

TRUE CONTRITION
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TWO CONTEMPORARY WESTERN
CONFESSIONS

From Jessica Kautz, *The Sun*, January 2018

I'm sorry I don't have a better way to start this. I tried to think of an interesting hook or an amusing anecdote, but then I figured I might just as well get it out there: of all the bad habits I possess (and there are many), unnecessary apologies are the worst.

"I'm sorry," it rolls off the tongue so mindlessly, like an "umm," or "er;" I barely hear it any more.

When I was a child, apologies were often expected, even demanded, of me, and I was a quick learner, eager to please and to pacify. "I'm sorry" did the trick with angry parents and irritated teachers and bullying classmates. Even when I wasn't at fault, peace was more appealing to me than justice. I'd do anything to dissipate the tension so I could go back to my books, my cats, my drawings and my imagination.

As a teen, I felt like apologizing for my existence. I was too fat, too plain, too clumsy, too dreamy, too awkward to take up space in the world. Numbing myself with alcohol and drugs helped. So did angry music, art, dark clothes, dark hair, and friends who did the same. I disappeared a little bit.

As a college student I began to see my privilege more clearly – not just as a white female, but as a middle class American with clean drinking water and access to birth control and a warm home and plenty of food. I was so lucky. And I was so very sorry about it.

I've come to realize that "I'm sorry" is the wrong reaction to all of the above. I do not need to apologize for having an imperfect body. I do not need to apologize for my First World privileges – although I do need to work on making the playing field more level.

Yet I still mindlessly say, "I'm sorry" many times each day: to the clerk at the grocery store when I forget to bring a canvass bag. To the waiter when I request my salad dressing on the side. To the postman who has to lug a big box to my doorstep. Even to my sweet boyfriend when we bump noses while kissing.

Recently I've started paying more attention to the men I know. Few of them seem to possess this verbal tic. What's their secret? My five-year-old son has become my role model. Sure, he'll say he's sorry when he has hurt a friend's feelings or carelessly broken a toy, but he never apologizes for his existence.

From an interview with the musician Ani DiFranco

(in 2013 DiFranco scheduled an event called "Righteous Retreat" at the Nottoway Plantation and Resort in White Castle, Louisiana.... Like much of the land in the South, it used to be a slave plantation. Her idea was to have seminars and classes over four days with the goal of inspiring artists and musicians in their own work.)

A promoter who'd done a similar event at Nottoway the previous year had planned it all out and I'd agreed without knowing the exact location, only that it was near New Orleans.... For my co-faculty I picked Toshi Reagan, Buddy Wakefield and Ed Hamell – three very political, poetic, kindred spirits.

When I found out that the name of the hotel was Nottoway *Plantation* I was shocked. But I didn't automatically think it was incorrect for my crew and me to inhabit that space. Toshi is black and had played at a former plantation before.

But there was backlash. The woman who spearheaded the criticism of the event had done her research, which I certainly hadn't, and she'd discovered a promotional pamphlet

describing the slave owner of this plantation as...benign...someone who'd tried to "maintain a willing workforce." Willing is a pretty offensive word to apply to slavery.

First, the controversy built on social media for two or three weeks, but my manager chose not to tell me, believing it was not my job to get involved in every dispute about my work. When I eventually became aware of the problem, I thought I had to respond that day. I was emotional and made a misstep. I tried to explain my side, how I perceived it. I pointed out, for example, that any older building in the South had been constructed, directly or indirectly, by slave labor and that to avoid using such buildings I would have to move far away from New Orleans.... I also asked whether I should investigate the history and ownership of all the venues where I played, performing arts centers, the theaters and nightclubs.

This only provoked more fierce reactions. I see now that I should have just said, "I'm sorry," and affirmed people's pain. "Sorry" would have shown that I was listening. And a few days later I released another statement saying just that: my white privilege had snuck up on me. The attacks had made me reexamine myself. Places like Nottoway need the most awareness and the most healing. When you have a wound you can't turn away. You have to address it, or it gets worse and worse.

