

Just Apologize, Dammit

by Julia Smillie

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All I wanted was for the waitress to say she was sorry. I didn't need her to mean it, necessarily. (I'm not *that* demanding.) But we were gasping of thirst until we flagged down a sympathetic bus boy to refill our glasses and it had been so long since we had ordered we couldn't remember what day it was. The waitress said: "Things are really backed up tonight." The waitress said: "I have no idea what's taking so long." She challenged us to trump her own sense of annoyance at the delays, rolling her eyes and trying to assure us that this was harder on her than it was on us.

Yet, to me, it was what the waitress didn't say that was more important – and it was the only thing she would have had to say to quench my frustration. The waitress didn't say: "I'm sorry."

It seems as if no one does any more. The folks at the remarkably unhelpful Home Depot near my house are constantly telling me they're out of this or that or they don't carry certain items. My web site hosting company has a habit of over-charging me, forcing me to call and spend precious time I could be watching TV waiting for them to fix the problem. And every time, I get bogged down with excuses – or, worse, a distinct "who cares?" attitude – when all I really want is an apology.

Forgive me if I'm wrong, but wasn't there a time when saying you're sorry was Customer Service 101 – or, hell, Humanity 101? Maybe I'm making a big deal out of nothing – and if I am, you can damn bet that I'll apologize for wasting your time – but it seems to me that in this age of entitlement and excuses, the missing apology is a pretty significant symbol of, at worst, our lack of compassion for other human beings or, at best, our dwindling sense of courtesy.

As a kid, I received mixed messages about apologizing. If I did something wrong, I was forced to apologize for it – to my parents or my siblings or whoever I had offended. The thing was, much of the time, I wasn't sorry for doing it; I was sorry for being *caught*. Thus, I learned early on that apologies needn't be sincere. They just needed to *be*.

Confusing the matter further, my mother had a penchant for waiting for an apology, then saying, "Don't be sorry. Just don't do it." It was very confusing. I thought I was *supposed* to be sorry – and how could I not do something I had just done? It seemed to me that this was a time-space-continuum issue that required wisdom far beyond my years. The important part, however, was that I learned to apologize.

Maybe it seems that I'm nit-picking here, but apologies matter. Just ask Plato, who penned perhaps the most important literary apology of all time. Nations seek formal apologies from one another as an important element in peaceful international relations. Friends go years without speaking while waiting for one or the other (or sometimes both) to just say they're sorry.

I'll spare you the old dictionary definition trick, but many entries suggest that apologies and excuses are somewhat interchangeable. With all due respect to Merriam and Webster, I think there's a distinct difference and that, in fact, excuses often undermine the soothing impact of a simple, pristine apology.

Not all apologies – or apologizers – are equal, of course. I have friends who are chronic apologizers. They are sorry for everything and anything. They feel bad. They carry the weight of the world on their shoulders and are convinced that they can and should fix everything. In the much-loathed shorthand of the therapy set, they are ragingly co-dependent and the overall effect is, of course, like the boy who cried sorry. It ceases to mean anything real; it's a conversational short hand.

Then there are what I call the accusatory apologies. I once had a friend who dodged all semblance of personal responsibility in any situation by saying, "I'm sorry that you think I was killing your puppy" or "I'm sorry if that upsets you." It's an interesting and sneaky point of deflection. It makes you think you're getting an apology. But you're not. You're getting shafted.

I'm not pretending that it's easy to apologize, although, in a professional capacity, it's not that hard to say you're sorry if the fries were cold. No harm, no foul, right? In personal situations, those two little words can get tangled up by pride, and sit in your throat until it's hard to swallow or breathe. I'm not sure anyone actually likes to apologize. In fact, I'm finding, as I get older, that I consciously work to live within a code of conduct that minimizes the number of times I have to apologize for anything. When I do, I try to take the band aid removal approach – do it as quickly as possible, since taking your time only makes it hurt more.

It occurs to me that maybe this is what my mother meant all along when she said, "Don't apologize. Just don't do it." Maybe she meant that being a good person in the first place is easier than going back and apologizing for something later. It's advice that is only half-useful, though, since humans are flawed and we're going to make mistakes and we're going to do things to inconvenience or upset others. I think there's a balance in there somewhere, one that doesn't even require any understanding of the time-space continuum after all.