

Difficult Journeys

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Dear Juliette: I'm sorry for making that obnoxious joke about the music you were listening to on your iPod. Dear Sales Rep for a textbook distributor: I'm sorry for lying to you on the phone. Dear Jon Bon Jovi: I'm sorry for throwing empty beer cans on your lawn.¹

These aren't just apologies, but ones that were made in a very public format. Author Dave Bry writes an online blog called Public Apology where he posts apology essays, long ramblings about personal mis-doings, both for recent ones like the joke to the iPod listener and ones for incidents that may have occurred something like 20 years ago, like the one to the textbook distributor. Some are downright hilarious, like the one to a Mrs. Noonan which says "sorry if it seemed like I was trying to see you naked. I wasn't; I swear." ...and the one to someone named Emily in which he apologizes for wearing sweatpants on their first dinner date. And some of his apology essays reflect on deep learning about his fellow human beings and the impact of his actions on them.

Apologies can serve a profound need between human beings. Now I am not quite sure if this is what Dave Bry has in mind when posting for his blog, if he is using the forum to prompt meaningful reflection or to develop material for a book on the subject he has that's being released in a couple of months or maybe it's to make himself feel better for our listening to the confessional aspect of his apologies. There is certainly tongue-in-cheek with some of them, like the one to Bon Jovi where he admits a tiny twinge of guilt but still continues to make fun of his music. But many of his apologies seem heartfelt and illuminate some of the complex relationships between humans, when he said or did things that he later regretted having done.

Apologies don't always serve profound needs; sometimes they are just a form of common courtesy and don't really go much deeper than that. In an apology, we are identifying something that we did or that we did not do in the past and communicating our regret for it. An apology can be for something that one did: "I'm sorry for taking that money from your wallet" or "I'm sorry for making an obnoxious joke." Or it can be for something that one did not do: "I'm sorry for not calling you." An apology is based on one's sense of harm done to someone else. But they can be profound, especially for the person making the apology. One truly touching apology that Dave Bry shared in his blog, with one of the highest counts of comments made on it, is an apology where he writes, "Dear Jews who may have been sitting

¹ <http://www.theawl.com/tag/public-apology>

near me and my friends in the college dining room, I'm sorry for making anti-Semitic slurs. I didn't know what they meant at the time."²

Apologies come up in grief work. Last year, I participated in a small grief recovery group. I had been asked to be an assistant facilitator for the group, which mostly meant remembering the sign for the door and bringing enough boxes of tissues. But it also meant participating in the content the group was working on. As we progressed through our meetings, working on a variety of changes and losses in our lives, I found myself more and more working on my own incomplete grief over the loss of a dear friend from high school. We had been best friends but had drifted apart after graduating and had not really managed to stay in touch. About twelve years after graduating with only a little contact in those intervening years, I got word that he had taken his life. My regrets were heavy – what if I had been there for him? Would my friendship have changed anything and saved him? My regrets only intensified after he visited me in a dream a few months later. And now, years after, in this grief recovery group, I found myself forming apologies to him. “I'm sorry for not staying in touch.” “I'm sorry for not seeing your pain when we sat and talked on that bench outside Walgreens a year before you died.” “I'm sorry for not being there for you.” I didn't need to forgive him as much as I needed to forgive myself. I needed to forgive myself for these things that I didn't do so that I could let go of my regret.

Forgiveness is a word with many definitions and is often misunderstood. I've found a definition that has been meaningful to me. Forgiveness means “giving up the hope of a different or better yesterday.”³ It means giving up the hope that something in the past might change. It means letting go of my regret for not being there for my friend. I found myself holding tight to those hopes, convincing myself that things could have been different. Starting to let go of my hope for a different past has helped me to be able to remember my friend more than remembering only my own regret.

Christine, whose story about her tattoo I read earlier, was making a similar journey. She tells how she got the word “Forgiven” tattooed on her wrist after her father's suicide. “I wanted to [have to] explain it,” she says. “‘My father killed himself, so I got this.’ I wish I could tell them that grief comes out in strange ways. I wish I could explain that I wanted to make sure I didn't forget — not the tragedy, but [I didn't want to forget] my decision to let it go.”⁴

² <http://www.theawl.com/tag/public-apology>

³ John W. James and Russell Friedman, *The Grief Recovery Handbook: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses* (2009), page 138.

⁴ <http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/441/forgetting>

Forgiveness to her meant a decision to let go of the tragedy, of her father's decision to take his own life. This is her ongoing forgiveness work, giving up the hope that the past could have been different. It is letting go of that in order to find peace in the present.

This is different from approving of what's happened. Forgiveness is so often confused with accepting actions done in the past, with condoning them. The idea of forgiving can be a confusing struggle. It was for a listener who sent in this letter to one of my favorite radio programs:

"I don't know what forgiveness means. Two and a half years ago, I discovered that my husband of 31 years was having an affair with a co-worker. When I found out the level of his involvement, I told him to leave our home. The details are sordid and still unbelievable to me and our adult children. We have since gotten a legal separation, and he is on reasonably good terms with two of our three kids. My life is on track, and I have weathered this quite well in most ways, except that I am still angry with him. In the past two years, I have heard the word 'forgive' too many times. I have heard many definitions and been told that in order to move on completely, I need to forgive him. My brain understands that I need to put that part of my past away, lay that burden down, but I cannot forgive him. I wish there were another word for the process I need to go through. Forgiveness to me includes giving permission, or acknowledgment that the action was okay or in some way not that bad. The betrayal of my husband was not and will never be okay. If there is a word to better describe the process of putting the past in the past without the underlying approval, I don't know what it is. I don't like the word forgive anymore. I believe that there are situations and people that can't be forgiven. When I discovered that quite a large part of my life was a lie, my understanding of the way the world works was overturned." The letter concludes: "What does forgiveness mean? I don't know."⁵

Does forgiveness mean that we are okay with what happened? Does forgiving an action change what that action was?

