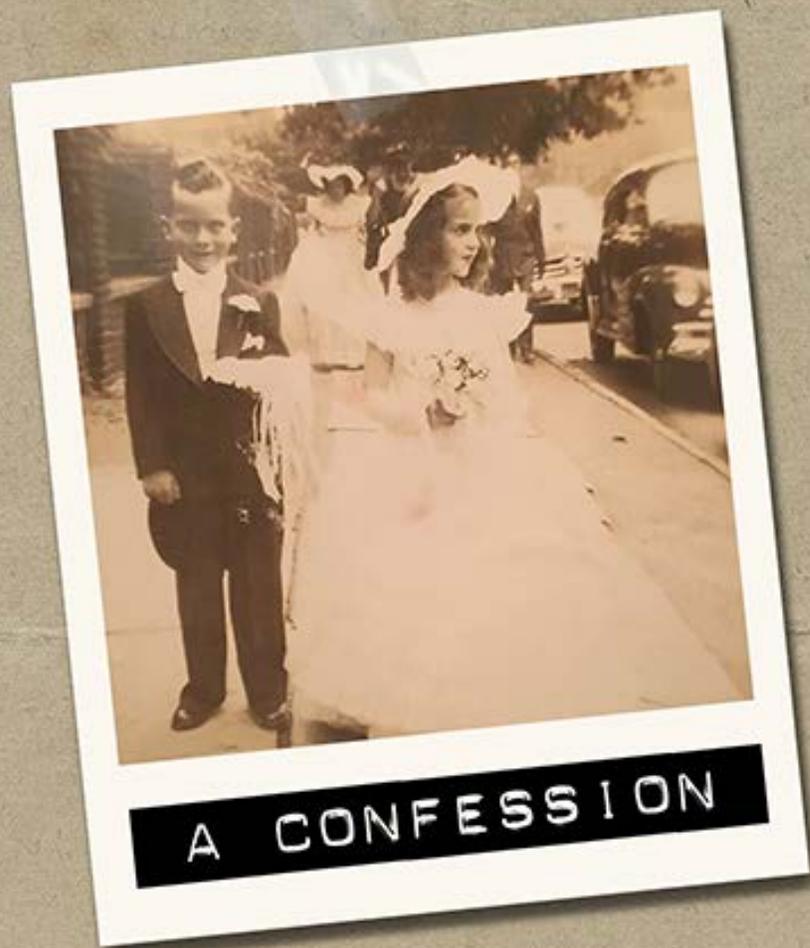


*Am I a good person?
What is "good" anyway?*



A CONFESSION

a novel by **WILLIAM F. AICHER**

“In silence, an act is an act is an act.

Verbalized and discussed, it becomes an ethical problem ...”

– Aldous Huxley, from ‘The Genius and the Goddess’

I

Am I a good person? I like to think so. I mean, I think I am.

What is “good” anyway? My life, like anyone else’s, has had its share of rough patches ... times when I’ve done differently than I’d have preferred in hindsight. But is it bad to make a mistake? No, I don’t think so. What’s most important is that we recognize our missteps and take responsibility for them. I guess that’s why I’m talking to you.

Let me be clear: my life hasn’t been marred by evil. It barely contains a stain – and even those have mostly faded, cleaned away by time and numerous washings. But there are some things I’ve done that I wish I hadn’t, and quite a few other things that were probably just outright bad. That’s why I’m talking to you. You can judge me, when all has been said – that’s what this whole conversation is for – but please do me the courtesy of waiting until I’ve finished.

I’ve lived a fairly uneventful life, as far as lives are concerned. I haven’t done great things. I haven’t scaled mountains, written great missives, or stood arm and arm with my brothers on the battlefield. But like any other man, I have lived, and during my forty-six years I’ve done both good and bad. The question now, of course, is where to start? My birth would be of little interest, as would my childhood, I fear. They were both normal, or as normal as anyone else’s.

Yes, I know I’m rambling. I’m just trying to get my bearings here.

There’s a lot to tell and it’s just overwhelming to think of where to start.

I guess I can just start anywhere and go from there. Let’s start where it’s easiest.

