



On Apology

Aaron Lazare

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One of the most profound interactions that can occur between people, apologies have the power to heal humiliations, free the mind from deep-seated guilt, remove the desire for vengeance, and ultimately restore broken relationships. With *On Apology*, Aaron Lazare offers an eye-opening analysis of this vital interaction, illuminating an often hidden corner of the human heart. He discusses the importance of shame, guilt, and humiliation, the initial reluctance to apologize, the simplicity of the act of apologizing, the spontaneous generosity and forgiveness on the part of the offended, the transfer of power and respect between two parties, and much more. Readers will not only find a wealth of insight that they can apply to their own lives, but also a deeper understanding of national and international conflicts and how we might resolve them. The act of apologizing is quite simply immensely fulfilling. *On Apology* opens a window onto this common occurrence to reveal the feelings and actions at the heart of this profound interaction.

On Apology Details

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From Reader Review On Apology for online ebook

Christina says

I still use the precepts I learned from this book. A genuine apology offers explanation, a communication of remorse, and an offer of recompense. No "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings!"

Hannah Scanlon says

In this book, Aaron Lazare, M.D. takes a sustained look at one of humanity's most needed interactions. Acutely aware of a world in which nations, institutions, and individuals exist in an interdependent global village, his message contains both a hopeful call and a warning sign. By providing specific examples of how nations and individuals have apologized for their offenses in the past, he offers the optimistic idea that offending parties have made an ongoing commitment to change their behavior to those they have offended. As apology is an important means of social and political conflict resolution and reconciliation, he also warns that the dangers of neglecting it are high. This is a good read for people both with political and personal interests in apology.

Sergei Moska says

If only I could write this well.

At first glance this books seems a little too simplistic. But looking back on it, that's just not the case. It just seems that way because Lazare is such a good writer. I mean this in two ways. First, his sentences are just easy to read. They're conversational without talking down to the reader. Second, this books is wonderfully structured at multiple levels. He carefully disambiguates the elements of an apology, the motivations that push us to want apologies, the motives that push us to want to give them, the timing of apologies, failed apologies, etc.

Most chapters have the following format:

- he introduces the central concept of the chapter
- he introduces the relevant elements of that concept
- he dedicates a subsection to each element

In each subsection, he begins by very briefly describing that element in the abstract, then presents a number of cases that illustrate the point.

It's mercifully clear and easy to follow. This in turn makes his analysis stand out even more. Again, you'd think that such a structured approach would end up being boring, but that's not at all the case. Or maybe you'd think that the reliance on case studies would make this a less-than-serious think piece. Yet that's not the case either. There is a good amount of material here whether you're a layperson or using the book as an academic resource.

Grace says

Reading this short and insightful book will make you think about your own relationships and situations in which you were the offended seeking an apology versus being the offender and offering (or coerced into giving) an apology. There are many nuggets of wisdom to be gleaned from this book, such as how to give an effective and proper apology, when to apology immediately and when to wait, and why apologies can be powerful and life changing even after more than half a century between the actual apology and the original offense.

Author Aaron Lazare started out the book talking about the increase in apologies found in media outlets in recent years and the growing importance of apologies in an interconnected world: the global village as he called it. He mentions companies in China that specialize in apologies and the differences between cultures concerning apologies - what is acceptable versus what isn't. He even touched upon the increasing numbers of women and minorities in high level positions within corporations and governments and how their values toward apologies will shape the future. I wish the book focused more on these issues.

Ruth Seeley says

One of the best written non-fiction books I've ever read. A thorough and not too horribly US-centric examination of both public and private apologies that distinguishes between an apologia (essentially self justification) and a true apology, while exploring the very human need to admit wrongdoing (on the part of the offender) and to have the wrongdoing acknowledged (on the part of the offended party). Ok now I'm starting to sound a lawyer. This topic fascinates me - what can I say?

Carmen says

This book started out really boring. The first chapter is so boring, but it ends with a rather interesting personal story from the author.

One experience from my family illustrates how even an apparently simple apology can have a complexity that teaches many lessons. On a Saturday afternoon, my wife bought her favorite treat for dessert that evening, a gourmet, nut-filled brownie. But as dinnertime approached, my wife was unable to find it. Suspecting our youngest child, Naomi, then 16, who was the only child in the house at the time, my wife asked her whether she had taken the brownie. Naomi denied the accusation. But my wife was confident that Naomi was the culprit, and so she began to lecture her on the importance of telling the truth and of trust in relationships. Naomi continued her denial.

The next morning, my wife asked again. "Naomi, are you sure you did not take the brownie? I hate to think one of my children would do such a thing. There must be trust between a mother and a daughter." (Notice the level of the discussion had now escalated from taking a brownie to trust between a mother and daughter.) Our daughter denied it even more emphatically. She then turned her gaze to just over my wife's head and spotted the missing brownie on a shelf where my wife had originally placed it. My wife now remembered putting it there. Naomi's face turned smug and self-satisfied as she said, "Well, are you going to apologize?"

