

When today's national anthem could easily be "Don't Blame Me," is expecting an apology expecting too much?

JUST SAY YOU'RE SORRY

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

Ruth Reichl, the *New York Times* restaurant critic, once explained in an interview that there are certain offenses that doom a restaurant in her eyes, such as not being seated until 8:30 when the reservation is for 8. There is one way, she added, that the restaurant might redeem itself: if the maître d' apologizes—and, to give the apology substance, offers something like a complimentary glass of wine.

Apologies are equally powerful at home. I observed this when two friends—a married couple—had a disagreement in my presence. The wife and I were busy making dinner when the husband returned from an errand that had kept him away much of the afternoon. The wife was angry, because he'd agreed in advance to share in the preparations. He explained that he'd surmised his help was not needed when he learned I would be there. To her, the point was not getting the work done; she had looked forward to doing it with him, and he had exempted himself without discussing it with her. He saw her point, and she saw his; yet she was still angry. At this impasse, he offered, "I don't know what to say." In a gesture of mock secrecy, I raised my hand to hide my lips from his wife and mouthed, "Apologize." "What?" he asked me. This time, I whispered: "Apologize." Still confused, he walked over to me, and I said in a voice loud enough for both to hear:

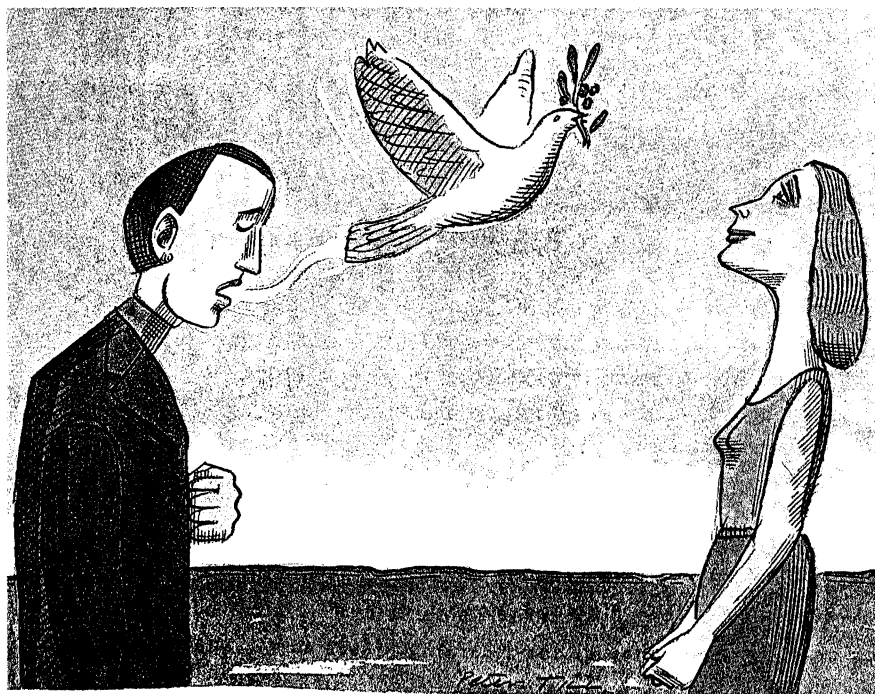
"Apologize!" He laughed out loud. "That never occurred to me," he said. But his wife agreed: "Yes, if you'd just say you're sorry, I'd forget the whole thing." So he did, and so she did. And so did I observe once more the power of that small conversational act to restore peace.

Why are apologies so palliative, so disarming? And why do so many people resist offering them?

Apologizing entails admitting fault. Many people see this as a sign of weakness that invites further assault. In some cases, that is true. But often the effect is just the opposite: the apology forestalls further attack by allaying the anger of an aggrieved party. Yet despite the nearly magical properties of apologizing, resistance to it persists, in part, I think, because of what I call our "argument culture," which is the subject of my most recent book [*The Argument Culture: Moving From Debate to Dialogue*; Random House; \$25]. In public discourse all around us, human relationships are modeled on a metaphorical battle between two polarized sides. Television shows and news reports frame

issues in this way: though Westerns have been replaced by plots of crime, intrigue and governmental wrongdoing, the underlying dynamic is like a shootout between two gunslingers, which one must lose while the other wins.

