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**[Chalice]So-o-o-o-o-o Sorry: [Chalice]  
The Art of the Apology**

Presented May 18, 2008, by Susan Morrison Hebble

I ask you to stop and think for a moment about how many times in an average day you apologize, say "I'm sorry," "excuse me," "pardon me," even "oops," or, my personal favorite, "my bad." I tried this exercise the other day, and I found that I'd said I was sorry 13 times! Here's an overview: I apologized to Sophie for having to wake her up for school; I said I was sorry out loud alone in my car for almost pulling in front of another car that I hadn't seen; I apologized several times to my tennis mates for my erratic, inconsistent, at times goofy performance on the tennis court; I offered an "excuse me" in line at the grocery store for some offense I cannot even recall, and I apologized to Anna for being unable to help her with her math homework (I've been apologizing for that for years!). I think you get the idea. I even apologized to a friend for not being home when she'd called earlier in the day. Laugh if you will, but I suspect you will come up with similar lists of small offenses that prompt you to offer up a mea culpa every few hours. Most of the "I'm sorries" that we utter so frequently are really just polite reactions to small infractions; some are actually expressions of compassion more than apology --Anna, I really do feel your mathematical pain! But it is interesting, isn't it, how spontaneously reactive we are with these words.

So here's the big question, and I won't hold you to a public response here, when was the last time you had to present a real apology--something that smacked of sincerity and remorse, something upon which a relationship hung? The truth of the matter is that, in spite of our propensity for the quick "sorry!", we find ourselves rarely faced with the daunting and uncomfortable task of crafting a true apology. But everyone of us has, indeed, been in this position and certainly will be again at some time. And while it is something we rarely have to do--truly, deeply apologize--it is an essential act of humanity, one that, done well, can have profound, restorative power. Or, as Lynn Johnston, known for the cartoon For Better or Worse, suggests, a well-presented "apology is the superglue of life. It can repair just about anything."

Let's look, first, at what an apology is. The original use of the term comes from the ancient Greek apologia, which translates, interestingly, as defense, and one of the best known examples of this terminology is in Plato's 4th Century B.C. The Apology, a fictionalized rendering of the trial in which Socrates defends himself against accusations of "not recognizing the gods recognized by the state, inventing new deities, and corrupting the youth of Athens." The term, then, refers to a philosophical, even political, defense of one's views. During the first millennium, the term apology also referred primarily to the defense of ideas (Christian theology, in particular). But the contemporary rendering of the term denotes an expression of regret or remorse for one's actions more than a defense of one's beliefs or ideas. In fact, as we'll see a bit later, the contemporary apology, thoughtfully presented, presumes a common ethic between two parties.

Still, in recent months and years, I've noticed that the apology has become as ubiquitous as those "Geico" commercials on TV. And a lot less funny. Turn on your television, flip a few channels, and chances are good that you'll stumble on some public figure groveling for our forgiveness--and, frankly, they don't do a very good job of it, either! Elliott Spitzer recently addressed the media to assure the public that he had "begun to atone for my private failings with my wife, my children, my entire family"--all as his wife stood, stonily, shell-shocked, beside her husband who had over the course of XXX years planned, paid for and presumably enjoyed visits with a prostitute. Somehow I am guessing that Spitzer required her presence beside him, probably to lend his speech credibility, but ultimately her presence underscored the humiliation he continued to suffer upon her. Indeed, was he apologizing for visiting to the prostitute or for getting caught? Some observers cite Spitzer's most memorable moments in front of the camera as a great example of a non-apology.

But Spitzer's is one of a proliferation of apologies, or non-apologies, by politicians dating back 50 years. Scholars who study the apology--and, yes, there are people whose life's work is the study of the apology!--point to Nixon's 1953 "Checkers Speech" as a watershed moment for public apologies. In the broadcasted speech, Nixon manages to save his political career (at least for a while!) by evasively addressing claims that he had diverted $18,000 of campaign funds for personal use. That's about $150,000 in 2008 currency. The speech came to be known as the Checkers Speech, in reference to Nixon's aw-shucks admission that a Texas salesman had indeed given the family a pet dog, and Nixon wasn't going to dare to take that dog, Checkers, away from his children.

