

# Confess And Be Happy

Hi, I'm Scott, I'm an alcoholic  
and I killed my girlfriend in 1971

By David Ray

The Saturday morning A.A. meeting was large - a circle populated with 12-steppers, some casually dressed in jeans and others with suits and ties or the trim executive outfits yuppies wear when venturing near a fashionable shopping area in Kansas City.

A few of the folding chairs were untaken, and 10 minutes into the meeting a man with scruffy reddish-brown hair and a mustache, perhaps 40 or just over, wandered in and looked about in sullen appraisal.

"Well, I finally learned the hard way, I just had to let go and let God," a girl was saying, running her hands through her dark hair. "That's about all I have for today, so I'll pass."

It was the scruffy-haired fellow's turn already, and he wasted no time. "I'm Scott," he said, "and I'm an alcoholic.

"Hi, Scott," everyone greeted him.

"I'm glad to be here," he said. "I came today - although this isn't my regular meeting - because my sponsor's been telling me I'll never stay sober unless I confess, like the fifth step tells us to. Here's the deal. Back in 1971, I murdered my girlfriend - it's that simple. I injected her with an overdose of heroin. I took her to the emergency room, but nobody suspected I had done it. It was easy to get away with it."

A few heavy sighs, but no one interrupted. It was not unusual to hear a shame script, a recitation of what people had done when they were drinking - a "drunkalogue." Most of it was covered under the leader's usual reminder at the opening of each meeting. "What is said here should stay here."

"I served some prison time later, for manslaughter, on a drunk driving charge," Scott added, "but they never

found out about my girlfriend. So there it is and I'll pass."

"Don't worry," the leader assured him, "We're not going to hang you."

Then a woman stood up and walked over to Scott.

"Jesus Christ died 2,000 years ago for your sins," she said. "I want to give you a hug. God loves you." Awkwardly, she bent down and hugged Scott.

Perhaps Scott had exaggerated his guilt. There's the joke about the alcoholic who was in a San Francisco hotel at the time of the great earthquake. He awoke, looked out the window, and said to himself, "Oh, hell, how am I ever going to pay for this?"

The meeting droned on as usual, with speakers one by one telling of their struggles not to drink, and to maintain a spiritual center. None made a reference to Scott's confession. And when they were finished, all stood up, joined hands in a circle, and intoned the Lord's Prayer.

Scott was invited to stay for coffee, but he slipped away, presumably with confidence that his secret was safe. And yet, "We are only as sick as our secrets" is another A.A. tenet.

But is murder covered by the 12-step formula? Apparently at least one precedent says no, because last year Paul Cox, a carpenter from Larchmont, N.Y. was convicted for a 1988 double slaying he revealed during an A.A. meeting five years later.

The Alcoholics Anonymous fifth step says to admit our wrongs "to God, to ourselves and to another human being." Another human being might be a priest or a doctor, but could "ourselves" mean a room full of strangers? How far does confidentiality go in a 12-step meeting? And are we really empowered to forgive on

behalf of victims we don't even know? And who are we to decide a killer is no longer a threat?

Detective Porfiry inviting Raskolnikov, the murderer in Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," to confess, said "it will be infinitely better for you." But there was a little matter of expiating the crime with a few years exile in Siberia.

Raskolnikov experienced the redemptive love of Sonya, as well as the understanding of the detective who trapped him for his own good. Sonya was willing to go with him to Siberia, but she never suggested that his solution was to hide his crime. "Go to the crossroads," she told him, "bow down before the people, and kiss the ground, because you are guilty before them, and say aloud to all the world, 'I am a murderer!'"

She does not tell Raskolnikov to say it to a group assured that his secrets will be kept. She says "to all the world."

Let's hope Scott's not still a danger to others, but who am I to decide, particularly when justice these days seems to be as much a matter of popularity or social prestige as of guilt or innocence. When was the last time a rich man was executed?

For decades Klansmen walked out of Southern courtrooms with smirks on their faces, after justice was not done. Do we give the same blessing to those crimes we do not report? What right does a killer have to expect us to keep his secret?

Recently in a Kansas City suburb at least a dozen teenagers kept the secret of a classmate who had been involved in a murder. All knew, none told...as if they were sworn to the Mafia code. And a friend told me he had not reported being mugged because he was afraid of retaliation.

"I don't owe it to society to get myself killed," he said.

"But you are society," I said. "If everyone makes that decision, we have anarchy."

Perhaps we don't care enough about the victims - including Scott's nameless girlfriend, dead for nearly two decades.

A minister has told me how he handles confessions like Scott's. He offers to go with the confessor to the authorities, to stand by him as he accepts accountability. A 47-year-old friend of mine was provoked into a fit of weeping and a call to her daughter, who hangs out with drug people, after I told her about Scott's confession. "That could happen to her," she said. "I could get a phone call at any moment saying that's just what happened to her."

Maybe we are so far down the road of contempt for ourselves and the earth that we listen with benumbed fascination, then share our own confessions with the dreamy confidence that no one will really take them seriously. Porfiry and Sonya no longer live among us and we are not obliged to accept Siberian exile, though it might restore sanity.