

Flourishing Through Contrition: Hunger and Transformation

July 2011 by Shannon Jung, Saint Paul School of Theology

Who among us can eat well when we become aware that what allows us to flourish precludes other people's flourishing? That is the conundrum that will shape this essay. The following are the steps of an argument intended to grapple with that problem.

Step One: Food is intended for delight and nourishment

Food was created and is intended for human delight and sharing. There is enough for all![\[1\]](#)

Step Two: The distribution of food is not equitable, with the delight of some contingent on the suffering of others

Those in affluent cultures (and that probably includes all, or most, who read this essay) delight in good food, but participate in a system that precludes distributing food equitably enough so as to avoid others' starving or being chronically malnourished. Whether or not we intend to participate in this unjust system, it is clear that most of us do not know how to do otherwise. In short, the affluent appropriate the benefits of a global food supply system that unjustly costs the producers and other "service workers" who enable those benefits.[\[2\]](#) These benefits also come to the affluent at the cost of the health of the wider earth community. And let us not be deceived: the consequences of such benefits are structural, built into the economy, and require considerable resistance to imagine and live differently.

Step Three: The result is injury to all parties

Furthermore, these costs are damaging to the health of both the affluent and the poor; to the economies even of "developed" nations; to farmers and rural communities; to the earth community; and to the spiritual well-being of the affluent.[\[3\]](#) Evading the recognition of reality does not evade the consequences of evading reality, as Ayn Rand herself is quoted to have said.

Step Four: We are complicit

Those costs, I believe, are indirect, not deliberate, largely unseen, and not a matter for so harsh or overwhelming an accusation as that of guilt. But they are a matter of complicity, a weak complicity when considered individually, but a powerful complicity when considered socially, ecologically, and globally. Consider just a few examples that come to mind: Katrina, Haiti, climate change, world hunger, tsunamis, starvation, wars, Japan, epidemics, political rebellion, and economic downturns and their consequences. The affluent must face the reality of their individually weak but cumulatively powerful complicity.[\[4\]](#)

Step Five: Contrition is the way to and beyond complicity

So what exactly is involved in becoming aware of our complicity on a visceral level? It is contrition that is both the trigger to awareness and simultaneously the result of awareness. If we are to flourish we must face complicity and be moved to contrition. That is the path to being transformed and flourishing. Elsewhere I have made the case that contrition is a gift of grace in the face of complicity. Consumerism blocks contrition and is a barrier to our transformation.[\[5\]](#)

This fifth step is the focus of the present essay. However, let me lay out two further steps whose shape will depend on the answer to this fifth one.

Step Six: To be successful in this “conversion,” we must re-educate our desires

Contrition involves the re-education of desire in a consumer culture such as ours where we are taught there is no such thing as “enough.” For example, take the matter of easy, costly credit. A woman protesting the credit card (and payday loan) industries once complained, “I just see how it has caused us to want more and more.”^[6] Our desires will need to be re-educated from the senses outward if we are to begin to share and be transformed. That may in fact involve such basic and unconscious processes as brain chemistry and other forms of body memory. Clearly it will involve an alternative form of desire to what we presently experience in our culture – community and compassion will be among the values embodied in that alternative.

Step Seven: Transformation is grounded in hope.

It is a matter of hopeful belief that people (and especially the affluent) can be transformed so as to enjoy their lives and to recognize that their well-being and that of others are conjoined. The nature of that transformation and the steps that will reinforce it are significant. It will necessarily involve a greater sense of community—a community of mutual benefit, a reduction in the significance and amount of consumables in affluent people’s lifestyles and identity; a real and sustained effort to reduce hunger to a minimum; and a sense that others’ needs are on a par with our own.^[7] (Note: Mark Bittman reports today that “the amount of grain being fed to industrially raised livestock in the United States alone is enough to alleviate much if not all of world hunger.”^[8] Presumably some of that grain would be used to feed malnourished people first in what this seventh step is labeling a transformed world.)