But you can pick your political apologists--How about Governor Schwarzeneggar's response to allegations, documented by the Los Angeles Times, of groping and sexual harassment over three decades? or D.C. Mayor Marrion Barry's so-called apology after his arrest for cocaine possession? or Clinton's apologies regarding the Monica Lewinsky scandal? Or Mississippi Republican Trent Lott's 6-day "Apolo-Orgy" (so-named by Bruce Lansky and Arleen Sorkin, who collect public apologies like Hummel figurines). Lott's series of apologies for remarkably idiotic racist remarks in 2002 pre-empted his resignation from office but led Lansky and Sorkin to crown him the "21st Century's reigning king of contrition, ayatollah of atonement, the rajah of regret" (235). And more recently, we can look, with awe, at Larry Craig's "I am not gay" non-apology in the wake of his arrest for lewd behavior in an airport men's room. And there's not nearly enough time to chronicle the exchange of accusations and apologies that have punctuated this year's presidential primaries.

But politicians provide not the only fodder for the Contemporary Apology Mill: Athletes like Pete Rose, Scottie Pippen, Mike Tyson, Kobe Bryant, Marion Jones and Michael Vick have all gone before the microphone with a wide variety of apologies, pseudo-apologies, non-apologies for a variety of offenses. And actors, entertainers, radio show hosts, TV hosts, and other celebrities famous for nothing in particular seem to take their turns at apologizing, as if they are going through a revolving door at the Entertainment Channel Headquarters. Mel Gibson, Paris Hilton, Don Imus, Ted Turner, and Kate Moss, among others, have all taken a turn attempting to apologize for something offensive. And all kinds of corporations are sorry for all kinds of things--for lead in the paint of kids' toys, for medicine that makes people sick, for products that don't do what they're supposed to do.

As Chicago Tribune cultural critic Julia Keller put it, "We are officially--and lamentably--awash in apologies . .In politics, in business, in sports, in religion, the rituals of contrition have been piling up" to the point that their value is suspect. Keller asks "What happens when apologies become knee-jerk reactions to any sort of adverse publicity? And even when called for, what happens when apologies become so rote, so trite, that they undermine the lustrous rhetorical tradition of regret and self-recrimination? When apologies are recited as quickly and thoughtlessly as 'Howyadoin' at a company picnic?"

So the effect of these multi-mea culpas is that we no longer take seriously the apology OR the public figure whose apologies seem staged, manipulated, intended, perhaps, more to ensure instant redemption rather than sincere regret. Philosophy professor Nick Smith has recently published *I Was Wrong: The Meaning of Apologies*. In his introduction, Smith suggests that the ubiquity of the apology has led to a serious corrosion of its value. "Now when we bear witness to yet another famous person apologizing, our reflexes have become cynical. We question intentions. Does she apologize only to garner votes in the next election? To placate teammates or fans? To brace falling stock values after a corporate controversy? To take the blame for someone more powerful? To avoid or minimize incarceration?" (4) And inevitably arbiters of contemporary culture--journalists, commentators, and--of course--comedians, have begun to reflect on this phenomenon. Another apology scholar, Aaron Lazare, notes that the topic of apology is regularly the subject of discussion or analysis for newspaper columnists, cartoonists, advice columnists, radio show hosts, and comedians. David Letterman, Jay Leno, John Stewart, and Stephen Colbert have all relished the often lame or deliciously atrocious attempts at apology by public figures. And in his radio show, comedian Harry Shearer has, for the last 8 years, included a segment called "Apologies of the Week." As viewers and listeners, we must delight in the apologetic fumblings of people we've elected, rooted for, or loved to hate, then.

