

Transforming the difficult sinner

Rachel Miller Jacobs

This spring, I attended a one-day conference called “Transforming the Difficult Child.”¹ With his workshop title, Howard Glasser lures in all kinds of well-meaning folks who are intent on changing their children, their students, or their clients, and then, surreptitiously, he changes *them*. The transformers become the

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transformed. And, miraculously, the shift in their behavior and thinking creates the space the “difficult children” need to find new ways of being. At least that’s what happened to me.

The gist of Glasser’s approach is to energize positive interactions with children, to have absolutely clear expectations for them, to stop being an enforcer, and to become a coach. On the surface, this doesn’t sound like anything special, but it turns out to be nothing short of revolutionary. When I came home from the conference, I started upping the positives, cheering my kids on, commenting specifically about the things they were doing well, noticing them before they

asked for my attention. I had thought that I was an encouraging parent, but I discovered (as did my children) the depth of my critical spirit, and how entrenched I was in my conviction that a temper tantrum or a refusal to obey could ruin an entire day.

After a week or so of looking for the good, I sat my kids down and told them I had noticed they were being exceptional in many ways, and that I thought they deserved some credit for all their hard work. I wasn’t making this up. My new disciplines were changing both what I noticed and their desire to be cooperative, considerate, and compassionate. With their help, I devised a list of ways to earn credit: rules, positive behaviors that would earn bonuses, and chores and responsibilities. This list included a

bunch of “gimmes,” things I knew the kids would do without fail, so that even on our most conflict-ridden days, I could give them credit for something going well. Beside each item was the credit they could earn by doing it. We also came up with a list of ways they could spend their credit: extra dessert, time with friends, staying up late, play time with a parent, maid service, TV and computer time. The list included the cost of each of these items (maid service is expensive, time with friends isn’t). I gave them a signing bonus for saying yes to the credit system and doubled it for signing on right away. My boys went to bed delighted with the stack of credits they’d received, about 500 apiece.

Everything was rosy until the next day, when they realized they had to pay with credits for privileges they had considered their right. All hell broke loose. For two hours, they yelled and cried and slammed doors and accused me of being a dictator. I sent them to time-out after time-out, all the while congratulating them on doing their time-outs well, commenting on how difficult this shift in perspective was, and telling them I could see they were really struggling to control their strong feelings. It wasn’t a pleasant afternoon for any of us.

But something remarkable happened when it came time to award credits at bedtime. I went down through the list, and as I got to “no yelling,” “no slamming doors,” “no arguing,” and “no calling people names,” I gave them half credit, as per the workshop leader’s instruction. They turned to me, aghast. “But Mom,” they said, “you can’t pay us for not yelling. We yelled a lot!” “That’s true,” I said. “But you were awake about thirteen hours, right? And you only yelled about two. So most of the day, eleven hours in fact, you weren’t yelling, and I want to make sure to give you credit for that.”

What struck me at the time, and what I’ve continued to think about, is the transforming effect of a context of abundance. In most credit schemes, you only get credit for the things you do perfectly. Teachers, parents, churches set it up like this because they really care about their students, children, and congregational members, and they’re committed to teaching them important values. What these well-meaning folks end up teaching, however, is that you’ll get noticed for the gradations of your failure. Focusing on failure doesn’t encourage most of us to learn from our

mistakes. Instead we learn to deny them, or blame them on someone else, or hold them at arm's length. And, sometimes, we get stuck in them.

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I was seeing and naming what went well rather than dwelling on what went badly, because I had committed myself to making sure they got all they needed rather than only what they deserved, they were able to take ownership for their behavior in a realistic way. Lest you fail to appreciate the import of their comments, I must point out that their "confession" was virtually unprecedented in our family life.

Did they learn that owning up to yelling brought an end to our relationship or provided an occasion for shame and blame? No. Their yelling was unpleasant, surely, and something not to turn into a habit. But who we were, and our relationship with each other, was about lots more than a yelling interlude, and this new approach gave us a way of living into that reality.

Which brings me to confession. It seems to me that the contexts in which we've thought about confession, the ways we've understood both ourselves and God in relation to what's gone wrong, have made confession almost impossible for us. When it comes right down to it, we're not confident that anything good can come from confession. We're convinced that admitting our failures is likely both to put others one up on us and to call down God's wrath—even if we don't quite believe in God's wrath. So we're tempted either to deny our sins or to wallow in them. We're tempted either to smugness or a kind of free-floating guilt, to the feeling that we do it all right or that we can never do enough.

