**REMORSE**

*The importance of an enduring gesture*

By Juliet Rogers

Remorse is often regarded as a feeling associated with guilt, regret and it is usually accompanied by an action, an apology, reparations, tears or a gesture of acknowledgement of wrongdoing. The gesture is usually deemed to indicate the sincerity or what is described as the ‘genuineness’ of the feeling of remorse in a person who has done something they or others perceive as wrong.

Sincerity or genuineness of the feeling of remorse are measured in the depth of this gesture and the gesture can sometimes be seen on the face – through tears or an expression of pain. As many people say of remorse, ‘I am not sure how to describe it, but I’ll know it when I see it’.

However, the idea that we can see remorse is problematic because often the most violent of perpetrators are the best at evidencing a feeling which may or may not mean they experience that feeling. Further, once the remorse is seen it can dissipate, while the pain of the victims may not. Thus while apologies and tears at a meeting between perpetrators and victims may be sometimes cathartic or satisfying in a moment, that moment passes and victims are often left with nothing, while the perpetrator’s tears dry and their lives go on without hindrance. Victims’ satisfaction in the apology in the moment may then turn to bitterness as they watch the perpetrator live on and later see them enjoying their lives or even benefitting from their crimes of the past.

It is because of the fleeting nature of apologies, the possibility of disguising insincerity in the perpetrator and that the victims may come to resent the disparity in what they live with and what the perpetrator does not, that victims often articulate a need to see something more than a single apology. In many instances of efforts toward post-conflict reconciliation worldwide it appears it may be more helpful for victims to evaluate the depth of the gesture of remorse, and consider the value of its depth in terms of two guiding questions – does it leave a mark on the perpetrator? And is this mark enduring?

The etymology of remorse comes from the Latin verb ‘to bite’ (morsus, mordere) and it is here that we get the idea of a morsel and precisely, a morsel of flesh. While many victims do not require the retributive justice that is implied in taking a morsel of flesh from the perpetrator – either as their life (as mortality or in the case of a life sentence), or as the infliction of corporal punishment – in most cases they require the perpetrator to lose something of themselves when they express remorse. A symbolic loss of flesh.

Gestures of remorse that are meaningful to victims must therefore often involve loss and a loss that is enduring. If this loss is money, as reparations, it needs to be seen as a loss in the flesh, and not simply a token. That is, it must be a loss of money that hurts, that impacts on the perpetrator’s resources and thus their lives as an impact on their flesh. If the gesture is apology it needs to be accompanied by what we might call atonement, as acts that involve a labour that can be felt and perhaps seen in the flesh, and this may be the flesh of the perpetrator, or the flesh of the community in which s/he lives. It needs to be seen as work that changes the body of the perpetrator and the body of the community.

In some societies these gestures of atonement are not expressed as such, but often involve working in the community in which the act was done. That is, if you kill someone in order to produce the community you want, then it may be important precisely to work for that community now. And the work must be hard, not necessarily physically, but it must alter the life or the body of the perpetrator for it to be perceived as a meaningful gesture of remorse, and thus for it to mean anything to the victims.

Letlapa Mphahlele offers this in respect to his authorization of the killing of Lyndi Fourie in the Heidelberg Tavern Attack in Cape Town, 1993. In conversation with Ginn Fourie, Lyndi’s mother, he says ‘Ginn forgives me, but it is not enough to be forgiven. I must be worthy of that forgiveness every day for the rest of my life’. This does not mean he must apologise to Ginn every day for the rest of his life, but, for him, he must work for a South Africa that is better than the one in which he killed, and he must work in a South Africa that he created, that is, a South Africa in which Lyndi Fourie no longer exists in the flesh. He must feel her loss in his flesh through the recognition of her loss in his community, every day for the rest of his life.

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