

Public redemption at the speed of light

[Phil Bronstein](#)

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Salvation of the soul these days is faster than broadband. Is God on Twitter?

With Michael Vick's return to football, former senator and restless-leg-syndrome-guy Larry Craig opening a consulting firm and San Francisco anarchist Supervisor Chris Daly making homeboy brownies for a running-dog mainstream newspaper (this one), we're clearly in the middle of a cultural phenomenon:

The Speedy Redemption. It's like drive-through churches - there's a significant idea at work, but any true value is lost in the rush to get it over with.

I'm not here to judge the NFL's decision to let Mr. Vick back onto the forgiveness field, which is crowded. Gov. Mark Sanford begs our pardon, endlessly, but stays in office and says it's "time to move on." Ex-Gov. Eliot Spitzer is punditing.

The latest era of immeasurable greed has passed through us like a foul wind, though it's as fast-dissolving and hard to grasp as gas. Jail sentences might be long, but Bernie Madoff has a prison consultant.

But doing hard time is not the same as paying back.

Modern society is ripping off a critical concept. All these people looking for redemption, and finding it fast, "are borrowing something on the cheap and applying it," says the Rev. Steve Privett, Jesuit priest and head of the University of San Francisco. "Whether Michael Vick is redeemed is kind of up to Michael Vick and his ability to repair damage he's done"; it's not just about better PR.

Real redemption is a basic religious notion, all about genuine attempts to make good on your bad. "It's not a reprieve," Privett says. "It's an acknowledgment of the pain you've caused and your efforts to heal that."

In other words, a donation to the SPCA or a few tears doesn't cut it. Neither does grudging acknowledgment, a la Bill Clinton. These things are "pale and superficial," Privett says.

This priest knows something about the hard slog of real redemption. He walks the walk. I met him in El Salvador 20 years ago where he fearlessly ministered to terrified villagers while choppers strafed the tree line.

"Someone else may call the redemptive process just doing the decent thing, following your conscience," he says. "Whether a guy can run for office again or get to play football, that's generally not redemption."

At least some cultural sinners had the right idea: Richard Nixon not only suffered in the sealed chamber of his own personality, he spent years of hard work coming back. Jimmy Carter, irritating though he might be, has taken the long road to post-presidential recovery and redemption. One of the original modern bandits, Michael Milken, ended up doing a lot of righteous stuff for people. And Ted Kennedy, a bad boy in his early life, comes to mind.

I'm not religious myself, but I do believe that public redemption should be less like a statute of limitations and more like some serious and willing community service.

Mr. Daly, here's your broom.

Phil's sick deal of the week

Homeland Security wants to put a \$700 million infectious diseases lab in the middle of Kansas' tornado alley. It's a political pork-barrel thing. Brilliant. Toto, we're airborne!

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