And here's the odd thing. Whether we succumb to one of these temptations or to the other, the result is the same: we keep both ourselves and God at a distance. You wouldn't think so at first glance. But either way, it's pretty much all about us, pretty much about being at the center of our own perverse and twisted little universe.

What it takes for us to move from center stage is a sense of God's mercy. We can admit where we've gone wrong when we're confident that our sins are only a part of who we are, and that they don't really change the way God, or the people we love, see and value us. Unfortunately, however, most of us have understood Jesus' call to discipleship as a particularly deadly perfectionism. Nursed on the mother's milk of the Sermon on the Mount, we've passed over verses like "If you, with all your faults, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Abba God in heaven give good things to those who ask!" (Matt. 6:11).² Instead, we've taken as our motto a woodenly literal interpretation of an earlier passage: "Therefore be perfect, as Abba God in heaven is perfect" (5:48).³ To give us some credit, we haven't done this kind of selective reading with the Gospels only, but have applied it indiscriminately to the Law and the Prophets, the epistles and wisdom literature.

Let me be clear that I'm not arguing for skipping over all the judgment passages in Scripture. On the contrary, I want us to make sure to read them, but to do so side by side with the mercy texts, which is how the Bible usually brings them to us. It's just that so many of us have either fixated on judgment, or in reaction, we've made it a point not to be "into" judgment. As it turns out, not being into judgment doesn't help us out much, because we know in our very bones that things aren't always as they should be between God and us and in our relationships with others. Whether we get stuck in judgment or ignore it, we're in big trouble. The only way out is to struggle with how grace and terror can be, and are, neighbors, and thereby to come to a more nuanced understanding of who God is, an understanding that makes confession not only possible but desirable.

To create an environment where confession is possible, we must become convinced that it is our job as pastors, mentors, spiritual directors, teachers, and fellow believers to see what is good, to encourage its growth, and to speak of judgment and grace from the foundation of God's unconditional love. This love goes right to the heart of Jesus' ministry and mission, to his choice to suffer rather than condemn. This love affirms that God created us in God's own image, and that God isn't only trying to catch us being good (to borrow a phrase from educational psychology) but

is relentlessly committed to using every opportunity for moving us toward faith, love, and hope.

But what's to prevent us from continuing down the road to perdition if we haven't had our noses rubbed in our failure? Isn't

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highlighting mercy just another form of liberal namby-pamby, a particularly insidious form of "I'm O.K., you're O.K."? Though we sometimes find it difficult to believe, focusing on the good doesn't pretend that what's bad hasn't happened. It just means that we choose to give our energy, our attention, and our discernment to every baby step that leads toward, rather than away from, God. In the process, we learn to trust the one who created us in love and has no intention of abandoning us to our sins.

So the first thing we need to do in order for confession to take place is to create a context where it makes sense. We can do this through teaching, Bible study, and spiritual formation, both for ourselves and for others.⁴ We can invite people to think about their God images, and to listen for the ways God might be nudging them to a truer apprehension of the divine. One of the best ways to do God-image work is through guided meditations, which we can suggest to our families (including our children), our Sunday School students, our small group members, our spiritual friends, or our directees. And we can lead them in doing this work.⁵ We can make it a point to ask people what face God is showing them in the particular situations in which they find themselves. This is easier than it sounds. Many people are hungry for God-talk and have few opportunities to pursue it. With some sensitivity on our part, they will be happy to do their theological spadework. Sound theological work will inevitably have consequences for our behavior. From the Ten Commandments on down, the Scriptures clearly link who God is with what is called forth in the behavior, attitude, and allegiance of God's people.

But we dare not stop with context. We need to keep going and actually do the work of confession. Many Mennonite congregations already practice confession in Sunday morning

worship. This practice is a good beginning. But because not all kinds of confession are appropriate for public worship, and because so many of us are so out of practice in confessing our sins, we need to be imaginative in finding and encouraging ways to “just do it” in a wider variety of contexts.

The first place to begin is to practice and teach private prayer practices of confession. As a teenager, I was given a formula for private prayer which I used into my thirties: ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication or intercession). I doubt if private confession would have become part of my repertoire without this acronym. Another prayer practice is the consciousness examen, which provides a regular way to review our lives and make our confession to God.⁶

We can commit ourselves to practicing and modeling confession in our daily relationships with others: taking ownership promptly where we’ve gone wrong, asking for forgiveness, and, when necessary, making restitution. This kind of confession need not have a religious overtone and can include confession of our self-centeredness (manifested in our pattern of interrupting people or neglecting to listen to them) or of our lack of faithfulness (shown in breaking promises or forgetting responsibilities), to name just a few examples. While these are minor offenses, we do well not to overlook them. When you try something new, or scary, it helps to start small. And, for these occasions to help us with the work of confession, we need to be clear that confession is not merely apologizing. An apology is a social nicety that smoothes out relationships, but confession’s aim is more profound: transformation.

