

# The Game Changer of Divorce: A Genuine Apology

by Alison L. Patton

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How do you forgive the unforgivable?

This is a common question I get from divorcing clients, and one we should ask the family of Tim See. [Tim See was the 17-year-old boy killed in a car accident by teen drunk driver Takunda Mavima](#). Another teen was also killed in the crash. At Mavima's sentencing hearing, instead of seeking retribution, Tim See's sister made an emotional plea to the judge on behalf of Mavima, asking for leniency:

"I am begging you to let Takunda make something of himself in the real world -- don't send him to prison and get hard and bitter. That boy has learned his lesson a thousand times over and he'll never make the same mistake again," she said.

At the hearing, Mavima tearfully addressed the families of the victims: "I'm so sorry that I took two bright, intelligent, wonderful people out of this world."

[Tim See's father even hugged Mavima](#) as he left the courtroom.

This story deeply moved me, partly because of the nobility demonstrated by the See family, partly because I witness every day the pain of couples who struggle to heal and forgive after divorce and partly because of my own experience with an apology that set me free. I have come to believe that a genuine apology -- given and accepted -- is perhaps the most powerful gift we can give to one another. It is also the most powerful gift we can give ourselves. Yet it is hard to do, and so often we deny it to ourselves and the world.

In my own life, I struggled to let go of a betrayal that was personal and deep. I did all the "right things" to heal and move on -- grief therapy, mental and emotional processing with wise mentors, I surrounded myself with loving, supportive friends, read books on forgiveness and did some writing and meditation. I even participated in a "letting go" ceremony at the winter solstice (something my East Coast friends enjoy teasing me about, the California girl that I am).

Everything helped to some extent. I made progress and felt at times like I was moving forward, but then suddenly, when something would remind me of the past or there would be another mildly wounding experience (because, like in divorce, the source of the betrayal is still in the periphery of my world), I would find myself angry and sad all over again. I felt stuck and in a spiritual slump that was hard to shake completely, even though life was filled with good things and the past was over.

Then I was thrown a bone. I received a phone call, and an apology was made to me. Not an "I was wrong, you were right" kind of apology, but more like an "I'm sorry about what happened, it has been sad and hard for me too, and I regret what has passed between us" kind of apology.

The power of these words was huge. I realized how profoundly healing it is to hear from another person that he or she actually cares about your feelings, even if there is no actual acknowledgment of wrongdoing. It was enough just to hear that there was regret and that my feelings mattered enough for the words to be said.

And then I got a bonus prize I didn't expect -- something certain spiritual leaders of the world call "grace." I realized after the phone call that the residual anger I had -- that deep-seated bitterness -- was essentially gone and I was left with some compassion for this other person, and a hope that we can move on without any further bitterness. This was a significant "Ah ha!" moment for me, as was the final awareness that came 24 hours later.

It hit me the next day that everything I had done -- all my grief work and the various steps I had taken to try to reach a place of healing -- had served a purpose. I didn't know it at the time, but I had been preparing for a final exam -- I jokingly call it my "spiritual final exam" -- that came when I least expected it. And I was able to pass because I had done the work.

Therein lies the mystery. We don't understand how it all works but must nonetheless keep the faith that something good is coming from all the time and effort we are putting into the grief process and by working to let go of the past. Sometimes it feels like we're going nowhere, like a hamster on a wheel, but a lot is happening that we can't see when we commit ourselves to this process.

Until this phone call, I had often felt like the farmer who spends months and months sowing seeds and watering his field and yet nothing grows -- it is still just a big field of dirt. After the phone call, I could see the tiny green stems breaking through and the promise of a lush field in the near future. A lot of growth and re-birth had been happening inside me beneath the surface.

In divorce, the hardest thing is to say "I'm sorry" to your ex or soon-to-be ex. And sometimes it can be just as hard to accept your ex's apology, especially if the wrongs done to you have been almost unforgivable, like in the case of Tim Lee's death. But the only way we can set ourselves free and set the world free, one person at a time, is to give and receive the gift of these words.

It takes one courageous person to speak their heart and clean the slate. A sincere apology can be a game changer in divorce -- I have seen this before. It can transform the tone of the divorce and the co-parenting dynamic in the years ahead. But even if your apology falls on deaf ears and your ex is unable to respond in kind, do it for yourself. Create your own clean slate.

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