**APOLOGY**

*Saying sorry, sincerely - on the promise and pitfalls of apologies*

By Wilhelm Verwoerd

“I am so sorry…!” We all know from personal experience what a big difference these few words can make…IF we are convinced that the sorrow is coming from the heart of the person who hurt us. A friend recently put this promise of apology as follows:

“If you've done something to me and I'm angry with you and if you come and say, 'I'm sorry, Themba, for what I did...' For me it's like you have the key to my own liberation and I have the key to your liberation. So when it happens, we are unlocking the chains that are holding us as individuals.”

Of course, for these “keys” to work we need to answer this rather tricky question: how do we really know that someone’s sorry is sincere?

Let’s use a relatively straightforward example to start with. Say I stole Themba’s bicycle and now I want to apologize to him. What would it take for Themba to believe my apology?

I would have to start by accepting personal responsibility: “Themba, I am sorry, I stole your bicycle…” I would then have to make it clear that what I did was wrong and that I understand and acknowledge the hurt my actions have caused: “Themba, I accept that I did not just borrow your bicycle, without asking, I STOLE it and I now understand that this meant you couldn’t do your work and that you and your family have really struggled to survive since…”

I will also have to convince Themba that I will not steal from him or hurt him again. Shedding a few tears can be a sign of sincerity, but though important this body language is rarely enough. Also, if this is the first time I stole from him or deliberately hurt him, he would find it easier to accept my commitment. If not, the final step becomes even more important.

I will have to do something practical to address the consequences of what I did; Themba will need a tangible token of my sincerity: “Themba, I am very sorry, and I am currently saving to buy you a new bicycle. This will take a month or so, but in the mean time I will bring your family some food at least once a week.”

Each one of these key parts of a sincere apology can become a pitfall – I can deny personal responsibility (“my friends forced me to do it”); I can deny wrongdoing and/or underestimate the hurt (“I only borrowed it for a while…why are you so upset?”); I can keep on hurting someone; I can deny the need for practical amends (“But I told you I am sorry?!”)

These pitfalls loom even larger as we move from the above interpersonal, ordinary life example to hurt and harm that was caused, say, during Apartheid. Let’s take the example of someone who was badly treated by the security police.

Looking back at what he was involved in during the 1980s, one of these policemen – as we saw during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings – might be inclined to deny personal responsibility, thus not meeting even the first requirement: “Yes, we treated people badly, but I was only following orders…”; or: “we had no choice, we needed the information…”

If this security police person really believed that he was fighting against “evil, communist inspired terrorists” he will also struggle to say sorry sincerely, to really acknowledge that what he did was wrong, even though he might not deny that he was personally involved and wanted to “defend my community”.

For someone who was strongly politically motivated in his (wrongful) actions it would typically be quite a personal journey to come to a point where he (or she) actually accepts what he did was wrong and where he really sees and feels the hurt and pain caused by his actions.

For “I am truly sorry…” to spring from his heart he will need to begin to challenge not only his beliefs, but also his sense of loyalty to his community or group. He will need courage to sit with the pain of those he harmed, and deal with the feelings of shame and guilt that accompany this pain. He will most likely need to work through a sense of betrayal of himself and his community when he starts to move closer to former enemies. He will need to break through blinding boundaries of narrow group belonging. In other words, underlying any sincere apology is a journey towards authentic compassion. When someone’s heart is truly touched by the human suffering that resulted from his actions, the next two requirements for a sincere apology tend to flow more freely. Once the former security policeman has been willing to meet and really listen to the human stories of those he treated badly, it is much more likely that he will be willing to do something practical to address these consequences.

What these tangible tokens will look like need ideally to be worked out in conversation with those who suffered – “What can I do to show you that I am really sorry? What would be the most important thing that will help you to deal with the pain from the past?” Writing a cheque and posting it, or anything that comes relatively easily and does not involve someone really engaging with those he harmed, are unlikely to be convincing signs of a sincere apology.

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