

Nate Carmody (Alum)
'Apologies'
Tree Talk 07/18/08
Camp Pasquaney (Dana Porch because of rain)

(This requires a couple of volunteers to walk in late)

>>*Stand up and start*

I'm sorry I'm late...

I'm sorry I didn't listen better during announcements...

I'm sorry I was playing with sticks during your tree talk...

Mr. Vinnie, I'm sorry about the joke I played on you back in '91.

Most of us do it almost as second nature. We were taught by our parents at an early age to say 'sorry' for hitting our brother or sister. We learned that if we didn't say it, we would get in trouble. We might still get in trouble anyway, but at least saying those words made it less.

As you grow older, this doesn't work as well. It's important to learn what is really involved with an honest apology and what it takes to give one. However, few of us have good examples of how to do this. At my home growing up, I never saw my parents give good apologies. It may have been because they felt it wasn't appropriate to fight or apologize in front of the kids, but as a result I had no proper role model for this behavior. I had to struggle through learning it the hard way.

So it's probably best to have some theatrical examples as the basis for talking about it.

(Enter Mike H. from behind, walking from the infirmary)

Mike H.: *“Dude, I'm sorry I'm late.” (sits down a bit away from me)*

Did he sound remorseful? Do I think he really means that he is sorry, or is it just what he has been told he ought to say? I can respond to Mike, “It's OK”, but this would demean me, and I wouldn't feel good. After all, I traveled 10 hours to get here, spent 12 hours preparing this talk, it only will last 10 minutes, and he doesn't even have the decency to be on time. He even had a bugle remind him! So I shouldn't say that it's OK. I certainly don't feel it.

Mike H, somewhat exasperated: *“I'm sorry if that hurt your feelings!”*

This is even worse. It's the false apology. He didn't take responsibility for what he did. He didn't even acknowledge that he was in the wrong. He put the blame on me for being hurt. This is common, in that people do it a lot as a way out of an honest apology.

(Enter Doug C. from the glade)

Doug C: *(walks up to me, looks mournful, head hanging a bit low)* *“Nate, I'm really sorry I'm late. I lost track of time in the glade cleaning out poison ivy from the sitting area. I will try not to let it happen again.” (sits down)*

That sounds much better. Here I have Doug, acting like he is sorry, giving an honest account of his actions, trying to explain why it happened. This is a very good start. But, it is not the end of a good apology. As I just said, I put a lot into this, and his actions were disrespectful.

So what actually makes an honest apology. Fortunately, Doug and Mike have previously consented to

let me talk further about their recent mistakes.

The first step to honest apology is to be honest with yourself and accept your mistake.

Accept what you did with clarity. Don't make feeble excuses to yourself about it. Putting myself in Doug or Mike's place: I was late to the Tree Talk. I know Nate put a lot of effort into this. He traveled all the way up here from Virginia. I know his tree talk is going to be fantastic and he was really excited about it. However, I was late. I chose to cut it too close trying to get something else done. I heard the bugle, and I didn't respond immediately. Do I have a bad habit of doing this? Have I done this before? Am I habitually late? Before I go any further, I need to answer these questions. Honestly. Only I can know the real answers. But I have to be honest with myself. If I fail here, I can never make an honest apology.

The second step is to determine how your best self should have behaved in this situation, knowing the outcome.

Continuing the example, should I have tried to fit in too many other things? Should I have left the poison ivy for another time? Why is it important to be on time?

The third step is to take these two previous steps and integrate them into a full and complete selfless apology. Explain what happened. Don't make excuses. Accept personal responsibility for your actions. Express your honest remorse. If you did the first two steps well, this *will* come from the heart.

I'm sorry I am late. I didn't pay attention to the bugle when it was blown, and I should have. I know you put a lot of effort into this, and I feel terrible about this. I would like to make it up to you somehow.

The fourth step, which is the hardest yet most important, is to make the personal change so you learn from this. You must change your behavior to live closer to your best self. We all make mistakes. But to show that we believe they are mistakes, we have to learn from them and try to do better in the future. Offer specifically how you can make it up to them. For example, if you were late, offer to make it up by being 10 minutes early the next 5 times. The reparation should cost you something personal; time, effort, shame: something appropriate to the initial error. If you broke a friend's tennis racquet, you should offer to get him a new one. Not have your parents buy him a new one, but use your own money to buy him one. If you don't have the money, you could ask for that instead of a birthday present. It's all right to ask for guidance, such as "What can I do to make this up to you?" Whatever it is, it should be appropriate to the level of the mistake and you should feel it.

Back to our theatrical examples of Doug and Mike. If Mike is feeling terrible on the inside, and makes up his mind that he is not going to keep being late, and actually changes his behavior in the future based on this, then his apology is much better than I had originally thought. There was change and real regret, even though he was unable to voice it.

On the other hand, if Doug doesn't change, is habitually late, always ready with a heartfelt sounding apology and an excuse, it makes a lie out of the apology. His actions clearly show he is not sorry. We all have read Emerson's input on this: "What you are thunders so loud I can't hear what you are saying." In order to make his apology real, he needs to genuinely feel it, use the regret to change his actions, and try to do better in the future. Apologizing for being late to your scheduled activity for the fifth time is not real. You are mouthing the words you think you ought to, not actually feeling sorry for your actions and trying to change.

So, what should you expect from the person to whom you are apologizing? Nothing. They do not have to forgive you. To expect them to automatically forgive you is to demean your apology. Go back to step 1 and start over with being honest to yourself about what you did. Forgiveness might take them a

long time. It might take them seeing that you are really changing your behavior. It might take them seeing that you follow through on your offer to make it up. In some cases, it might never happen. You need to remember that you are the one apologizing, not them. If they didn't make the mistake, they don't owe you anything.

Finally, when is the right time to apologize? As soon as you realize that you made a mistake that justifies an apology. When you really don't want to say you're sorry, it's almost certainly time to do so. Like most of you, I hate being wrong. I believe that if I messed up, the best way to stop being wrong is to admit it and apologize. The sooner the better. It is often quite hard to do. But, the more you work on doing it right when you need to, the easier it will become for you to do.

An old movie has an often quoted line of "Love means never having to say you're sorry." The response nobody remembers is "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."* And it is. A friendship needs to include the words "I'm sorry". To maintain the friendship, they need to mean it. And they need to make the changes so that they don't keep having to apologize about the same things. When we don't do this, small things eventually build up enough to bring down any friendship. We need to say we're sorry to give our friends the ability to forgive and move on, free of any lingering guilt or regret. An honest apology is an act of humility, courage and commitment to your friendship.

To recap, there are four keys to the honest apology.

1. Honest self examination and acceptance
2. Determine how your best self should have responded
3. Make a complete apology and explanation to the right person
4. Learn from your error, and change so that you live truer to your best self

With honest practice, this can be a skill that serves you well your entire life.

I'd like to thank my council actors for their help in giving realistic examples with which to work. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

*The line "Love means never having to say your sorry" was originally in *Love Story*, spoken by Ali McGraw to Ryan O'Neal, without any response. However, a year later in *What's Up Doc*, Barbara Streisand said the same line to Ryan O'Neal, and he gave the response "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."