

Congregations of Confession by Rev. Wayne Arnason
A Paper in Response to “No Release: Ministry Under Pressure”

By The Rev. Molly Housh Gordon
The Prairie Group November 11-13, 2019

Henry Nouwen writes: “(The minister) is not one who reveals God to the people – who gives something to those who have nothing -- but one who helps those who are searching to discover reality as the source of their existence. In this sense we can say that (the minister) leads humans to confession, in the classic sense of that word.

(Pastoral conversation) is a deep human encounter in which people are willing to put their own faith and doubt, their own hope and despair, their own light and darkness at the disposal of others who want to find a way through their confusion and touch the solid core of life.”

Henry Nouwen: The Wounded Healer - P. 42 -43 (Image ppbk, 1972 and 2010)

I found myself very moved after my first reading of Molly Housh Gordon’s paper, although gratefully not in the way she described in her opening story. The paper builds to a powerful conclusion in which she calls for us as religious leaders, in the interests of serving our faith and the work of justice, to access our own pain, rather than ignore, project, or sublimate it. Shortly after I finished reading the paper, I came across the cartoon I’ve reproduced for you. The man facing the firing squad is hastily scrawling his final words:



I saw the cartoon as a metaphor for some of the ministers I’ve known whose careers were in freefall, and could only seek to put the best spin on the situation and never undertake the deep work that Henry Nouwen has described: putting your own faith and doubt, hope and despair, light and darkness at the disposal of others who want to share the journey with you.

The firing squads that we face in our lives in ministry are not only found in the struggle to get through a year, or from one year to the next, without being fired upon or fired. They are also found and faced in the routine tensions of our work and our lives that Rev. Housh-Gordon describes which make us sick, physically and mentally.

It has been both a release and a relief to engage with the advance reading and viewing for this year's Prairie Group, even as a retiree. I hope those of you with much more intense schedules than I have now have also experienced the requirement to open up Trevor Noah or Wes Nisker or turn on a Netflix comedy special as a chance to relax and enjoy as well as to reflect. I will admit, however, that the provocative choices made by our excellent program committee (that's an applause line!) often left me both released and convicted at the same time! I laughed at the jokes, and I felt uncomfortable laughing at them. I learned from the stories that were being told, and I was forced to look hard at my own story, and how insulated it has been from many of those we were encouraged to read or hear.

In that context, I began to form my thoughts for this paper as I came to the sections the paper that consist of, or invite our reflection on, acts of confession as a critical part of our professional or personal spiritual practice.

Confession is, of course, best known to us as a religious practice through the sacrament in the Catholic church, which requires confession in a ritualized way to a priest. The Catholic church's patron saint of parish priests, in fact, was recognized as such because of how dedicated he was and how good he was at receiving confessions. St. Jean Vianney was a parish priest in post-revolutionary France at a time when more people felt free to skip church on Sundays than ever before. He preached against this backsliding, and would spend extra time in the confessional to allow responsive parishioners to confess and repent any time they could. His reputation for receiving confession spread and pilgrims began to come from afar to make confessions to him. His Wikipedia entry tells us that at its peak in 1855 he was receiving 20,000 confessions a year and spending all day in the confessional booth. No wonder, the story goes on to tell us, that he abandoned his parish on four different occasions to retreat to a monastery and to beg the bishop to re-assign him, but to no avail. The price of sainthood is heavy. Vianney died in 1859 while continuing to bear this heavy pastoral load.

Confession in the Protestant Christian faiths is easier on the clergy – it's encouraged but not required for salvation and can be done directly to God – and both Judaism and Islam encourage confession not only to God or a religious authority but to anyone you have wronged.

Molly's paper, however, points us to an entirely different dimension of confession for clergy: not to the receiving of confession, but to the offering of confession in public and private sacred spaces. The connection through comedy is made explicitly. Molly writes:

“Comedy is often confession in a way that our congregations rarely provide.

The difference between ministers and comedians in this, is that our calling is to help people stretch their comfort zones enough first to make these revelations in soul-safety, in the service of growth.”

What does it mean to be Congregations of Confession? Many of our congregations use the Soul Matters materials to help us shape our liturgical themes, and this opening sentence in

each one “What does it mean to be a people of...” Has shaped this question and the title for this paper. However, within the past five years of Soul Matters themes, which is as far back as their web site takes us, the theme of confession has not appeared. It remains an area of discomfort for Unitarian Universalists, especially in our anti-oppression justice work.

I was recently asked by the current UUMA Board to reflect on my tenure as President of the UU Ministers Association twenty-five years ago, and I was reminded that it was a time when the UUMA’s leadership team made its first covenant together to be and to lead towards becoming an anti-racist UUMA. When we published our covenant, and reflected on the learnings we had from our training together with Crossroads Ministries, we were surprised to receive several strong letters from colleagues offering a theological critique of this training and our covenant. Crossroads was based in a Christian doctrinal view of original sin, we were told. It requires confession of the sin of racism to receive redemption, we were cautioned. Why can’t the UUMA affirm a Unitarian Universalist anti-racism based in our affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person? we were asked.

Sitting on my kitchen table as I wrote to Wendy Williams about these questions we received all those years ago was the Washington Post Magazine’s cover story on Ibram X.Kendi, and his widely read best-seller on “How to be an Anti-Racist” in which he starts from the premise that “the heartbeat of anti-racism is confession”.

I can affirm his understanding because that has certainly been true for me. I learned something new, however, about the ways that confession can happen through our engagement with this year’s theme and Molly’s paper. I recognized that there is both a release and a new opportunity for engagement when we engage in rituals of collective confession. I learned from several of the stand-up specials that we were invited to watch about how a comedian can become the focus of an oppressed community’s celebration of itself, and a chance for people who have been part of the oppressor class to see themselves and the dynamics of power in which they often unconsciously engage in a new and accessible way.

We can do that too in our preaching and in our teaching. We have the capacity and I would say the obligation to appreciate and incorporate the transformational elements of confession in our worship and in pastoral counseling and in our relationships with staff. We recognize first and obviously that our parishioners and staff colleagues are not there to be our confessors or our therapists. There is a skillful means to telling a story that shares awkwardness, embarrassment, mistakes, or personal pain. Authenticity in the pulpit is critical to a transformational ministry, and our people always appreciate it when that authenticity includes the ability to laugh at oneself.

Similarly, in counseling, we have all learned that there’s a rare time that can be the right time to share a personal experience with the issue that your parishioner wants to talk about. You show your understanding by your attentiveness, by your reflection back, and by the life experience that is in the background of the decision your parishioner made to talk to you. The presumption that because you may be a parent, or a woman, or an older person and that therefore you are bringing something to the encounter personally beyond your professional skills is important.

The comfort zone that Molly describes for us, the zone where we maintain enough tension to keep challenging ourselves and our parishioners, and not so much tension that the inevitable controversy that comes with engagement drives people away, is very hard to maintain, and it has to be done through every aspect of our ministry. The pulpit, the counseling couch, and the

office table are all places where the zone of safety can be reinforced, and accepting the possibilities that participation in a congregation of confession offers can be encouraged.

Our congregations, and our ministries, have the capacity to be more resilient than our shame. Being able to laugh at ourselves, at our mis-steps and our failures, is necessary to build that resilience – and being able to confess that we do not have all the answers or that we are clumsy in how we seek them will just as important.