** REFLECTIONS **

If you receive the news of the day from any source whatsoever - print, electronic, or just coffee shop conversation - you're familiar with charges of sexual misconduct that have been leveled at an increasing number of notable public figures. Some, like former Alabama Supreme Court justice **Roy Moore**, were creepy miscreants who preyed on teenagers. Others, like **Garrison Keillor**, have felt like a member of the family - the rumpiled uncle quick with a quip or an amusing anecdote.

The fall of an insufferable blowhard like **Bill O'Reilly** may have elicited a little *schadenfreude*. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen!" we smugly say to ourselves. But when someone like the personable **Charlie Rose** falls from grace our emotions are a little more mixed. Who'd have guessed he was such a cad, other than those he abused, that is.

Now, what I've found most interesting about this avalanche of reports, which has now given rise to the nationwide #MeToo movement, is the manner in which the perpetrators have responded - the strategies they've adopted to deal with or deflect these scandals. Some decide to circle the wagons and, despite copious evidence to the contrary, deny any wrongdoing. **Judge Roy Moore** didn't know any of the women he accosted as a young DA. For **Donald Trump**, reports of his infidelities and raunchy behavior were and are "Fake News," stories fabricated by "women I don't know and have never met."

At least one highly regarded religious figure, the seventy-year-old Buddhist teacher **Sogyal Rinpoche**, had the temerity to justify his lechery, claiming that it was consistent with the Tibetan Rigpa tradition's "crazy wisdom." Rigpa disciples are obliged to accept the ostensibly abusive behavior of recognized spiritual masters as part of their enlightenment training. When eight long-time associates of the **Rinpoche** detailed his misdeeds in a twelve-page letter he offered this rejoinder,

I have spend my whole life trying my best to serve the Buddha's teachings, and not a day goes by when I am not thinking about the welfare of my students...I will now go into retreat to pray and practice for healing and understanding to prevail, and the in spirit of the great masters of the past, take the suffering upon myself and give happiness and love to others.

Other perpetrators expressed a greater willingness to take responsibility for past

indecencies. After having been shown the door by CBS and National Public Television, **Charlie Rose** issued an apology, saying he was “greatly embarrassed.” He characterized his past behavior, in hindsight, as “insensitive.” But then, in his own defense, he said, “I do not believe all the accusations are accurate (and) I have always felt that I was pursuing shared feelings, even though I now realize I was mistaken.”

Alex Kozinski, a Federal Appeals Court Judge for 32 years, reacted similarly after fifteen former law clerks individually issued complaints. I may have overstepped, he admitted, but it was really just a misunderstanding because “I’ve always had a broad sense of humor and a candid way of speaking to my...clerks.” Without addressing specific and damning aspects of these reports **Kozinski** went on to say, “I may not have been mindful enough of the special challenges... women face in the workplace.”

If you are thinking that responses such as these, apologetic or not, don’t quite measure up, you’d be right. In each instance, one or more important elements are missing. Leaving aside those who simply dismiss the charges out of hand as part of some feminist-inspired conspiracy, where do the others miss the mark? For purposes of comparison, let’s consider one more post-exposure apology – **Al Franken’s**.

Although some of his ardent supporters complained that **Franken** was being pilloried for offenses far less egregious than those of a **Charlie Rose** or **Donald Trump**, the entertainer-turned-senator felt an abject apology was in order. And of all the *mea culpas* I’ve read, his felt the most authentic and insightful. “I respect women,” he told his colleagues from the Senate floor, “and I don’t respect men who don’t.”

And the fact that my own actions have given people a good reason to doubt that makes me feel ashamed. (As a comedian) I’ve told and written a lot of jokes that I once thought were

funny, but later came to realize were just plain offensive. But my intentions behind my actions aren’t the point at all. It’s the impact those jokes had on others that matters. And I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to come to terms with that.

My topic this morning is “contrition” and I’ve spent considerable time describing the way well-known public figures have responded to their accusers because it may help us understand what contrition is and why it matters.

