

# The Art of the Apology

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So, which do you find easier: apologizing or forgiving—  
saying, “I’m sorry,” or accepting an apology?

I’m guessing that for many if not most of us,  
we find it much easier to say “sorry” than to forgive.

With apologies to Elton John,  
sorry no longer “seems to be the hardest word.”

If anything, sorry seems to come a little too easily these days.

Now, before I get myself into a great deal of trouble,  
we should acknowledge that apologizing  
is as much a part of the Canadian character as hockey and Timbits.

Indeed, a friend a few years ago initiated me into the mysteries of Canadian  
“martial arts,” which go something like this: “Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, Canadians do have a certain ease with saying I’m sorry.

It is, to me, one of the most endearing aspects of Canadian life.

Frankly, the world would be a much better place  
if we could figure out how to bottle it up and export it.

In a world that grows increasingly crowded and complicated with every day,  
we need the simple social grace that a quick apology can provide.

And, yet, what are we to make of the disconnect  
between how easily sorry seems to come  
and how slow we are sometimes to forgive?

What do we really mean when we say that we are sorry?

In thinking about this question,

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<sup>1</sup> Gentle Reader: This line in the sermon was accompanied by some dramatic hand gestures.

I turned to the great theological text by Ian and Will Ferguson called *How to Be a Canadian*.

Bob and I gratefully received six copies of this book shortly after our arrival in Canada sixteen years ago.

For those not familiar with this humourous take on Canadian culture, there is an entire chapter devoted to apologies, called: “Twelve Ways to Say ‘I’m Sorry’:  
How to Be Canadian—in the Worst Way.”

The Ferguson brothers point out that though the words remain essentially the same, with careful emphasis and inflection, it is possible to convey at least twelve different meanings with the words “I’m sorry.”

“The Simple Sorry” is the one that we say when we step on someone’s foot as we’re taking our seat in a theatre after everyone else has taken theirs.

“The Essential Sorry” is the most common form; it’s the one we use when someone steps on our foot in a theatre. It’s said firmly, “I’m sorry,” to point out that the fault isn’t really ours.

There’s “The Aristocratic Sorry,” the one used with a slightly halting, condescending tone—“I’m. . . very. . . sorry.”

It’s employed when we’ve been given the wrong entrée and we want the waiter to fix the problem.

There’s “The Ostentatious Sorry,” the one that has a slightly raised and quizzical inflection. “I’m sorry?” As if to say, “are you kidding me?”

“The Unrepentant Sorry” expresses not so much personal regret for what one has done, but that one has been caught at it.

The list goes on and on, but ends with “The Authentic Sorry.”

About this one, the Fergusons have very little to say, other than to point out that it’s the form most seldomly used.

They, of course, then, apologize for that.

Though neither sociologists nor linguists, I think the Fergusons are on to something

in teasing out the many nuances of saying that we're sorry.

It's really no wonder we find it hard to forgive—  
if the words we use to apologize to one another have lost their currency,  
leaving us to doubt their sincerity and one another.

There is, indeed, an art to apologizing,  
and if we are not intentional with our words,  
I fear that precious art will be lost.

In their book *The Five Languages of Apology*,  
Jennifer Thomas and Gary Chapman identify five key ways  
that we convey an apology:

Regret  
Responsibility  
Restitution  
Repentance  
and a Request for forgiveness.

Now, I'll return to each of these in more detail in a moment,  
but what's important to grasp at the outset  
is that each of us mixes and matches  
these five "languages of apology" in different ways.

What each of us assumes an apology to be,  
and what each of us needs for an apology to include,  
may be quite different from what others assume and need.

This is why, if you're like me, you've had a few apologies fall completely flat.  
Fall with a resounding thud.  
Flat as a pancake.  
Dead on arrival.

The key to an effective apology is saying the words  
that the offended party needs to hear.

Different people sometimes need to hear very different things  
in order to accept an apology.

And, so, in our attempt to offer a sincere apology—  
and for that apology to be truly heard—  
we may well have to learn to speak in different languages.

So, as I take you through these five languages,  
consider which ones resonate for you,  
as we are all likely inclined more towards some than others.

The first language of apology is *expressing regret*—  
this is when we say, “I’m sorry.” And mean it.

The second language is *accepting responsibility*—  
this is when we say, “I was wrong.”

The third language is about *making amends, or restitution*.  
This is when we ask “what can I do to make it right?”

The fourth language involves *genuinely repenting*, or committing to change.

The word “repent” means, quite literally, to turn around.  
Repenting is our way of saying we will try not to do again  
the thing we did to cause offence in the first place.

And, finally, the fifth language of apology is the one of *forgiveness*—  
when we specifically ask to be forgiven for the hurt we have caused.