My wife then launched into a sincere, agonizing, and shame-filled apology. "I am so very sorry that I

thought you or any of my children would have taken the brownie and would have lied about it," she said. "I feel so terrible... " etc. My daughter castigated her by saying, "You should have known that I am allergic to nuts and would never have taken a brownie with nuts. Don't you know about my allergies?" My daughter was not presuming high moral principles, since taking candy or pastries from one another is not, according to family standards, a mortal sin. The mortal sin is lying about it. Naomi was now offended (or at least pretending to be offended) that she was being accused of taking a pastry with nuts when a good mother should know that her daughter is allergic to nuts.

Naomi let my wife continue with her apology until she felt she had seen her suffer enough. She then said with smug pleasure on her face, "I love it when you apologize, Mother, because it makes you feel so foolish." Several weeks later, my wife phoned me at work to tell me that Naomi apologized for something she had done. This event was remarkable because we could not recall Naomi ever apologizing for anything.

I was horrified by this story and since Lazare was describing this as "a successful apology," I was worried about the future of this book.

For one thing, why didn't the daughter use the nut-allergy defense right away?

Two, in my family if the parent was in the wrong and apologized sincerely to the child and the child responded with a smug "I love it when you apologize, Mother, because it makes you feel so foolish.", she or he would have been ~~slapped~~ in deep, deep trouble for disrespecting a parent like that, especially for acting like a little snide brat when someone is giving you a sincere apology. That shit would not fly.

It's disrespectful and wrong to make people grovel and beg. I'm not into humiliation.

Three, it seems as if he's saying this experience taught Naomi to apologize? Not sure how since apparently sees apologies as a chance to really humiliate people and rub their faces in feces.

However, despite the... weirdness... of this story, the book turned out to be stellar. Lazare covers so many different aspects of apologies. He doesn't go into depth about a lot of things, but he does try to touch on many relevant topics.

Sometimes, saying "I'm sorry" is not an apology, as in "I'm sorry your aunt is ill." This is not an acceptance of blame, but instead a profession of concern and empathy. Lazare also talks about 'false' apologies a lot, and why they are so unsatisfying.

A simple test for determining whether "I apologize" is an apology in the formal sense of the word is to ask whether the person making the statement would repeat the behavior if a similar situation arose.

He talks about how women are more comfortable with apologizing, likely to apologize, and have a higher proclivity for guilt (although he doesn't get far into this subject). He talks about cultural differences in apologizing, mainly focusing on American, Japanese and Chinese sensibilities.

He talks about what makes a good apology and why people apologize - they could be doing so to assuage internal guilt and their conscience, they could be trying to please and appease their superiors, they could be forced by society to issue an apology they don't really mean.

Can there be nonverbal apologies? Lazare says yes and gives some real life examples, including drivers

apologizing to each other using facial expressions and hand gestures, President Harry S. Truman's trip to Mexico in 1947, and Pope John Paul II's visit to the Western Wall.

He also describes brief apologies, such as the ones you make after accidentally bumping into someone or keeping a borrowed book for six months.

He also discusses who should make apologies and when.

Could a president who has never served in the military successfully apologize on behalf of the nation? Does a sitting Roman Catholic pope have the standing to apologize for the mistakes of the church's priests and parishioners from earlier centuries?

This is strange to me, I don't really see why a president who didn't serve in the military would be unqualified to make apologies on behalf of the nation... but oh well.

Lazare is also fascinated with and deeply delves into the idea of apologies that take place decades or centuries after an offense.

...are we guilty for acts we did not personally commit, many of which occurred before we were born?... Should Germans born after World War II be held responsible for Nazi atrocities?... ...people are not guilty for actions in which they did not participate. But just as people take pride in things for which they had no responsibility (such as famous ancestors, national championships of their sports teams, and great accomplishments of their nation), so, too, must these people accept the shame (but not the guilt) of their family, their athletic teams, and their nations. Accepting national pride must include willingness to accept national shame when one's country has not measured up to reasonable standards. I believe that this accountability is what we mean when we speak of having a national identity, or a sense of national belonging, or a national soul.

Lazare also discusses apologies in personal relationships.

By apologizing, the offending party reaffirms his or her commitment to the rules and values implicit in the relationship by saying, in essence, "I really am the person you thought I was." Trust is thus reestablished, making the relationship safe and predictable once again. Such apologies remind us that people can make mistakes and recover from them, that values once ignored can be reestablished, that relationships once damaged can be healed. We breathe easier knowing that our original estimation of the offending party was correct after all: Our trust was not misplaced.

