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Deconversion Narratives and the Failures of Rhetoric of Healing

Deborah Laake begins her autobiography not with the typical rhetorical entre, "I was born," but rather with her landing on a college campus. With long legs striding confidently from under carefully hemmed mini-but-not-too-mini skirts, Laake wondered who might be out there waiting for her but not what career path she might take. If, for the Latter Day Saint, four years were as but a day, she might have invoked Emily Dickinson's famous lines: "Born, bridled, shrouded/ in a day/ . . . /is this the way?"

Indeed, Laake's account of her life, published as *Secret Ceremonies: A Mormon Woman's Intimate Diary of Marriage and Beyond* (1993), begins with decisions made and events that occurred during her four years at Brigham Young. The period included more than one romance, a marriage, her sexual awakening, and the realization that although her first marriage was seen as her birth into the Mormon temple, the ceremony bridled and shrouded her in other ways. As a deconversion narrative, Laake's story differs little from others told by women in the latter twentieth century. She marks her movement away from the religious tradition of her childhood and family with what have come to be seen as recognizable rhetorical tropes. She has turned from one belief system and the pain and suffering it has caused her to a new faith of universal love and, in the process, a new sense of self-worth and identity. Her tale concludes—if the deconversion narrative may be said to have a conclusion—with a quite typical sense of hope and wholeness.

Laake's story, however, does not end with the published account that spent 15 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and has appeared in at least 500,000 copies. My analysis was prompted by events of not quite two years ago, when I was teaching Laake's tale in a class on American autobiography (against the wishes of at least one colleague, an LDS himself). In the midst of the semester, a student approached me with results of the Internet research she had

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conducted on market responses to Laake's text. Among her findings was news of Laake's recent suicide. In spite of my shock over this tragic event, I saw the student's finding as one of serendipity: it allowed the class to explore further--and with concrete discrepancies between narrative and bodily behavior--the very claims about the power of the autobiographical act that I had attempted to illustrate and have us explore all semester. The story of Deborah Laake and her published narrative (two distinct entities) illustrate simultaneously the successes and the failures of rhetorical testimonies as acts of healing. These two perspectives of the same story are what I wish for us to explore here.

My goal is not to undermine the important place of the autobiographical act or the oral testimony in our culture; neither is it to reach a resolve about the relationship between truth-telling and lying in women's narratives. Rather, my hope is that we might address issues I raise by bringing both theories of autobiography and of religious discipline to bear upon Laake's situation and, in so doing, that we might help to allay--if deemed at all possible or even preferable--similar situations. At least, we might use accounts such as Laake's to teach and to raise levels of understanding about the nature of rhetorics of healing among our students and the general public.

In the first part of this presentation, as I share more details of Laake's account, I will draw from John Barbour's study of Christian deconversion narratives to delineate the genre and explain how *Secret Ceremonies* both follows and breaks traditions. Then, I will turn to concepts of the language of women's narratives and of "confession." Of particular interest to me is the role of what we might call a "support community," or the audience of the testimony. Richard J. Foster, in his *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, makes some insightful suggestions about the role of one who receives a confession. Yet Foster's work, like Barbour's, assumes a Christian perspective that may be neither acceptable nor appropriate to all who seek or need healing, especially those who believe strongly in theories of the inevitable difference that persists through the writing of women's narratives..

Deconversion Narratives and Laake's Account

Laake's *Secret Ceremonies* in 1993 joined narratives by a cloud of witnesses, women among the Latter Day Saints, who struggled with what they saw as the oppressive and abusive patriarchal system: from the nineteenth century, the story of Mrs. T. B. H. Stenhouse; more recently, Sonia Johnson's *From Housewife to Heretic* (1981) and *Going Out of Our Minds* (1987), and Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge* (1991). Most of them emerged from it, telling their tales in hostile tones, raging against the machine in which they had been trapped. Such anger and confusion also appears in narratives by women of traditions other than the Mormons who leave the faith of their "Fathers": Sue Monk Kidd describes her journey out of the Southern Baptists in *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1997); Sally Lowe Whitehead's *The Truth Shall Set you Free* (1996) tells the tale of the author's simultaneously coming to terms with her husbands homosexuality and their many years in conservative southern churches; Mary Daly's *Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage* (1992) marks her move out of patriarchal Christianity into a more holistic faith.

