

## STUDY GUIDE

# STANDING NAKED BEFORE GOD THE ART OF PUBLIC CONFESSION

Molly Phinney Baskette

## Introduction: How Confession Saved Our Church's Life

**W**hen you hear the utterance, “Talking about sin is so negative,” what do you think? Have you said that yourself? If you were going to play devil’s advocate to this thinking, what would you say?

The root word for “diabolical” is *diabalein*, “to tear apart, to compartmentalize.” What are some situations or problems that “tear you apart”?

How does compartmentalizing our feelings or realities contribute to spiritual unhealthiness? How has compartmentalizing one aspect of your life bedeviled you? (Hint: this is sometimes easier to diagnose in other people 😊.)

Are you different people at home, at work, at church, with friends? What would it look like, and how would it feel, if you could be the same person, everywhere—integrated?

What are some “hard things” your own church, if you are part of one, asks people to do? How has it strengthened them, and the entire community, to do them?

## Chapter One: Breaking Narcissus' Mirror

**T**heologian Paul Tillich defined sin as anything that separates us from God, ourselves or others.

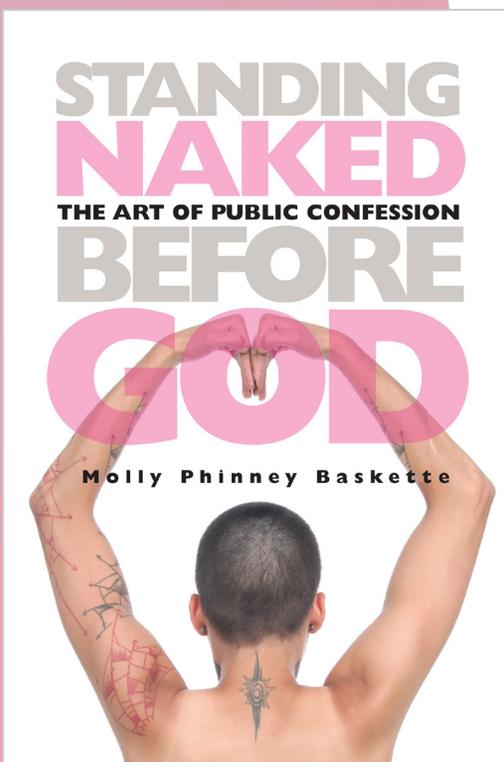
How do you understand sin?

What is a working definition of sin we can synthesize from our individual understandings?

Carl Jung developed the concept of the shadow side—the “stuff” about ourselves we hide from our conscious selves. How have you become aware of your own shadow, and what lives in it?

How would you rate your church community, if you are part of one, on a Willingness to Be Vulnerable scale from 1-10?

Baskette says that there are some things that are not sins, and we still feel ashamed of them: particularly struggles with mental health, eating disorders, abuse in various forms, and addictions. These are illnesses, or wrongs done to us, and NOT sins. But how do they, nonetheless,



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separate us from God, others, and our own selves? How can we destigmatize them—undermine the theology in some churches that they are a result of sin—and address them?

Have you ever met God face to face? Describe the feelings surrounding that experience.

Tell about a time when you felt exposed and vulnerable—when you were forced into seeing yourself differently, acknowledging something in your shadow, but it turned out to be a blessing.

### Chapter 2: The Hero Path

**J**oseph Campbell described the myth of the hero's journey as the core human story. One principle of the hero's journey is that suffering and challenge leads to transformation.

Where have you seen someone in your life transform through suffering, for the better?

How about in your own life?

There is another facet of many of our core human stories—the myth of redemptive violence, in which the story is presented with two clear sides, good and evil, and good is permitted to use violence in order to vanquish evil. Baskette upends the myth of redemptive violence with an alternative theology, in which no one is all good or all evil, but we are all “a little bit of each.”

Where do you see the Myth of Redemptive Violence at work? In what news stories? In what works of fiction, movies, TV shows, commercials, social media memes?

In a playful way, pick one or two of these examples and retell the story, but with the “little bit of each” theology, blurring the lines.

Richard Rohr says that we grow much more spiritually by doing it wrong than by doing it right.