Back in my twenties I thought I knew everything, just like most young men do. I had yet to experience failure, and I had yet to be humbled. My life in front of me, I was certain I already had the important parts all worked out. This, however, didn’t stop me from cavorting with my share of unsavory characters. No, I still did that – I guess I did even more of that in my youth than I do

now. Probably because I felt so invincible. I didn't fit in with them exactly, but I did get along with them just fine. Their lives were vulgar and undesirable, but still I spent many a night wasted on their sofas, listening to music and pumping my body with whatever drugs happened to be pulled from the lint of someone's pocket. I never did anything alone, but I did do enough of them with my friends to say I was teetering on the edge of a habit.

Did I know these people were "unsavory" at the time? Absolutely. And I presume that's why I spent the time with them that I did. One can bring himself up to great heights by simply surrounding himself with others who are lower. It's just an illusion of perspective, to be fair, but it does pad the ego.

They were a dirty, foul bunch with no future in front of them. I, on the other hand, held great promise. They wouldn't amount to anything, yet I would ... and that gave me solace. I could watch them slowly wither away in front of me. Their self-destruction was no cliché, watching their hopes and dreams go down the drain. No, they had no hopes or dreams to begin with. They were born losers, destined to fail even if they had put any effort into life. But that wasn't me. I was elevated by my very nature and impervious to such downfalls. My presence, while not unwelcome, was, for them, an act of convenience. I had money, they didn't, and most nights I simply had nothing better to do with my time.

The money? Oh, yeah, I definitely was what you might consider a financier. I liked to help them out, and I got great pleasure by simply being an investor in their pain avoidance, though I admit I succumbed to the simplicity of those chemical solutions quite often as well. It wasn't charity, oh God no. It was compatriotism. They weren't my friends, but they helped to pass the time. I figured sooner or later they'd all be dead anyway and I could then just move on with my life. Either that, or I'd just walk out when I felt like it.

I remember one night in particular, splayed out on a crusty brown sofa that reeked of beer and bong water, listening to them all blabber. I had no idea what they were saying. It was just gibberish. Gibberish from a bunch of rats who crawled out of the sewers into society where they feigned humanity for a while until they slunk back into their holes and died.

Why spend time with them then? I already told you. They lifted my spirits. There's nothing as uplifting as watching another person suffer, especially if he's ignorantly happy in his suffering. That's the thing with these people. They weren't unhappy. They were honestly much happier than me. But it was just so invigorating watching them flounder about, with their meaningless jobs delivering pizzas to college kids or styling businessmen's wives' hair that I couldn't fathom them actually being happy. They thought they were, or at the very least appeared to be – but I knew that one day, maybe soon or maybe on their death bed they'd realize it: their lives had been complete wastes and they'd done nothing good for anyone. Then they'd be back at the bottle or the pill, back into the ignorance and disgust they called life.

No, they weren't all bad. They had their positive qualities and they all did appear to genuinely care for one another. There was a bit of security there, knowing that should any of us fall, another would be there to pick us back up. But the thing of it is, there wasn't really a lot of heavy lifting involved in putting us back to where we fell from. Happy in ignorance, drugged up and living their lives, they were the reason for my own. I hated being with them, but I couldn't live without them, until one day I decided I never wanted to see them again.

Late one muggy night in later summer, my friends and I were coming down listening to Massive Attack's 'Protection.' We'd been out late partying, dancing our cares away and making spiritual connections under the influence of some choice E and a soundtrack of 808 State, Orbital, Future Sound of London, probably some Prodigy – their early stuff, none of that "Firestarter" bullshit –

or whatever else was hot on the party scene. The clock showed well past three, and Tracy Thorne was guiding us back to reality when our blissful malaise was inconveniently interrupted.

The door shuddered in its frame from the hammering. I seriously thought the lock was going to break. The drywall cracked thin spider webs at the pounding and bits of dust and plaster fell to the floor. I looked to the door, then to the others. I wasn't about to answer it.

I arched my eyebrows and gestured with my head. "Someone, see who it is," I said.

Well, the idiot who opened the door didn't think to look through the peephole first. He opened the door a crack, but even that was too far. The door kicked open hard, knocking my friend down, and a stout, bloodied Latino stood there, looking straight at me. At least, he seemed to be looking at me. One eye was swollen completely shut, and the other seemed to have a hard time focusing on anything in particular. His windbreaker was torn to shreds and a big red gash marred his left cheek.