One thing I really like about this book is all the real life, public examples of apologies Lazare discusses. Monica Lewinsky. Bryan Smith to Stephen King. Prince August to Turkey. Latrell Sprewell to his coach. Senator Conrad Burns to Arabs. Liberal Democrat Ota's comments on gangrape. Bob Ryan. John Cheney. Roy E. Frankhouser. General Patton. De Kock. Kurt Werner Schaechter. Curtis Oathout. Cardinal Bernard Law. President Abraham Lincoln. Richard von Weizsacker. Kevin Grover. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Janet Jackson. President Clinton, President Grant. Cardinal Edward M. Egan. President Richard Nixon. The newspaper at Spokane Community College. Carlos Jagmetti. Fuzzy Zoeller. U.S. Col. Kassem Saleh. The IRA. Walter Mondale. Scott D. Waddle. Mike Tyson. Justin A. Volpe. Robert S. McNamara. James Kartell. President F.W. de Klerk. Timothy McVeigh. Samuel Sewall. Dick Armey. Steven Glass. Victor Crawford. General Robert E. Lee. David Brinkley. Reverend Jerry Falwell. John Plummer to Kim Phuc. Bobby Powers to Theodore Landsmark. George Steinbrenner to Yogi Berra. Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. Reverend Billy Graham. Janet Dailey. Govenor George Wallace. David Brock to Anita Hill. Richard Reeves to

President Gerald Ford. Bobby Hall. Joseph Prueher. Captain Charles D. Wilkes. Joseph J. Ellis. Senator Trent Lott. Steven Cook and Cardinal Joseph Bernadin. Ernst Werner Techow. Eric Lomax and Nagase Takashi.

Whether you know all or none of these stories, they are fascinating as Lazare breaks them down and analyzes the motives behind the apologies and if they were sincere or not.

He also discusses literature and how apologies are portrayed in literature. His analysis of Agamemnon's apology to Achilles is on point. Also,

From a literary perspective, Elaine Showalter, a professor of English literature at Princeton University, argues that male authors allow their male characters to mistreat women and escape without an apology... She writes, "Allowing a hero to humiliate himself before a wronged woman would render him awkward, wimpish, embarrassing, and lacking in sex appeal - in a word, unmanned." Showalter argues that "if literary heroes never apologize and rarely explain... it must be because male authors regard such actions as dishonorable.

...

Showalter adds that, in contrast, female writers make men live up to their misdeeds, "forgiveness comes the hard way: you have to earn it."

Obviously she's not talking about "genre fiction" but "literary fiction" only, still, I thought this was interesting - and she uses lots of examples to illustrate this in the book.

Why is apologizing harder for some people than others?

We can surmise what personality traits in people make it particularly difficult for them to apologize: They need to be in firm control of interpersonal situations. They need to be in control of their emotions. They need to feel right or morally superior most of the time; they believe they rarely make mistakes. They assume the world is hostile and that relationships are inherently dangerous. In contrast, people who find it easy to apologize accept sharing control of interpersonal situations and enjoy relationships with others. They accept, respect, and even enjoy their emotions. They can acknowledge their vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and flaws while constantly trying to improve. They believe they are reasonable and decent people and assume that others share these traits. When they apologize, they are merely admitting they made a mistake. Such an admission is not a threat so long as they feel good about themselves and feel that THEY are not a mistake.

Lazare also talks about forgiveness.

First, the act of forgiving people with no apology. For instance, forgiving your dead, abusive parents. People who never forgive no matter what. People who offer forgiveness with an expectation of a future apology - such as a mother forgiving a murderer for killing her son, or a man forgiving a robber for robbing him. This doesn't pardon criminals from court justice, but it can help them repair their souls and do better in the future. Lastly, people who only bestow forgiveness on people who have apologized, which Lazare points out is the most religiously sound way of doing things for both Jewish and Christian peoples.

Tl;dr - In short, although this book gets off to a rocky start, it ended up being very informative and educational. I learned a lot, not only about apologies and apologizing, but also about history. Lazare is a good and interesting writer - he knows not to drag stories out for too long and he knows not to lecture

without also giving us entertaining, real life examples.

I would recommend this book to anyone with an interest.

Melinda says

If you want to know what a good apology is and why it is so important then this a book for you. I found it at the library. Among the many little nuggets that make it worth reading....."an apology that fails is potentially more destructive than no apology at all. With no apology, one can hope for a future apology, but with a failed apology, one often concludes that the matter is hopeless." (p. 73)

Tucker says

Lazare distinguishes between so-called "apologies" that are merely expressions of regret or empathy, apologies in the Greek sense that are simply explanations, and true apologies that involve the acceptance of responsibility. What Lazare calls "genuine apology" requires a person to "acknowledge the offense adequately," "express genuine remorse," and "offer appropriate reparations, including a commitment to make changes in the future." (p. 9) Lazare says that people can be motivated to apologize because of "their empathic concern for others or their inner distress of guilt and shame" or they may "want to influence how others perceive and behave towards them." (p. 134)

Execution is important because "an apology that fails is potentially more destructive than no apology at all. With no apology, one can hope for a future apology, but with a failed apology, one often concludes that the matter is hopeless." (p. 73)

Aaron Lazare. On Apology. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Angela T says

Although at times unnecessarily repetitive, the book gives compelling evidence for the importance of apology in our lives. I agree with Lazare's suggestion that studies in all disciplines could benefit from including lessons in the act of apology.