The answer to the opening question is co-terminus with the answer to the following one: How can we both delight in the goodness of food and know that we are enabling others to delight? Part of the solution to that question resides in our ability and willingness to accept and live a story that stands over us in accountability and that has the power to effect transformation? In part, that means that we will need to be able to live within limits. My guess is that we will find such living a joy rather than the threat we now perceive it to be. Being contrite logically necessitates an experience of accountability to some standard or rule of life or story; without the ability to accept such a norm into our lives, we are rudderless and often, one suspects, flying by the seat of our feelings.

Contrition as the Key to Transformation

At the moment, however, this essay will return to step five. Since I have been working on this issue, the Gordian knot has always been the question of motivation: “What causes or enables change?” I have found that it is **contrition** that enables moral agents (people) to be willing to change their lifestyles, most notably to consume less and to share more.^[9] Though it seems counter-intuitive in our consumer culture, the ability to be alert to the ways we contribute to others’ misery is the beginning of our own true flourishing. Vitor Westhelle puts it stronger when he writes, “The movement of grace must always start with us... Grace can come only with repentance, and by allowing ourselves to be exposed to the wounds of the world.”^[10]

I was recently brought up short by a comment made by ethicist and theologian Tex Sample. He said, “Asking ‘how’ [how to foster renewal, how to live a more moral life, how to change] is the wrong question. Instead, the question is: What am I as a follower of Jesus Christ to be?”^[11] I was startled to realize that I had been pursuing this question of transformation the wrong way. I had been asking, “How” or “What should we do,” when I should have been asking, “Who should we be,” “Who are we,” or “Who is God.” Sample helped me go beyond my previous inquiry which may have been confined, in part, to a utilitarian examination of human capacity. Sample’s comment does not express the whole truth, but it does contain at least half the truth.

Whereas Westhelle emphasizes human responsibility and action, Sample prioritizes the initiatory act of God. Both, though, point toward the necessity in transformation of “becoming” or “embodying,” not just “doing.” In regard to their perspectives, I maintain it is grace that allows us to be alert, to recognize our appropriation and complicity, but I also contend that it is necessary to respond to that grace by opening ourselves to the “how” of transformation.

Both Westhelle and Sample have important points to make. I recognize them both as necessities, in sequence: first, the movement of grace to bring us to openness and awareness, and then application of human ingenuity to transform the hungers of the world. This sequence is made possible by contrition.

So what is contrition? Robert Roberts was instrumental in getting my thought moving in this direction. In his book, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues*,^[12] he differentiates contrition from guilt and other related emotions. Contrition is the awareness that my actions are implicated in others’ distress and that I recognize my own turpitude before God in that distress. In short, my actions have contributed to that distress. Contrition also entails an awareness of the forgiveness of God and that my turpitude before God can be forgiven;^[13] thus, my life does not have to continue in the past ways that have generated regret and wrong. I recognize that there is the possibility of change.

Contrition is a complex emotion, and the task of excavating its nuances is complicated. My definition arises from personal experience, research, and from conversations with others. To begin, let us lay out its ingredients. Note that there is some sequential movement in these elements of contrition. Regret and awareness precede the elements of forgiveness and community, which precede the element of having a rule of life or discipline.

Elements of Contrition

1.) **Regret**—That we the affluent are complicit in the misery of others is a hard pill to swallow. It is easy to see why many of us ignore or evade that reality. But it is, in fact, reality. Contrition begins with the confrontation of that reality and the emotion of regret. We are discomfited by the fact that the ribeye we eat with relish entailed the use of gallons of water and pounds and pounds of grain that also produced ill effects for the air and water and possibly the cattle as well. That grain and water came to us through the labor of others (say, Mexican-American beef packers in Dodge City, Kansas) who work in conditions and for wages that many would not. We imagine the pain and harm that went into that ribeye and can empathize with that suffering. While we learn through our own pain, immediate experience of adversity, and tribulations, we have the (limited) capacity to imagine vicariously the sufferings of others. That means we can, to

a degree, identify with others if we have not experienced suffering ourselves. We regret that suffering. [14]