"Let me in!" he yelled as he pushed his way past the guy at the door. A few of his friends, whose presence I hadn't even noticed, followed obediently and surrounded him like ten-cent bodyguards as he dropped himself onto my couch.

"Some fucker tried to jump me."

He looked at me like I cared. I cared, alright. I cared that he was bleeding all over my furniture.

"But we stopped him." It was some guy from his posse, a big shit-eating grin spread across his face.

Luiz, that was the bleeder's name, glared at his amigo, shutting him up, then turned his eyes to me. "Listen, I need someplace to crash for a while. I have to wash up."

I just wanted him out of my apartment. Now. That minute. Preferably sooner. There was no way I was going to get my couch clean.

“You need to do more than wash up – you need serious medical attention,” I said. “Want me to call the hospital or something?” His friends perked up at this suggestion, gathering around me like a pack of feral dogs. They probably thought that by hospital, I meant police.

“No way man, it’s fine.” He dismissed them with a wave of his hand. “Just let me clean up.”

I begrudgingly let him and his friends spend the next few hours at my place. Kicking them out wasn’t an option, and I didn’t have the fight in me to try anyway. He cleaned himself up with my dish rags and dried himself with my kitchen towels, staining them all crimson with his blood.

While he dressed his wounds I noticed the beating was much worse than I’d originally thought. His body was covered in bruises, and he had what looked like a pretty serious knife wound on his arm – from shielding himself from his attacker, I assume. He wrapped the gash in gauze, which quickly soaked through. I was pretty sure he needed stitches, but I felt it smarter to keep my mouth shut.

As the night progressed, my mind slowly cleared from the drugs. I remember standing in my living room, looking at him asleep on my couch with his friends snoring away on my floor. I thought to myself *Why the hell is my drug dealer here? Why did he come to my house? How does he even know where I live?*

He left early the next morning just after the first pinks of sunrise lit the sky. But that night, while he slept, staining my couch with his blood, I decided I was out. This was not the life I had signed up for – or at least not the life I wanted to stay part of. Things had gotten way too close to home – they’d actually come home – and I wasn’t about to let them get any worse. I stopped buying from this guy. In fact, I stopped buying drugs completely. For a few months I still hung out with this crowd, and financed many a purchase – but I extricated myself from any contact with sellers. In addition to keeping me out of harm’s way, and my house free from gangs of hemorrhaging drug dealers, it allowed me to gradually wean myself off the stuff. By relying on others and not having

stashes of my own, I forced myself to slowly give it up. The relationships faded away along with my usage. Once I wasn't using, they weren't much fun to be around anymore. I don't even know if they noticed I stopped showing up.

I still think about this band of failures from time to time, and I don't think of them fondly. I think of them as they were – sad and pathetic, unaware of the place they inhabited, and unaware that they would never succeed – that they would never be someone worthwhile, other than maybe heroes to others of their creed. I got out, but none of them did. It was easy for me, because I was never in. I was never one of them. I knew better.

So, now that we're on the subject, I guess I can admit it – I've done bad things to my body. I've also broken the law. I suppose those infractions could be considered sins – I'll leave that up to you. But I just thought I should start out with something simple and we can go from here. Thanks again for taking the time to listen.

II

Rainy days really are a drag, aren't they? We're stuck inside here, with nothing to do but talk. At least it's a dreary day today though, because honestly if the sun were shining I'd much rather be outside than in here with you. As autumn sighs its dying breaths and the days turn cold, one has to take advantage of the sunny times, right? At least this gives me an excuse to stay in.

Oh, but a sunny Autumn day ... I just love to hear the crunch of leaves beneath my feet, like beetle shells on an ancient cave floor, don't you? Also, fall has a special smell to it, and it's just that – that autumny smell. I don't know for certain, but it's probably just the smell of rot and decay tricking us into thinking it's something special. But it smells so fresh and crisp, and we all love it. I know I do. A hike on a warm November day, that's what we live for. It's not too late in the season that you'll get a chill, but it's cool enough that you'll get a bit of a bite in your lungs. It's invigorating, to be outside this time of year. But not today. Today it's just unseasonably cold and rainy. It's really a waste of a day.

