

All Apologies

When we were young, my best friend's older brother taught him the first rule of catch—don't apologize. Especially if you drop the ball or overthrow.

The year I turned eleven, Reagan signed legislation officially apologizing for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. He had originally threatened to veto the measure because of its cost.

My sister stood in the doorway with her tiny arms stretched out to grip the doorjamb, smiling. Her ladybug T-shirt didn't quite cover her little round tummy. And that's where I punched her. There was no hesitation, no moment of doubt. She was standing there with her arms out and I punched her stomach. It was an experiment. And I was sorry the instant my fist hit her. Sorry even before I saw her face, covered in shock, a horrible purple. I had knocked the wind out of her toddler's body,

Example Biss uses about punching her little sister in the stomach and the response she had to Biss's apology.

and she was rolling around on the floor. "I'm sorry," I gasped. "I'm sorry." But already I felt something else. I grabbed her arm desperately. "Please," I said, "don't tell."

The men who killed children in the village of No Gun Ri during the Korean War did not tell until they were asked. Some still did not tell. The officer who had given or not given the orders was dead. One veteran, Ed Daily, said that he was haunted by the sound of little kids screaming. He confessed to participating in the atrocity and helped the press investigate the role of his unit, the Seventh Cavalry Regiment. At a ceremony in Cleveland, Ed Daily embraced a survivor of the massacre.

On the day he signed the bill apologizing to Japanese Americans, Reagan resisted apology. "It's not for us today to pass judgment upon those who may have made mistakes while engaged in that great struggle," he said. "Yet we must recognize that the internment of Japanese Americans was just that, a mistake."

As adults, my siblings begin to remember some of the crimes of childhood as accidents. My sister no longer claims that the scar on her face is my fault.

In the same year that Japan's parliament was debating a resolution to apologize for its role in World War II, George H. W. Bush refused the suggestion that he should apologize for the

can basically be said about every apology ever given

atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He called the idea of apologizing for the bombs "rank revisionism."

In the basement, with the beekeeping equipment and the vat full of honey, my little sister first said the phrase that would plague my childhood: "Sorry doesn't cut it." I was baffled. My sister would no longer, as a matter of policy, accept my apologies. The words "sorry doesn't cut it" appeared again and again—after each insult, each scratch, each slap. What followed an apology from then on was an enraging reminder that every action is essentially irrevocable.

Youth, you might think, is one thing we do not owe an apology for. But I am certain there are ways of being young that are unforgivable.

The year I turned twenty, Congress proposed a bill officially apologizing for slavery. Jesse Jackson called it "meaningless," and Newt Gingrich, "a dead end."

"For a serious offense," writes psychiatrist Aaron Lazare, "such as a betrayal of trust or public humiliation, an immediate apology misses the mark. It demeans the event. Hours, days, weeks, or even months may go by before both parties can integrate the meaning of the event and its impact on the relationship. The care and thought that goes into such apologies dignifies the exchange. For offenses whose impact is calamitous to individuals, groups, or nations, the apology may be delayed by decades and offered by another generation."

you cannot apologize when it comes to events like genocide, rape, sexism. When lives are affected. it makes it hard to apologize

While the country debated whether Clinton should issue an apology for slavery, a member of the Cayuga Nation called for him to apologize to the Native Americans.

The historic Seventh Cavalry Regiment was the unit that opened fire on Indian women and children at Wounded Knee Creek. Ed Daily joined the Seventh Cavalry more than half a century after Wounded Knee. In 1993 he attended a peace ceremony in South Dakota with members of the Lakota Sioux tribe, and then in 1999 he attended a prayer service in Cleveland for victims of the massacre at No Gun Ri.

Ed Daily was not at Wounded Knee, of course, but army documents show that Ed Daily was not actually at No Gun Ri either. He spent most of the war as a mechanic and a clerk behind the front lines, and he joined the Seventh Cavalry Regiment eight months after the massacre at No Gun Ri. He confessed to an atrocity he did not commit. At the ceremony in Cleveland, Daily said that he was "very sympathetic with the survivors and what they've endured." He came closer to apologizing than any of the soldiers who actually fired on civilians.

Some apologies are unspeakable. Like the one we owe our parents.

"Daily has this thing about apologizing," said a former Seventh Cavalry officer. Ed Daily's memories of the war began to emerge after his marriage ended. He had never spoken of the war to his wife.

As being people we have known our entire lives, it can be easy for us to take advantage to what they have done for us and what they truly mean to our lives.

During his first campaign, Clinton apologized for "wrongdoing" in his marriage. Within a year of his election, he formally apologized to Hawaiians for the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani a century before. In his second term, Clinton apologized on behalf of the federal government for an experiment conducted from 1932 to 1972 in which hundreds of black men had been denied treatment for syphilis and allowed to die.