In addition to private confession to God and to each other in our daily lives, we also need to offer and enlarge the possibilities for private mediated confession. Partly because of disagreements about and changing perceptions of sin, even the congregations most stressing responsible church membership have generally avoided the practice of confession in congregational life. In addition, church discipline in the Anabaptist tradition has normally focused on shame (shunning) rather than guilt, and the shaming inherent in our tradition continues even in congregations that no longer practice the ban or its traditional antidote, a confession before the group which expresses appropriate humility,

followed by reconciliation and restoration to the community. Without intervention from spiritually mature people in representational roles (pastors, spiritual directors, pastoral counselors, elders, etc.), without a place for confession to take place and a movement toward reconciliation to be marked, it's unclear how people can find release from their shame.⁷

Mediated private confession can therefore become a useful part of pastoral counseling appointments, spiritual direction sessions, conversations with pastors or elders, meetings among

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spiritual friends, and the relationships of mature Christians (pastors, parents, Sunday school teachers) to children. Obviously the shape of confession will vary depending on the circumstances and people involved. We may need to suggest confession as an option for people who have never considered it, and encourage them to shape confession in a way that is useful to them.

When healing prayer has been requested, we can ask if there is anything in the person's life that might block their healing. In the case of people working with addictions in a Twelve Step program, we can provide a setting for

initial confession, and discernment about how and when to extend that confession into the penitent's life with others. In cases where we're called in for conflict mediation, we can encourage those involved to consider confession to each other and to God as an important part of their work together. When we sense others are burdened, we can ask if they need to make a confession and receive forgiveness, and if it would help to do it with someone who can be God's presence to them.

We can also encourage people to call together groups focusing on particular confessional needs. Support groups of various kinds often provide excellent places for confession to take place. Parents' groups, Twelve Step groups, men's and women's groups, youth groups, and Sunday school classes can all be places where we can confess our sins and struggles in relation to parenting, sexuality, addictions, or our misuse of money. People may also want to gather a specific group to confess particular sins and

receive forgiveness for them. These meetings may involve worship or new rituals crafted for the occasion, which could include Scripture reading, singing, anointing, laying on of hands, hand- or foot-washing, communion, and prayer, to name just a few possibilities. Those providing leadership in these contexts will establish clarity about the group's task, and create a setting that enables people to confess and receive forgiveness. When with false humility we wonder, "Who am I to forgive sins?" we risk missing important opportunities for God to be incarnate in our midst and for all us sinners to taste and see that God is good.

My own spiritual life and the lives of people I meet in a variety of contexts convince me that many of us are literally dying to know God's presence, love, and forgiveness in the midst of the pain, failure, and sin of our lives. We need many opportunities for confessing both the truth of our human need and the truth of God's forgiveness and desire for our wholeness. Pastors, congregational leaders, and spiritual directors are in an ideal position to help make confession a lively part of the spiritual practice of people of all ages and stages of spiritual maturity.

Notes

¹ See Howard Glasser and Jennifer Easley, *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach* (Nashville: Vaughan Printing, 1998).

² *The Inclusive New Testament* (Brentwood, Md.: Priests for Equality, 1996).

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Walter Wink's *Transforming Bible Study*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1989), and Patricia W. Van Ness, *Transforming Bible Study with Children: A Guide for Learning Together* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1991).

⁵ Excellent resources for guided meditations include Marlene Halpin's *Puddles of Knowing: Engaging Children in Our Prayer Heritage* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Pubs., 1984), and Flora Slosson Wuellner's *Release: Healing from Wounds of Family, Church and Community* (Nashville: Upper Room Bks., 1996).

⁶ A lovely resource for daily guided prayer (including the examen), with helps for those new to these practices, can be found at www.jesuit.ie/prayer. A good resource for using the examen with children is Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (New York: Paulist Pr., 1995).

⁷ For this historical perspective on confession, I'm indebted to Teresa Dutchersmith's unpublished paper, "Mediating Private Confession of Sin: A Representational Pastoral Task in the Work of Reconciliation," 15.

About the author

Rachel Miller Jacobs is a preacher, worship leader, teacher, and spiritual director. She is married to Randall Jacobs and they are the parents of three lively, delightful sons. She believes that if chocolate were associated with confession, we'd all be happier people.