So we're inside, the fire is warm and the air feels toasty, like a blanket wrapped snug and tight around your shoulders. The heat of a fire this time of the year is such a welcome thing. It's not like summer where on a hot day you're sweaty and uncomfortable from the oppressive weight of it. The man-made warmth from the glowing embers of a well-kept fire avoid those sweaty discomforts of a summer day. It's enveloping and safe – and made even more comforting by a view out the window. Yes, the shutters are closed and we can't see outside, but we can still hear the rain. The tapping on the roof above us as it drones on with its job makes us aware that it exists, whether we see it or not, and we're safe from the chill and shivers it would otherwise bring. We're here, it's warm. Outside it's cold and wet. Thank God for matchsticks and thank God for houses.

III

Around this same time, I had a friend who...let me clear this up; I need to make sure you're not misunderstanding me. I wasn't a complete deadbeat during this time. Those potheads and dropouts I hung with, they weren't the only people I surrounded myself with. I had plenty of friends and acquaintances who were basically normal. They had their jobs, like I had mine, and they had their little picnics and Saturdays at the dog park and Sunday family barbeques, and I went to a lot of them. I wasn't just a man of one world, I was of many, and that one foot in the door of socially accepted reality gave me a leg up and the confidence that I always had a way out of the other.

One summer I was invited to a party at an acquaintance's house. The fireworks that night make me think it was the Fourth of July, although I can't be certain of the date. Regardless, it was a summer night and I'd been invited to a family gathering – though not my own family, someone else's.

The day began, well not the day, since I didn't get to the party until late afternoon or early evening. I remember slipping on the dewy grass as I walked across the lawn, struggling to see who was who. I got to the party just as the sun was setting and the smoky air held reminders of meats fresh off the grill. I ate a bit, and spent some time talking to other people there, getting to know them.

While we're on the subject, I'll let you in on a little secret: I never actually get to know people. I merely pretend to. I talk to them, share a laugh, listen to their stories, smile and nod. There's something trite about conversation, but still everyone has to have it. If we were just all sitting around in a room together not talking to each other, it would be uncomfortable, so we make up things to say even though they're meaningless. How about that sports team game? Wow, that sounds like a really fun trip. What do you do for a living? Look at the face, shake the hand,

remember their name and file away what you've learned so that next time you'll have something to talk about so you can continue your meaningless relationship for who knows how long. It keeps up appearances though. You're normal, they're normal, we all have normal lives. We all do our boring things and we all care about them and they're oh so interesting. Then we go home, sleep, and forget about everyone else and worry about ourselves again until the next time we have to interact with others.

It was the same kind of situation at this get-together. I don't know who I talked to. I made a show of interest in their lives but after the night was through I had no plan on ever talking to any of these people again. I feigned concern, they engaged, and social interaction was born.

On this point I do admit, I am rather good at these interactions. The easiest way to have someone think you're interesting is to simply listen to what they have to say and act like you care about it. Ask questions, let them show how worldly or benevolent they are, and they'll be on your side for the remainder of the evening. Make false promises. *Oh yes, we must get together. Let's meet up for lunch sometime.* They're gestures merely for show, and in the oft chance that someone takes the offer seriously and attempts to make contact in the future... well that's what excuses are made for – unless of course it's in your interest to continue the relationship further.

There was one person that night, however, who I did find genuinely interesting. She was pretty, in a meek, slouched-shoulder kind of way. A pretty little made-up, yet still pale face, decorated by a simple brunette bob – worth talking to for the evening. Besides, one never knows where simple conversation can lead. Our conversation hit off just fine, following the same protocols as any other conversation, but with additional tricks of flirtation added in. A smile, a touch on the arm. A laugh at a joke. *Here, let me get you another drink.*

Then reality came in rearing its ugly head. Reality, in this instance, being history and baggage and all the other things one never needs to know about someone until the time is right, which is

preferably *never*. The host of the party, as I should have guessed, was related somehow to this woman to whom I'd devoted the better half of my evening. To this day I'm not quite sure how it came up, perhaps it was simply due to another act of obligatory conversation, but I learned from our host, while filling our glasses with another round of wine, that her father was a preacher.

