

ART OF THE APOLOGY

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Apologize, acknowledge, ask forgiveness, explain, ask forgiveness again.

This is the proper order. Many times when she does something wrong, instead of apologizing, acknowledging what she has done, asking forgiveness and then explaining what happened, she starts with an explanation and leaves it at that. An explanation, however, is not an apology.

Let's take a concrete example. We shall call her Angela. Angela is an aerobics instructor in the city whose very ethos is time is money. Her next class is Sculpt and Shape at 6 p.m.

The members who take her class every week have hurried to leave work in time, pushed into the overcrowded, rush-hour subway, sprinted to the gym through the sweltering humidity, changed into their gym clothes which they had almost forgotten to pack that morning and finally, finally, they stumble into the studio. Frankly, they are ready to collapse but no, after this much effort, they are committed to getting a good workout.

Those who know each other murmur hellos, a few bend down to retie their shoelaces, some arrange their towels and water bottles, others pull their heels to their gluts trying to stretch out those quads before class...but class should have already begun five minutes ago.

But five minutes is okay. Angela must still be on her way.

Ten minutes pass. Anxiety is palpable, bouncing off the mirrors and the weight rack.

Eighteen minutes gone, the grumbles are starting to rumble like thunder

coming closer. The class is only forty-five minutes long so more than a third of the class has already been wasted. One member says loudly that she turned down tickets to a Broadway play to be here at the gym tonight. Another lady complains that she is paying the babysitter for an extra two hours so she could make this class.

Just before the storm breaks, Angela sashays into the studio and makes a beeline for the music player without making eye contact with any of the peeved members who are looking at her expectantly. Digging for her iPod, Angela mumbles into her bag, “The subways...I don’t know what was going on. There was, like, a sick passenger or something. We were stuck in between stations for a really long time.” Retrieving her iPod, she plugs it in, starts the music and begins the warm-up.

The lady who gave up Broadway tickets rolls her eyes, everyone tries to blame the MTA when they’re late, it’s such a convenient excuse to cover up poor time management. The woman who is paying the babysitter for extra time quietly picks up her towel, her water bottle, her locker key and exits the class. The remaining members, visibly offended, start marching to the beat but without much enthusiasm.

Angela has just done what so many of us do – put forth a half-hearted explanation in lieu of an actual apology.

Would it have cost Angela so much to walk into the classroom and say, “Sorry I am late, there was a problem with the trains. I’m so sorry,” thus acknowledging that she knows she is in error even if it was not entirely her fault?

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Angela has had a bad day herself. Arising at five a.m., she had already taught four classes by two p.m., crisscrossing Manhattan thrice. Making the trip to Brooklyn at the end of the day is almost more than her body can bear and she still has to go shopping for groceries afterwards because there is no food at home. Bone tired, her old knee injury is bothering her, but not half as much as the fight she had with her husband last night. By day, he is a charming personal trainer, advising his clients on their fitness regime, nutritional program and often, their personal life. But when he comes home in the evening, his silver tongue can blunt into a blade with a rusty serrated edge. Some of his more cutting comments are still working their way through her system. He owes her an apology but she is not sure if he even understands how hurtful he was. She is wondering if he will say sorry tonight when she returns from the supermarket but meanwhile, she tries to bring her mind back to the here and now, the warm-up.

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The lower the stakes, the easier it is to apologize.

Ironically and perversely, the more important the relationship, the harder it is to say sorry.

Will Angela's husband come home tonight and

Apologize – expressing regret over the way he made her feel,

Acknowledge – what he has done to make her feel that way,

Ask forgiveness – to sincerely show her he desires her pardon,

Explain – his side of the story, we all have our sides, and then

Apologize again.

And perhaps Angela will owe him an apology too when she hears his side?

As the language indicates, when you say sorry it's because you owe someone something. Apologies are like debts that need to be settled. The longer they go unpaid, the more interest accrues and the harder it is to dig oneself out of the emotional bankruptcy caused by too many unspoken apologies.

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To ask forgiveness presumes, of course, that one is aware of having wronged someone else.

Most of us tend to become obsessed with the wrongs done to us and spend little time contemplating how we have hurt others. Perhaps that is the first step then. Focusing on what we have done rather than what has been done to us.

In a superficial society which judges us on our hairstyles, our flat abs, our well-toned biceps, many a man is doing push-ups to make his pectoral muscles bulge. We exercise our egos, not our empathy. In the end though, it is emotional heavy lifting that makes a real man...

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