, God gave me a taste of heavenly love. I came to know the joy of being totally accepted for who I was, even while being challenged to be better. Al couldn't vaporize my anxiety disorder. But he bore it with me, and made me feel understood. And I was able to move forward into a life whose central motif was love and connection.

Resurrection doesn't always come according to our plans or expectations. In some ways, Al wasn't the person I thought I wanted. I had this wish list of things I wanted in a husband. For instance, I wanted a sighted person who would take me for adventures in the great outdoors. In other words, I wanted to marry the front end of a tandem bike.

But God knew better.

A few years ago, I talked to a spiritual director about my troubles with God. Knowing how much I value my marriage, she advised me to imagine Al's love as a foretaste of God's love. At the time, I thought what she was saying was too easy, too trite. Now I realize that it wasn't trite at all. What I really thought was: it was too good to be true.



**SETH WISPELWEY**

*Seth is a grassroots organizer in his mid-thirties, working to build and convert public will into political/policy outcomes that generate transformation and justice. He tells people “your voice matters” a lot, and gets excited when he sees evidence that it’s true.*

***Now is the time when we bring our stories before God.***

I permanently deleted my Facebook account recently, and with it fifteen hundred friends.

After the decision, there were three major kinds of responses I got before an eerie silence settled in. Some good-naturedly teased me about my regression to trying to depend on '90s forms of communication like phone and e-mail.

Several (lovely) people who had never met our daughter Sasha—and quite honestly, probably never will—lamented the disappearance of her pictures and the joy they brought (to be honest, this just strengthened my resolve).

Third, and most interestingly, were the several comments from people wishing they could be as “brave,” that said they had “come close” several times to doing the same, and wanted to know how it went and what my reasons were. Maybe I was on to something . . . but the truth is, I’m not there yet.

I want to confess my reasons for quitting the Ubiquitous F today, and my struggle to overcome them. When it came down to it, I realized my relationship with Facebook was one of antagonism, isolation, and profound ambivalence. And by relationship with Facebook, I mean relationship with the fifteen hundred “friends” on there.

Antagonism—at people like my cousin Margaret, the cousin closest to me in age on either side of my family, who, according to her Facebook timeline—and increasingly mine, when I posted articles of interest—had become a raging, offensive, and ignorant Tea

Partier with no original thoughts and a spiritually violent outlook. Who evidently doesn't even know *The Onion* is a joke.

And . . . whoops, here I go again. Her unwelcome comments would nag inside me even when I wasn't on Facebook, like she was some chess adversary whom I had to plan my next comment for five moves ahead. By the time she gave birth to her first child, I found it hard to add an exclamation point to my congrats on her timeline. I judge her—badly enough already—without talking to her, without being in actual relationship, and ignoring the good she does with her life off of Facebook.

Isolation—from the people I want to communicate with and see and hang out with regularly. Instead, I'd unconsciously reach for the One Ring . . . I mean, my iPhone . . . in my pocket countless times a day and numbly scroll through an endless timeline of updates from people I don't see, don't remember, don't care . . . but there I am, absorbing this information, while an inbox full of thoughtful notes and shared articles from loved ones goes ignored until "I have more time," while grandparents who rely on the written word or a landline phone don't hear from me, while the sun is shining outside and I could be updating my own real life timeline . . .

Ambivalence—was the biggest and most humbling reason to leave. Funny enough, it was an *Onion* article that slapped me awake to how ambivalent I was about all of these connections that had boiled down into dopamine pleasure hits of diminishing returns from seeing that little red button pop up that someone "liked" my status. The truth is, I do know, remember, and did care for all of these fifteen hundred people, but on Facebook I had become ambivalent about it all. Ambivalent about *friends*.

I could try to say Facebook (and this kind of technology) did this to me, but the relationship with Facebook is a two-way street, and I was feeding the beast with these struggles that are already naturally and naggingly human—antagonism, isolation, ambivalence. Quitting

wasn't a cure-all, but something needed to help kick-start the old outgoing Seth who *loves* social interaction—the more people around, the better.

### *Prayer*

### *Silence*

### *Assurance of Grace*

Render unto Twitter what is Twitter's and "Like" your neighbor's status update as your own. The social gospel of the twenty-first century? Hopefully not for me anymore. The isolation and ambivalence have not disappeared overnight (nor the inbox and unwritten letters), but the scattered storm of thoughts and inability to concentrate has significantly calmed.

I have felt the Spirit bringing me anew into each day's present moment, so I can have the peace of mind to stop and get on the floor and play with Sasha when she asks, not after I scroll through one more time. To pick up the phone, and see how someone's doing. And would you like to go out for a cup of coffee just to talk?

Facebook will always be with you, but you will not always have me. And I will not always have you. Thankfully, we do have a God whose status update is always an invitation to an open and affirming dinner table, always reminding us—me—that we are called to meet each other—in person—there.