

It's tough to say "I'm sorry" – but here's a different approach that can work magic.

The Power Of An Apology

BY ROSAMUND STONE ZANDER

I'M SORRY I WAS LATE," he said, holding out a huge bouquet. "Saying you're sorry just doesn't cut it," she snarled. "And *forget* the roses!" She knew he was thinking that the problem was that *she* was an angry person – not that *he* had forgotten to pick her up for the fifth time.

"I said I was sorry," he grumbled. "What else can I do?" She couldn't hold back the tears that always put him over the edge. "Oh, for goodness *sake!*" he shouted and stormed out.

For most of us, this scene is all too familiar. I am certainly no stranger to the lame apology. I have been the guilty party, and I have been the recipient of roses, so I know all the moves. Usually we apologize to put ourselves in a better light. "Sorry," we say, and then add "but" as shorthand for "I'm really right."

Yet one apology I received miraculously left us *both* feeling better and started me thinking about apologizing in a way that doesn't have anything to do with being wrong.

A new kind of apology

It happened when we moved my mother into a hospice, just weeks before she died from lung cancer. I tried frantically to make everything comfortable for her. Her first evening, she wanted to watch a Red Sox game on cable TV, but there was no cable in the building. I let the cable company know that this would be my mother's last game, and the house was wired within two hours.

When my sister rushed back from 18 months abroad, I stood aside so she and our mother could catch up. But when I returned to my mother's bedside, I was greeted by a tray of hospice food thrown directly at me. My mother said she never wanted to see my face again.

In another attempt to please her, I typed up the poems she had been writing throughout her life and bound them into a spiral book. But my mother berated me

for my selfishness: Obviously, I had done this only to be admired, whereas she was a woman of privacy. Tears of self-pity burned my eyes.

As I sat by her bed the night before she died, I felt my mother reach out her hand and hook her pinky finger around mine. "Rozzie," she said, "the reason I've been so mean to you and so nice to your sister is that when you were children, I was nicer to you than I was to her. I wanted to even things out. But it's silly, darling. I apologize. You know I love you." You see things more clearly around death or birth. I noticed how different her apology was from the usual kind. My mother wasn't apologizing for her actions. She never said she was wrong. Nor was she trying to pacify me – in fact, I hadn't complained. She didn't mention throwing food or hurling insults at me. Instead, she apologized for how she had frayed the tie between us. And by doing so, she knit it up again.

I realized that there were two kinds of apologies: In one, someone admits she is wrong, the other person gets his revenge, and justice is served. The second type is as different as love to war. In this one, a person notices that something is broken and finds a way to make it whole again.

When you blame someone, you get resistance. But if you take responsibility for repairing a rift, you form a team.

To Restore Harmony. . .

- Think of any breakdown between you and another person as an opportunity to apologize. You know there is a breakdown when you feel angry, tense, disapproving, distant, sad or vengeful toward someone.
- Notice that the way you are feeling and behaving is maintaining the problem.
- Apologize for letting anything other than the relationship take priority: For example, say: "I'm sorry that I let my feelings of pride [or fear or laziness] get in the way of us."

Whose fault is it? Does it matter?

I began to notice that whenever there was tension between me and someone else, I could always find a real, honest-to-goodness reason to apologize. 01

For instance, I picked a fight with my husband the other day – about an issue I felt justified in raising. But he just looked upset, accused me of spoiling things and reminded me that he had a big project due. I realized I had a choice about bringing us together again. "Come here," I said and gave him a hug. "I'm sorry for

introducing an important topic when you have no time to talk. It made us both feel bad. I promise I'll find a better moment soon." I didn't say I was wrong about the subject matter. I apologized for causing a rift between us. His mood became sunny in a flash.

Some years ago, at a school meeting, my son's teachers were talking about ways to make him more responsible. I began defending him and telling them how to do their jobs. I was riding a very high horse. Suddenly I realized things were not going in a good direction. I stopped short and said, "I'm sorry. I forgot who you are." By which I meant,

"How can I be treating you as the enemy, when you have dedicated your lives to children?" Their faces changed so rapidly, it was as if I had waved a magic wand.

Recently, my husband – who runs a program for young musicians – was upset with some of the students for skipping a concert after he had arranged for tickets and buses. "Be sure to apologize," I said. I had become so awestruck by the power of an apology, so certain that one can find the way in which one is a source of friction, that he had to laugh: "What could I possibly apologize to those kids for?"

But he found it. He said to the students, "I want to apologize to you. Some of you missed a concert that I felt was really important for you to hear. I see now that if I am going to invite you to something special, I should talk about it in a way that gets you so excited that you won't want to miss it for anything. So I let us all down."

One student came up to him afterward. "I was one of those who went shopping," she said. "I just want to say I'm sorry." He had showed her how easily an apology restores connection, and she caught the spark.

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out who is right
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Practicing the apology

Once you realize you don't have to make yourself wrong to deliver an apology, you'll feel a new power. If you differ strongly with a friend on a political matter, you can say: "My passion for my own beliefs has made it difficult for me to fully understand yours. If it has caused trouble between us, I apologize. My relationship with you is far more important than whether we agree or not."

And if you have a strained situation with your boss and feel misunderstood, at least you can say, "I'm sorry for the tension that has developed between us. I intend to find a way to work it out."

If your teenage daughter screams at you that you are ruining her life with your rules, you can say: "My rules are meant to protect you and teach you how to get along with people. I'm sorry for any bossiness or coldness that I may have delivered with my message."

We cannot always act in perfect harmony with the people we love.

They inevitably will feel upset, misunderstood and frustrated by things we do. But we don't have to get so caught up with figuring out who is right and who is wrong that we forget what matters. "Because of deep love, we are courageous," said the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse more than 2000 years ago. The power of an apology does not lie in the admission of guilt. An apology is a tool to affirm the primacy of our connection with others. It can unlock deep love in our everyday lives.

Don't wait. Apologize!

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