Barbara says

Interesting look at the phenomena of apology. Why we do it, what the mechanics are, what constitutes a true apology, why we wait.

Lots (maybe too many?) of examples and anecdotes of apologies.

David says

In a perfect world, people would view the act of apologizing as empowering (for both parties in an offense) and not as a sign of weakness. But then, of course, a perfect world - being perfect - would have no need of apologies.

The world we inhabit is far from perfect. ~which is why - in his invaluable work gathered in this terrific and very accessible book - Dr. Lazare states that the world may finally be realizing it needs the act and the art of the apology more than ever. As is stated: "Academic disciplines of sociology, social psychology and psycholinguistics became interested in research on apologies beginning in the 1970s, and the few books on contemporary apologies and 'how to apologize' did not appear until the 1990s." Its value is gaining ground.

Lazare has been studying apology for awhile now; it's his primary interest. He asserts that, as our world continues to become 'smaller' as the result of being more closely inter-connected, the apology should be mankind's primary interest as well. He makes a convincing case; I agree with him.

A particular point Lazare makes is the distinction between apology and forgiveness - that people can find it much easier to forgive (or be forgiven) than to apologize. The act of forgiveness is less work - but forgiveness and apology are intertwined and only satisfyingly effective when they're together.

Lazare looks at apology from what seems every possible angle of the act itself, and he illustrates how apologizing plays out on levels that can be personal as well as international and inter-cultural. He has compiled a lot of (often fascinating and gripping) stories that bear out his claims.

On the back cover of the book, there is a quote from the starred review from 'Publishers Weekly': "Everybody on Earth could benefit from this small but essential book."I'd say that's accurate.

Gabrielle says

Not enough interesting information to be engaging. Although the chapter on when to delay an apology was definitely novel, this book felt more like a manual on common sense than a guide to repairing personal relationships.

Maureen Flatley says

An authentic and effective apology includes two components.....the apologizer's authentic remorse and the willingness of the offended party to accept it.

Thomas DeWolf says

When my cousin Deb heard Aaron Lazare speak in Boston she bought his book after the lecture. She was really moved by what he said. My faith in her judgment led me to pick it up as well. I've never come across a book like this before; that covers the subject of "apology" from so many perspectives. It is part story-telling,

part analysis, part history lesson. This book definitely informed my own work as I wrote "Inheriting the Trade" and will continue to inform my writing and my life. So often we fear dealing with the complicated issue of apology when, in fact, apology is part of the pathway to healing damaged relationships. I heartily recommend "On Apology" to anyone interested in understanding more deeply our shared humanity and the process of apologizing.

Dawn says

I read many short articles on apologies, and then read this book. I am not a self-help book fan, and while this book IS that, it is so much more. At the risk of boring you:

From Publishers Weekly

This jewel of a book reveals the many facets of the simple act of apology. Given, there are significant cultural differences in the way humans apologize. "Japanese apologies are more apt to communicate submissiveness, humility, and meekness whereas Americans are more apt to communicate sincerity," writes Lazare, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Under the surface of their differing presentations, however, in spite of their length or even sometimes their complete wordlessness, all true apologies are a kind of offering intended to restore the dignity and self-respect of the offended party, according to the author. An apology can work a miracle, inspiring spontaneous generosity and forgiveness on the part of the offended, whether it is a whole people or a single individual. Drawing on a vast array of literary and real-life examples, such as Agamemnon, George Patton and Arnold Schwarzenegger, from the current pope to the machinist who approached him after a lecture, Lazare lucidly dissects the process of apology: offering an explanation; communicating remorse, shame, humility or sincerity (according to our cultural values); making a gesture of reparation or reconciliation. Among the most moving examples in the book is Lincoln's second inaugural address, in which he apologizes for American slavery: "two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil" enabling some to "wring their bread from the sweat of other men's faces." Just as breathtaking was the apology made by Kevin Gover, an assistant secretary of Indian affairs, for that agency's grave crimes against the Indian people. Lazare succeeds in showing that a true apology is among the most graceful and profound of all human exchanges. When it is sincere, it is not an end but a new beginning. "It is a behavior that requires of both parties an attitude of honesty, generosity, humility, commitment, and courage," he writes. Everybody on earth could benefit from this small but essential book.

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