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# Confessing

October 2023



UNITY CHURCH-UNITARIAN

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# Confessing

October's theme is not one that is typically found in Unitarian Universalist curriculum. Early in the development of Universalism and Unitarianism, our ancestors rejected such concepts as original sin, and developed a theology of inherent goodness. As a result of this theological shift, the liturgical traditions that acknowledge human capacity for sin and evil were removed from worship, from religious education and from a deeper engagement.

Many come to Unitarian Universalist churches to escape the heavy-handed dogma of a religious tradition that made them feel guilty or innately wrong. Instead, Unitarian Universalism feels like an ever-flowing stream of positive and hopeful potential. Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke famously believed in "The Progress of Man [sic] kind, onward and upward forever." James Freeman Clarke was an optimist. And he was wrong.

As Unitarianism grappled with the evils of the First and Second World Wars; as we came to understand the horrors of the Holocaust and subsequent wars, Unitarians and Universalists moved farther away from the belief that humankind would progress in spiritual maturity "onward and upward forever." Instead, we grapple with the reality of evil and the culpability of the human heart for sin. Yet, even though we have no doctrine of sin—nor do we have a liturgy to acknowledge this human reality, we are ever more aware of the need to confess our humanness, which includes the ability to cause harm—to ourselves, to one another—and to our planet.

Confession—as many former Catholics understand it—is a practice that no longer means much to them. Yet, "confessing," our confusion, our uncertainty, our mistakes, our vulnerabilities within the context of religious community is not about going to a priest for absolution. Instead it is a form of spiritual practice, most often done within the context of recovery communities, but available to us all. Confessing is an acknowledgement of our own brokenness; our own capacity for harm. It extends to the awareness that for those of us who believe ourselves to be white, we too have played a part in benefiting from and maintaining white supremacy culture, which, writ large, perpetuates harm. The hope for our month of "Confessing" is not to engender feelings of guilt or shame, but rather, an opportunity to unburden oneself, through the embodied practice of our worship life. Only through confessing our weaknesses, can we then truly, as Rev. Rob Eller-Issacs wrote "to forgive ourselves and each other and begin again in love."

Confessing then—is a verb. It's an act. The Ministry Team, the Chalice Circles and small groups all encourage you to go deeper into what "confessing" means to you. It is our hope that this month provides you with a time of deep introspection and reflection.

Written by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz. Contributors include Rev. Lara Cowtan, Rev. KP Hong, Rev. Tom Duke, Rev. Andrea La Sonde Anastos, and Nelson Moroukian.

# Spiritual Practices

## Option A Confessing Litany

Confessing is a form of self-assessment that invites us to look not only at what we have done that aligns with our deepest values, but also the places where we have operated out of fear or denial, out of comfort or self-satisfaction, rather than from our professed beliefs. Confessing is not intended to shame us, but to allow us to recognize our wounds so that we may bring healing power to them.

This litany can be spoken all at one time, with silence left as written for thought and presence. Or you may choose to do only one segment per day, perhaps leaving a longer silence to journal your feelings or to light a candle of intention.

I confess my words spoken in vengeance or anger or fear  
and my silence of abandonment or disapproval. (Silence)  
I confess the lies I have told  
and the lies I have implied  
and the lies I could have corrected. (Silence)  
I confess the peace I have stolen from my neighbors,  
the misuse of my authority to deny joy to someone,  
the protection of my ego at the expense of another. (Silence)  
I confess that I have taken more than I need  
and given less than I am able. (Silence)  
I confess the dashing of someone else's hope,  
the disrespect of someone else's self,  
the disparagement of someone else's curiosity. (Silence)  
I confess what I have done with ill intent  
and what I have left undone for my own comfort. (Silence)  
I confess all that separates me from my true self,  
from those who are most dear to me,  
from the living beings who share this planet,  
and from the planet itself. (Silence)  
May I lay down the burden of self-interest  
and find common cause with those I meet this day.  
May it be so.