2.) **Being aware**—Awareness is much more complex than it appears. Human beings seem capable of letting certain information onto their screens and into their hearts at different levels. An imminent and clear danger triggers immediate awareness and action; at the same time, others' criticism of our acts can easily be dismissed or simply not heard. We remain unaware of what they are saying. Thus, to be aware involves information, but also involves allowing that information to register. When the issue is our appropriation of the benefits of others, or of the ways that we add just an increment to a situation we regret, it is more difficult to allow ourselves to accept and examine that issue. Thus, this issue generates another one: what does it take for us to become aware of issues of active commission, or of cooperation with evil, or of reactive hurt, much less issues of weak complicity which can become diffused over a multitude of actors?

Perhaps it is also fear that blocks us from acknowledging our appropriation; we fear that our security will be breached if we confess that we are complicit. We may feel that denying any vulnerability or any connectivity with others will wall us off from all danger and destroy any relationships that may make a claim on us, even if they might enrich our lives and give us joy. We simply cannot face the sort of insecurity that fear brings because we are afraid that the only trustworthy fortresses are the ones we erect. In short, we may block awareness because we fear what we may find—rejection, vulnerability, and diminishment. We fear that there may be only judgment and condemnation. Contrition brings the gift of letting all that go, secure in the providence of God.

3.) **Recognizing the possibility of new life. Success stories**—One of the elements that enables people to experience contrition is the recognition that there is life on the other side of -complicity. By realizing the hope that one can change and amend one's habits and ways of acting, men and women become capable of change. I have become much more optimistic about this since joining Alcoholics Anonymous. I have seen people change, and I myself have changed. One of the dynamics that contributes to AA's success is that fellow alcoholics tell their stories about change and about how their ongoing recovery is improving their lives. Two or three of the steps in the program talk about making amends for what we have done in the past; -those steps of making amends are not dependent on the acceptance or forgiveness of those whom we have harmed. Thus, the possibility of new life is fostered by success stories which depend on "God doing for us what we could not do for ourselves" (from *The Promises*, Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book*, 64).

Furthermore, socially and corporately, success stories of collective action bolster our hope that there is the possibility of making amends, of changing the world for the better. Without such hopes, there may seem little reason to be contrite or make amends.

4.) **Community**—While it is true that individual men and women can make amends as an act of contrition, and true that we can realize that such contrition and amend-making is valuable regardless of the other's reaction, it is yet also true that beliefs (and the capacity to make amends) depend on community. It is in community with others that we learn that we will not be shunned, ostracized or rejected when we are contrite and confess our weaknesses, wrongs, and

complicity. This may sound too simple; it is not. The practice of community depends on being accepted by others, while learning to accept others and to appreciate the unity of the group. There is no need to like another person nor to condone his or her behavior; that is not entailed in the practice of community. But, without an ongoing sense of community, the practice of repentance and confession of complicity will die out. Furthermore, it is in reflecting on experience with trusted others that we learn from our experiences.

5.) Some empathy. A point of connectivity—Our own pain and vicarious experience of others' pain and suffering is a significant point of connectivity. Empathy with others' hunger, for instance, can result from voluntary fasting, a recognition both of what we can do without and what others are often compelled to do without. Contrition simply does not seem possible (does not have much lasting impact) without a sense of community or connectivity. In part, this is because hunger is a collective and social phenomenon and not simply an individual one. Contrition may be individually felt, but it is buttressed and reinforced only by the communion of others. That is logical since hunger and many of today's ecological issues are collective in source. They call for the collective actions of millions.

