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Accountability must follow remorse

Words of wisdom and truth learned from our parents can pop into our heads at the oddest times. It happened to me the other day as I was reading a story in the CDT about a rape conviction.

The perpetrator was quoted as expressing remorse at the time of his arrest, saying something like, "This was the worst thing I've ever done in my life. I'm really sorry."

Interestingly, it was not reported that he expressed remorse during his trial, which could be one reason he was convicted.

Remorse is something easily expressed but not so easily enacted. Feelings of remorse and guilty sorrow can be dramatically expressed, often accompanied by heartfelt pleas for forgiveness. But here is what I learned from my mother, the truth of which came to me as I read the account of the rapist's conviction -- saying "I'm sorry" has to mean you won't do it again.

Emotion-filled expressions of regret frequently follow problematic or criminal behavior, although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish whether the accused is sorry he committed the crime or only sorry he got caught.

Sometimes those expressions of guilt and remorse follow the negative consequences of our behavior. It is not uncommon, for example, for a man who abuses his wife to be very sorry that she left him, even as he tries to explain and excuse his abusive behavior.

There are times, however, when remorse and guilty feelings are genuine, when people are truly sorry for the harm they have caused others. But again, the words of my mother echo -- "I'm sorry" has to mean you won't do it again.

In other words, remorse has to be accompanied by accountability.

And accountability takes concrete action. Religious communities often use the term "repentance" to explain what is needed when one causes harm to another. As **Marie Fortune** says, "Repentance goes beyond confession, apology and good intentions. Repentance means to turn around, to change one's behavior and to not repeat the offense. If one does not do whatever is necessary to change one's abusive behavior, the confession is at best a sham and at worst a ploy."

It is easy to get sucked into dramatic expressions of remorse. Seeing others feel bad, watching them experience the pain of guilt and regret, is difficult.

Often our response is to try to make the guilty party feel better, responding with "it's all right, I know you didn't mean to do it." People make choices, however, and the choices they make have consequences. Healthy relationships require us to take responsibility for the choices we make and to be accountable to the ones we love. Healthy relationships require not just feelings of guilt and remorse, but active efforts to repair the damage we have done and a willingness to be accountable for our own behavior. And within a community, truly heartfelt remorse requires that the one who has harmed others will accept the difficult consequences of accountability, whether it is participating in a drunken driving course or going to jail.

Remorse is painful, and repentance takes hard work. But healthy relationships require both.

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