In spite of their departures from Christianity, these women all turn from one faith to a new one of some sort and, in so doing, place their narratives among those Barbour defines as "deconversion narratives". That is, their works are ones of "deconversion" rather than "secularization," for deconversion is a self-conscious decision that informs a narration, where "the former faith is presented as not just irrelevant but as wrong or misguided" (3). Secularization, however, "is a gradual fading away of beliefs, as religion simply ceases to inform a person's life, to make any real difference" (2). Although secularization aptly describes the loss of faith of many people in our culture, deconversion is the process narrated in the texts and testimonies described above. These works, especially those by former Mormon Sonia Johnson, serve as useful points of comparison as this analysis progresses.

In *Secret Ceremonies*, the new belief Laake upholds is one that in the 1970s might have been called "secular humanism." She describes the moment of new insight, occurring after

several weeks in a psychiatric institution (PI), when she offers to teach a very young and needy man how to dance. This hour of willfully giving of herself without being in need or with expectation of return indicates her new understanding of a connection to a human family that extends beyond the bounds of any religious organization. It ends up being only one of several gestures of love she offers to those around her.

Although undergraduate students from conservative religious backgrounds have difficulty claiming such passages as moments of "conversion" to a new belief—indeed, many have difficulty seeing anything other than Laake's hostility and what is, in their eyes, a perverted sex drive—any reader with a larger understanding of testimony and the traditions of religious narratives sees these moments as positive periods of healing and acceptance of a new faith that promises to give her life meaning and create a new sense of identity. As she writes it, she experiences a sense of self worth distinct from one that depends upon support or feedback from any man. These passages of union with others are in stark contrast to ones in which isolation and periods of dark bleakness predominate.ⁱ

The periods of isolation and darkness are as much in keeping with the traditions of the genre as is the coming to a new belief. As Barbour has written, "the loss of faith brings emotional upheaval, especially such painful feelings as grief, guilt, loneliness, and despair" (2). "I was not very well suited to being alone, but I was completely alone now" (258), Laake wrote of one significant moment when she realized the church's teachings no longer were adequate to guide her.

Two other characteristics of the deconversion narrative—questioning "the truth of a

ⁱ Some might see her frequent moments of masturbation during her first marriage, not long after experiencing orgasm for the first time, as the epitome of these periods of isolation. In keeping with the images of darkness in China Galland's *Longing for Darkness* (1990), these might be seen as necessary periods of incubation that lead to her rebirth as a whole woman. A question that remains, however, is the degree to which she gives birth to herself and the degree to which she depends on others to help her out.

system of beliefs" and "the rejection of the community to which he or she belonged" (Barbour 2)—quite obviously emerge in Laake's account. After she has asked for and received her Mormon father's assistance with pursuing her first divorce, and after being reprimanded and counseled by male church leaders about the life she is sharing with a "Gentile" (her second husband), she does not question a male leader directly but writes into her narrative the feelings she experienced.

I have often been asked why I stopped being a Mormon in my middle twenties, when everything I'd done until then had being a Mormon so fiercely at its heart. There isn't one answer to the question—there isn't one thing that *happened*—but there were many things that didn't happen. I didn't storm out of the society that had sheltered and harmed me, didn't fly into a rage at anyone, didn't begin to hate the people who proposed pat answers. There was never a showdown. (257).

As the Bishop John Lawton walked away from her after giving her the advice that "everything will be all right if you can just support your husband more," she experienced

John Lawton's back moving away from me down a quiet street and realized that there was nothing in him that could acknowledge my life's complex circumstances. The rules of our religion were the only rules we know, he and I, but they were rules that demanded some predictability from days and nights and husbands and wives, and they would no longer stretch to explain my experiences. (258)

Laake's severance from the church, as is typical, happens gradually.ⁱⁱ

She moves through her marriage to the "Gentile," who is also an atheist, through associations with a group of smart, witty, fun loving "jack Mormons," and through psychiatric counseling that culminates in the PI experience. She becomes a successful journalist and, as she explains in the epilogue, is happy and healthy as a single woman who endured a third marriage and divorce ("a mistake," she writes), surrounded by friends and colleagues who give her love and support. The formal, final break with the church occurs as a result of her writing of the book. Her excommunication occurred within a week of the volume's publication. At that point in her spiritual journey, the church's act was unsurprising and almost insignificant. She had found her own way for many years prior to putting in print the stories she had told friends for more than ten years.