Recently someone from here shared this with me:

"By forgiving someone are you saying that they weren't wrong in your relationship? Are you saying that whatever event that led you to need forgiveness is now null and void? Is it possible to continue to acknowledge the wrong done to you, but allow it to live in the past? Can you look at an individual and see their actions (or lack thereof) in the context of their greater life

⁵ Anonymous author, excerpt from "Forgiveness" on *Tapestry* with Mary Hynes, CBC Radio, April 29, 2012 episode.

and allow the peace of today to speak in the place of the pain of yesterday - without saying that yesterday wasn't painful?"⁶

So many things hurt when they happen; that's a given. The pain is real, and it doesn't vanish from our memories. I think it shouldn't. The work of forgiveness isn't speaking as much about changing the past as it is the present, changing our relationship with that person, and with ourselves. It's different from condoning what happened, different from making it right in any way. So often it isn't right at all, and nothing will ever change that. And we aren't forgetting our experiences. What we're dealing with is their weight and their pain in the present. We're dealing with how these past experiences are still affecting us. And this can take years or even decades to be able to do. Which means that some of us may have quite a bit of weight that we are bearing.

Forgiveness is usually a primary topic at Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement which marks the end of the High Holy Days each year. At one Yom Kippur service I attended, the rabbi told of another high holy day that she had witnessed. The congregation entered the service to find a huge pile of potatoes at the center of their worship hall. During the service, each person was invited to take a plastic bag and put potatoes into it, one for each thing they had not or were not able to forgive, big things, small things, anything that they were holding onto. Don't worry about how many potatoes other people are putting into their bags, they were told. Just think about your own bag and what should go into it. Upon finishing their bags they were instructed to carry these bags with them everywhere until the next service in 10 days, to carry them to work, in the car, to the dinner table, in the shower, everywhere. I have to say that I'm glad it was only the story being told in the service where I was, and not the actual experience! When the members of that congregation brought their bags back after 10 days, in all their heavy and stinky glory, and I can only imagine how relieved they were to be rid of them.

What weights they had been carrying! The potatoes were tangible reminders of the weight of past experiences that they were holding. And their rotting and stinkyness are metaphors for the resentment and bitterness that they grow into over time. What would your sack of potatoes look like if you were to fill one? Mine might have a variety of smaller potatoes in it with a few larger ones, mostly run-of-the-mill varieties with perhaps a couple more unusual heirloom ones mixed in. Some that seem to grow larger as time goes on. Some would have gotten pretty fragrant over the intervening time since they made it into my bag. Someone who lied to me when I trusted them. Someone who said something hurtful to get their way. Maybe they seemed like smaller potatoes at the time, but they've grown since.

⁶ Quoted with permission.

What is it from these past experiences that I'm still holding onto? Not just the memory of them but also anger over their happening in the first place, hope they'd be different, a lingering resentment. I once heard it called "memorized resentment." Resentment that I've memorized deep in my being, resentment that can shape what I do now. Forgiveness work isn't so much for the other person as it is for ourselves. The past isn't hurting them anymore, or if it is then that's their work to do. The act of forgiving is about a shift for ourselves, a shift to not letting the painful past hurt any longer.

Forgiving is an act of freedom-taking.

Throughout our lives, we've been hurt, lied to, ignored, betrayed, and not loved as much as we needed. But if truth be told, we have also harmed others, we've lied, we've ignored, we've betrayed, and we've fallen short of the love that others craved. What would it take to forgive those who have wronged us? What would it take to let go of lingering anger or resentment, to free ourselves from pain that we still feel.

Every situation is different. And I don't think it's a stretch to say that this kind of forgiveness is never easy. If it was, I wouldn't even need to be talking about it now. This can be some of the most challenging work that we might ever do. What do you need to be able to do it?

Does it take intentional work supported by a community, like the grief group that I was in? Or forcing oneself to reflect on it, over and over, like Christine with her wrist tattoo. It might take some other circumstances or events related to the one needed to forgive. Perhaps it just takes one's growth in other areas and is part of deepening emotional and spiritual maturity. What it does take, I think, is some sort of support from outside of ourselves. Maybe it's other people who we trust; maybe the spirit or divine in some way, or perhaps a loving community. What do you need?

I'd like to close with the prayer that we sang together just a little while ago:

Words that we hold tight won't let us go.

Paths we don't follow will haunt us so.

What will undo us is not our friend,

Show us, O spirit, how to befriend.

Show us how to forgive.

To all who live, show us forgiveness, that we may live.⁷

May it be so as we walk these sometimes difficult journeys, carrying our heavy loads when we must, and setting them down when we can. Blessed be.

⁷ Bishop Dr. Adedeji Ishola, *Singing the Living Tradition*, #179.