

Sharon Kagan—The Undoing: Forgiveness

Everyone knows that COVID has changed the world we inhabit. But no one is certain about the details of that transformation, particularly in terms of the ways people behave toward one another, as well as the ways we interact with our own feelings, which include our expectations and assumptions, memories and regrets, dreams and ideals. One difference I've noticed between behavior before and after the pandemic has to do with the ways we communicate.

Just before COVID struck, one of the dominant forms of public discourse was the confessional. Celebrities and comedians, politicians and athletes, civic leaders and other citizens who had run amok confessed their misadventures publicly, just like St. Augustine did almost two thousand years ago, but more quickly and less poetically than the Christian saint, who needed three years and 13 volumes to recount—and redeem himself from—his youthful transgressions. Like Augustine, some modern confessors seemed truly sorry: contrite and repentant and interested in being forgiven. Others not so much. A good number appeared to be going through the motions, following the scripts of apologies carefully crafted by publicists, corporate boards, and damage-control consultants. The most egregiously self-serving confessions, in my opinion, were those that began with the disgraced speakers paying lip service to whatever misdeeds they had committed only to turn their monologue into a defense of their selfishly misbegotten actions, which should have embarrassed them deeply, but instead became part of a proud explanation of their supposed specialness, a bit of manipulative autobiography wrapped in the garb of the-rules-do-not-apply-to-me privilege. Such self-serving story telling was doubly cynical: It turned what could have been a moment of honest assessment of shortcomings shared by many into a moment of one person treating their own moral shortcomings as what makes them better than the rest of us—unique and distinct and supposedly worthy of our attention, no matter how diminished its span.

Now that COVID has been with us for two years and running, people no longer seem to be interested in following the format that Augustine established so long ago to tell stories about themselves—or to listen to others tell stories about themselves. In terms of public discourse, confessing one's sins has fallen by the wayside, a victim of the pandemic or, more precisely, a victim of the way COVID has affected the ways we communicate with others and, equally important, converse with ourselves: telling stories, putting feelings to words, explaining why we are the way we are, and, most important, coming to understand just what that

might be. Today, much of what passes as public discourse begins with a sense of being aggrieved. Not mildly disappointed, in ourselves or our surroundings, nor philosophically opposed to thoughtfully articulated ideas or propositions, but deeply, profoundly, and intractably pissed off: angry, to the core, and seething with resentment about an injustice or series of injustices that have been done and continue to be done and will continue to be done unless we make the damage they have caused and continue to cause known, as loudly and dramatically and as unambiguously as possible.

Make no mistake, there's plenty to be angry about. A short list includes economic exploitation, racism, patriarchy, global warming, and the inequities—of gender, religion, and ethnicity—seemingly built into the social structure of every nation on the globe. But when it comes to the loudest pronouncements based in aggrievement, it seems that the goal is not to resolve or rectify a problem, but to blow off steam, to vent, to rant and rage, the more aggressively the better. That superficially passionate activity is accompanied by the cynical conviction that it's too late to make any real changes and all one can do is register their disgust, their resentment, their disdain for their fellow citizens, which they turn into enemies. Public figures and politicians have perfected such theatricalized versions of feeling aggrieved, parading their resentment for being unfairly treated by playing victim only to shore up their power, their positions, their privilege.

In a sense, what they do is the opposite of a real confession, which originates in self-reflection and an acknowledgement of one's faults. In another sense, what they do isn't all that different from what the fake confessors did pre-pandemic: flaunt their shortcomings as their strengths, turn weaknesses into fraudulent virtues, and pretend that they are their best selves when they follow the path of least resistance. Such short-sighted monologues and self-serving diatribes transform the give-and-take of real conversation into pay-attention-to-me temper tantrums, stage-managed reenactments of perceived grievances that, locked in a closed circle of repetition, bury the possibility of discovery, of growth, of truth.

