

WHEN SHOULD YOU SAY YOU'RE SORRY?

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THE ART OF APOLOGY Three Real Life Instances

Rachel Naomi Remen, physician author of the book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, recalls an incident from 1944 when she was six years old. While visiting her physician uncle, she flipped through one of his books on reproductive physiology. Rachel found the illustrations so interesting that she tore several pages out of the book so that she could take them to school to show her friends.

What happened next is predictable. The teacher was horrified by the pictures, the principal went ballistic. Remen's mother was called to pick up the offending material. The principal brought Rachel and her mother into his office and, addressing the child's mother, demanded that Rachel apologize to the children who had seen the pictures and that she write a letter of apology to their parents. He also demanded that Rachel be punished.

Remen's mother asked the principal to explain exactly what Rachel had done to offend the school or other children. Then she listened to her daughter's simple description of what she told her classmates about sexual intercourse and looked at the pictures she had shown them. She turned to the principal and refused to make her daughter apologize to the students or parents. "It's true, isn't it?" she told the principal.

But Rachel was not off the hook. There was one apology she did have to make, and in making that apology she came to recognize what she had done wrong. That apology went to her uncle, of course, for the offense of tearing pages out of one of his books. It may or may not be appropriate to force children to apologize, but if it is, we should let their apologies identify what they are apologizing for.

Janet and Ed were coworkers in a fast-food restaurant. One night they were closing up and Janet decided to play a trick on Ed. When Ed entered the walk-in freezer, Janet shut the door. She thought it was funny. But as she pulled the door handle, nothing happened. The door was locked tight and she didn't have the key. To her horror, she had trapped Ed in the deep freeze.

She heard Ed banging on the walls. Janet didn't know what to do. She knew that she would get fired for this stunt, but she had no other choice but to wake up the store manager. It was an hour before he could get to the store with the key to the freezer. Meanwhile, Janet was crazy with worry and remorse for a joke that had gone very bad. When the manager arrived, the first thing he told Janet was "You're fired." Then he unlocked the freezer and pulled the heavy door open. They went in expecting the worst. But the freezer was empty and Ed was nowhere to be found.

In fact, Ed had escaped from the freezer by a little-known service door that led to the parking lot. Then he had simply gone home. He thought he was just continuing the joke that Janet has started. He had no idea about the panic Janet had gone through or the fact that she had lost her job.

Later, Janet called Ed to apologize. She had thought long and hard about what she wanted to say.

Ed, I am sincerely sorry for locking you in the freezer. I know that people have died from being locked in freezers. I can't believe I put you in that awful position and exposed you to that risk. I've learned by lesson. It was a terrible lapse in judgment and I feel terrible about it. I accept that I was fired. I just hope I don't permanently lose your respect. Again, I apologize.

Ed's response? "Don't worry about it."

On May 9, 2008, a bullet-ridden copy of the Koran, Islam's holy book, was discovered by an Iraqi militiaman at a police shooting range at Baghdad's western outskirts. One or more American soldiers had been using the book for target practice. His hands trembling in outrage, the Iraqi militiaman reverently opened the thick volume. Turning the shredded pages, the man found an English profanity, scrawled in ink.

The discovery was incendiary. Word of what the Americans had done rippled throughout the district. The dignity of Islam required a response, and many clerics called for violence. Seen strategically, the shooting of the Koran threatened to unravel years of cooperation between the United States and Iraqi militia.

As it turned out, the public anger at the desecration of the Muslim holy book was muted because the American apology was quick, direct and nuanced. A week after the incident, a delegation of American commanders arrived to face tribal sheikhs and hundreds of chanting tribesmen lined up behind razor wire. Major General Jeffery Hammond, commander of the 4th Infantry Division, began the apology:

In the most humble manner, I look into your eyes today and I say, please forgive me and my soldiers. The soldier identified by the investigation has lost the honor to serve the United States Army and the people of Iraq here in Baghdad.

