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APOLOGIZE Everyone's Doing It NOW!

Jane Smiley:
The Grovel
Reflex

Erich Segal:
Love Means
Never *What?*

Elaine Showalter:
Shameless Men

Guest
Editor Deborah
Tannen



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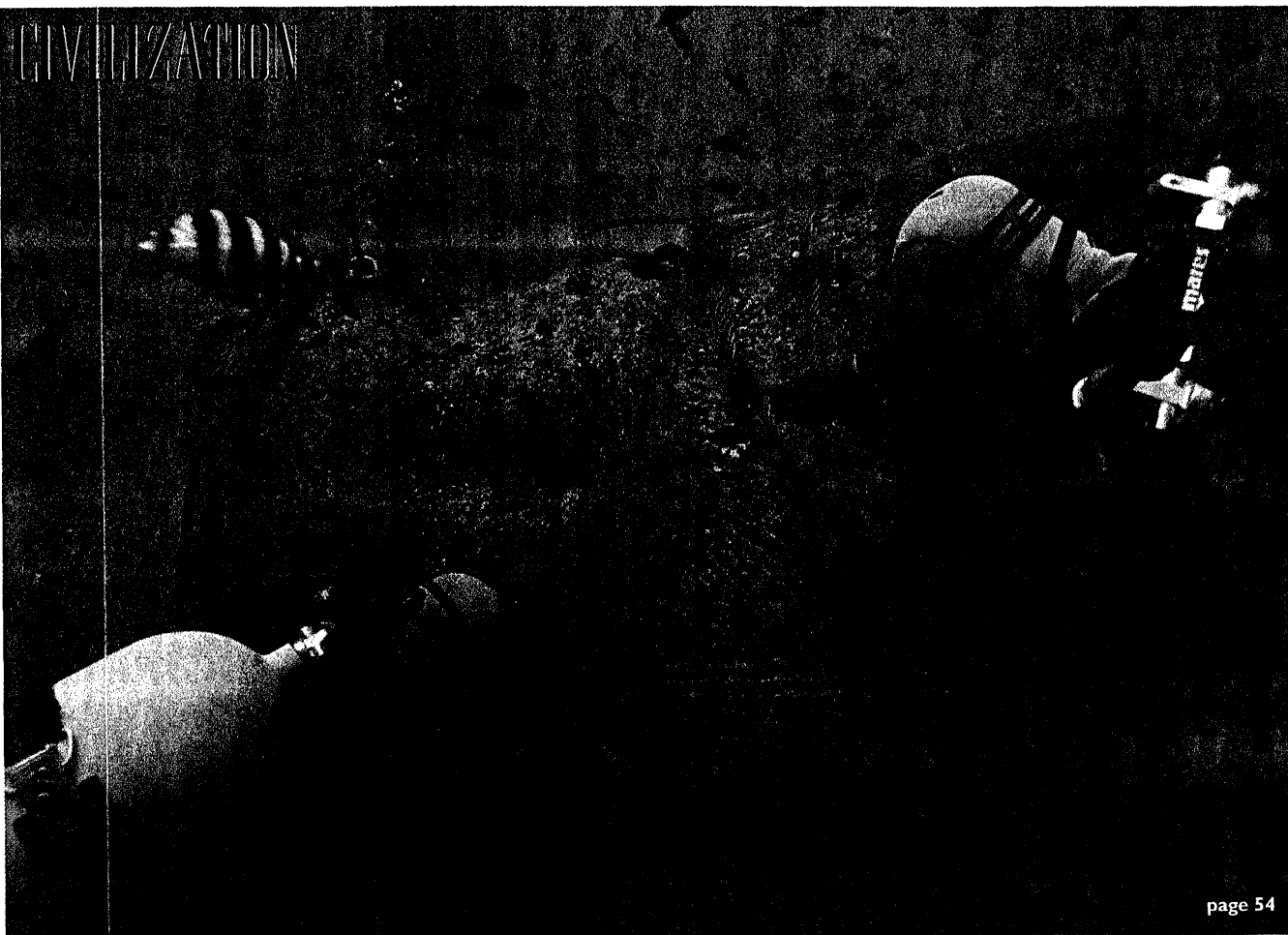
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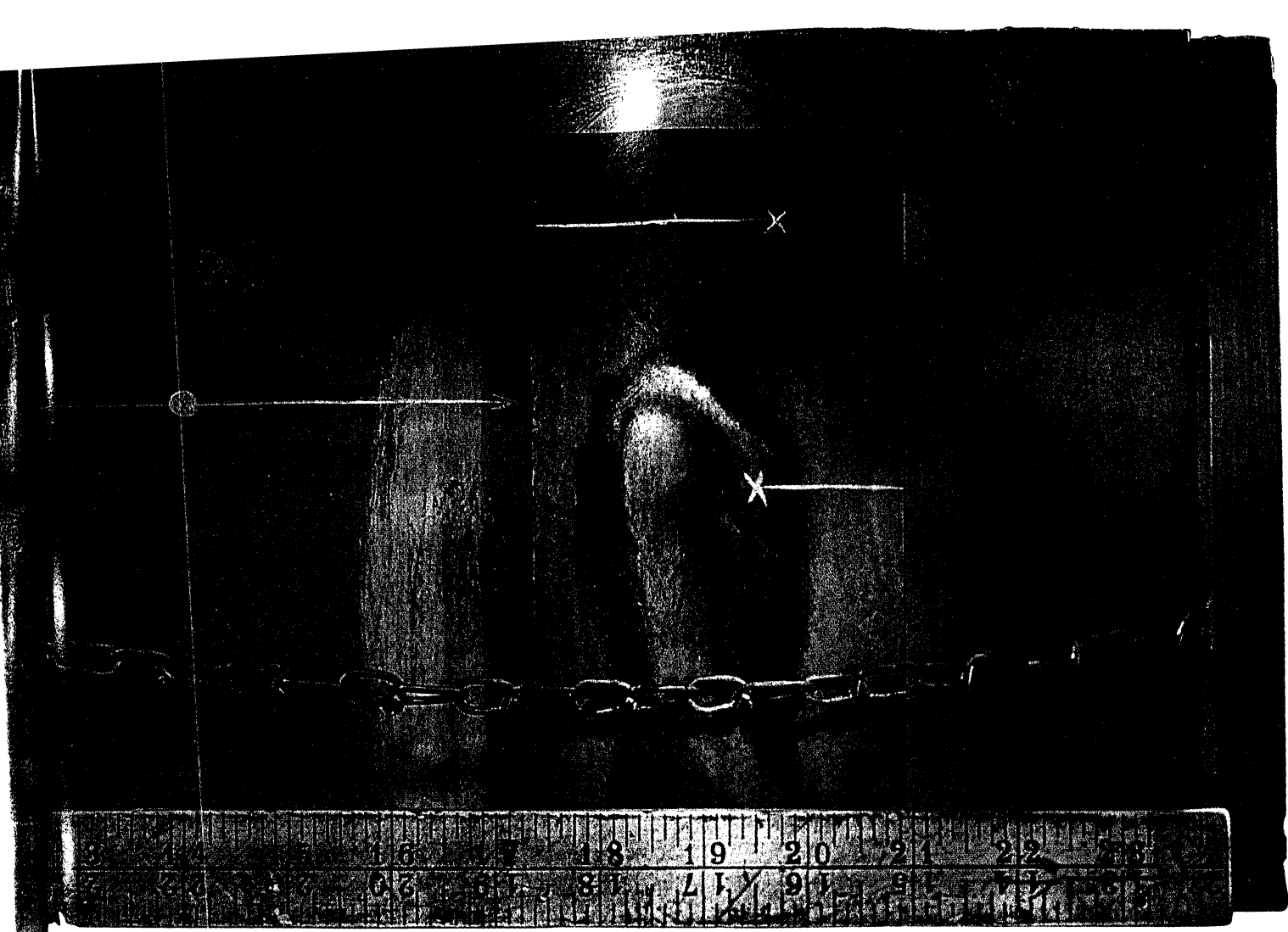
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1 contrite makes right

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

*Whether used to repair
old, strained relationships
or to lay the groundwork
for new, productive
ones, the mighty "sorry"
has proved effective*

APOLOGIES ARE POWERFUL. THEY resolve conflicts without violence, repair schisms between nations, allow governments to acknowledge the suffering of their citizens, and restore equilibrium to personal relationships. They are an effective way to restore trust and gain respect. They can be a sign of strength: proof that the apologizer has the self-confidence to admit a mistake.