Laake's narrated experience not only exhibits characteristics typical of deconversion narratives in general but also those written by women of the latter twentieth century. For the women whose narratives Barbour studied, "gender-related conflicts were crucial aspects of the process of deconversion,"; "a common and crucial issue . . . is rejection of the prescribed sex

ⁱⁱ Sonia Johnson, for example, writes her first autobiographical book (*From Housewife to Heretic*) with a focus upon her excommunication from the church and her unexpected divorce, which occur during the same period but for very different reasons. Although she had been excommunicated for her political activism as a supporter of ERA and a member of NOW, she fought to maintain her position within the church because she could not imagine her life without it. Her faith, as it is with many women, was too important for her to relinquish it completely and immediately, in one fell swoop. Instead, she first tried to make changes she felt essential for women and for the church.

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roles and exploitation" (189)—an issue not unlike that experienced by people of color in response to "White Man's Religion." The gender-related conflicts in the accounts "include such events as the perception of a church's misogyny, a decision to have an abortion, or an experience of sisterly solidarity with other women that discloses by contrast the deficiencies of a religious community" (189).

Barbour divides women's deconversion narratives into two groups--those who reinterpret and affirm some version of Christianity and those who reject any version of it because they "insist that oppressive tendencies are not just corruptions of Christianity but are inherent in its myths, theology, and institutions" (190). Among the former, he notes 1) these writers are more tentative than many works of religious autobiography in asserting their beliefs 2) they "emphasize uniquely personal experience rather than acceptance of dogma, doctrine, or ecclesiastical authority" (190) 3)"Their autobiographies are this-worldly and antidualistic, seeking the holy or sacred in areas of life often viewed as secular or profane by the official institutions of Christianity" (190). Considering these characteristics, it appears that Laake's narrative adheres more to the group of women's narratives that rejects any version of Christianity.

Laake's account, however, should be seen as a narrative of deconversion rather than a story of secularization, for she does claim to come to a new belief about what she sees as true and important to humanity--giving to people in need without expectation of return. She underscores her uniquely personal experiences, writing in her "Introduction," "my book is personal, not political. . . . I have tried to illuminate the deeper nature of my heritage, by telling my own story in detail" (xx). In her "Epilogue" she presents her career as "a writer and newspaper executive" and "her tight-knit group of friends"—as giving her life meaning: "I realize that many people who once believed I held promise cannot imagine that I am finding happiness as a childless, unmarried woman on the threshold of forty, and that those things I regard as my best accomplishments—my joy in my career, my intense friendships, and my hard-won mental

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health—are easily discounted by them” (318) . This "this-worldly and anti-dualistic" approach to the holy and sacred is that from which she draws strength and identity. She writes specifically of God at this point, “I want to be free to draw no conclusions at all about the nature of God without feeling that my inability to know Him now is a lack of faith” (319) and “my relationship with God has only broadened I see him everywhere and am content for His true nature and purpose to be a mystery” (325).

These claims about her relationship to God and “mystery” precede Laake’s concluding comments that any ideas proposed as singular solutions to problems are lies. It is such strong statements in Laake’s “Epilogue”—about her faith, her relationships, her work with language, about truth and lying—(all of which mark her narrative as not unlike those of other women) that contribute to the questions in the second part of this essay.