Give an example about how “doing it wrong” brought you to a deeper place.

What is God's grace? How does it work?

### Chapter 3: Slaying Ourselves and Not the Other

**T**he “shadow side” works on the principle that we hate in others what we despise in ourselves, even if we don't consciously believe we contain that personality trait, political view, etc. that we hate.

What class or type of person irritates you or ignites you the most?

How can you match this to something that might live in your shadow?

The scapegoat is an ancient rite—putting the “sins” of a whole community onto one individual (a goat, and later: humans) and sending it out into the wilderness as a sacrifice to appease the gods.

Who are the scapegoats in our society? How does their sacrifice “appease the gods”? How are we actually, collectively, responsible for the sins we attribute to them?

Baskette makes the claim that the “better” we are (the more charismatic, etc.), the more capacity we have to do ill. Where have we seen this at work?

“Functional atheism” is saying we believe in God, but then acting as if it all depends on our own efforts. Give one example of how this works in your life or the life of someone you love.

Nadia Bolz-Weber has accused clergy and modern churches of preaching a “sin management program” where our goal is to present as perfectly as possible. Perfectionism is a way of supplanting God's activity in our lives. Talk about how you have seen this at work.

How does God actually judge us? Are we all held to the same standard? How does grace work to free us from the need to be perfect?

## Chapter 4: Sin is a Good Teacher

**H**ave you ever imagined God as the all-seeing Being who notices your nightly snacking habits, or how you didn't return the shopping cart to the appropriate area in the parking lot? What do you think about this possible attribute of God? How has it changed your behavior?

Read and discuss this quote of William Barclay's. Do you agree with it, or disagree? *If we took everything and set it in the sight of Jesus, it would make all the difference in the world. If of everything we did, we asked, "Could I go on doing this if Jesus were watching me?," if of everything we said, we asked, "Could I go on talking like this if Jesus was listening to me," there would be many things we would be saved from doing and saying.*

Practice the "Ignatian Daily Examen" form of prayer described in this chapter, right now. You can do it aloud as a group, or move through it silently, individually, with prompts.

What is the relationship between conscience and consciousness?

Is public confession of sin 'critical self-examination for external approval,' or 'critical self-examination for an internal peace'?

What reservations, if any, do you still have about publicly confessing sin in a community of faith?

What is the difference between pretending to be better than we are (i.e., cleaning for the maid), and "faking it till we make it"?

## Chapter 5: Spirituality and Recovery

**H**ow are spirituality and recovery related?

Have you ever been to a 12-step meeting, as an ally or as an addict yourself in recovery? What was your experience of that meeting? Do you remember any stories from it?

How does the practice of testimony help folks in recovery to get and stay sober?

Who are some sober folks you know, who are spiritual powerhouses? What makes them so? Be specific.

Has anyone ever made amends to you after getting sober? What was that experience like?

Get a copy of the Big Book of AA. Take turns reading each step aloud. Pause and leave generous silence between the reading of each step.

Now open the Big Book at random, and read a paragraph aloud. Discuss what you heard.

## Chapter 6: How to Tell The Truth: A Manual

**H**ow likely is your community of faith, if you have one, to adopt a practice of public confession?

If you feel called to do this in your setting, what are the obstacles? What are the arguments against it? Which of the counter-arguments that Baskette states are mostly likely to come up in your setting?

What is an elevator pitch you could give on behalf of a practice of testimony to the leaders in your community? Practice and refine it with each other!

What are the intermediate steps—the track that needs to be laid—to make such a shift happen?

What are your biggest anxieties in adopting this practice?

Pick one or two of the bravest souls in your group. Have them prepare a confession according to the guidelines, and present it to the group. Have the group pray for them before they speak, and react with lovingkindness when they are finished offering their testimony.

## The Stories

**A**fter each section, ask these questions:

What in these stories rung true for you? Where did you see yourself? How did the wisdom and grace in that story help you in your own journey?

Were there any stories you had a strong negative reaction to (anger, revulsion, anxiety, judgment)? Part of the scapegoating mechanism is to ‘banish’ people who embody things that live in our own shadow. What, in particular stories, taught you about your own shadow side?



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