My friend taught me the first rule of catch not because we were playing catch, but because I had a habit of apologizing too much.

Women apologize as often to their friends as to strangers. Men rarely apologize to their friends. "Men," the linguist Janet Holmes writes, "seem to avoid apologies where possible."

President Clinton referred the question of whether or not he should apologize for slavery to an advisory group. It was decided that he should not apologize.

I waited for almost an entire day to see a doctor in a Brooklyn clinic packed with fifty women without health insurance. Those of us who were not pregnant stood so that the others could sit. I was the only white woman in the room. The doctor who examined me, finally, was a very quiet, gentle man. When he lifted the paper blanket that covered my legs, he said softly, "I'm sorry." He pushed my knees apart, saying twice, "I'm sorry." The nurse handed him something. "I'm sorry, does this hurt?" he asked. "I'm sorry," he said, pressing down on my stomach with two

^{emotions as well.}
fingers. He hesitated. "I'm sorry, miss, I need to lift your shirt."
He examined my breasts, saying, "I'm sorry. . ."

Some of us learn as children that it is often better to apologize for something we did not do than to try to maintain our innocence. And some of us do not learn this until we are adults.

I walked home from the clinic in Brooklyn grateful to have finally received an apology for the vulnerability of my body. An apology from a man. The doctor's apologies were important—necessary, even. And he was guilty of nothing.

While in Africa, Clinton expressed his regret for U.S. participation in slavery, for U.S. support of dictators during the cold war, for U.S. neglect and ignorance of Africa, for the failure of the United States to intervene in the Rwandan genocide, and for U.S. complicity in apartheid.

F. W. de Klerk apologized for apartheid.

Nelson Mandela apologized for atrocities committed by the African National Congress in fighting against apartheid.

Mathieu Kérékou, president of Benin, apologized on his knees in Baltimore for the African role in the slave trade.

President Johannes Rau said, "I pay tribute to all those who were subjected to slave and forced labor under German rule, and, in the name of Germany, beg forgiveness."

In Uganda, Clinton departed from his prepared text to say, "Going back to the time before we were a nation, European Americans received the fruits of the slave trade, and we were wrong in that."

"Stop," my brother told me. We were standing in the yard with rakes in our hands. My little brother was not a skinny kid anymore. He was fully grown, and we stood facing each other suddenly as adults. "You always do that," he told me, "and then you think you can just apologize. If you were really sorry, you wouldn't do it again."

After publishing a report in 2000 on how Aetna Insurance had profited from slavery, the *Hartford Courant* apologized for having accepted advertisements for slaves. Aetna then officially apologized for having insured slaves as property.

An apology is also an admission of guilt. Public apologies can have legal consequences. And a cost: \$1.25 billion for the survivors of the Japanese American internment camps, \$10 million for the victims of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, \$5.1 billion for forced laborers under the Nazi regime . . .

Aetna was among a series of insurance, railroad, tobacco, and financial firms recently sued for profiting from slavery. The plaintiffs in one case asked that the companies establish a fund for the health care, housing, and education of African Americans.

What is an apology without forty acres and a mule?

Clinton chose his language very carefully. About Rwanda, he said that, at the time, he "did not fully appreciate" the extent of the genocide. Not that he did not know. Because he did know. The *Washington Post* reported piles of bodies six feet high, and the evening news showed rivers choked with corpses. Regret, not action, had been his policy decision. Regret, he hoped, would not cost him anything.

Clinton settled with Paula Jones for \$850,000 after telling her to "kiss it." She said she wasn't sorry she didn't get him to apologize.

A boy hissed at me in the hall while I was on my way to the bathroom. As I spun around, angry, I realized that he might have thought I was another student. "Watch yourself," I said, "I'm a teacher." He gave me a low-lidded half smile and looked me up and down. A kid—he was a kid in a baseball cap. But he was a foot taller than me and he leaned in to say, "Mmmm, so wuz your name?" Then I sat in the office of the Harlem school, sorry I had said anything, while my boss went to hunt down the kid. I had the sickening sense that I was about to be responsible for a lynching on my own tiny plantation. A boy came to the door of the office and looked at me uncertainly. "I'm sorry I sexually harassed you." I stared at him. He wasn't the same kid. "But it wasn't you," I said finally. "Yeah," he said as he pulled down his baseball cap and started to walk away, "but it might have been my cousin."

Like me, my cousins have European blood. They also have the colonized blood of Jamaica and the massacred blood of Native

Americans. My skin is white, but I still have the ravaged blood of Africa in me.