To be contrite is to be remorseful and sincerely penitent. That’s the thumbnail definition, and if we parse it we can see that it contains several elements. First, the contrite individual feels bad about what they have done and are paying an emotional price for their behavior. Second, they are conscience-stricken, knowing they’ve crossed an ethical line and violated their own professed values. And finally, they exhibit candor and accept personal responsibility.

Using these criteria, we can revisit the foregoing statements and point to those that reflect the spirit of true contrition. Again, leaving denialists like **Roy Moore** and **Donald Trump** aside, where do others make the grade or fall short? **Sogyal Rinpoche** doesn’t deny the evidence; he is honest about his past abuses but he feels no remorse nor does he feel that, given his spiritual orientation, any ethical norms were violated.

In this respect **Sogyal Rinpoche** resembles those former overlords of South Africa’s apartheid regime who, when confronted with the torture they had inflicted, defended it in ideological terms. As **Pumla Godobo-Madikizela**, a psychologist serving on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, put it:

The trick perpetrators use...starts off with rationalization, to convince himself of the legitimacy of his acts, then he begins to communicate his

rationalization to others. At this point it is no longer a rationalization but a “truth” that releases the perpetrator from any sense of guilt he might still feel about his evil deeds.

Although it’s not quite so obvious, we find in other public apologies this same element of rationalization and an evasion of contrition’s honesty requirement. **Charlie Rose** thought he was pursuing “shared feelings,” as if a man at his level of influence and power wasn’t used to imposing his feelings and his desires on others. And to argue that after years of serial abuse the problem boiled down to miscommunication is more than a little disingenuous.

Similarly, **Judge Kozinski** lays part of the problem on his clerks, who just didn’t “get” his broad sense of humor. For **Kozinski**, as for **Rose**, this is his “truth,” an outgrowth of the rationalizations abusers often use to absolve them of serious breaches of trust, safety and honor.

At the feeling level it seems clear that **Charlie Rose** is suffering emotionally for what he has done. “I am greatly embarrassed,” he admits. But is he remorseful? Is it the unseemly acts themselves or their public exposure that has caused him embarrassment? If the latter, then **Charlie Rose** is indulging in self-pity and not showing sympathy for his victims. “How do we judge the genuineness of remorse?”

Pemla Godobo-Madikizela asks.

How do we know that the signs of an alleged contrition are not simply the product of the perpetrator’s having been caught, or of changes in the society that have destroyed his power base and support structures?

Charlie Rose may now appreciate how much distress his overbearing and unwanted advances had caused those who were under his celebrity thumb. But you wouldn’t know it from his public apology.

So what about **Al Franken**? Does he pass the contrition test? It is telling that he used the word “ashamed” rather than “embarrassed” in describing his emotions. Synonyms for “ashamed” include abashed, rueful and regretful. These words point to a profound sense of self-betrayal and a clear recognition of wrong-doing.

Moreover, **Franken** makes no attempt to rationalize his behavior as part of a comedic shtick. “I came to realize that jokes I thought were funny were just plain offensive,” he admits. In any case, he says, it’s not the jokes and his intention in telling them that matter. What counts is the impact they have had on others. There’s been no misunderstanding, and no one is to blame but **Al Franken** himself.

More often than not, in issuing an apology we invoke our intentions. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings” or “I had no idea my comments would cause you to be offended.” This is, again, something of a deflection, as the Buddhist teacher **Ken McLeod** points out. The subtle implication is that the victim may be too sensitive; that the problem is not with the words themselves, but the recipient’s reaction to them. **Franken** doesn’t go that route; he says, “Lesson learned; words do matter,” and I’m just sorry it took me so long to grasp that.

This is not to say that the offended party’s feelings don’t matter or shouldn’t be acknowledged in the course of apologizing. But that recognition needs to be accompanied by a clear statement of personal accountability. Without that, there’s no impetus to change, just to be more careful about the company we keep.