## **Option B**

### **Reflecting Backward Through the Day**

In *The Art of Confession: Renewing Yourself Through the Practice of Honesty*, Paul Wilkes outlines a practice he calls praying or reflecting backward through the day. It invites you to unwind the past day, starting from the present and looking back; to gather in all the goodness and light. Then, in gratitude, attend to the shadows and what they say to you, seeking healing, courage, and forgiveness. He writes that it is not an exercise in self-reproach or anxiety: “Its purpose, rather, is to allow you to see yourself more clearly, to see where change is needed and when you are on track.” Move through these prompts:

At the end of the day, let your mind rest for a moment.

Now, slowly wander back through the day you have just lived. There is no hurry.

You may be surprised that you skip right over what seemed to be the major events of the day and find yourself instead pondering the seemingly inconsequential.

Let your mind wander. Let it take detours; that is exactly the purpose of this exercise.

If you find yourself making connections between something that happened today and something in the past, all the better. Most of us are creatures of habit. Our objective is to find those habits that enrich our well-being and those that are not in alignment with who we really are.

When you finally arrive at morning, rest. Let the day’s events speak to you.

Let those events of which you are proud confirm your desire to do them again or more often.

Consider those events that you know do not represent the best in you, and how you might better handle them in the future.

In your Chalice Circle, share something of your experience: Was it helpful? Did this form of confession move you to insight, to change?

## **Option C**

### **Confessional Writing**

Confessing can be an element of spiritual memoir, journaling, poetry, and letter writing. Whether this is part of your spiritual practice or new for you, try writing a confession. Come to Chalice Circle prepared to comment on the experience.

Was it productive, even healing, for you?

Has this kind of writing been an important exercise for you in the past?

Is confessional writing that is not shared with others a meaningful practice? In what way? Are you moved to share what you have written? How?

## Questions to Ponder

Read through the questions below and notice which ones resonate with you. One or more of the questions might seem particularly compelling, or some might stir resistance in you. Either of these reactions might make the question fruitful to consider. Choose just one and take time to consider it, over several days if possible. Write it down on a piece of paper to carry in your pocket. Or take a picture of that paper with your phone. Or record it in your journal. Spend some time, each day if you can, reflecting on it in writing or otherwise, noticing where it leads you and what you learn from it, and your response to it.

### Questions

1. Is there value in confessing, in and of itself? Does confessing provide absolution?
2. What and to whom do we confess, and why?
3. Can you repent and atone for a wrong without confessing?
4. Think of your experience of confession in a worship context at Unity Church, or a confession of sins in another faith community. What was this experience like for you? Is this form of confession important to you? Why or why not?
5. *Anam cara*, soul friend, originally referred to someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life. Do you have such a friend? Are you someone's *anam cara*? What has this sharing been like for you?
6. Is there an event or behavior in your past or present that you yearn to confess? What is making it difficult to carry through?
7. What does an unhealthy secret or an unresolved action feel like for you? Where do you feel it in your body? (For instance, a cord around your lungs? A heavy place beneath your sternum? Restlessness?)
8. Have you ever received a confession that was disconcerting or awkward? How did you respond?
9. Have you ever shared a confession made to you, with someone else?
10. What is the best thing to do when confessing to someone you've harmed causes more harm than healing? Might there be another way toward healing?
11. What's the purpose of confessing? Do you do it for yourself, to relieve your own burden; or, do you do it as one step in righting a wrong?
12. If a person confesses without moving to repair the situation or change their behavior, can a confession do more harm than good?
13. Have you ever been coerced into confessing? Was it an authentic confession? How did it make you feel?
14. **What is your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't name what life is asking of you now, spend the month listening to your heart to hear what is your question.

# Inspiration

## Recommended Resources

### For Personal Exploration & Reflection

Here you will find a variety of resources to help take a deeper dive into the worship theme. These offer you several ways to engage with the theme that invite you to consider it thoughtfully, to inspire thinking, and open you to new insights. They are optional. As you browse the packet, consider trying out several that hold meaning for you and, possibly, one or two that may feel challenging.

### Word Definitions

Confess—verb

1. to acknowledge or avow (a fault, crime, misdeed, weakness, etc.) by way of revelation.
2. to own or admit as true: I must confess that I haven't read the book.