Narratives and Healing: Confessions, Truth, and Support Communities

Laake’s title, *Secret Ceremonies*, suggests its connection to the confessional—a mode used to describe poetry as well as prose that seeks to create a bond with the reader by way of revealing intimate details that have not yet been made public. She continues such a mode in the opening sentences of her introduction: “This book has taken a long time to write, primarily because I have kept losing my nerve. More than once I have stopped stone dead, unable for another moment to reveal such intimate acts in front of an audience I don’t know” (xv). Yet the confession, according to its religious connotations, should provide not only intimate details but also a form of healing. Indeed, at least since the time of Freud, even the secular narrative, shared with the therapist, has been seen as significant to the healing process. Yet feminist scholars have argued that women’s narratives, including the confessional, are always composed of lies. Even those who theorize about the autobiography in general acknowledge its fictional nature and the difficulties of distinguishing between truths and lies. Bringing together these theories, Laake’s “Introduction” and the claims of her health and happiness in the “Epilogue,” informed by knowledge of her suicide seven years after the book’s publication, we must address the degree to

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which narratives of healing may succeed or, put another way, their shortcomings and failures.

The question of truth and Laake's confessional narrative has been raised by Mormons, of course. Those I have known who have opposed the teaching of the book have opposed it for what they see as "untrue" pictures of the church and, especially, the men within it. A *Newsweek* review of 1993, for example, announced, "Laake fails to be fair Nowhere does she mention that women can and do preach from Mormon pulpits, lead congregations in prayer and in some organizations even give orders to men," suggesting her story is at best only a partial truth. Reader reviews at Amazon.com make similar assertions. (My LDS colleague also expressed this view. One LDS student, who continued in my course with fair warning about the reading assignment, was willing to go along with the reading and present other perspectives to the class, although she was offended by the disclosure of "secret ceremonies" that she deemed sacred and that, in her view, Laake profaned). These "partial truths" are related to issues of Laake's experiences, her style, her goals in writing, and her sense of audience.

The most recently published paperback edition announces Laake as an award-winning journalist. An obituary in the *Phoenix New Times*, for which she wrote and edited for many years, lists her numerous awards, among these Arizona's Journalist of the Year (1988) and a national Headliner award for feature writing (1991). Knowledge of Laake's skills as a writer, combined with her easy-to-read style and titillating details of her sexual awakening, cause readers to wonder about the woman's intentional appeal to the mass market. Indeed, the color and images of the paper cover edition look more like those of a cheap romance than the sedate navy with silver embossing the original boards boasted. (Found among university libraries, this handsome volume looks as credible as any others on the academic shelves.) Was she attempting to destroy a public image of the LDS movement to a wide audience? To make money by selling "romance" to a mass market?

Who, then, was Laake's audience? A larger, popular audience of English-speaking people, with whom she sought union and understanding by providing negative pictures of the

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Mormon church? An imagined group of women--those who buy popular romances--with whom she sought a bond? A group of Mormons, with whom she wished to "get even"? Or herself, for whom she most needed to justify her behavior? Probably she conceived of all of these as she wrote.

Yet the message Laake wrote to herself is one that should most intrigue us. For if we take her opening literally, her claim that she was unable "to reveal such intimate facts to an audience" she did not know raises questions of her own self-knowledge. Since her Epilogue so clearly claims health and wholeness, supportive friends, faith in a God she did not clearly understand, and contentment with the mysteries and unknown, we are led to believe she had a good self-understanding at the time of writing. The contradiction points to concepts of truth and lying in autobiographies and testimonies.

Andrew Hudgins has enumerated and classified the types of lies autobiographers unconsciously employ: lies of narrative cogency, of detail, of fictional convention, emotional evasion or omission, self re-creation, extended consciousness, and interpretation. He sees these lies as not undermining the narratives' values but as essential to the autobiographer. They make autobiographical narrative what it is, make it worth reading. Others, such as Barbour, have attempted to delineate an ethics of reading and writing autobiographies, ways of determining "truth" among the necessary lies.

Feminists, such as Sidonie Smith, have emphasized the power that exists within the lying inherent to women's narratives. Since women are forced to speak and write not only in patriarchal language but also in the conventions of genres, such as the confessional, created by a patriarchal institution, their narratives are filled with shortcomings and gaps, where their stories and views of themselves, their linguistic reconstructions, cannot fit the molds imposed upon them. Like Laake viewing Bishop Lawton and his solutions, these women know the narratives imposed upon them and seek to work simultaneously within and against their constraints. As Smith explains, the inevitable lying that results not only are "manifestations of duplicity

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expected of 'woman'" but also the "disruptive potential . . . in the coherent organization of operative fictions of 'gender' and 'truthtelling'" (162). Stories such as Laake's "disrupt, consciously or unconsciously, the surface of the unified, authoritative, essential 'self,'" they "disrupt the superficial placidity of an autobiographical contract that assumes identity between narrator and narratee" (162).