Then Colonel Ted Martin, commander of the Division's 1st Brigade, greeted the crowd with an Islamic blessing. He said that what the soldier had done was wrong, and that he had been relieved from duty, reprimanded by the commanding general and dismissed from the Regiment. Then Colonel Martin apologized. Holding a copy of the Koran up for all to see, he kissed the book and touched it to his forehead as a sign of respect, before presenting it to a tribal leader. Then a local Sheikh came to the microphone:

In the name of all the sheikhs, we declare we accept that the apology was submitted.

Ultimately, the apology was effective enough to defuse tensions in western Baghdad.

** REFLECTIONS **

Elwin Hope Wilson is 72 years old, lives in Rock Hill, South Carolina and suffers from severe diabetes. In recent months he has become something of a celebrity because, after a lifetime of racist rhetoric and activity, he has had a change of heart.

As a young man, Wilson assaulted civil rights Freedom Riders. Later in life he threatened a real estate agent who had sold a nearby home to a black family, and another he time vehemently protested the desegregation of the local cemetery where his parents were interred. On yet another occasion he hung a black doll by the neck in his front yard and dared his neighbors to remove it. He regularly embarrassed his children and grandchildren by loudly repeating racial epithets in restaurants and other public places.

But then, a few months ago, all of that changed. Having decided that his previous behavior had been horribly misguided, Wilson began the painful process of issuing apologies. He traveled to Congressman John Lewis' office in Washington, D.C. to personally apologize for punching and knocking down the former Freedom Rider in 1961. He has visited black churches and offered public declarations of repentance. He has sought reconciliation with black citizens in the community.

Many have greeted Elwin Wilson's apologies with surprise and pleasure, but others have been more skeptical. As one Freedom Rider allowed: "In the back of my mind I just keep thinking, 'Why now?'"

Why now, indeed. Although it's always hazardous to render judgments about another person's motives, one thing is clear: Elwin Hope Wilson, beset with serious health problems, was scared. "I'm going to hell," he despairingly told a friend last January, to which his friend replied: "If you truly ask forgiveness and you mean it in your heart, you can be saved." At that moment Wilson felt that perhaps he could escape the hellfire he believed was awaiting him.

So, what are we to make of Elwin Wilson's attempt to reconcile himself to his victims? How legitimate were his apologetic gestures?

There can be no doubt that the man had a great deal to be sorry about and that a sincere and heart-felt apology for his egregious offenses was in order. And there can also be no doubt that Elwin Wilson has gone the extra mile. Like those medieval penitents who were ordered by Catholic Confessors to undertake lengthy, arduous pilgrimages in order to atone for their sins, Wilson has made a strenuous effort to demonstrate remorse in many places and before many people, including members of his own family.

Elwin Wilson's apologies have made him the object of considerable attention, and now he receives regular requests to speak publically about his conversion - a role he doesn't really relish. He isn't interested in publicity and, having said he was sorry, just wants to be free of a painful past and gain some measure of hope for the future.

John Kador, who has worked extensively with men in prison says that, in his experience, for someone with a track record like Wilson's to apologize is so rare that the event often becomes newsworthy. His apology is attention-grabbing on two counts, then, for it comes from an incorrigible racist who is also a proud man.

When considering Elwin Wilson's behavior, one thing to take into consideration is his gender. As a rule, men find it much harder to apologize than women. Numerous studies support that finding. Moreover, **Barbara Flanigan** observes, women tend to "hold themselves more accountable for their failures and flaws than men." It is more common for men who have made mistakes or transgressed to respond with defensiveness, justifications, stonewalling or even outright defiance. 150 years ago, gentlemen squared off with swords or pistols rather than besmirch their honor by issuing an apology to their foe.

But gender differences aside, many of us are reluctant to say we're sorry even when it is clearly called for because we fear negative repercussions. Will people think less of us? Will we lose the respect of family or friends? Will others perceive us as weak and seek to take advantage of us? Will a messy emotional scene ensue? Perhaps our apology will be misunderstood and further damage be done.

Saying "I'm sorry" does entail certain risks. That's one reason why the gesture is so powerful. As **John Kador** emphasizes, "We can't control how the apology will be received,"

the apologizer relinquishes power and puts him or herself at the mercy of the victim... Thus, apology is the bravest gesture we can make to the unknown. It derives its moral authority from this fundamental uncertainty. There are no guarantees.