(Dictionary.com)

Confessing is the act of admitting or acknowledging something, typically a wrongdoing or a fault. It involves taking responsibility for one's actions and expressing remorse or regret for any harm caused. Confessing can take various forms, such as verbal or written statements, and can be done voluntarily or under duress.

Confessing is often associated with religious or legal contexts, where individuals are expected to confess their sins or crimes, respectively. In religious contexts, confessing is seen as a way to seek forgiveness and absolution from a higher power, while in legal contexts, confessing can be used as evidence against the individual in a court of law.

Confessing can also have therapeutic benefits, as it allows individuals to confront their mistakes and work towards making amends. In this sense, confessing can be seen as a form of self-improvement and personal growth.  
(From The Content Authority)

### Wise Words

“Confessing is a start. It is not about blaming, shaming or condemning, but about naming and making space for the turn toward repair. Confession may move toward repentance where we shift assumptions and realign behavior. In the humanist language this may be seen as pointing toward ethical action. It's about a change in outlook.

Confession helps assure that our intellectual (rationale) commitment to change is accompanied by a change of heart and soul. For there to be actual change, the heart needs to engage. The move toward atonement and reconciliation begins when we clear the space and not rush through the pain.”

—From “To Whom Do You Confess” (sermon), Rev. Sue Browning, Minister, UU Fellowship Easton  
<http://uufeaston.org/sunday-services/sermons/to-whom-do-you-confess/>

“Confession is a stripping away of protection, the telling of a truth which might once have seemed like a humiliation, become suddenly a gateway, an entrance to solid ground. To confess is not only to acknowledge a truth we have held from ourselves all along, breathing quietly, alone and in secret what we could not initially give a voice, but the hopeful dedication to a larger life that might make us powerless to commit the self same sin again.”

—David Whyte, “Confession,” *Consolations*

“As any good therapist will tell you, you cannot heal what you do not acknowledge, and what you do not consciously acknowledge will remain in control of you from within, festering and destroying you and those around you.”

—Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.”

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

“I recognize that the heartbeat, historically, of racism has been denial, has been to deny that one’s ideas are racist, one’s policies are racist, and certainly that one’s self and one’s nation is racist, and so then I was like, ‘Okay, by contrast, the heartbeat of antiracism is confession, is admission, is acknowledgement, is the willingness to be vulnerable, is the willingness to identify the times in which we are being racist, is to be willing to diagnose ourselves and our country, and our ideas, and our policies.’ And the reason why that’s the heartbeat is because, like with anything else, the first step is acknowledging the problem. We can’t even begin the process of changing ourselves, of acting in an antiracist fashion, if we’re not even willing to admit the times in which we’re being racist. And so I realize that essentially to be antiracist is to admit when we’re being racist. And so I realize that in order to really give voice to that, in order to really model that for people I had to do that to myself and for myself.”

—Ibram X. Kendi, *Unlocking Us* (Brene Brown podcast)

“In the case of national repentance work, confession—the public telling of the truth becomes absolutely critical. It may be that some people were heretofore unaware of the nature or extent of the harm, and the confession serves to alert them. It may be that those who indeed know wished to elide,

ignore, or discount what happened, to deny their own complicity, or to focus on their own experiences of pain. It becomes much easier to avoid real accountability, to sidestep the critical work of change, if the full truth is not told.... Confession is a critical first step for every nation that seeks to address the harm that it has caused. But without the other pieces of the puzzle—the reparations, the apology, and the work to become different in deep, systematic ways, to set up structures that necessarily create a new kind of reality—it is not enough.”

—Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*

“Therapy, in a sense, is a modern-day ritual of confession. By revealing (confessing) our personal pain and secret conflicts, regrets, and longings to a therapist, we face our truth—no matter how painful that may be.... It is in the act of ‘telling’ that our life narratives become coherent stories and as we reveal our true selves, we begin to achieve insight and clarity.”