Quite often, as **Beverly Flanagan** points out, we choose to express “regret” rather than “remorse,” ruing the outcome but not necessarily the deed. Regret says, “I’m sorry you were hurt,” while remorse says, “I’m sorry for what I did.” Regret is the easier path to take because it excuses us from further inner work. In true contrition one resolves to do better, to become a better person, to do

what's necessary to avoid making the same mistake, and that requires remorse.

This is by no means easy, especially for men in our culture who are used to being on top, exercising control and projecting strength. Our default position when challenged is to raise the shields in order to maintain control and preserve a positive self-image. It's quite rare in my experience for a man with celebrity comparable to that of **Ani DiFranco** to do what she did after the Tottoway Plantation scandal: suck it up and submit to being educated.

The word "repentance" is a near-synonym of contrition and in the Bible it signals a moral and spiritual awakening that leads to a change of direction that promises to make of our lives something that's more responsible and life-affirming. The theological term for this is *metanoia*. The quintessential tale of repentance – or contrition, if you will – is the return of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke's Gospel.

After leaving home and his familial responsibilities behind, the profligate younger of two sons loses everything in a binge of gambling and carousing. After "hitting bottom" as it were, he awakens to his selfishness and stupidity and returns in shame to his family. As his grateful father embraces him, the son blurts out his apology: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

Powerful in its brevity, this apology is a model of true contrition. The son acknowledges the hurt he has caused his loved ones, takes full responsibility for his unethical behavior and shows his sincerity by saying he deserves to be disowned. Though it's not explicitly mentioned, the son's commitment to change is implied by the unqualified forcefulness of his statement.

There's one more, final issue that remains to be considered: the relationship of contrition to forgiveness. When confronted with someone who meets all the criteria, is the victim duty-bound to forgive?

In our Judeo-Christian culture people often feel that forgiveness is a moral and religious obligation. After all, when Peter asked Jesus how many times one must forgive a person who's repeatedly harmed us, saying "is seven times enough?" Jesus shook his head. Seventy-seven times he replied, without placing any conditions on the process. We must forgive early and often, for that is the godly way.

In the Gospels Jesus speaks frequently of forgiveness often and extends forgiveness freely – even to those responsible for his crucifixion. But as applied to our normal human affairs, this can feel like "cheap grace," or a "get out of jail free" card. Unconditional forgiveness leaves little incentive for the offender to make meaningful behavioral changes. "It is as inhuman to forgive all," the ancient Roman writer **Seneca** said, "as to forgive none."

But that kind of magnanimity isn't good for the forgiving party either. If the injured party feels pressured to take this step without sufficient readiness, **Robert Enright** warns, it may add to their suffering. "Not only have they been violated," he writes, "but they now feel guilty because they aren't able sincerely to extend their hand in forgiveness."

Still, when true contrition is shown and recognized as such, "readiness" to forgive may develop sooner than it would otherwise. The victim's suffering has been acknowledged, their story accepted at face value, and the imbalance of power and authority created by the abuse corrected. "A remorseful apology inspires empathy and forgiveness," **Pumla Godobo-Madikizela** assures us. Still, it is always the prerogative of the injured party to decide whether the contrition is genuine and what further steps might be called for before burying the hatchet.

The process of righting a wrong doesn't end with the expression of contrition and an act of forgiveness. In fact, that may mark only the beginning of an extended process of moral and spiritual discernment on the part of the

perpetrator. Writing from a Buddhist perspective, **Ken McLeod** says, “we have to stop feeding the inner patterns that moved us to do the harm in the first place,” and that takes time and the steady application of effort.

We’ve been talking here about the big stuff, not every inadvertent slight or accidental injury that occurs. As **Jessica Kautz** learned, we shouldn’t be apologizing for who we are or for our all-too-human foibles. It’s not only unnecessary, it’s debasing to the whole forgiveness process. For minor everyday injuries, a simple “pardon me” is more than sufficient.

For serious transgressions we up the ante, because for open wounds the bandage is forgiveness, but the balm is true contrition.