

When our past sins come up

There's no perfect way to atone, but humility is a good start.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [September 25, 2019](#) issue



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When a letter showed up in my in-box from my seventh-grade science teacher, it took me by surprise. I haven't thought about Mr. Erickson for 47 years. Seventh-grade was . . . well, a long time ago. Exactly what possessed this fun-loving teacher with the scruffy beard to contact me I'm not entirely certain.

Mr. Erickson included a photo of the Amateur Radio Club he had formed with a few of us—a photo taken from an old yearbook page. My friends Bob and Tom were pictured on either side of me in the front row. We were the officers of this venerable club, early adolescent boys full of self-importance but short on social skills; in love with the acrid smell of solder but lacking the smarts of Steve Jobs, who knew when to leave Heathkit radio assembly behind.

In the yearbook photo, Eric stands enthusiastically at the left end of the second row. This seventh-grader lived with significant mental and physical disabilities. He was integrated into regular classrooms long before that was the norm or the law. With halting speech, twisted gait, poor coordination, and an intellect resembling a much younger child, Eric was the laughingstock of far too many in my school. To see his photograph now brings back some of the most troubling memories of my childhood.

Eric was on the receiving end of ridicule and insults. Classmates lobbed nasty names at him and pushed textbooks from his arms. They dumped his milk at lunch when he turned his back. A few kids were practiced at bumping into him as he carried his food tray. If he swatted back at those who teased him, they only bullied more. This wasn't just a small group of hooligans; it was a whole cadre of outwardly pleasant middle schoolers.

Here's the worst of those lunchroom memories: I didn't do everything I could have done to stand up for Eric. I sat with him now and then when he was at a table all by himself. I helped him pick up things that others shoved from his hands. But I can't recall ever bringing him to the fun tables where I sat. I know I didn't speak up forcefully enough to some of our cruelest classmates. The moral compass within me froze more often than I'd like to admit. I live with the enduring pain and shame of that silence.

I know of no perfect way to atone for wrongs of the distant past except to take the painful lessons learned and humbly focus life more generously toward others. God doesn't excuse shameful behavior that harms others. But if confession can deepen compassion, and if personal faith can strengthen kindness, and if repentance can redirect support to favor mocked or bullied people, perhaps adjudicating people's past sins is not what's most important.

As I read about prominent public figures facing their own inglorious moral failures—bigoted utterances and participation in blackface skits come to mind—I think of my own journey through regret and repentance. I'm less enthused about punishing others for their own gross insensitivities and more interested in looking for signs of humility, acknowledgment of pain caused, and serious course correction.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Dealing with past sins."