—Estelle Frankel, *Sacred Therapy*

“Here we are gathered, Humanist, and Christian, Non-theist, Buddhist, and Jew, Pagan, and Seeker—a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Let us confess what we know to be true.

“We are quick to proclaim our faith, but slow to live the teachings of that faith as it has been handed down to us, across every generation—from prophets, preachers, and sages, scientists, historians, and poets, great thinkers of every age, from ordinary women and men who would have us understand what it is to be, and what it is to love the neighbor.

“We are quick to judge one another, but slow to act for justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We are quick to ignore or smooth over broken places among us, too fearful to work for peace and healing. We are quick to share our knowledge, but slow to temper that knowledge with the love and wisdom that leads us always closer to the truth.

“In small and large ways we are overwhelmed by all we cannot do.

“For all the times we fail to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, when we do not affirm and promote the goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, when we live as though interdependence were a personal choice and not a fact of our existence, we ask forgiveness of one another and we vow to begin again, in this and every moment.”

—Mary Edes, “Unitarian Universalist Confession”

## Poetry

### This Is Just To Say

William Carlos Williams

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

### You Still Dream

Nikki Grimes

Here, poem meets prayer.  
We are exceedingly comfortable  
with posturing and self-defense  
that masquerade as apology.  
But what’s needed in this moment  
is unmixed confession  
of our nation’s sin,  
deep and indefensible.  
“Now I lay me down to sleep”  
must make way for

something more muscular:  
sack cloth and ashes,  
prayer and fasting,  
naked prostration.  
Daniel understood  
radical repentance begins  
with this unvarnished profession:  
You are righteous,  
and we are not.  
Please heal our nation.  
Cleanse our stubborn hearts.  
Show each of us what part to play.  
Broken as Judah and Jerusalem,  
we cry and come bending our will  
toward the good  
you dream for us still,  
no matter our sin,  
no matter what skin  
we’re in.

### old confession & new

Danez Smith

it sounds crazy, but it feels like truth. i tell you —  
it felt like i practiced for it, auditioned even, applied.  
what the doctor told me was not news, was legend  
catching up to me, a blood whispering  
*you were born for this*. i tell you — i was not shocked  
but confirmed. enlisted? i am on the battlefield  
& i am the field & the battle & the casualty & the  
gun.

my war is but a rumor & is not war. i swallow a  
green pill  
everyday at noon to take asylum from my body.  
i am a delicacy in the tradition of the fugu.  
too much of me will end you. at the end of me  
there is a boy i barely remember, barely ever knew  
saying *don't worry, don't worry, don't worry, don't  
worry*.

so now that it’s an old fact, can it be useful?  
that which hasn’t killed you yet can pay the rent  
if you play it right. keep it really real:  
plenty black folks get paid off the cruelty

of whites, why not make the blood  
a business? here. take it. here's what happened to  
me.

while you marvel at it imma run to the store.  
my blood brings me closer to death,  
talking about it has bought me new boots,  
a summer's worth of car notes, organic fruit.



“Confessing” Wlastimil Hofman, 1906

## Articles

### “Confessing Communities”

by Robin Tanner

A UU minister advocates for confession in  
“confessing communities—places where we admit  
our wrongdoings, are held accountable, and called  
back into covenant.”

<https://bit.ly/48v2eia>

### “christmas: a confession”

by adrienne maree brown

brown wrote this article explaining why, even  
though it is fraught with difficulties, Christmas has a  
place in her life. Often we feel compelled to confess  
things that we participate in even if it goes against  
our knowledge and beliefs, because life is complex  
and there are as many reasons to hold on as there are  
to dismiss. When we are in a culture of dismissal of  
the status quo, admitting we hold certain things  
dear can feel like a confession.

<https://bit.ly/48npfUr>

### “Owning Up to My Toxic Biases”

by Parker J. Palmer, *On Being*, October 17, 2017.

Palmer writes, “My confession needs to go deeper  
than owning up to white privilege. Like many people  
of my race, I carry unconscious elements of white  
supremacy. If I want to help stem that bloody tide, I  
must become conscious of that fact.... Hope opens up  
as soon as we gain self-awareness, confess our role  
in creating injustice, and reach deep for ways to  
release the better angels of our nature.”

