

I'm Sorry but Not Really

THE APOLOGY HAS HAD A LONG AND GLORIOUS CAREER and is still a growing and well-accepted currency of nominal guilt. It's often demanded and given as payment for some perceived wrong done by one to another. How great is that? If only all debts could be so easily erased.

OK, you may have some difficulty admitting you're wrong, particularly when you're not. For example, the guy who has the job you know you can do better isn't worth ant spit and perhaps you haven't been able to hide that opinion as elegantly as you'd wished. So, now you're in an awkward, impolitic position. What do you do?

Well, you do the politically correct thing: You apologize. You say, "I'm sorry," without really meaning it. You say that even though you may have been thinking whatever it was you said, you shouldn't have actually *said* it out loud.

See how well that works. It would be Orwellian for anyone to suggest, or for you to admit, that what you *thought* was somehow wrong or offensive. Your only error, if it could even be called an error, was in saying it *out loud*. Saying you're sorry doesn't cost you anything. And—here's the best part—by apologizing you get to say it *out loud* again: "I'm sorry I implied that you're not worth ant spit. I was thinking that but I shouldn't have said it *out loud*."

There are two basic rules in using an apology. First, you must be specific about what you're apologizing for. Second, you must apologize often and every chance you get. That way you get free, unfettered future use of the insult. You have to remind people how sorry you were when you described your old boss as not worth ant spit and how sorry you were that you said that out loud.

Those two-and-a-half words, "I'm sorry," with the exception of "freedom," are the best use of six letters in the English language *ever*. Saying "I'm sorry" is like a get-out-of-jail-free card. It's like hitting the reset button or rebooting when everything has gotten all gummed up and won't work anymore. It's like being born again. When all else fails, "I'm sorry" gets you a fresh start.

In order to make an apology work effectively, you must think of an apology in the classical sense. The word comes from the Greek *apologia*, which means "a speech in defense." Socrates, for example, defended himself with an apology in 399 BC against charges that he corrupted the youth of Athens and somehow meddled with religion. If he had simply accused the Athenian political leaders of not being worth ant spit, he might not have had to drink the hemlock, but then his name and what he did wouldn't have lived through 2,000

years and counting of history. Socrates really knew how to work an apology. Do what Socrates did: Think of the apology as an aggressive defense of a painful truth. But it's better to leave children and religion out of it. Stick with politics.

The key to why apologies are such effective all-around tools is that, on the one hand, they imply regret through the acknowledgment of a wrong, injury, insult, or fault while, on the other hand, they're a formal defense of the act that resulted in the wrong, injury, insult, or fault. It's kind of like having your



CREDIT???

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cake and eating it, too. "I'm sorry I ate your cake. I didn't know that piece was yours. I guess I'll save mine for later."

Even better is the fact that apologies are timeless. As already noted, once you apologize, you can offer the same insult over and over again merely by reminding people of your former apology. "You know, every time I think about it, I wonder how I could have been so insensitive as to put that guy in the same category as ant spit."

You can even use the occasion of a reminder to escalate the insult without the requirement for an additional apology. Call this the rebound apology. For example, you might say, "Ants really can spit, you know. Carpenter ants tunnel through wood and spit out the wood pulp in little bitty piles

... little inconsequential piles ... except for the fact that they're destroying your house. That's what I was talking about." See, you escalate by talking about the nature of ant spit, not the guy.

Apologies are timeless in another way, too. You can apologize before, during, or after you've offended. It all depends on which approach guarantees the kind of impact you're going for.

Apologies in advance tend to give the insult greater oomph. Forgive me for saying this, but some people are just too dense to realize they're being insulted, and sometimes they have to be put on alert. Advance apologies can also be made conditional. For example, you might say, "You're not going to like what I have to say if you're one of

those people..." It goes without saying that I don't think you *are* one of "those" people, and even if you are, you aren't going to admit it by being insulted. So a conditional, advance apology is like a free ride or a coupon for a free insult. It's like putting shields up and engaging the warp drive with no worry about asteroids in the path ahead.

The best type of apology is one that gives the insult a little time to simmer. Take bubble wrap, for instance. I just love breaking those little bubbles and making a room scream with pops. It's fun for me but, I guess, not necessarily for others. How do I handle that? Well, when I'm done with the popping, I offer a general apology something along the lines of: "I'm sorry, I just can't help myself." Then, I pause just

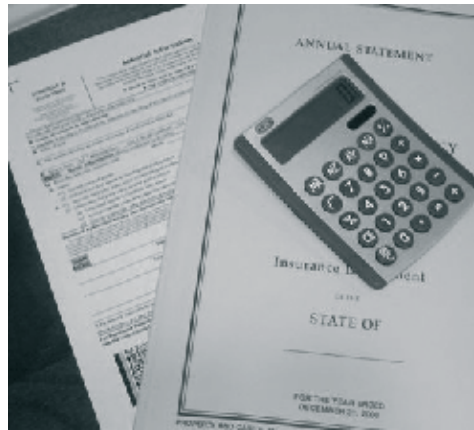
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long enough and say: "If they didn't want me to pop these things, they shouldn't have sent them to me." In this you can see the elements of a well-made apology. First, acknowledge the fault. Second, blame it on someone else. In my example, I've blamed "them"—always a good choice.

Now, if anything I've said here has offended anyone, I'm sorry, but I had to say it because it needed to be said. That's an example of a contemporaneous apology, a contemporaneous apology coupled with a sense of duty. I'm bravely stepping up to the plate. I am the only one with courage enough, indeed, with the wisdom necessary to recognize and take action on this issue. You apologize and glorify yourself all at once. I call that the hero apology.

Sometimes you may find yourself in the position of wanting to defend a noble cause you have nothing to do with. In that case, you can step in and apologize for someone else or, in some way, associate yourself with a group that might, in part, be associated in some way with the wrong, injury, insult, or fault you want to defend.

For example, you might apologize to the Neanderthal for the role Homo sapiens played in making them extinct. I'm sorry

you guys didn't make it, but obviously, you needed more than just an opposable thumb. You, of course, may have to search around a bit to find a Neanderthal to make that apology to, but chances are you'll probably find a Homo sapiens willing to accept the apology. "I accept your apology on behalf of all Neanderthals." There is absolutely no reason one must be present to accept an apology.

In the end, all this apologizing has a tendency to make anyone a pretty sorry and callous person and, upon reflection, perhaps not the person you really want to be. So you may want to consider the in-your-face approach of straightforward honesty and candor—telling it like it is with no regrets. Live a life to be envied. Quoting the lyrics of Tracy Bird, the country music philosopher, from his great country hit, "The Truth About Men": "We ain't wrong; we ain't sorry; An' it's probably gonna happen again."

I bet that would work for women, too. ●

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