The most necessary apology is the apology for what we have done to ourselves.

More than one hundred years after the first antilynching bill was proposed by a black congressman, the United States Senate voted to apologize for failing to ban lynching during the twentieth century. "There may be no other injustice in American history," Senator Mary Landrieu said, "for which the Senate so uniquely bears responsibility." The resolution to apologize was passed in the presence of a cousin of Emmett Till, a teenager who was lynched for whistling at a white woman.

Monica Lewinsky told Barbara Walters that she had waited a long time to tell the country she was sorry.

"In general, women apologised more than men for intrusions on the space of another person," writes Janet Holmes of a study on patterns of apology. "They were more likely than men to apologise for bumping into another person, for instance. In fact when women bumped into each other, both generally said sorry. It is perhaps not surprising to find a predominance of apologies for accidental body contact in a group who are the main victims of sexual harassment."

Clinton expressed regret. Clinton then expressed profound regret. Finally, Clinton said he was "very sorry" about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

"I regret our long neglect of the planet Pluto. It took until 1930 to welcome Pluto into the family of planets. And that was wrong," Clinton said to laughter at a 1998 dinner. "And I am so sorry... about disco."

(Monica Lewinsky noted that the president had apologized to everyone except her. "I think he's sorry he got caught," she said.)

Clinton's regret over Rwanda did not move George W. Bush. "I don't like genocide," Bush said during his campaign for presidency. "But I would not commit our troops."

During George W. Bush's first year in office, the Chinese government requested a formal apology from the United States after an American spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter plane, killing the pilot of the fighter plane and making an unauthorized emergency landing in China. Bush refused the request and China held the crew of the plane. After a week of stalemate, Colin Powell was the first to publicly use the words "sorrow" and "sorry." The Bush administration finally issued a letter saying that the United States was "sorry" about the death of the Chinese pilot.

I broke a flowerpot in Mexico. "Lo siento, lo siento, lo siento," I kept repeating to a woman who only stared at me. Were these the right words? I was sure they were, but the woman said nothing. An apology is incomplete until it is accepted.

If I apologized for slavery, would you accept?

sometimes apologies aren't accepted because it's either impossible to take or just not genuine

The Chinese government rejected the first draft of the letter of regret offered by the United States and asked for a stronger apology. The Bush administration revised the letter to say that the United States was "very sorry" about the death of the pilot.

There are several words for apology in Chinese. One can simply acknowledge a loss, one can excuse a mistake without taking responsibility, or one can admit guilt and express remorse.

The final letter of U.S. regret was issued only in English, which allowed the term "very sorry" to be translated by the Chinese as *dao qian*, which implies that the speaker admits wrongdoing. After the letter was accepted, Colin Powell said that the United States had nothing to apologize for. "He landed without permission," Powell said of the American pilot, "and we're very sorry—but we're glad he did."

Near the end of his first term, the State Department recommended that Bush apologize for the abuses in the Abu Ghraib prison. When Bush did not apologize in his interviews with two Arab television channels, the king of Jordan suggested that if the president wanted to begin to calm outrage over the scandal, he should apologize.

The year I turned thirty, I wrote to the friend who taught me the first rule of catch and apologized for being young once. My friend did not respond.

"Given the president's simultaneous and reiterated insistence that neither he nor his staff have done anything wrong and that there is nothing to change in his policies or goals, who will take seriously such an apology, extracted in extremis?" asked NYU professor Tony Judt of the proposed apology for Abu Ghraib. "Like confessions obtained under torture, it is worthless."

My childhood might have been different if I had known that it is possible to apologize without apologizing. I might have been spared the pain of learning.

"I told him," Bush said to reporters after his conversation with King Abdullah, "I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners, and the humiliation suffered by their families. I told him I was equally sorry that people who have been seeing those pictures didn't understand the true nature and heart of America. . . . I also made it clear to His Majesty that the troops we have in Iraq . . . represent the very best qualities of America—courage, love of freedom, compassion, and decency."

(There is only one word for apology in English, but there are several words for a loss of freedom—"internment," "imprisonment," "detention," "slavery." . . .)

Lo siento, meaning, literally, "I feel it."

The United States and Israel walked out of the 2001 World Conference against Racism. Spain issued a statement of "deep regret" over slavery. England did not apologize, for legal rea-

sons. The German foreign minister did not apologize, but he said that recognizing historical guilt could restore "dignity" that had been stolen." The French parliament unanimously acknowledged that "the transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trade, perpetrated from the fifteenth century against Africans, Amerindians, Malagasies and Indians, constitutes a crime against humanity."

I apologize for slavery. It wasn't me, true. But it might have been my cousin.