



## Sidewalk Redemption

CONSTANCE ADLER

*A chance to speak your secrets could unchain your soul*

The inspiration came to me on Mardi Gras the year I dressed as the pope. I was resting on a curb on Frenchmen Street when someone asked what I was doing there. I replied, "I have come to hear confessions," an idea I didn't know I had until the words came out of my mouth. People began to kneel before me in the gutter and speak of their deepest sorrows and secrets. I heard myself saying wise and profound things. They appeared grateful. Or I said nothing and just listened. It didn't seem to matter. Those making their confession appeared genuinely transformed—lightened, relieved, joyful—simply by speaking their secrets aloud to me, regardless of my response. I knew I was onto something.

I decided to embark on a journey of discovery into the nature of confession—to explore the mystery at the heart of this ancient practice. Why do people want to confess? What does it do for them? Why does it work? Confession has been part of every known spiritual tradition, from ancient Egypt through Catholicism. Secular confessions abound in psychoanalysis, as well as in the recovery movement. The essence of confession seems ephemeral, deeply challenging and yet vital. We fear stripping away the veil of secrecy from our inner world, and yet we yearn to offer up the worst parts of ourselves so we don't have to carry them alone.

The first day that I hear confessions in Jackson Square I hang from an iron

fence a banner with the message "Confessions Heard Here," then sit beneath it with a pen and notebook and wait to see what happens. I have established some ground rules: I will make it clear to anyone who stops to talk to me that I'm writing a story and plan to record their confessions in my notebook. I'll use only first names or made-up names. I will not offer absolution because I do not consider myself empowered to do so. "I have come to hear confessions" is all I will offer; the interpretation of *confession* will be up to the person before me.

At first, people look quizzically at me, and I try to look neutral. I do not want to actively solicit a response from anyone; anything worthwhile I get will

have to be wholly voluntary. After about an hour of nothing, I begin to feel this whole thing is a bust.

Then a gang of Christian Teen Terrorists arrives. Spoiling for a fight, they have come to Jackson Square because they love Jesus Christ. They wear T-shirts bearing the lines: "That if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you shall be saved." Bingo!

They take one look at me and my banner and immediately swarm over. They ask with barely restrained aggression what am I doing. They can't put their finger on how exactly I'm offending them, but I can tell they really want to pummel me with their enlightenment. They retreat, huddle, and one girl approaches me.

"Hi, I'm Kristen. We are teens who have found Jesus Christ, and he has made an awesome difference in my life. My confession is that I love Jesus Christ with all my heart, and I want to spread that joy to everyone. And I wanted to tell you that everyone should accept him as their savior because that's the only way to get to heaven."

One by one, they make a confession of faith in Jesus Christ. They use the rhetoric of love but speak in tones of stinging hostility. It occurs to me that their love for Jesus Christ hasn't made them any less angry than teens who don't love Jesus Christ.

A coterie of alcoholics attaches itself to me. One assigns himself the task of protecting me from the Christian Teen Terrorists and barks at them whenever they come near me. We debate matters theological. He doubts that confession works. I maintain it has value in our lives. He offers me a sip of his gin and tonic. I decline. Another of the alcoholics mistakes me for an ally of the Christian Teen Terrorists and begins yelling at me, getting very close, and inadvertently spits into my face.

"That's enough! Back off!" I finally yell back at him. I disperse the alcoholics. This is not going well.

I seek advice from professionals. "A person is never more dignified than when he acknowledges he has done wrong," says Father William Maestri of

Notre Dame Seminary. Charlotte Mathes, a Jungian analyst, tells me "Confession breaks down the barriers of isolation and destroys the illusion of perfection—or the illusion that we are the worst person in the world." Still, I fear that someone might confess a horrible crime to me.

The second time I hear confessions, my worst fear is swiftly realized. No sooner do I hang my banner than an unkempt vagrant teen stumbles over and seats himself beside me. His torn clothing is stiff with grime; silver loops hang from his brow and lip. Haircut looks self-inflicted. Eyeballs appear swollen and swim unsteadily, seeming unable to fix on anything. He spells out his name for me, letter by letter: Benji Leo Boydston. "I have lusted," begins Benji. "Have murdered, stolen. I have raped." Here he looks significantly in my direction. I think this is supposed to intimidate me. I am good and scared by now and not sure what I should do. Call a cop? Keep listening?

"I am a violent alcoholic. I am me," Benji concludes. I notice Benji has a dried bloody gash about three inches long on his neck.

"Why did you decide to make your confession?" I ask in a small voice.

"Because you were here. I've never made a confession before." Benji sighs deeply and contemplates the implications of this. He continues. "I have a demon called Legion that runs with me. I swear that Legion is not one demon, but that is what he is called. That is all I have for you, my sister." He pats me companionably on the knee before staggering off. I am relieved. The imaginative turn his confession took at the end leads me to think Benji is just an ordinary loony, not truly a rapist or murderer.

A kid sporting a billy goat beard climbs to the top of the iron fence and yells to a friend on the other side of the park, "Hey! C'mon over! I'm thinking of having my confession done," apparently thinking it is much the same as a horoscope.

A man on holiday leaps atop a park bench and cries, "Bless me! It's been 40 years since my last confession!" His wife tugs at his shirt and makes him get down. I look invitingly at him, for I

long to talk to someone relatively sane and sober. I realize that, to tourists, I am just part of the oddball New Orleans scene—we are like creatures in a zoo here in Jackson Square—and none of them will ever stop to talk to me.

I realize, in fact, that the only people who will confess to me are people with nothing better to do—the unemployed, the drunk, and the crazy.

The next time I hear confessions, after making my first in 29 years at Saturday mass—perhaps the most intimate moment I've shared with a man—I try to emanate a new air of authority. A guy rolls up on his bike. Stephen is interested in making a confession, but first he wants to discuss the concept. We toss the whole philosophy around for a while: that confession frightens us because it forces us to contemplate our essential nature, which is alienated, pained, desperate, confused; that it breaks down rigid constructs of persona, allowing true self to emerge. While we talk, a street performer sets up his act. He is an escape artist who invites the audience to strap him into a straitjacket and then wrap thick chains around his arms and legs. This entertainer differs from the other Jackson Square buskers in that he performs mostly in silence. He squirms on the ground, inching his way out of bondage, throughout my conversation with Stephen.

Stephen is intrigued by the idea of confession, but ambivalent. He says he might feel better with a priest. "At least that's supposed to be a conduit to God. And therapists, well, I call them rent-a-friends. But you I don't know about. The nature of journalism is so cold and objective.

"To be honest," he adds, "I want to run right now. But at the same time, I am desperate to speak. There are things inside of me that I want to talk about. But I feel like I'll be opening Pandora's box. There are millions of things."

"I have come to hear confessions. What do you have to confess?"

"What do I have to confess?" Stephen takes a moment to consider. "I'm in love with an insubstantial hope." I

wait for more. None is forthcoming. The sun is setting, and a shadow falls over the square. Stephen and I watch the escape artist, who appears to move in a trance as he shifts the muscles of one shoulder in a manner that seems anatomically impossible. I watch the tourists watching the escape artist. They, too, appear to have fallen into a trance, mesmerized by the sight of this man writhing to escape from his own trap.

The chains cut painfully into the

crotch of the escape artist, who kneels doubled over before the audience. Saliva dangles from his mouth, and his face purples with the effort to ease one crucial loop over his foot. Then, with a grunt and a constricted hop, he slips the last of the chains and straitjacket over his head. And he's free. The audience erupts into applause.

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