I certainly saw such contradictions the first time I prepared to lead a discussion of Laake's *Secret Ceremonies*. I saw her claim to wholeness and the ways in which her story "fit" the generic mold of the deconversion narrative. Yet I sensed some lies among her claims. Chief among the discontinuities were those existing in her last chapter and "Epilogue." In the last chapter, where Laake "develops" at PI, she claims to understand the importance of giving love rather than looking to receive it, to need to rely upon herself rather than guidance from any man. Yet in the "Epilogue" as she describes her successful work as a journalist, she also mentions the "mistake" of her third marriage. The topic is more than a passing comment, for she uses it as a way of explaining how far she has come as an independent, single woman. But for many readers the third failed marriage reminds us that her moments of epiphany at PI were simply that-- moments of clarity of insight, recreated through the autobiographical act, satisfying readers and, most likely, herself. These brief moments in no way signified her journey and future experiences would be static, yet we are asked, through the language she employed in her "Epilogue," to believe in the continuing existence of the healthy Deborah Laake she presents there.

Laake's "Afterward" in the last paperback edition, which discusses the book's success and the public's mixed responses to it, reminded me of the ongoing nature of her life, beyond the pages of the narrative. Similarly, ex-Mormon Sonia Johnson wrote in her first book of her love of the LDS, the sorrow brought about in her life by her ex-communication from the church and her divorce, and the concern about her position as a single heterosexual woman in her mid-forties. In her second book, *Going Out of Our Minds*, Johnson includes discussion not only of her dislike of all patriarchal religions but also the discovery of her lesbianism. The changes

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occurred in just three years.

In spite of my knowing the temporary nature of inscribed lives in relationship to their authors' ongoing physical and spiritual experiences, knowledge of Laake's suicide in February 2000 troubled me. I felt both proud that I had seen the lies and contradictions and upset that Laake had been compelled to take her own life. Indeed, as I had read and taught *Secret Ceremonies*, I had been pained by Laake's pain, and I knew other women that had been as well. They had seen the truth of her story and appreciated the ways in which it helped them understand their own faith journeys. Such mixed feelings prompted me to explore the failings of her narrative.

It is my contention that Laake, the physical being attempting to sustain herself and make sense of her life, needed more than her imagined large audience of readers (a necessary image in the mind of the writer) and even more than the very real large audience of readers that has been documented by sales records and fan mail. She also needed more than herself as she moved through her struggles with mental and physical illness. She needed a tangible support community. And, while a community of colleagues is, indeed, better than none, I would argue that the secular supporters she describes in the book's Epilogue did not offer the same kind of support a markedly "spiritual" group should have been able to offer.

Language is a form that marks both connection and difference—an attempt to bring back together a primordial, pre-linguistic union with the mother. Confession, according to theories of language and narrative, will always fall short in creating re-union. Yet reunion through confession can occur, according to some Christian theorists. Richard Foster explains it as a reliance upon grace and mystery, supplied in part through human relationships. The action is not merely linguistic.

To explore this claim, I turn to ideas delineated in the "confession" chapter of Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. Foster acknowledges confession as a difficult movement because of

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the fear of judgment that might result, especially when the confessor sees the audience as "a group of saints rather than as a group of sinners" with whom she has much in common. The role of the audience, however, is crucial, and Foster describes it as similar to but extremely different from that of the therapist. According to Foster's Quaker theology, the audience has "the authority to receive the confession of sin and to forgive it in God's name" (146). Yet the recipient of the confession has important guidelines to follow: understanding her own place in relationship to the cross (her own sinful nature and humility), which should help her to hear the confessor's words without an air of superiority or feeling the need to divulge the information to others; being quiet, so that the "sacredness of the moment" might occur; "set[ting] the cross between" the confessor and the recipient, which is a way of saying, "keeping God's presence and mystery" prominent, as it, and only it, will contribute to the healing process; praying "for the inner wounds that the sin has caused," "invit[ing] God to flow into the deep inner mind and heal the sorrows of the past" (155-56).