<https://bit.ly/3RwAkws>

### “Unhappy Confessions: The Temptation of Admitting to White Privilege”

by Claire A. Lockard

“Admissions of white privilege and/or racism are  
common among white anti-racists and others who  
want to combat their racism. In this article, I argue  
that because such admissions are conscious  
attempts to address unconscious habits, they are  
unhappy speech acts and contrary to their implied  
aims. Admissions of white privilege or racism can be  
conceptualized as Foucauldian confessions that are  
pleasurable to enact but ultimately reinforce white  
people’s feelings of goodness and allow them to  
avoid addressing this racism.... (I)n addition to  
doing no anti-racist work at the moment of saying,  
these confessions actually reify white privilege  
deeper into the unconscious and make it harder to  
address.”

<https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2016.2.2>

### “Confessional Poetry: An Introduction to a Newly Personal Mode of Writing that Popularized Exploring the Self”

Editors of Poetry Foundation

The phrase “confessional poetry” burst into  
common usage in September of 1959, when the critic  
M.L. Rosenthal coined it in his review of Robert  
Lowell’s *Life Studies* in *The Nation*. The book, which  
contained poems that unsparingly detailed Lowell’s  
experiences of marital strife, generational struggle,  
and mental illness, marked a dramatic turn in his  
career. The personal had always been fodder for

poetry, but Lowell, Rosenthal claimed, “removes the mask” that previous poets had worn when writing about their own lives. The poems in *Life Studies* felt like a “series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal.”

<https://bit.ly/3PQabrh>

### “Scaffold”

Healing Minnesota Stories

Walker Art Center’s former director said, “I take full responsibility for the missteps” surrounding the installation of historic gallows, which included a particularly offensive one representing the mass execution of the Dakota 38 in 1862. The Walker issued a public apology and removed the gallows.

<https://bit.ly/46m01nz>

### “In ‘Confession of Guilt,’ German Catholic Church Admits ‘Complicity’ with Nazis”

The Times of Israel

After decades of ambivalence, a document prepared by clergy says hundreds of priests gave spiritual guidance to Hitler’s soldiers on the front, and “lent war an additional sense of purpose.”

<https://bit.ly/463OnpM>

### “False Confessions”

The Innocence Project

False confessions happen more than most people think. Children, people with intellectual disabilities, and people with language barriers are particularly vulnerable to coercion in confessing.

<https://innocenceproject.org/false-confessions/>

## Prayer

Robin Tanner

“Beloved, may I know the beauty that can be the full confession unfiltered, one that shatters the shame where I share my sin openly with all siblings. Grant a love that heals to those I harm; free my heart of hatred denial. Call my being to openness, covenant and accountability. Help me to be a faithful member of the confessing congregation. Amen.”

## Books

*On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*

by Danya Ruttenberg. Beacon Press, 2022.

Ruttenberg discusses confession as the first step toward repair: in every situation, minor or major, intimate or public, the work of confession forces us to fully acknowledge the harm that we caused, which means that we have to understand why the person has been hurt. Then we must name and own that harm, in public as is warranted. This forces us to resist the temptation to shift blame, to minimize the problem, to focus on our excellent and pure intentions, and put off an uncomfortable conversation. Along with a confession of harm and repair/atonement, we should resolve in the deep places of our being that we're done doing the harmful thing.

In the Bookstall, and the Anderson Library: 202.2 R.

<https://bit.ly/45bqPG2>

*The Art of Confession: Renewing Yourself Through the Practice of Honesty*

by Paul Wilkes. Workman Publishing, 2011.

This brief, secular book reinvents the power of confession for a contemporary audience. Confession is the foundation of religion, the essence of mental health. It is listening to the voice within to follow the path to honest and conscious living. And for thousands of years people have used the power of confession to find their best selves.

Liberating confession from the confessional, *The Art of Confession* draws on traditions as old as ancient Greece and as modern as psychoanalysis, and as diverse as Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam, to show readers how to incorporate a confessional practice into their daily lives. Included are visualizations, spiritual exercises, prompts, and meditations.

