

The Naked Eye

True Confessions

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*Telling our secrets to others
is an act of self-awareness and
an exchange of love.*

YESTERDAY I GOT A CHECK IN THE mail to write the story of my life. I find this amazing, since I've never been famous, rich, or castrated with a kitchen knife. Nonetheless, I have been asked to confess my secrets in hardcover, to spill my guts at Barnes & Noble, to report—on a scale that matches my ego—the facts of life as I have known them.

Such luck is an exhibitionist's dream, and an author's. It is also, I've come to believe, far more profound than that—a part of the human dream itself to strip yourself in the marketplace, to confess your most outrageous secrets without shame before you die. It's part of our hunger to bear witness—both to ourselves and to one another—and bridge the void around us. We're meant to pause for a moment in passing, to tip our hats and testify before each odd, particular being passes into memory.

The truth of this need for real-life confession struck me hard a few years back, when I found that I could not write a novel. Not one novel, in fact, but four unfinished, terrible concoctions, the remains of which are buried today like skeletons in a cardboard box. Year after year, I struggled to do what "real" writers do—to reinvent myself in fiction, to soar on the wings of make-believe—and each time I abandoned the work, bored out of my skull. The more I failed, the more I wondered why I was so awfully blocked, why I couldn't drop my reporter's mask, why, in other words, I was not a true *artiste*.

My dilemma ended unexpectedly in 1989. Destitute and about to be thrown out of my apartment, desperate to breathe some life into my livelihood, I decided to let the first person leak into an exposé I'd contracted to write out of necessity. This risk changed my entire career, as if I'd hit a motherlode. I found, to my astonish-

ment, a gold mine of a thousand stories buried underneath my nose. As time went on, I learned that the more I wrote in a confessional way, the more there was to discover about experiences on which I was the world's greatest (and only) expert. Why make up a world when you *are* a world, I wondered. I felt like Archimedes in his bathtub, shouting "Eureka!" My computer overflowed.



So did my mailbox, with letters from around the country telling me that people had been moved by my self-disclosure. For the first time in a decade of being published, I felt that I'd finally touched the public "out there," that my voice had been distinguished among a thousand others. Trite as this sounds, the contact was shattering, and led me to hope—as I'd given up doing—that what I did at my desk every day of my life, locked in a room with a blinking screen, might actually be of some earthly use.

The impact of this discovery got me thinking about the power of confession in general, and where it fit into the human drama. What if the world itself were really a theater for the unveiling of souls? What if confession (used in its broadest sense, free of sin, dogma, and coercion) were taking place in one form or other *nearly*

all the time, not only in churches and therapy—where the power of testimony as medicine has long been known—not only in support groups and Twelve Step meetings, but in coffee shops, beauty parlors, retreat centers, prison cells, classrooms, anywhere that people make love? It occurred to me that wherever individuals meet and tell secrets, where there's someone to talk and someone to listen, confession might work its subtle magic. People who've felt themselves invisible, alone, walled off in their private hells, might suddenly come to life—like the statue in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*—through contact with another being.

We find this reflex in nature herself. Babies must be mirrored to know that they exist; if not, they often compensate in heartbreaking ways. In founding hospitals, it's common to see "rocking sickness" among abused and abandoned children, clutching their own chests and swaying, whispering comfort to themselves. Beyond skin hunger, there is the spiritual need to be known and attended to, blessed and given meaning by this attention. Relationships teach this lesson all the time. My own partner, who suffered from depressive isolation most of his life, admitted that he finally knew his pain was real when he saw it in my face. His insight strengthened me in turn (his knowing that I knew that he knew that I knew . . .), confirming, again, that true confession is always a reciprocal act.

I seem to have known this as a child. Perhaps because I couldn't stop probing, perhaps because listening made people like me, perhaps because I was a writer *in ovo*, I became the family confessor. From the time that I was old enough to climb into a chair, my mother, sisters, neighbors, friends told me their deepest,

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darkest secrets, which I soaked up like a two-foot sponge.

This knack worked for me later on. As an editor at *Interview* magazine, I made a living getting celebrities to reveal their underbellies for the public. I learned in no time that the famous and infamous love nothing more than to talk about themselves, just like the rest of us. I learned that people are frequently at their best in the act of unbuttoned self-display and that even the most reticent feel better afterward. Once, I wrestled for weeks with Kurt Vonnegut's agent to get an interview with the author of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, then, two hours into a 60-minute meeting, couldn't shut my subject up. When

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I finally escaped out the front door, Vonnegut came running after me down the stairs, eager to reveal one last detail he'd forgotten: a Lyme-tick bite in the middle of his back.

The point is that we all have scars we're tired of hiding. We all have the secret urge to flash them in the light, to assure ourselves that they—and we—really matter. We all have a thousand stories to tell, tangled in us like balls of yarn, that can't be unraveled alone. This is what communion means, and what makes confession sacred. The truth, as always, sets you free. To confess is to take possession of your life at last. It doesn't matter how you do this, only that you do, as shamelessly and frequently as you possibly can.

So I'll write my book and pray for the best. I have nothing to lose but my reputation. What's left of it, that is.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author, with Andrew Harvey, of *Dialogues with a Modern Mystic* (Quest Books) and of an upcoming memoir, to be published by Putnam.

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