This is the context—or background—out of which Sharon Kagan's brilliant little video emerges. Without fanfare or theatrics, and with none of the visual tricks or digital bells and whistles that characterize so many big-budget Hollywood productions, her straight-to-the-point piece of DIY videography subscribes to the belief that remaining calm, cool, and collected is the best way for any of us to communicate with anyone else—and that the best chance we have for gleaning insights into our own selves also involves patience and the capacity to slow down

and wait, passively but not impassively. Without sitting still and shutting up, for listening to what others are really saying and being equally attentive to the silent voice of our own inner beings, nothing worthwhile will be discovered. So that's what Kagan asks of us—to listen attentively for thirty minutes to the stories a handful of individuals recount as they bear witness to the internal journeys they have taken and are continuing to take. What these ordinary people have to say is compelling because they do not pretend to be know-it-all authorities or performers acting out scripted roles in order to manipulate audiences, but because they come off as individuals struggling honestly and openly and earnestly to come to some kind of understanding of how their experiences have shaped them and what they might do about that today.

That moves me. Their mixture of everyday pragmatism and hope-for-a-better-life idealism matches the way I approach the world. The distinctness of their life experiences resonates with my own not because their realities mirror mine, but because they are different and distant from mine and, in that difference and distance, invite me to see my own world differently: more fully and deeply and honestly—neither as a string of random happenstances nor as a sequence of preordained occurrences, but as events and experiences still open to interpretation, perhaps intrinsic to my identity or maybe incidental to it (despite what I have assumed for years, even decades). Kagan's genius is to show that the future is filled with possibility because the past, although it has passed, is not over and done with, but open to transformation—and that that transformation is a matter of our capacity to understand it differently. In her hands, transformed perceptions generate transformed realities. Perspective matters, more than we usually acknowledge. And each of us is in the best position to change our perspectives, our assumptions about their roles in our lives, our default settings, as it were. No one can do that for you. Nor take away your capacity to do it for yourself.

Kagan's multi-source, fixed camera meditation cuts through all sorts of nonsense to give viewers a glimpse of what it looks when otherwise anonymous and perfectly ordinary individuals slow down, think deeply, and do three things: 1.) honestly mull over how the circumstances in which they have found themselves have shaped them; 2.) fearlessly ponder how their initial, generally unreflective responses to those situations trapped them in a cycle that perpetuated some of their most damaging features; and, 3.) come to understand that they have the power to escape the confining cycle of repetition, freeing themselves of its needless burden and being able to enter the moment unencumbered by the past:

filled with the possibilities real innocence presents. Neither confessing their missteps nor publicizing their grievances, they articulate, in their own words, how they have worked, and continue to work, to forgive people who have hurt them.

The most significant difference between what transpires in Kagan's *The Undoing: Forgiveness* and what predominates in the confessions and grievances of public discourse is that her endeavor begins with forgiveness. That's radical. It's an idea or an action entirely absent from the other types of conversation that have dominated public speech. One reason Kagan's video is so different is because it is intimate. The people in it are brave enough to be vulnerable. What they do has nothing to do with the false bravado of so many public figures nor the faux confessions of narcissistic internetters. In contrast, her work gives individuals the time and space to talk about experiences important to them, and then invites viewers to listen in. It's clear that Kagan's collaborators trust her, otherwise they would not have revealed so much about themselves. It's also clear that Kagan trusts us viewers, both to treat her people's stories with the respect they deserve and to come to our own understandings of what those stories mean to each of us. Neither a micro-manager nor a control freak, she behaves as she believes: that without the freedom to interpret words and tones as we see fit, those words and tones ring hollow. Conversations with no back-and-forth are not conversations: They are monologues or declarations or pronouncements. As an artist, and as a human being, Kagan is uninterested in such authoritarian modes of communication.

Another reason her video is so powerful is because it insists that social relations are essential to individual subjectivity. The forgiveness the speakers in her video enact always takes place between at least two people—an individual and someone else. That relationship, in the world created by Kagan's art, is foundational. It's distinct from confessionals, which focus, almost exclusively, on the self. It's also distinct from the rants of aggrieved parties, which include others only to blame them for everything bad that has ever happened, absolving the aggrieved speaker of any and all responsibility. That is the opposite of what *The Undoing: Forgives* does: show people taking responsibility not only for their own actions but for the ways other people's actions have affected them. With impressive, often inspiring strength, the people in Kagan's video show us what it looks like to overcome trauma and suffering to make room for something different, something as yet unrealized, something like love.

David Pagel, Art Critic, Professor of Art Theory & History at Claremont Graduate University, and Curator