6.) An experience of grace, that forgiveness is possible. An "ah-ha" moment—This aspect of contrition may be a bit repetitive, but worth running that risk. Somehow contrition requires an experience that forgiveness is possible. We need to *experience* this forgiveness; it must be a bodily experience (thus, an ah-ha moment) that comes over us, and that is not something we can will or think ourselves into. The experience of forgiveness from others is analogous with the forgiveness of God. Better put, it is one way that God's forgiveness comes to us. And because that is true, it becomes all the more important that we communicate the reality of forgiveness to others—and that the affluent belong to communal groups that live out forgiveness. This community may be a church, but it could any kind of organization.

7.) A rule of life that is based on a narrative that makes incarnational sense to us—Perhaps it is becoming clear that contrition is not so much obligatory or even utilitarian as it is illuminative and formative. It is a gift more than it is an achievement. We may be in the right place and with the right people to receive the gift of awareness and contrition, but why some receive that gift and others do not is a mystery. Stanley Hauerwas has been hammering that we are formed by living a narrative and having our character shaped by remaining true to the Christian narrative, whether or not it conforms to the liberal, the evangelical, or the American narratives. Why some can be vulnerable enough to receive the gift of recognizing their own moral deficiencies and complicity, and then surrendering to God, and others not, appears to be somewhat beyond our own capabilities to know or effect. Perhaps it is a matter of opening ourselves (to the extent this is possible) to God's action.

Contrition is difficult because it invites us to hold ourselves accountable to a particular set of standards. Here is where Sample is right; contrition invites us to be the sort of people that Jesus Christ would have us be. We are challenged to live a narrative rather than choose what accords with our own desires at the moment, or to attempt to calculate what is in our best interest. It is only when we stand before judgment that we experience grace and are free. We are only free when we live in such a way that our path can be called into question. Contrition, it turns out,

requires a standard by which we can be judged and come to repentance. We need a rule of life that admits contrition, amends, and transformation.

According to Gregory Fruehwirth, superior of the Order of Julian of Norwich in Waukesha, WI, our contemporary situation urgently needs people who have been transformed. Those who seek to do God's will and be transformed "can do nothing more helpful than committing [them]selves to a rule of life under spiritual direction, within the framework of a worshiping community. Until," he writes, "we engage a regular rule of life, and until we are willing to see ordinary life as the place of our encounter with God, exactly as it is, we will be unable to grow spiritually."^[15] Turning from lives centered on our fears, desires, and anxieties, we commit ourselves to a spiritual rule and begin to walk in the way that leads toward intimacy and presence and action. Doing so, "we become presence workers in the world, an epiphany of God's presence and Jesus' life and energy here and now."^[16]

The entire ninth chapter of the Gospel of John is devoted to the story of the blind man whom Jesus healed and who was subsequently subjected to the questioning of his neighbors and the Pharisees. Eventually Jesus finds the man again and, after the man's confession of Jesus' Lordship, Jesus says: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." The Pharisees, overhearing this, said to him, "Are you talking about us? Surely not." Jesus replies, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (John 9:39-41).

As I read this, the act of contrition and the recognition of one's turpitude is the key to vision/sight, but failure to see one's own shortcomings and one's neglect of others—nay, even complicity—is to fall into blindness. The references to incarnational sight and lack of it are instructional. The failure to be sensitive to others and to recognize the truth bodily is a curse. To remain complicit in one's sin and to attempt to evade it is one way of choosing to follow one's own desires and anxieties rather than to follow a rule of life that transcends our whims and complacency.

Turning to another, secular, way of saying this is discovered when we turn to cultural and political theory. An important volume, *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice* "contends that when complicity is silenced, especially when preparing for an act of commitment, injustice remains facilitated and perpetuated."^[17] Rather than being understood as an immobilizing or aversive condition, complicity is seen as an enabling force of commitment. That commitment, in the terms of this essay, is liberating when it travels through contrition to responsibility.

Contrition Reconsidered

These elements, when taken together, form a sort of etymology of contrition. Roberts calls emotions "concern-based construals" and indeed we perceive in the above elements a mix of feeling and thought. As we moved through those elements, they increasingly concerned our flourishing.

