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The abstract art of apology

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It has been a season of apologies, with stories in newspapers and magazine covers about well-known names and faces expressing contrition for wrongs done. Names that come to mind are not just Toyota and Tiger Woods but also John Terry, the footballer, as well as other popular newsmakers from a multitude of public life.

Why are we seeing a slew of apologies? Is there true remorse, smart public relations, or is it a way of escaping bigger penalties - both legal and otherwise?

Shakespeare mentioned that the quality of mercy is not strained and it enriches both the giver and the receiver. Portia's words in the Merchant of Venice were not sufficient to convince Shylock who was bent on getting his pound of flesh. However, that does not stop people from seeking forgiveness whenever they have been caught in the act. Which begs the question - is the remorse true or is it some nifty footwork to charm the public who anyway have fickle memories? Let's look at some forms of apology. We have a lot of examples to go by. Remember Clinton who publicly admitted that while he did smoke pot, he 'did not inhale'? Ever figured that out? If he represented one end of the spectrum, the other is the Japanese method where CEOs bow in public accepting that the buck stops with them. If we had lived in medieval times, a mere apology and public prostration would not have sufficed for these senior personnel. Some would be honor-bound to commit seppuku which was the samurai requirement for atonement.

Most of us fall between these extremes and continue to deny any wrongdoing till the mountain of evidence grows, making it impossible to push it further under the carpet. Then more often than not begins the exercise of displacement of blame. If you are in the government, it's the opposition's fault (of course funded by the foreign hands of CIA!). If you are in the opposition, then it's the government's fault (because they are 'buckling under the influence of foreign powers', namely USA!). In democratic societies, the next action is usually the formation of a committee to probe the matter further. In other words, take a side step to begin containment of the problem. This is a popular way of burying issues so deep, so far, that eventually newer events make us forget the entire sorry episode.

Psychologists insist that an apology is a good way to begin reconstruction of a breach of trust. Sounds simple, but anyone who has been compelled to apologise knows that swallowing pride is never easy for anyone with a huge ego. Which truly means that public figures would be the last to ever express their regret, as it is their powerful ego that propels them forward in the first place. And, having pushed themselves ahead of others, to now expect them to admit mea culpa in full public glare is admittedly too much to ask. Thus, they will go to any extent to avoid lying (or as a famous British civil servant once said, 'no lies, but yes we do stretch the truth') until the inevitable happens and the cats are finally let out of the bags.

Modern technology has made life even more difficult for public figures. The ubiquitous camera phone has transformed everyone into either a paparazzi or a citizen journalist now, capturing every moment that a celebrity passes by in public locations, like airports, hotels, etc. Any hasty action in an unguarded moment of passion may well become the next big hit on You Tube, as an anonymous watcher can capture your foibles and broadcast them to the world. Soon enough, you too would be joining the list of those making public apologies!

Seeking public apologies has not been limited to individuals. Nations too had joined this list in the past. The case of the Japanese premier apologising for the country's role as an aggressor in the second world war, and more recently the Australian premier's public apology for racially discriminatory policies that adversely impacted the country's local or indigenous people for decades (including the 'stolen generations') caused much debate. While the wrongs of history are difficult to write off in this manner, even this step of public atonement has gone some way to apply balm on historic hurt - though it has not fulfilled the demands of those nursing generations of anguish and seeking financial compensation.

So, can life go back to normal after an apology? We know that it does not quite work out so pat even in private life. The upset and sense of hurt is often so prolonged that the rupture takes a long while to heal. And, tragically, it may never do so. Public figures, on the contrary, are usually luckier. It is already being said that all it takes for the past to be forgotten is for Tiger Woods to reappear in a few months' time on the greens and strike his way to another title (and given his prodigious talent, this is a very high probability) and before long, he would be a hero again! Be that as it may, he knows that life will never be the same again - both at home and in the eyes of his fans around the globe. While apologies can begin the process of reconstruction, since the onus of forgiveness is on the other person, true rehabilitation is a two-way process that takes a lot of time and constructive work to repair the breach of trust.