

Owning up

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 24, 1999](#) issue

These days it is risky to point fingers. Think of the members of Congress who've been found guilty of sins similar to these for which the president was put on trial. And then there's the sad story of Eugene Robinson of the Atlanta Falcons, who on the night after he received an award for being the National Football League's most righteous player was arrested for soliciting an undercover cop for prostitution.

James Warren, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, found the accusing finger turned toward him recently. In his column "Sunday Watch," he keeps tabs on people like Cokie Roberts and other putatively fair-minded reporters who accept huge and, he thinks, tainting honoraria. Then the *Washington Post* watched him and thought it had caught Warren in hypocrisy. "James Warren is among the first to take journalists to task for accepting speaking fees, but he recently had no qualms whatsoever about accepting a singing fee in the form of an upgrade on a Virgin Atlantic flight from Dulles to London." "Pretty ominous, eh?" comments Warren. Then he explains what happened.

On the way to England to surprise his brother at Christmas he found that the airline was offering a free upgrade to business class to anyone who would sing a Christmas carol at the gate. He joined 15 or so others to sing "Jingle Bells," and they all got an upgrade.

"I thought this was rather far afield from the shameless, self-promoting media buck rakers who take \$10,000 or \$20,000 from organizations whose doings or issues they cover," Warren says. But he told the reporter that he would give "deep and long, even agonizing consideration to ever editing a piece of copy related to Virgin Atlantic."

I searched my own soul regarding airline favors. Yes, I did accept one once. Harriet and I were about 15 people back in the "economy" line waiting to be processed for a trip to London. The airline representative signaled us to come forward and whispered that we could get an upgrade. So we enjoyed business class, which, as Warren mentions, means "a wider seat but the same food as in economy." Before we

boarded I asked why Harriet and I were God's, or at least the airline's, elect. "You were the only neatly dressed couple-you in your bow tie and your wife wearing a dress-we thought you'd upgrade business class." Flight personnel, I am told, are turned off by mass grunge on travelers.

You can be sure that we now always go to the airport reasonably well dressed. Good fortune has not yet retracted. But I do have to admit that that upgrade was a perk.

What other benefits have I received? Often I speak on campuses, at least wanly questioning hierarchy and privilege. Before the lecture, the school president or dean will say, "Time is short. We have to crash the cafeteria line, load up our trays, and head for the VIP room to eat before you talk." I have no choice but to share this grand privilege. Usually I hold the tray up to hide my face, to minimize resentment and enhance my credibility when speaking. I have been noticed and resented for this. Before I'm publicly exposed, I'll own up in advance. Consider me self-outed. Like Warren, I do get upgrades and privileges. Dear reader, confess and be absolved before the watchers list you among the Unrighteous Righteous.