Nowhere has this been clearer than in the complex and far-reaching developments of Kenneth Starr's investigation

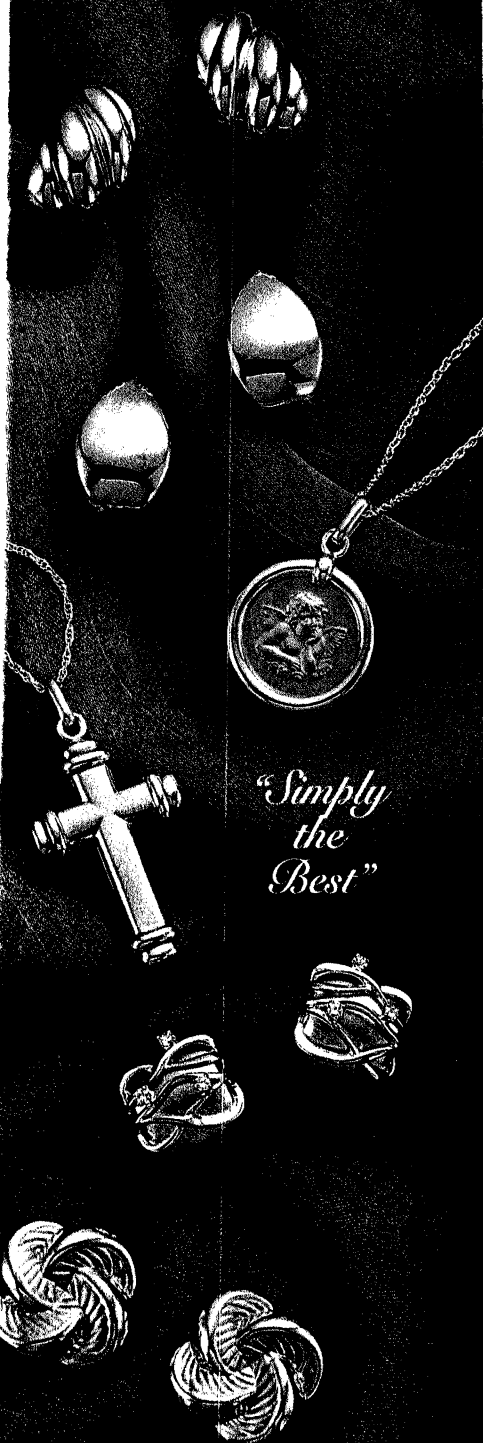




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of the President, which have been pressed into this familiar script—and in the aftermath of Clinton's much-debated statement to the nation. So we read about victories for Starr or Clinton, or the "showdown" between them, rather than the implications of judicial and political decisions that will affect the country long after these two men have moved on. Against the backdrop of the argument culture, the fear of losing becomes paramount. Apologizing, then, can seem all the more like a defeat.

Reluctance to accept blame is exacerbated in our litigious times by fear of a lawsuit. Let's say you're involved in a

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minor car accident, and you know you caused it. You'd like to say "I'm sorry," to do what your human inclination urges you to do. But you feel you shouldn't, because insurance companies admonish: "Never admit fault."

Substituting legal procedures for a simple apology can create more frustration, rather than less. That point was captured by a caller to a talk show on which I was a guest. "I was recently involved in a legal dispute with a neighbor," she explained. "We've been paid money, but I still feel unresolved because what I really wanted was an apology." Ironically, the caller was an attorney.

Apologies work their magic in myriad ways. Among the most surprising: they can prompt *someone else* to admit fault. Apologies typically come in pairs and constitute a ritual exchange. I say I'm sorry for X, then you say you're sorry for Y, and we both consider the matter closed. Twin apologies are the verbal equivalent of a handshake. So if I think you are at fault, one way I can get you to apologize is to speak the *first mea culpa*;

this should compel you to do your part and utter the second.

But, as with many social rituals, taking the first step incurs risks. Suppose a friend arrives at a restaurant fifteen minutes late. You get angry, and he feels you're making too much of a small offense. To end the dispute, you say, "I'm sorry I overreacted. I had a bad day." You expect him to say, "That's okay. I'm sorry I was late." But what if he fails to take any responsibility and instead says, "Yes, you did overreact. Try to keep a lid on"? You feel like someone who's climbed onto a seesaw, trusting the other person to keep you aloft only to have him step off and send you crashing to the ground. The argument is likely to be off and running again rather than ended.

In a society that values aggression over conciliation, as ours does, some curious reasoning can take root. This emerged in another call to a radio talk show I was on. A woman recounted the time she was in a waiting room where a man was smoking directly under a "No smoking" sign. Instead of saying, "Don't you see that sign? Put that out," the caller politely said, "Excuse me, sir. I have asthma, and your smoking makes it hard for me to breathe. Would you mind very much not smoking?" The man graciously obliged. The caller's question to me was, "What's wrong with me?" She was expecting me—the communications expert, the linguistics professor—to tell her she should have been more assertive. But the way she handled the situation sounded perfectly fine to me. She got what she wanted without humiliating the smoker. Had she taken a more confrontational approach, he might well have resisted complying or even become belligerent.

The caller's method of getting the man to stop smoking was just a ritual, a socially agreed-upon way of getting what she wanted while saving face for him. After all, that's what getting along in society means. We have many ways of saving face for each other and also getting what we want. That's how communication works. And that also helps explain the power of the seemingly simple, but deeply satisfying, act of apology. ❧

Tannen, Deborah. "Just Say You're Sorry," Town and Country November 1998, pp. 168, 174.