CAMBRIDGE, Mass----Will nobody ever again own up to his transgressions and take the punishment like a person of character, setting a much-needed example?

Rummaging through recent American history, one is hard-pressed to think of anyone who has.

My hopes were riding high on Robert C. McFarlane, the former national security adviser. He openly admitted he had deceived Congress and covered up key elements of the Iran-contra affair and the arms-for-hostages deals. He appropriately and extensively expressed deep regret and remorse: "I could have prevented this......and it's all my fault." He even asked to be punished.

"There, you see," I said to my class, "That's the way to conduct one's self." Nobody can lead a blame-free life. But if we do violate the law or ethical standards, we can still straighten things out and avoid further harm. We must acknowledge our wrongs, make amends to those we injured and to the community whose legal or moral precepts we undermined. We repent by seeking to restore the legitimacy of the code that was broken, paying homage to what is right, even if we had flouted it or were to feeble to live up to it.

The failure to repent is what made a double loser of President Reagan's former political director Lyn Nofziger. First, he violated the law by using his White House contacts for influence-peddling during the short period in which such acts by former high Government officials is prohibited. Then, when convicted, he trivialized the court's finding ("like violating a stop sign," he said) and attacked the law as "lousy" and "stupid."

Gary Hart compounded his troubles by lying about his original indiscretion and then trying to defend it. He would have done better if he had simply confessed when caught, and moved on.

Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, there is no denying, cuts an appealing figure: the take-charge, can-do Marine; no depressed, monotone Hamletesque McFarlane here. But he appeared to go further than others, implying that his disregard for the laws of the land was justified as a matter of principle of national security.

When I expressed dismay over Colonel North's lack of contrition, a colleague tried to hang Colonel North's falling on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other advocates of civil disobedience. One is entitled to rebel, to heed one's conscience, to live up to higher principles, I was reminded.

However, Dr. King and the others openly challenged laws they declared unjust. They fought to change these laws before they turned to civil disobedience. And then they took their lumps accepting jail, refusing bail.

Colonel North did nothing of the sort. He claimed the right to disobey only after he was caught. And he reportedly sought to hinder justice, refusing to provide samples of his handwriting, instructing Swiss banks not to release documents----this when he was not busy shredding potential evidence. No hero of civil disobedience here.

Sadly, even Mr. McFarlane's guilty plea was no act of contrition. He said he agreed to plead guilty to four misdemeanors only because a long costly trial would have rendered his ultimate victory a hollow one. No, Mr. McFarlane won't stand up as a model of repentance.
Couldn’t the Rev. Jimmy Swaggart serve? He didn’t stonewall or lie or depict himself as crucified by the press. Mr. Swaggart both confessed his wrongdoing and eloquently paid to the precepts he flouted. He did not make excuses, like being swept away by alcoholism (As Michael Deaver did), or blame some other demon. He declared that his fall from grace was due to "no one but myself." He certainly did not try to argue post hoc that his transgression was acceptable.

All this would have been so much more commendable if it had not been reliably reported that Mr. Swaggart did so only with a "gun" pointed at his head. Before he agreed to confess and to repent, Mr. Swaggart is reported to have offered a defrocked minister, Marvin Gorman, to be reinstated and appear on his television show if Mr. Gorman would suppress photos showing Mr. Swaggart in the company of a prostitute. Only when Mr. Gorman turned over the pictures to the leaders of the National Assemblies of God did Mr. Swaggart come forward, thus making an imperfect example for the rest of us.

Another imperfect example is John Dean, President Richard M. Nixon’s counsel, who admitted his wrongdoings in the Watergate cover up, but only as he was being prosecuted.

These incidents of great reluctance to repent reflect the weakness of current moral precepts and further contribute to their erosion. It may well be naïve to ask for a moral resurgence, but could we have at least one politician, official, preacher, etc, who has fallen from grace come forward and stand upright?

If nothing else, the nation requires an example to show the many others how to conduct themselves. It would be a fine start on the road to ethical rebuilding.

** The caption I gave to this article was, "Some Repentence, Please."