

On erring

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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To err is human, Alexander Pope famously said in his *Essay on Criticism*. Yes, it certainly is. And the more experience I have with this being human business, the more evidence I am afforded of this unpleasant truth.

The season of Lent is about self-examination and repentance, so I decided to grit my teeth and take a bit of an erring inventory this morning. My particular erring seems to happen on a number of levels. I make dumb, relatively harmless mistakes pretty much constantly. I forget things, I lose stuff, I respond obtusely to people, I fail to pay adequate attention. This kind of erring can mostly be chalked up to having limited space in the hard drive, I suppose. Or at least I can convince myself of this.

But there are more serious kinds of erring. *I leave undone those things which I ought to have done; and I do those things which I ought not to have done*, to borrow the words of the prayer book. I do right things for wrong reasons and wrong things for right reasons. I speak poorly of people and dress it up as righteousness. I selfishly crave attention and mask it as humility. I let people down. My compassion runs out. I am impatient and acquisitive. I am unable to be and to do all the things that people need me to be and to do.

I am very busy in my erring. It takes up rather a lot of my time.

In his marvelous little book [Unapologetic](#), Francis Spufford coined a delightfully caustic and agonizingly appropriate phrase to describe the many and varied ways that we human beings find to err. He was seeking to avoid using the word “sin” and thus alienating his post-Christian audience, so he came up something more memorable: **The Human Propensity to F*** Things Up (HPtFtU)**.

What a phrase.

According to Spufford, the HPtFtU can refer to the deepest and darkest parts of who we are and what we want. But it also describes something less obviously insidious, more of a gradual settling in. Spufford offers the following tragicomic example:

It need not be dramatic, though. It can equally well be just the drifting into place of one more pleasant, indistinguishable atom of wasted time, one more morning like all the others, which quietly discloses you to yourself. You're lying in the bath and you notice that you're 39 and that the way you're living bears scarcely any resemblance to what you think you've always wanted; yet you got here by choice, by a long series of choices for things which, at any one moment, temporarily outbid the things you say you wanted most. And as the water cools, and the light of Saturday morning in summer ripples heartlessly on the bathroom ceiling, you glimpse an unflattering vision of yourself as a being whose wants make no sense, don't harmonize: whose desires, deep down, are discordantly arranged, so that you truly want to possess and you truly want not to, at the very same time. You're equipped, you realize, for farce (or even tragedy) more than you are for happy endings. The HPtFtU dawns on you. You have, indeed, f***** things up. Of course you have. You're human, and that's where we live.

A being whose wants make no sense ... whose desires are discordantly arranged ... who is equipped for farce and for tragedy. Yes, this is where we live, where I live.

Yesterday afternoon I went to visit a dear old saint at a nursing home. I helped her sit up in bed and make her way to her chair by the window. We talked for a while about this and that, about how she was doing, about the warm winter we've been having. We talked about how life is long and sometimes hard, about how God sometimes seems absent, even in the places where we need God most.

And then, we pulled out a little grape juice box and a whole-wheat bun. We poured the juice into a tiny little goblet and broke the bun into little pieces. We read a passage of scripture and then we each took a little piece of bread and dipped it in the juice and recited familiar words to one another.

The body of Christ, broken for you ... Broken for all the things you will break, for all the ways in which you will let people down and fail to rise to the level of others' expectations, for all the stupid decisions you will make, for all your lousy attitudes, for your own specific propensity to f*** things up in your own unique ways.

The blood of Christ, shed for you ... Poured out for all the ways that your sin seeps out like a creeping stain, for all the people you hurt (mostly, but not entirely

unintentionally), for all the careless words you throw around, for the compounded laziness and greed that settle in like a dull fog.

We sat in silence for a minute or so, chewing slowly. And then we prayed, asking God to forgive us our sins.

Sometimes I think that the most important thing I will ever do in my work is to hold out a little piece of bread and a cup of juice to another human being and say, *Take this, take and eat ... this is for all that you will not and cannot do in the world, this is for all your mixed and tangled up motives, all the bad that comes out of your good intentions, all of the good that finds its way through thickets of selfish motives and hardness of heart. This is what God has done for the HPtFtU.*

To err is human. Yes, erring is what we do. It is tragically, consistently, painfully, grindingly, predictably human. When we look honestly in the mirror, when something or other in our lives “quietly discloses us to ourselves,” the viewing isn’t always pretty.

But the second clause of Pope’s famous quote tells a more important truth: *to **forgive**, divine.*

This is how God discloses God’s self to us. In a piece of bread and a cup of juice. On a cross. In a welcome at the gate for a sinner stumbling home. Erring is what we do and where we live; but forgiving—thanks be to God—is what God does. Forgiveness is where God lives.

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