A preacher! Can you imagine that? I think I did a good job hiding the look of shock on my face, although from the widening of my eyes and the abrupt change of tone in my end of the conversation – meaning I killed it – pretty clearly showed my host the shift this news would have on my evening. Now, as you can guess, I'm not exactly a religious man – but that doesn't mean I know the answers to everything. I am here, talking to you, after all. But what I cannot stand is one who believes what he or she believes without having any sort of real reason for it other than upbringing and momentum. I feared this was the case with the preacher's daughter.

Above all, I can't stand self-righteousness, and that, in all honesty, is what I'd already been taught through experience to expect from those who build their shelter too closely to God.

Back at our plaid blanket on the lawn, I placed the glass of wine in her outstretched hand. With the liquor already in my system working as a vocal lubricant, I jumped right into the topic.

“So, I heard your father is a preacher.”

“That's right,” she replied, leaving a healthy pause between us. She tugged at her earlobe, looking expectantly at me to continue with whatever point I was trying to make. I'm sure I asked her next what she thought of it, and if she went to church. A nonchalant conversation, using the tools of social discourse by showing interest in her and her background. It was an intimate moment, taking our conversation to a level of privacy not regularly explored at surface level barbeque party banter. Talk of religion and politics are always said to be avoided, but I've found that when one wants to bring things to a more personal level, one can do no better than to bring up discussions of what is core to a person's being. This wasn't the point of my interest, however,

even though from the way she moved closer to me as she spoke it was clear this was a topic dear to her heart and one she'd longed to find a kindred spirit in.

As often does in these instances, the conversation continued on civilly. Until several drinks later, when, fully aware that the night would end lonesome, I tired of the dalliances and just went on with my destruction. *Why do you believe? Can you give me proof?* All the silly arguments one makes in philosophy classes as to why God must not exist. I didn't care if God existed, but what I did care about then was that this woman have reason for her beliefs. *Why? Why do you believe in something that isn't there for you? Why haven't you found love and why are you so alone?* Silly woman.

She cried a lot that night, I learned later. I can picture her in my mind, her face streaked with runs of mascara, at her father's side bawling, "why?" He was there, that night, her father. I said my hellos to him earlier, putting on my best proper young man face I could so as to not arouse his concern when I later showed interest in his daughter. So I could talk to her as an adult, without interference and let the night go as I hoped it would.

I can only hope she's since thought about what I've had to say and has questioned the reasoning for her beliefs. If I got her that far, at least the destruction of the other friendship – the host and I never spoke again after that incident – wasn't in vain. She's probably happier now than she's ever been because she's been forced to think and then believe. Sometimes you have to break someone down to nothing just so they can rebuild. And when they rebuild maybe they'll think about what they're building this time around. Never let a good crisis go to waste. So, create a crisis.

I sometimes wonder if I shouldn't have been too hard on her, but was I really? I only asked that she help me understand what it was that she knew so deeply in her heart to be true. Perhaps she could have saved *me* at that time, had she revealed some great unknown truth I had yet to discover.

She didn't though, and I haven't discovered it. Her tears made it pretty clear that she broke that night. I'm sure she's doing fine.

But here I am going on about nonsense that really doesn't seem to matter much in the greater scheme of things. Why do I even bring these events up? Maybe I feel a bit of regret for the pain I brought upon her that night, but maybe I'm just proud of what I've done. It's the point of my whole reason for talking to you. It's the bigger riddle I'm hoping you can help me to unravel. Am I a good person? What makes us good? Does simply doing what makes others feel good make one good? Or, does one need to challenge, tear down, build up, tear down and recreate until the other has made his life his own, and not just the sum of the parts that have been preached as right and holy and just throughout their lives? Isn't the better option to help one see himself more clearly, with a lucidity that can only be brought through introspection? Is it my job to do this? If not me, then who? Why do I even bother? It's because I care about others and I want them to be happy and fulfilled in a truthful, authentic way of being. Not delusion. Not blissful ignorance. Truthful happiness. That is our purpose, isn't it? To help our fellow man? It's in great service that my actions stem, although at times I do question the effectiveness of it all. I do good, people may see me as bad. Perhaps I'm just a martyr.

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