*The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV*

by Christopher Grobe. NYU Press, 2017.

“The story of a new style of art—and a new way of life—in postwar America: confessionalism.” From Blurb: A blend of cultural history, literary criticism, and performance theory, *The Art of Confession* explores iconic works of art and draws surprising connections among artists who may seem far apart, but who were influenced directly by one another.... Grobe argues that a tradition of “confessional performance” unites poets with comedians, performance artists with social media users, reality TV stars with actors—and all of them with us.



Wassim Loumi

### Children’s Books

*David Gets in Trouble*

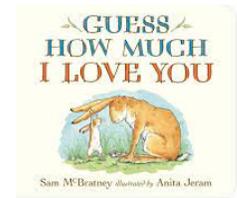
by David Shannon. Scholastic/Blue Sky, 2002.  
David follows his misbehavior with excuses and denials, until he doesn’t.

### *Guess How Much I Love You?*

By Sam McBratney.

Candlewick, 2014.

This now-classic story captures the deep and tender bond between parent and child as they seek to describe and confess their love to each other.



### Movies

*Death and the Maiden*

Directed by Roman Polanski, 1994.

Written by Ariel Dorman and Rafael Yglesias

A political activist is convinced that her guest is a man who once tortured her for the government.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109579/>

*Secrets & Lies*

Written and directed by Mike Leigh, 1996.

A woman admits she gave birth to a bi-racial daughter, when she is located years later by the daughter.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117589/>

### Videos

“Litany of Atonement”

Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs

The former minister of Unity Church explains that he wrote the litany’s communal response in the first person, and leads a responsive reading.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWsZZj\\_6vng](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWsZZj_6vng)

“Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *60 Minutes*, 1997.

<https://youtu.be/YY-ee1hghgQ?si=pYcqOPjAoPrLzpw5>

“The Central Park Five: A Cautionary Tale”

*CBS Sunday Morning*, 2019.

Under coercion, five teenage boys made involuntary confessions to a crime they did not commit, were convicted even though their confessions didn't match the crime, and served six to thirteen years in prison before being exonerated.

<https://youtu.be/1hf-bLR668g>

## “The Power of Knowing You’re Not Alone”

Candy Chang

Candy Chang speaks about “Confessions,” her participatory installation that allows people to reveal their struggles and vulnerabilities in an anonymous but cathartic way.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3A8C\\_lwBkc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3A8C_lwBkc)



## “Everything is Fine,” *The Good Place*

Season 1, Episode 1

Written by Michael Schur, 2016.

Eleanor Shellstrop (Kristen Bell) dies in a shopping cart mishap and arrives in a mysterious afterlife where she's not certain she belongs.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5789204/>

## “Casino Night,” *The Office*

Directed by Ken Kwapis, 2006.

The Dunder Mifflin crew holds a casino party at the warehouse and Michael has two dates. Jim tells Pam he loves her.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0800604/>

## Music



## *Lemonade* (Film, Album)

Beyoncé

Beyoncé’s 2016 blockbuster album *Lemonade* is, among other things, a work of confessional art, bringing issues of infidelity into a public conversation. (Content warning: Explicit lyrics)

<https://tidal.com/browse/video/108043437>

(Subscription, video)

<https://bit.ly/3RD35Yf> (Free, audio only)

## “Confessing” Spotify Playlist

<https://spoti.fi/3tgKtTC>

“All I Want Is You” —U2

“Damn I Wish I Was Your Lover” —Sophie B. Hawkins

“Midnight Confessions” —The Grass Roots

“Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” —The Temptations

“All the Good Times Are Past and Gone”

—David Grisman

“Best of My Love” —The Emotions

“Confessions” —Violent Femmes

“Always on My Mind” —Willie Nelson

“Beeswing” —Richard Thompson

“Always” —Ella Fitzgerald, Paul Weston and his Orchestra



Cover: “35 Buddhas of Confession”

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“The Confession of Love,” Jean-Honoré Fragonard, 1771, Public Domain.

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