Nevertheless, **Kador** continues, the fears we harbor about offering an appropriate apology are often exaggerated. When they are done right - and there clearly are better and worse ways of saying you're sorry - the great majority of apologies produce positive outcomes for offender and victim alike. Most of the time the party receiving the apology increases rather than loses respect for the person that extends it. "Apology," **John Kador** says again,

sends the clearest signal that we have the strength of character to reconcile ourselves with the truth. Apology is the most courageous gesture we can make to ourselves

So what does it mean to apologize? What does it entail? A great deal depends on context - the circumstances in which the offense occurred, the severity of the consequences, the degree of culpability. If I step

on someone's toe while making my way through a dense crowd of revelers only the minimal, "I'm sorry" or "excuse me" is required. No further elaboration is really necessary. But should I pull a prank on someone that turns sour, or if I fail to meet an important obligation, to achieve the desired results a more substantial apology is called.

The U.S. Army's response following the discovery of that bullet-ridden Koran highlights what a fully-formed apology should look like. As **Richard Bilder**, professor of international law at the UW-Madison Law School and a member of First Unitarian Society notes in a recent scholarly essay, "genuine" or "authentic" apologies include these essential elements:

- A clear admission of fault or blameworthiness for specific injuries and, without excuse of justification, an unambiguous acceptance of responsibility;
- A sincere expression of remorse and regret for the damage our words or actions caused;
- An appropriate offer of reparation or restitution for said damage;
- A commitment not to repeat such behavior in the future.

Each of these elements was present in the apology presented by the American military spokesmen. Moreover, by addressing his Iraqi audience in their native language, kissing the Koran and touching it to his forehead in the traditional Islamic fashion, Colonel Martin powerfully reinforced the message of remorse.

As the reporter of this poignant story notes, "The apology was effective enough to defuse tensions in Baghdad." It was effective because it was authentic and complete and, according to **John Kador**, convinced the Iraqis that their American allies "valued the relationship more than the need to be right."

Spiritual communities have long recognized the power of apology. Early in its history, the Christian Church instituted the sacrament of penance because it realized that, despite their baptisms and professions of faith, Christians were still susceptible to sin. More than once, Saint Paul evinced frustration over the factionalism, the infighting and quarrelling in the First Century congregations he worked with. A protocol was needed whereby members of these fragile communities could reconcile themselves to one another and begin again in

love. Eventually, the process for apologizing and petitioning for pardon was institutionalized in the sacrament of penance.

The exchange of apology and pardon has long served as a potent form of conflict resolution, not only in the sphere of religion but in other social contexts as well. As **Richard Bilder** observes,

Apologies have...in virtually all human societies, performed important social functions, including diffusing conflict, avoiding retaliation, facilitating reconciliation and reaffirming the value of rules and obligations. Human experience shows that, in many contentious social situations, apologies can really help.

Despite its utility, for many centuries the practice fell into disuse. In some quarters and for certain purposes, however, apology has recently been making a comeback. The governments of Australia and Turkey have expressed remorse for historic crimes against the Armenian and Aboriginal peoples. Last year Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, traveled to Tel Aviv to formally apologize to members of the Israeli Parliament for the Holocaust. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has elicited apologies from the architects of apartheid. Although, as **Richard Bilder** points out, the "eventual resolution of (serious matters like these) typically requires more concrete forms of reparation and adjustment...apology remains a useful instrument in a politician's toolbox."

The truth is, injured human beings place a high value on apologies and a lot of hurt is assuaged when an authentic one is offered. Recent studies of the behavior of health care professionals indicates that those who apologized promptly and properly following a botched procedure were less likely to be sued than those who tried to evade responsibility.

So when is it appropriate to say "I'm sorry?" Clearly, when like Elwin Wilson, we have sought willfully and maliciously to harm others. But such situations are relatively rare. Most of the time the hurt we cause is inadvertent; it happens because in our self-centeredness we trample on someone's feelings or compromise their safety. Intoxicated drivers don't mean to cause injury and fatalities but they do.

