

On Apologies

By Briana Garrett

I want to take a college class on something that matters, like how and when to apologize to other people. This is primarily because most people don't know how to apologize correctly, and I include myself in that bracket of humanity that sucks at accepting responsibility for their actions.

I am aware that I make mistakes, but I am also aware that I make a bunch of half-ass apologies, such as: "I'm sorry I did this thing to you, but maybe if you hadn't also done this equally problematic thing to me, I wouldn't have had to."

With me, problems are always someone else's fault and responsibility.

I'm not great at sincerely accepting the blame for things. I would say it's because nobody taught me how, but that would be deflecting the problem by blaming someone else yet again.

Honestly, it's just because I'm a terrible person.

That's not to say that I have never been sincere in my apologies or even apologized for something that I had no control over. Of course, like everyone else, I happen to apologize frequently for existing. If I burp or fart, I will apologize; if I bump into someone, I will say sorry- the list goes on.

But real apologies are tricky because they require people to be aware of when they are wrong- and generally, people don't like being wrong. I would assume that our distaste for it comes from the false analogy that equates expressing remorse with weakness, but it could just be that we hate being wrong because everyone thinks their side of the story is the one that counts the most.

For example, a while ago I had a friend of mine refuse to apologize to me after I explained to him that some unwarranted comments that he'd made previously had hurt my feelings. Instead of accepting responsibility for his actions, he doubled down on the comments and shifted the responsibility to me, because I hadn't, "Stayed in my lane."

While I am no longer friends with this person, the fact that he did not apologize to me was significant at the time.

A few months after this incident, a similar event occurred, as I was leaving an important meeting regarding the status of my future job opportunities. Confronted with overwhelming information and a multitude of options, I began to have a panic attack. After calling my mom for the fifth time with no luck, I tried texting the same friend for support and empathy. Instead of potentially making the situation better by expressing remorse on my behalf, he merely responded with a shrugging emoji, and there was no apology.

Some may argue that my scenarios might not have been worth an expression of remorse, but I would wholeheartedly disagree. In fact, the poem, "The Ambassador of Bad Things" by Iain S. Thomas sums up the value of a proper apology:

When something really, really bad
happens to you, people will say to you,
"I am so sorry," even if they had nothing
To do with what happened.

And it's because sometimes things
Happen that are so bad that what
they really mean is "I am acting as
an ambassador and on behalf of
everything that must hurt so much right
now, I say sorry."

Because sometimes things are so bad,

Someone just has to say it. (24)

In this poem, Thomas captures the importance of why apologies matter in the first place. Sometimes people just need to feel understood, and to feel like others empathize with them and what they are going through. Even if that person is not the one who wronged you, and was not involved in the incident that caused you pain, it is still nice to hear an expression of remorse. Sometimes people just need to hear the words, “I’m sorry,” without hearing an excuse or a deflection. Apologies are a form of empathy that bring people together.

While I hold the belief that no one is ever owed an apology, I do think that apologies typically make things better. Had my friend said, “I’m sorry,” during any of those incidents, we would probably still be friends today.

However, as evidenced by my former friend, you cannot make someone feel bad for things that they do not think they have done wrong. Demanded apologies are not sincere; they are a result of backlash and unappealing consequences. That is why celebrities and public figures are so bad at them. Disingenuous apologies resulting from public shaming are not the way to get people to feel remorse and empathy. Monitoring behavior this way simply makes everyone a victim.

The fact is, some people won’t ever apologize, and that’s okay. Shaming them for doing so will not make them more remorseful- it will make them more resentful.

For this reason, I would like a list of things that are definitively worth apologizing for, and a chart to reference for when it is acceptable to do so. It should be as follows:

Thing I did:	How that made you feel:	How I should respond:
Forgot your birthday	SAD	"I'm so sorry."
Kicked a ball through your window by mistake	ANGRY	"I accept full responsibility for my actions."
Cancelled plans at the last minute that I knew you were really looking forward to	DISAPPOINTED	"It's my fault. I should've been more considerate."

As much as modern society cares about how nice people are to each other, we seem to be especially lacking in the knowledge required to know when and how to apologize sincerely. For all of the studies and social sciences that are dedicated to human behavior, this one area of life is grossly overlooked. Polite society has conditioned us to feel remorse for things that we cannot control, and yet it is so hard for people to claim responsibility for the things that we can.

Not everyone is like this, I'm sure, but I feel like a large majority of humanity is struggling with the consequences of owning our mistakes.

As I grow older, this is something I am actively working on. I only hope that society will choose to work on it with me.

Works Cited

Thomas, Iain S. "The Ambassador of Bad Things." *I Wrote This for You: 2007-2017*. Central Avenue Publishing, 2017. Print. 24.