But we might also look to the media for evidence that the Average Joe is aware that apologizing may be a tricky but necessary task. We see this phenomenon reflected in popular sitcoms like Seinfeld, Everybody Loves Raymond, and Friends, all of which have played with the issue of the apology from the Everyman's perspective. And the Average Joe uses e-mail, text messaging, and instant messaging to juggle offenses and "my bad’s” like so many oranges; and then there's Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, and how ever many other sites that make public some of what 10 years ago would have been very private gaffes. As only it could, the internet has responded to this phenomenon with a number of sites, like theperfectapology.com, designed not only to teach people how to apologize, but to help them decide whether or not to apologize, and to provide a venue for users to post an on-line apology. At www.imsorry.com, a user can send an e-pology, print an "I'm Sorry" certificate; or buy an "I'm sorry" coffee mug to be sent to the offended party. You don't even have to look the poor bloke in the eye! And one site, apologycenter.com, allows visitors not only to post apologies on a message board, but to review posted apologies, critique them, and vote whether the apologizer is worthy of forgiveness or not. It's a kind of apology by democratic rule, I guess.

We find another extreme in the compulsive, even insistent, apologizer: I have a good friend--a bright, funny, lovely woman--who often opens a conversation with "I'm sorry." Really. In a recent 10 minute phone call, she said "I'm sorry" no fewer than 7 times! She's one of the reasons I wanted to explore this topic--in good part because her compulsive apologizing for things she can't control or can't possibly change offers such an interesting contrast to the calculated, carefully scripted, sometimes reluctant or desperate apologies we see on TV. When I told my daughter Anna about this topic, her immediate reaction was "I apologize way too much; I have to work on that, because it doesn't mean anything after a while." And after my Apology Count the other day, my tennis buddies and I decided that we all apologize way too much on the court--really, what do we have to be sorry for? We are well-matched competitors, and we're all friends, and we're all working hard to improve our play. Should we apologize for every errant ball hit in good faith? So we've put a ban on on-court apologies.

But think about it: from an early age, we get confusing messages about apologies--we know we're supposed to be sorry for many of our actions--it's clearly a social requirement--but we may not know why or how. In fact, children who misbehave are often ordered to be sorry, even when they really, quite sincerely aren't. Say a little freckle-faced girl pinches her brother real hard or "accidentally" spills chocolate milk on his beloved Teddy Bear; her Mom will probably insist that she apologize to her brother. And I'm sure she will--with sarcasm oozing from her pores--spit out a "SORRY!" Well, she's met her social requirement, hasn't she? But this little girl's mom is pretty smart and will have picked up on the insincerity and will most likely order her daughter to say it like she means it! So the little girl's tone shifts from sarcasm to syrup. . . . "Sorrrrry"!" Her mom didn't, after all, say she HAD to mean it; she just had to sound like she did. Sound familiar? well the nugget to take away from this little scenario--which is remarkably like those mentioned earlier!-- is that fact that we can't force, can't legislate true remorse! But these sorts of apologies do provide a quick appeasement so the parties can get on with the day.

The grown-up version of the expedient, if less than sincere, apology often includes some sort of qualification: "If I've hurt your feelings, I'm sorry." The qualification may even be defensive in nature, putting the blame for the misbehavior back on the person to whom one might be apologizing! This type of apology is usually structured like this: "I'm sorry, but ." Or it may gush profusely with exaggeration, quite often converting the pseudo-apology into a self-serving tool, diverting sympathetic attention away from the offended to the offender. "I'm sooooo sorry! I really really didn't mean it! Oh please don't be mad at me!" We end up feeling sorry for the person who has offended us! Or it may consist of a vague, catch-all statement that the speaker hopes will heal the problem, whether or not she even understands what the problem is: "I'm sorry for whatever I've done that may have hurt you." Or it may even rest on a backhanded insult, adding to the injury already inflicted: "I'm sorry if you misunderstood what I said. . . ." In other words, you're not bright enough to get my meaning.

