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## On Apologizing

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## ON APOLOGIZING

I'm about to make a sweeping generalization and will resist the urge to apologize for it. It appears to me that people split into two groups—those who profusely apologize and those who can't stand the people who do so. I belong to the former group; I am a profuse apolo-gizer.

I evoke the "I'm sorry" with tedious regularity on all occasions, throw it over my words like a flimsy jacket to brave possible winds or drizzles of indignation — whether I write too lengthy of an email, borrow my roommate's laundry detergent for the third time, or rummage too slowly for a vocab word during Spanish conversation. I think the inclination stems from the family of disorders that includes the pity laugh—that obligation to unleash strained chuckles when a speaker's joke or a friend's "hilarious" story falls flat. But I'm sure that's a topic for another essay.

I brainstormed with my brothers, who suffer the same sorry syndrome, the idea that we've conferred this habit on ourselves to compensate for our mom. She is the kind of person to pin down a waiter with darting eyes when the House bread is not on the house or send her dish back when she deems it "the skimpiest thing I've ever seen." I remember my brother Colton once muttered to me, when we were eating at Olive Garden, "I seriously just want to apologize for her." He must find, like me, every grating instance of that battle against petty injustices nearly unbearable. In these cases my apology is not a traditional "I'm sorry," but reincarnates itself into my and my brothers' overly-interested faces when the waiter gives menu specials, hearty laughs toward his feeble attempt at witty banter, and many thank-yous after water refills.

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I realized the other day to what extent my apologies are unwarranted when I went to take a shower in my dorm. I of course picked an empty shower stall and pulled the yellow canvas curtain closed—an indication, you would think, that this slot is now occupied. Thankfully I am fully dressed when a girl barges in and scans the cramped, gray-tiled stall with her eyes for a few seconds. I am caught completely off guard, and immediately an "Oh my gosh, I'm sorry" tumbles out of my mouth as if drawn by gravity, with an unnecessary forcefulness, a vigorous implying that I am in the wrong for being stuck in this moment at this time. When

she realizes she hadn't left anything in the shower after all, she leaves with a mere "Oh." No apology for making me apologize. I brooded over it during my entire shower.

I've found that "I'm sorry"ers nearly always expect an "Oh, that's okay" or "don't worry about it" after issuing an apology. Even a wordless grin is sometimes adequate, depending on the person. When I don't receive this kind of courtesy receipt after my self-effacing payment—whether the payment is a figurative penny's worth or not—I feel a nagging sense of injustice, like I didn't get what I deserved. Maybe because I know deep down that my apology wasn't necessary in the first place. But I think that when someone goes out of her way to do something nice, to apologize as an act of overused but nonetheless expected propriety, the "that's okay" becomes a mandatory, subliminal "thank you."

I perused some blogs online the other day and came across one titled, "Does it bother you when people apologize too much?" The person said: "I used to work with this girl who would say 'I'm sorry' all the time. I accidentally bumped into her once and made her drop what she was carrying and she still said 'Oh, I'm sorry.' Do you know someone like this?" Maybe if this blogger was aware of Oliver Wendell Holmes' observation, dare I say wisdom, that "Apologizing - a very desperate habit - is one that is rarely cured," he would not be so insensitive to the rather hopeless condition.

While excessive "I'm sorry"s annoy rather than appease the apology-receivers, even more ironic is that we apologizers usually annoy ourselves. This irony may occur, for example, when I apologize to dormmates who must step over my legs stretched across the hall as I sit outside my room, back against the cinder-blocked wall, typing this essay. A mild feeling of regret may spur me to ask myself, "Is it really hard for her to shift a bit to the left when walking through? Should I apologize for that?" And yet I continue to apologize anyway. But perhaps the greatest irony occurs when apologizers apologize to each other. If I apologize to my roommate when, say, my elbow joint cracks and pierces the silence (for some reason that happens often), while she is already the kind of person who apologizes to me for not being talkative enough or for being too talkative—are we not just perpetrating a burdening and arbitrary standard we foist on ourselves in the first place?