With this list in mind, what languages do you speak most naturally?

When someone is offering you an apology,  
what is it that you most need and expect to hear?

“I’m sorry.”  
“I was wrong.”  
“What can I do to make it right?”  
“I won’t do that again.”  
“Will you forgive me?”

And when you’re on the hot seat yourself,  
and it’s your turn to apologize,  
to which of these languages do you tend to turn?

Expressing regret, taking responsibility, making amends,  
promising to do better, or asking for forgiveness?

It’s helpful to know which of these languages respond to our needs and  
expectations.

And, it’s useful to learn to speak the languages that are not our native tongue.

Because while a simple “sorry” or an “oops, my bad”  
will go a long way to smooth over life’s little hurts,  
the deeper the injury,  
the greater our need to be able to speak all of these languages fluently.

Now, not every apology can or will always require all five languages.  
Not all offences are of equal weight, of course,  
but in my experience, if genuine reconciliation of a relationship is the goal,  
a full apology involves each of these elements, at least on some level.

It’s not an easy path to take.

Given such steep demands, it’s no wonder the Chinese  
have found creative ways to try to ease the burden.<sup>2</sup>

There are now “call-in” shows for apologies on Chinese state radio,  
and in recent years, several apology companies have sprung up.

The Tianjin Apology and Gift Centre has a staff of twenty on-hand  
to write letters, send gifts, and offer explanations on your behalf.

Their staff of lawyers and social workers will gladly help sort out  
family and business disputes, smoothing things over, all for a fee.

As this example shows, our expectations around apologies are,  
without a doubt, culturally rooted.

But there are no real shortcuts to be found  
through the hard work of getting to a meaningful apology.

This is the tough stuff of human relationships,  
and because none of us is perfect,  
and because we need one another, imperfections and all,  
this is our true work in this world.

It may be that all of this talk of apologies this morning  
has stirred your own thoughts, perhaps of wounds still fresh  
or of hurts never resolved, of relationships lost and of those hanging by a thread.

My hope for us all is that we might find the courage to move our lives  
one step closer toward love and wholeness.

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<sup>2</sup> Aaron Lazare, *On Apology*, pp. 7-8.

That we might summon the strength of heart and mind,  
to undertake the demands of this most spiritual and most human of challenges.

As my colleague Christine Robinson puts it,  
“The real problem with apologizing is not the apology itself.  
The real problem is getting ready to apologize.”

She says, “You know what they used to say about chopping down a tree:  
if you have one day to chop down a tree,  
spend the morning sharpening your ax.

“It’s the same with apologizing.  
Most of the real work is preparatory.  
It’s inner work, work that allows us to repair the damaged relationship,  
but also work that is part of our personal and spiritual journey  
toward wisdom and maturity.”<sup>3</sup>

And so it is.

To undertake this work is nothing less than an act of faith—  
faith in ourselves and in one another,  
faith in the sacred possibility that the fabric of life can be mended,  
that from the broken bits of our lives,  
we can go on to build a better world.

Robert Walsh tells the story of a man he knew who had stationery  
that was emblazoned at the top with the words:  
“Nothing is settled. Everything matters.”<sup>4</sup>

These words got under his skin, and he vehemently disagreed with them.

He protested that: “It’s not true that nothing is settled.  
In the past year choices have been made, losses suffered.  
There’s been growth and decay, commitments and betrayals.  
None of which can be undone...

One day this year I was present when someone needed me;  
another day I was busy doing something else [when I was needed most].

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<sup>3</sup> Christine Robinson, “How to Apologize,” First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, NM, September 14, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Walsh from *Noisy Stones*.

One day I said something to a friend that injured our relationship;  
another day I said something kind.  
The best and worst of those days are written.  
And nothing, not tears, not joy, not sorrow can erase it.”

But, following his rant, Walsh comes to see these words in a new light.

Perhaps, he says, that “even though the past is the past,  
what is not settled is how the story turns out.”

As long as we are alive, the story of our life is still being told,  
and the meaning is still open.

What is done is done, but nothing is settled...  
and if nothing is settled then everything matters:  
every choice, every act, every word, every deed.

They matter in the days ahead and, most of all they matter today.

Dearly Beloved, a new day is given to us.

A new day to ponder what work we have left undone,  
what corners of our life need healing,  
what relationships require mending.

In the coming days and weeks, I invite you to undertake  
a careful, intentional inventory of the heartaches that bear your name.

As you sift through the layers of your life, do so in the knowledge  
that, until we draw our last breath upon this earth,  
nothing is truly settled.

With words chosen with care  
and deeds taken up with intention,  
it is possible more often than we know,  
to right wrongs, heal hurts, and to fix what is broken.

We are still writing the story of our lives.  
We are still writing the story of the world.

Amen.