Apologies are also called for when we overestimate our abilities and thereby put others at risk - for instance, taking friends or family out in a power boat without having received proper training. Or, like **Janet** the fast-food worker, we sometimes simply experience a lapse of judgment with unhappy results. Under each of these scenarios apology is appropriate.

But there are also times when it is not appropriate. When **Rachel** innocently presented pictures of the human reproductive anatomy to her first-grade class the principal demanded an apology. Having heard the "evidence" of her daughter's crime, **Rachel's** mother balked. And rightly so, for **John Kador** points out that one of the purposes of apology is to "reconcile ourselves to the truth." Her mother felt that **Rachel** should not be made to show contrition for sharing accurate information.

Moreover, just as there are people for whom apologizing is extremely difficult, others seem to be saying "I'm sorry" all the time. If a person was made to feel incompetent or inadequate in childhood, or if they internalized the teachings of those religions that emphasize human depravity, they might well feel inherently bad and blame-worthy. **Beverly Flanigan** offers the example of parents who try to control their children or spouses their partners by tugging at their tender guilt-strings. Before apologizing for our behavior we have to sort out injuries we have actually participated in from those nagging feelings of not having met someone else's unrealistic expectations.

When all is said and done, apologies pay dividends to both parties to the transaction. For the victim, an apology provides reassurance that they were not to blame for the incident, that their distress is legitimate and that the perpetrator shares their values and no longer poses a threat to their well-being.

For the guilty party, an apology permits them to embrace their imperfection, affords an opportunity to face the truth and to reconcile their conduct with their core values. An offender who refuses to take this important step "cheats himself most of all," **John Kador** warns.

Finally, when both parties participate successfully in the apology process, the possibility of a more transparent and mature relationship emerges. "While it can never go back to what it was before," **Kador** writes,

Apology can redefine the relationship so that the offense becomes part of the foundation of a new

relationship...Sometimes you need a breakdown in order to have a breakthrough.

This brings up the question whether one should respond positively when offered an apology. Does the victim have a choice whether to accept or reject such an overture? They do, but **John Kador** points out the hazard of either dismissing or outright rejecting an apology. "It is never wise to answer a genuine offer of healing with even more resentment," he writes, "because that allows the offender to occupy the high moral ground." Even to say, as Janet's fast-food co-worker Ed did after her prank backfired, "Hey...don't worry about it" is inappropriate. Janet paid a heavy emotional and financial price for her mistake. She does and should worry about it, and it was insensitive of Ed not to acknowledge its seriousness.

Although apologizing is clearly beneficial, one thing it neither guarantees nor implies is forgiveness. That is not something the offender has right to ask for and it is not something one who has accepted an apology is obliged to extend. As **Beverly Flanigan** observes, "an apology may...put forgiveness into motion" but the two are really separate issues.

Apology is an interpersonal transaction. Forgiveness is a sentiment that can only emerge as the victim comes to terms with his or her anger, bitterness and grief and adjusts to a new reality.

In closing, let us recall the story of the Prodigal Son found in Luke's Gospel, for few stories highlight the power of apology more convincingly. Here the wayward son's wholehearted apology is graciously received and the family once again made whole. At some point in our lives, each of us is bound to find ourselves in both of these roles, so let that story serve to remind us that the ultimate purpose of apology is to "mend that which deserves to be mended;" to stitch back together important relationships that our actions have caused to unravel. It is a humbling experience to be sure, but one that also humanizes us in an unexpectedly powerful way.

If the injured party senses that the apology is not an expression of empathy and compassion for their suffering but only an attempt to assuage the perpetrator's psychic pain, it may fall on deaf ears. A genuine apology, as **Pumla Goibodo-Madikezela**, a former member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission states, "Focuses on the feelings of other people rather than how the one who apologizes is going to benefit in the end." The words must communicate the desire not so much to be "saved" but to be in right relationship, which is why **Elwin Wilson's** apology to people of color, though powerful, still feels unsatisfying.

Even if the apology is half-hearted or seems inauthentic, it should not be summarily rejected, **Kador** says. Instead, the victim might simply say, "I'm sorry, but I need a better apology than that" which invites the offender to engage in more self-scrutiny and deliver a new message in which all the important elements are present.