This delineation of "confession" differs markedly from a secular narrative presented to a therapist or a secular audience of another sort--friends over drinks, a stranger on an airplane, etc. While the secular therapist listens quietly, he or she is called upon to analyze, if not pass judgment. While the secular therapist may not feel dominant or superior after hearing the confessional narrative of one in trouble, both the therapist and the confessor approach these moments with attitudes different from what Foster describes. In Foster's view, it is imperative that both see the actions to be confessed as "sins" that need to be forgiven and forgotten and the confessor as one who needs to be healed and to change. Neither the recipient of the confession nor the confessor has the power to make the changes; it is only God's power and presence that can bestow change. That is, ultimately it is a divine, mysterious presence that moves through the confessional moment and the life of the confessor to bring about both healing and change.

Laake's many confessions begin in moments of counseling with Mormons. Yet as she describes them, these periods of interaction are not like those ideals Foster describes. She listens

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well but gives only partial testimony or partial responses to questions these supposedly "helpful" men ask her. Employing what many of us would see as a Foucauldian approach, she describes these counseling sessions as moments of titillation for older, married men who asked her details about her sexual relationships. Of course, we cannot know the judgments that occurred in these moments, but we do see what Laake presents as their failures. The failures seem to derive in part from her fear of judgment by men who present themselves as above her in their spiritual and moral journeys.

Remarkably, Laake's first non-church related counseling experience is the most effective in helping to promote change in her life. A counselor at PI, the institution in which she has her greatest moment of deconversion, was able to help Laake because he would not allow her to lie to herself. In keeping with one of Foster's prescribed characteristics of effective confession, Laake must be honest with herself about her behavior. Yet there is no divine presence or mystery described in these moments of counsel. Indeed, Laake's realization is that she not only must be honest with herself but also must depend upon herself (rather than looking to someone else for answers) for the healing process to occur. Those of us who recognize her ongoing weakness of looking to others (especially men) for guidance see Laake's acknowledgment of self-help as essential. (Yet Laake clearly overlooks any acknowledgment of a higher power that Foster and twelve-step rehab groups depend upon.)

Laake's decision to write *Secret Ceremonies*, which was encouraged by her new colleagues a few years later, was an important step in the confessional and healing process. Laake had to trust her ability to face the consequences of making her actions public and sharing them with recipients who might not be supportive. Herein lies part of the failing of her confessional act as a narrative of healing. Responses to the publication brought about more discomfort, pain and uncertainty. As she describes it in the "Afterward" of the last edition, hecklers and protestors made themselves known at her many public promotional appearances. Yet she felt called to continue, in spite of the emotional difficulties she encountered. What she

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describes then, is not the outcome of confession--grace, healing, and wholeness, as Foster describes it. Rather, her "confessional" act sustains a painful fight and her need for self-justification. The broad audience to which she appeals might be able to provide her a sense of justification, but justification is not the same as healing. This "secular" support is not the mystery of grace and divine presence Foster describes.

One might argue, drawing from theories of autobiographical writing and women's use of language that narratives of healing perhaps can never perfectly exist. They can only be complemented by relationships that extend beyond language. It is not the narrative itself but the lack of human relationships graced by divine presence and mystery that contributed to the failings. Perhaps what Laake needed most was spiritual listeners, those who would neither condemn nor condone her actions but would, through prayers to the divine for forgiveness and guidance, allow her to be healed and made whole. These perhaps could have complemented Laake's ongoing spiritual journey.

There are, however, wrinkles to be added to "the rest of the story" that Laake did not write. The *Phoenix New Times* obituary that discussed her Laake's final years explains she resigned from full time journalism work because of her intense struggle with cancer. How could narrative possibly heal physical illness? Those who study narratives of cancer patients explain the many ways metaphors provide at least emotional and intellectual strength, but do they have physical ramifications? And finally, can Foster's method of confession, or some slight revision of it, with its emphasis upon grace and mystery--preceded by acknowledgment of "sin"--work among those who have rejected Christianity?

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