Apologies, like so many other communi-

cation strategies, begin at home. They are one of a bevy of what some linguists call speech acts and are used to keep relationships on track. Each cultural group has its own customs with regard to conversational formalities, including conventionalized means of repairing disruptions.

In the American context, there is ample evidence that women are more inclined to offer expressions of contrition than men. One woman, for example, told me that her husband's resistance to apologizing makes their disputes go on and on. Once, after he forgot to give her a particularly important telephone message, she couldn't get over her anger, not because he had forgotten (she realized anyone can make a mistake), but because he didn't apologize. "Had I done something like that," she said, "I would have fallen all over myself saying how sorry I was. ... I felt as though he didn't care." When I asked her husband for

his side of the story, he said apologizing would not have repaired the damage. "So what good does it do?" he wondered.

The good it does is cement the relationship. By saying he was sorry—and saying it as if he meant it—he would have conveyed that he felt bad about letting her down. Not saying anything sent the opposite message: It implied that he didn't care. Showing that you empathize provides the element of contrition, remorse, or repentance that is central to apologies—as does the promise to make amends and not repeat the offense. In the absence of these, why should the wife trust her husband not to do it again?

If apologies are so effective in repairing disruptions, why do some people, especially many men, resist them? In my work on women and men talking, the theme that runs through many of the differences I observe is this: Women tend to focus more on the question, "Is this conversation bringing us closer or pushing us further apart?" Men, on the other hand, tend to focus more on the question, "Is this conversation putting me in a one-up or a one-down position?"

These contrasting sensitivities explain our tendency to view apologies differently. For most women, they are to be embraced because they reinforce connections, but many men are attuned to the symbolic power of an apology to advertise defeat. Like a wolf baring its neck or a dog rolling over on its back, an apologizer is taking a one-down position. And the socialization of boys teaches them to avoid that posture, as it could be exploited by an opponent in the future.

This fear is well founded, as some people use the apology as a way to humiliate an adversary. This explains, I believe, the disparity between the responses of the average person and those of many journalists and politicians to the apologies President Clinton offered after his relationship with Monica Lewinsky came to light. Polls indicated that a majority of American citizens was satisfied with the president's initial statement, in which he admitted fault ("It was wrong") and promised to make amends ("I must put it right"). But those who were not satisfied demanded that he offer a better apology, like street toughs insisting that an adversary who lost a fight publicly humiliate himself.

However, among men—and even in the quintessentially masculine world of the military—the ability to admit fault can be a sign of strength. In 1975, the ship of Navy Com-

mander Jeremy "Mike" Boorda scraped bottom, destroying its sonar dome. This accident could have ended his career. But Admiral Isaac Kidd, the officer to whom the report was sent, cut short the investigation because Boorda took responsibility. "There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it," Kidd said of Boorda's report. "It was just what you hoped a person of unquestioned integrity would write." Boorda went on to become an admiral and Chief of Naval Operations.

Apologies can be equally powerful in day-to-day situations, at home and at work. One company manager told me that they were magic bullets. When he admitted to subordinates that he had made a mistake and then expressed remorse, they not only forgave him but became even more loyal. Conversely, when I asked people what most frustrated them in their work lives, co-workers' refusing

to admit fault was a frequent answer.

Given the importance of taking responsibility for the results of our actions, it is distressing when the litigious nature of our society prevents us from doing so. We are, for example, instructed by lawyers and auto insurance companies never to admit fault—or say we're sorry—following automobile accidents, since this may put us in a precarious legal position. This stance makes sense but takes a toll spiritually.