At some point in this excavation of contrition, I began to realize that what I was drawing out of the experience of contrition was that contrition itself is a means of grace. It began to look more

and more like flourishing itself. The notion (and it was barely more than an intuition at that point) that steps six and seven depended on the shape of contrition was spot on. Perhaps by the time we are blessed with contrition, we begin to see the way forward into transformation. Some of the steps—connectivity, community, and a rule of life—begin to suggest what transformation might look like. Were there space, I would try to describe in what sort of ways the grace of contrition could re-educate our desires and calm our anxieties.

Let it suffice to say, the great strength of contrition is this: that it slingshots us into actions that are intended to ameliorate the condition that gave rise to our complicity and contrition in the first place. Contrition alone is not sufficient to effect full change, but it does further our willingness to attack such issues as hunger and homelessness. The area of the global food supply system and our own personal eating and drinking are areas which feed into how we flourish; it is difficult to flourish when we recognize that the food we eat comes to us through others' misery. But recognizing that, we can be freed to flourish by the act of contrition.

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Notes

[1] Jung, *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

[2] Jung, *Hunger & Happiness: Feeding the Poor, Nourishing Our Souls* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2009); see also Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickled and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2001, new afterword, 2008).

[3] For an extended compilation of statistics and arguments to substantiate these claims, see *Hunger & Happiness*.

[4] See Julian Cribb, *The Coming Famine: The Global Food Crisis and What We Can Do to Avoid It*. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2010), and also Ellen LaConte, "Garden As If Your Life Depended On It, Because It Does," AlterNet, posted on March 29, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.alternet.org/story/150428>.

[5] See my essay, "The Re-education of Desire in a Consumer Culture," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32 (forthcoming).

[6] Jesse James DeComo, “The People’s Interest: A New Battle Against Usury,” *The Christian Century* (January 12, 2010), 25.

[7] See Jung, “The Re-education of Desire in a Consumer Culture,” for some specification of what I presently believe such transformation will involve.

[8] Mark Bittman, “Stating the Obvious: Hunger Is a Disease,” *New York Times* (March 31, 2011), accessed at <http://bittman.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/31>.

[9] In what follows, much is owed to the students in my Theology of Growing and Eating class as well as to Marilyn Rochon, Rebecca Todd Peters, Patti Jung, Jerry Hiller, Craig Nessian, and a host of theologians and ethicists via their writings. See also my “Consumption, Complicity, Community,” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49:4, Winter 2010 (December issue), 284-290.

[10] Vitor Westhelle, “Exposing Zaccheus,” *Christian Century* (October 31, 2006), 27. I would claim that it is grace that allows us to be alert to our sins and the evil in which we cooperate and that, without such grace, awareness is impossible.

[11] Tex Sample, “An Address at the Rural Ministry Conference of the Center for Theology and Land,” Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa (March 7, 2011). As a Calvinist, I hold that it is important to attend to both who we are and how we learn to live a moral life.

[12] Eerdmans, 2007.

[13] The question of whether this sense of turpitude and new possibility necessarily involves forgiveness **by God** is an important one. We Christians would say yes, but allow the possibility—I think—that God’s forgiveness can be mediated and our lives redeemed without our own conscious decisions through God’s action on our behalf. This implies a strong theology of creation/creativity as well.

[14] Related to regret may be a sense of emptiness, of having to block out certain negative emotions. This may entail a sense of the question, “Is that all there is to life?”

[15] Gregory Fruehwirth, “Letting Go: Stages of the Contemplative Journey,” *The Christian Century* (November 4, 2008), 10-11. It strikes me that the twelve step process that I identify with Alcoholics Anonymous is such a rule of life.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Begum Ozden Firat, Sarah De Mul, and Sonja van Wichelen, eds., “Introduction,” *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Co., 2009), 10.