

Big mistakes

Nobody sits around wondering what their life's besetting sin is going to be. Maybe we should.

by [Martha-Lynn Corner](#)

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Lately I've been spending a lot of time thinking about the concept of things that have gone wrong—specifically, things that have gone wrong that we've caused. Even in a life as relatively privileged as mine has been, you don't live to the age of 41 without making some mistakes.

You spend a lot of time as a child thinking about what you're going to be when you grow up, or where you're going to live—what kind of life you'll have, and all the positive things associated with it. Nobody sits around wondering what their life's besetting sin is going to be, but maybe we should. Even if you have a cultural framework for understanding fault—something like a Judeo-Christian worldview, which is built on the concept of forgiveness and grace—it's really difficult to wake up and realize you're an alcoholic, or a compulsive gambler, or an adulterer, or maybe just mean. There are more terrible mistakes than ice cream flavors, but the ice cream is where we put all of our focus. There are a million ways to conceptualize what might go right in a life. There's not much support for how to navigate the realization that you've screwed up, perhaps royally.

Even in church we talk about sin and forgiveness, but we don't talk much about what walking those roads might look like. I read a lot of writing by recovering alcoholics and I think those communities (because there are many more besides AA) have the best articulated notions of what it means to rebuild in the rubble. Everything from the notion of twelve steps to spiritual connection, abstinence, support communities—there's a lot of helpful scaffolding around the idea of reaching a total dead end and making the decisions that lead to new ways of being.

I'm 41, and I have made some Big Mistakes. I'm hoping those will be the worst of my life, since they were so very large, but who's to say? I'm grateful over and over recently for the gift of my life of faith, as shaky has it has been at times, because ultimately in the person of Jesus I find an abundance of the relational gifts—unconditional love, gentle leading, prioritization of the marginalized—whose lack in my own upbringing is at the core of the mistakes I've made. We'll always find a way to make up for what we lack, and unfortunately, it's so easy to mess that up. But why don't we talk about it, even with the people we love and trust the most?

What if there was more conversation around the huge mistakes we all make? What if children were raised with a vocabulary of sin that was more than just a vague sense that we're all capable of immense wrong? What if we named some of the common pitfalls and, most importantly, could speak of healthy ways to cope? Should conversations like that be relegated to therapist's offices, where you unpack what you've already done? What if we could talk enough about the ways we try to fill the various holes inside ourselves that the language of mistakes and their warning signs is just something we know to talk to our children about? Or even, barring that, something we can talk to our right-now/fallible/flawed adult selves about?

More than warning signs, even—is there a way to talk about these mistakes as *given*? As things that we'll all do at some point? Can we name some ways to hold on and hold up through them, and do it often enough that there's a language of healing that's as robust as the language of sin?

We need to talk more about big mistakes. I think the person of Jesus has a lot to tell us about how to hold such mistakes in a compassionate way ... and I also think it can be so very difficult to allow ourselves to accept such compassion.

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