The truth of the matter, as scholar Aaron Lazare says in his book *On Apology*, is that the apology is something of a paradox--we think it should be quite simple, but it is really one of the more complex human gestures we make. Indeed, I'd like to think most people really are sorry for saying or doing something harmful, careless, or demeaning to someone else. Part of the issue is probably that we don't want to admit that we've screwed up; we're afraid, maybe, to admit to our own personal flaws, so we would rather just hope that the harm we may have caused will evaporate before the morning paper lands on the driveway. Another part of the issue is that we may be too naive, or self-absorbed, or unaware to appreciate that we have actually offended someone. Also, as human beings--as Americans--I suppose we just don't like to be wrong! To recognize that we are wrong is one thing; to admit it out loud, a frighteningly vulnerable other thing. We are supposed to be confident, sure of ourselves, always looking forward with hardly a backward glance at our mistakes. And certainly contemporary public figures feel our pain! With the media hovering (sometimes literally) outside the doors of anyone in the public eye, the politicians/entertainers /athletes etc. know that one thoughtless gesture or self-serving statement or stupid mistake can cost them not only a lot of money but a reputation, a job, a promising future. So the public contrition, with cameras flashing and the CNN ticker scrolling across the TV screen, is really about damage control. Just as our own pseudo-apologies offer a usually weak attempt at our own sort of damage control.

So how do we build a worthy apology? Each situation requires its own, custom "superglue" of course. But experts like Aaron Lazare and Nick Smith point to four essential parts to the apology, and we can remember them as the 4 Rs: Recognition, Responsibility, Remorse, and Reparation.

* First, the offender must show he recognizes his misbehavior by restating the offense as objectively and specifically as possible: repeating what happened and why will show that the offender understands not only where and how he went wrong, but why the offended is hurt. Be direct, not evasive. I.e., "I apologize for whatever I did to hurt you" won't cut it!
* Second, the offender must accept responsibility for the action that caused offense. No excuses, here! She can't blame the beer, the bad mood, or her own poor syntax. She must take responsibility for hurting someone else, intentionally or not.
* Third, the apology must show, sincerely, remorse for the misbehavior. Sincerity can't be faked: we know it when we hear it; and we sure as heck know fake sincerity when we hear it!
* The fourth essential component may be the trickiest: Reparation. The offender has to give something back, atone in some way for his offense. This is easily said, but hard to do. How, indeed, do we mend a broken heart? For starters, the offender needs to listen, openly and earnestly. He needs to hear what the person has to say; let her talk; let her suggest what might be done to restore harmony to the relationship. As Martha Beck writes, "The knowledge that one is heard and valued has incredible healing power; it can mend even seemingly irreparable wounds."

The value of an apology is hard to measure, but it assuredly allows both the offender and the offended to move forward because it re-establishes the harmony in what had been an unsettled and unbalanced relationship. Nick Smith explains that apologies "strike at the heart of our commitments and call on us to honor our basic duties. [They] can also speak directly to our character and integrity"(10). The apology, then, can restore social order; it acknowledges the presumption of a common ethic, a common wisdom of what is right and wrong in how we treat one another.

But the apology also represents a common frailty--we are all human; we will all make mistakes, perhaps even hurt someone, intentionally or not, and then face the dilemma of how to go from there. I would propose, then, that the apology requires us to shift our focus from ourselves--our own discomfort, our own embarrassment, our own sense of guilt--to the person or people we've offended--his hurt, his sense of betrayal. It requires us to act self-lessly rather than selfishly. It is a daunting task, one that forces us to look at ourselves, at our own flaws, and then look beyond them to the person we've hurt. But anyone who has offered up a real, solid, true apology will attest that in doing so she releases herself from the very pain, discomfort, and shame she'd been avoiding all along!

Where does this leave us, then, once a good, sincere apology has been delivered. The apology results, finally, in a shift of power--the person offended is given the power to choose to forgive the person apologizing. Or not. For true forgiveness is itself an art, itself a subject of unique and intriguing complexity, and a subject, perhaps, for a later discussion. So I'll leave with these words from Alexander Pope: To err is human, but to forgive divine.

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