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I have a Spanish minor, but I'm not very good at speaking Spanish. Since I will probably never reach fluency, I am left to just imagine what it would be like to be fluent. How would I say "I'm sorry," with its full spectrum of connotative triteness, in the same "one size fits all"

way that I can in English? I've wondered if, when immersed in a Spanish speaking country, I'd be stripped of my bad habit (it must be a bad habit?) by enduring something like a language barrier nicotine patch.

Contrary to popular belief among Spanish students, the commonly used phrase *lo siento* does not encompass all "I'm sorry"s. Conveniently, two sets of apologies exist in Spanish: one for genuine regret and one for what my professor labels "social faux pas." In the phrase *lo siento*, "lo" is a direct object ("it" or "that"), while "siento" stems from the verb *sentir*, to sense or to feel; the phrase, then, literally translates into "I feel that" and can also mean "I regret that." Spanish speakers use this phrase to express sympathy. *Disculpa* and *perdon*, however, are the more casual and less sincere phrases; they function in the same way that we prolific English apologizers use "I'm sorry"—to apologize for social errors, interrupt conversations, or get someone's attention.

I can't think of an English equivalent to the Spanish social faux pas other than idioms like "my bad" or the obscure "oops." Even then, "my bad" is too unofficial, too make-shift, while "oops" is worse than no apology—a clumsy acknowledgement of error without accompanying remorse. Maybe it is because the English language does not technically have two apology options that I am often irked by the use of "I'm sorry" as an insincere response to someone else's grief. I hope you'll permit me to here distinguish myself from this breed of apologizers and not consider me a hypocrite. At least in Spanish I can know that *perdon* does not require a sympathetic tone; but when I encounter fake sympathy etched into someone's face, eyebrows buried too deep to be actual concern, and the toss of an "I'm sorry" into the conversation following that tongue-to-roof-of-mouth "tut" noise, I am thoroughly bothered. Of course, this apology can sometimes be sincere; but all too often I marvel that the other persons cannot sense the note of cheap dismissal in their voice, their say-the-right-thing-so-the-conversation-can-move-on tone. You would think this type of "I'm sorry" wouldn't bother me so much since I am myself an apologist. But maybe the dilemma parallels that of when a grammarian quakes at the sight of "their" incorrectly replacing "there"; these apologizers use "I'm sorry" in the wrong way, like a "get out of jail free" card, if you can consider some conversations an imprisoning nuisance.

But then again, do I not use the phrase "I'm sorry" as the same quick-fix, even though the context differs? Certainly my apologies aren't genuine every time, and in fact, they're often quite the opposite; but at least they represent a case of *disculpa* or *perdon*, not a false *lo siento*. And even while the "social faux pas" type can yield the most trivial apologies,

I still feel a sense of having wronged someone for the split second before I utter one, even in the privacy of my own shower stall. *Disculpa*, after all, signifies the formal, second person tense of the infinitive verb *Disculpar*, which literally means to “un-guilt” someone or “pardon” someone.

Only during my post-apology reflections do I realize that the true injustice was my apologizing for something I didn’t need to. I’d like to say those post-apology reflections occur often, but they don’t. But what does it even matter, considering the circumstances are almost always insignificant anyway?

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The internet is saturated with apologizers seeking cyber solidarity. The other day I found a website that posts anonymous apologies. While something about that site that mildly repelled me (perhaps it came off as a creepy, collective confessional), and while I’ll give myself enough leeway to say that I was already in an emotional mood, I wanted to cry after I read an apology someone wrote to herself. She repeatedly apologized to herself for hating herself. It wasn’t even beautifully written; but its very essence rang with raw truth. The fact that it had to be anonymous endowed it with an emotional edge, a “sugar coat free” liberty to speak cruelly about oneself, even publically. I wonder— if I can trust the painful honesty of her apology— whether self-apologies are sometimes the most sincere ones.