The power of apologies as a display of caring lies at the heart of the veritable avalanche of them that we are now seeing in the public sphere. Governments, for instance, can demonstrate that they care about a group that was wronged, such as when the United States apologized in 1997 to African American men who were denied treatment for syphilis as part of a 40-year medical experi-

BY ERICH SEGAL

1 love means you know what

One line has turned out to be my hope for posterity and may even be a candidate for my epitaph: "Love means not ever having to say you're sorry," a bit of dialogue in my novella and then the movie, *Love Story*. It is, as a matter of fact, my single entry in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and other immortalizing lexica.

I've been asked by CIVILIZATION to explain what exactly the phrase means. There may have been a time when I knew, but its significance has long escaped me. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that as the increasingly popular movie and book traveled around the globe, the line had the opportunity to give translators many a headache. Here's what they've done with it:

■ *L'amour, c'est n'avoir jamais à dire qu'on est désolé.* A literal rendition, the Gallic phrase may, in fact, emphasize the speaker's distress rather than the act of apology.

■ *Amare significa non dover mai dire: mi spiace.* The Italians also tried to translate the line literally, yet the verb *dispiacere* can have connotations of annoyance or dislike in addition to contrition.

■ On the Eastern front: *Ha az ember szeret valakit, akkor semmi szükség arra a szóra: 'sajnálom'* (or: *If someone loves somebody, there is absolutely no need for the words "I am sorry"*). This is a favorite of my Hungarian mother-in-law, who claims it is revealing of her former compatriots' way of thinking. I have no idea what she means.

■ *Lieben heisst, dass man nie um Verzeihung bitten muss* (or: *Love means that one never is obliged to apologize*). Close, but no cigar. Perhaps the Teutonic language does not lend itself to apologies.

■ In Dutch: *Liefde betekend dat je nooit hoeft te zeggen 'het spijt me'*. This Germanic language has got rhythm and flow, and I think its version may even be better than the English one.

What does it all mean, you may well demand? As has been said before, "Don't ask me, I'm only the author."

ment that began in the 1930s.

Offering an apology to another country is an effective way to lay the groundwork for future cooperation. In the late 1990s, the Czech Republic remained the only European nation with which Germany had not reached a settlement providing restitution for Nazi persecution during World War II. Germany refused to pay Czech victims until the Czechs formally apologized for their postwar expulsion of ethnic Germans from the Sudetenland. In the interest of receiving both reparations and Germany's support for inclusion in NATO, the Czech government offered the apology in 1997 (despite the opposition of many of its citizens). The gamble paid off, as Germany responded by setting up a philanthropic fund for the benefit of the Czechs, and this year both NATO and the European Union have invited the Czech Republic to join their ranks.

Sometimes it may seem that a nation or group tries to purchase forgiveness with a facile apology. It is absurd—even grotesque—for the leaders of the Khmer Rouge to offer the people of Cambodia brief regrets and immediately suggest that they let bygones be bygones. The statement is woefully inadequate in light of the massive slaughter and suffering the Khmer Rouge caused while it was in power. Furthermore, by taking the initiative in suggesting the past be laid to rest, they seem to be forgiving themselves—something that it is not the offender's place to do.

The rising popularity of apologies reflects a transformation in the ethics underlying public discourse. Linguist Robin Lakoff, in her book *Talking Power*, suggests that the United States is becoming a camaraderie culture: Witness our greater informality, including our widespread use of first names to address each other, she writes. In addition, our ever more frequent use of apologies may be a corrective to what I have called the argument culture, which is marked by the increasing contentiousness of public discourse and has, in turn, led to demands for civility.

As nations discover the possibilities and limits of the peacemaking power of apologies, couples too must find ways to accommodate differing points of view. I have learned to pay attention to the ways my husband adjusts his behavior, even in situations where he resists apologizing. For his part, he has learned how easy it is to get me to drop a grievance by uttering the magic words of apology. This makes me wonder whether translators would have had an easier time if Erich Segal had written, "Love means being able to say you're sorry, and say it as if you mean it, and say what you're going to do to make amends." ■

literary brutes

*In works by male writers
from Will Shakespeare to
Tom Wolfe, heroes never
apologize and rarely explain*

BY ELAINE SHOWALTER