I have come across self-hypnosis downloads online to help people stop apologizing. I have come across online manuals with such titles as “How to Stop Apologizing” or “Stop Apologizing, Start Living” that are rife with the usual ideas that apologizers have a low sense of self-esteem, that apology abundance undermines the issuer’s confidence. But this answer seems too easy of a diagnosis, almost as much a hurried dismissal as the “I’m sorry” that functions like a *lo siento*.

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I think a philologist would find my over-generous “I’m sorry”s as contributing to the inadequacy of the English language, aggravating its descent into arbitrariness by something like word inflation. I should feel sorry for doing this as a lover for words. But honestly, I don’t care even if I am devaluing the meaning behind the actual phrase by increasing its circulation. I am unabashedly that person who strips a phrase of its meaning by incessant repetition, a person who uses language not to clearly convey my will and emotions but to uphold my own idiotic assurance that yes, I’ve distanced myself from possible scorn, I’ve created some insulation from reproach, I’ve compensated for my possible transgressions. But sometimes I cannot ignore the idea that my “transgressions” are not even

transgressions, that they do not violate anyone in a significant way. This must mean, then, that the other person distortedly judges me? Or maybe it is I who project on others a false sense of condemnation toward myself, however large or small, since I dictate when I should solicit forgiveness in the first place? In that case, I distortedly judge myself—sprinkle subconscious contempt on myself for when I sit too tall for the people behind me or let my glass water bottle clank on the computer lab table.

Maybe I hate my apology curse because it dilutes the serious apologies that I have said, that I want to say, that I never said but should have. My apology archives may be overcrowded with the trite “I’m sorry”s, but these don’t flood my memory of the real ones. I gave my truest *lo siento*, my most sincere “I’m sorry” of sympathy, over the phone as I tentatively toed the sidewalk crack outside in the dark, my eyes plastered to the ground. I gave this apology to a best friend who is no longer my best friend—five years after she almost died from a kind of self-destructive behavior. I apologized because five years ago I did not understand, but really should have, that self-destruction tyrannizes the mind as a devaluer of self before it tyrannizes behavior. I often mull over that apology because I didn’t give it until I truly understood what she went through.

I feel like my friend has a right to apologize to herself. But maybe she exhausted her reservoir; she was, after all, as generous with apologies as I am. I’ve often heard it’s most difficult to apologize to yourself. Maybe self-apology just adds insult to injury because one must acknowledge a truth he or she would rather remained an unreality, untouched by exposing words. Does anonymity make the difficulty any easier?

I used to reject the whole apologize-to-self as an invitation to self-pity, but who am I to authorize the appropriateness of an apology? I can’t even clearly distinguish between the meaningless times it is and is not occasioned. I myself am learning to apologize for lies to myself, learning the reverberating afflictions that obscured truths can wreak.

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I don’t think I can dare make the generalization that “I’m sorry”ers tend to be self-destructive, or that the self-destructive are often “I’m sorry”ers. Perhaps that self-apology on the anonymous website merely launched me in a cursedly and hopelessly sentimental mood. Maybe some people are just adamant apologizers for no other reason than, as my roommate Jane attests to, they are raised in a household that upholds a strict politeness (or, in the case of my brothers and I, raised by a mom who is thrifty with “I’m sorry”s). Maybe, as my friend Julie suggests, the tendency can stem from one’s environment, like what she calls in the South a “false courtesy.”

But something tells me that the “un-guiling” apology might stem not so much from a slow-accumulated nurture as a deep-seated nature — with its involuntary reflex, its teeming position on the tip of the tongue like an overweight diver at board’s edge, its dangling ripeness ready to drop, without my consent, after I do something as simple as grabbing the salad bar prongs at the same time as the person next to me. I think that urge to over-compensate for mistakes and achieve trivial security, that obligation to people-please, or even that sad dislike of self that converts to distorted judgment of oneself, all converge somewhere in the nature that has lodged itself in the home of half the world. Or maybe I’m just projecting deep meaning onto a habit that has no depth at all.

Either way, I may be vague about apologies to friends and self in order to distance myself from readers’ scorn— as if my vagueness can be one large apology. Maybe I should take to heart the words of some well-known person who once said: “Never apologize for showing feeling. When you do so you apologize for truth.”

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