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 Arlington Street Church
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Love Means Having to Say....

The thirteenth most popular movie quote¹ comes from *Love Story*, Erich Segal's romantic drama starring Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw:

Love means never having to say you're sorry.

Perhaps like some of you, I carried that quotation through my teenage years like a question, more like a koan than a talisman. I assumed I was missing something; it didn't occur to me that it just isn't true.

For the record – you heard it here! – it's not true. *Love means having to say you're sorry ... over and over again.*

I invite you to join me this morning in an exploration of the art of the apology.

Let's begin with another koan – a mystery worthy of our deep consideration – brought to us by *A Course in Miracles*. Paraphrased, it asks,

*Would you rather be happy, or would you rather be right?*²

Obviously, “happy” and “right” are not always mutually exclusive. But when it's one or the other, the victory of “right” at the expense of “happiness” is a Pyrrhic victory. I have wracked my brains for a situation in which I'd rather be right and miserable, and I cannot surface even one example.

A Course in Miracles suggests we use this affirmation: “I could see peace instead of this.” Author Gabrielle Bernstein comments, “We have many obstacles that get in the way of our peace, so we must commit to letting go of petty resentments, victim mentality, and fear.... Choosing happiness is a full-time job.”³

1 American Film Institute's *100 Years: 100 Movie Quotes*

2 “Would you rather be right or happy?”

3 Please see positivelypositive.com/2012/01/21/right-or-happy/

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I love to ask happily married couples for their secrets. Our friend Maurice, married for almost 25 years, says, “*Whatever makes you happy, dear.*”

But what to do when the wheels come off? Let's take murder off the table, and all those soul-searing situations in which it may not be possible to trust again, or love again, whether or not we can forgive. What about everyday, garden variety messiness? When there's a miscommunication, disagreement, misstep, blunder, or outright offense, how do we restore relationships with our intimate partners, families, friends, coworkers, neighbors, even strangers? How do we make it right?

Actress April Winchell says, “I can wholeheartedly apologize for not being at all sorry.” I don't recommend this.

Let us revisit the Nine Magic Words that could Change the World. These come to us from my friend, Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein. If you're new to the Nine Magic Words, here's your initiation. For the rest of us, here's a refresher. Please join me:

I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.

I'm not kidding; this is actually the prototype for the perfect apology. And if you're the one who needs an apology in order to move forward in a relationship, you can teach the nine magic words that could change the world:

I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.

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Stress management expert Ross Bonander went to a lot of trouble to write a piece called *4 Steps: Make a Sincere Apology* especially for those who find it odious to say *I'm sorry*. He's speaking to those for whom admitting a mistake is a very tough pill to swallow: it's all about humiliation and shame. If you might just rather be right than happy, this is for you.

Ross Bonander's Step 1: Take responsibility for your actions. I typed *Fake* responsibility for your actions. Not. This is about eating it – the whole thing. “People want to see [us] own [our] mistakes,” he says. “It sets the tone and creates the momentum for [an] entire, sincere apology.” He identifies the time when everything begins to get better as that moment when the person who's apologizing admits to exactly what they did wrong, owning the whole thing with regret and remorse, galloping into repentance.

Stick to “I,” he says, as in “I made a mistake.” And, whatever you do, don't let the next word be “but,” as in, “but you also blew it,” or, worse, “but you drive me crazy,” or, worst, “but you made me do it.” This is *your* apology; you are sorry. We take the first step when we take responsibility for our actions.

Step 2: “Acknowledge the repercussions.” Ross Bonander writes, “[G]et past your ego and any residual defensive posturing to confront your mistake ... [and] concede to [the] repercussions ... with an unimpeachably honest assessment” of the damage. “I know I embarrassed you with that joke;” “I understand that my showing up late to the meeting cost us the job;” “I get that I ruined dinner with my rudeness.” In Step 2, whatever you do, don't say, “if,” as in, “I'm sorry *if* you got offended.”

Step 3: Ask for forgiveness, or offer redress. In other words, clean it up. If you can fix what you did wrong, don't ask for forgiveness before you've straightened our your mess. If you can't correct the situation – you can't take back something you said or undo something you did – then, after you've completed the first two steps – taking responsibility and acknowledging the repercussions – then ask for forgiveness.

And here's my favorite step, Ross Bonander's Step 4: Stop talking. “Let it end.” Don't ruin an apology with an excuse; now that you've gotten naked and vulnerable with your apology, don't busy yourself rearranging your fig leaf. Don't mitigate your mistake by trying to squeeze in the last word and save face. You will, he says, detonate the first three steps and torpedo the whole apology. Here's what *not* to say: “Come on, cut me some slack; everybody makes mistakes; even you have to admit you can be a . . . difficult person.”

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Let's take the leap, now, from high-wire apologies to the concept of making amends. Making amends is an apology on steroids. Central to ongoing recovery from addiction – both steps 8 and 9 of the twelve steps call for amends-making – it is central to *all* of us living happy, peaceful, and free.

John MacDougall, Director of Spiritual Guidance at Hazelden,⁴ says that making amends “has to do with *restoring justice* as much as possible;... to restore ... that which we have broken or damaged;” or to make a symbolic restoration when we can't do it directly. Making amends is not just apologizing for stealing money from someone to buy drugs; making amends is getting off drugs and repaying the money, with interest.

⁴ Hazelden is an addiction treatment center in Minnesota.

On the other hand, John MacDougall says, “making amends is *not* running home to your spouse and saying, 'Gee, honey, ... I learned all about rigorous honesty [in addiction treatment], so I want to apologize to you for an affair I had five years ago.' That's clearing your conscience at [someone else's] expense; ... [they're] going to feel terrible. In this case, your [amends] can be [indirect]. Stop having affairs and bring your heart, your energy, and your attention back home where [they belong]....”

“Sometimes,” he continues, “people talk about 'living' amends'. That simply means that we live differently. Amends are about a genuine change in our behavior, instead of the patchwork of an apology. We take on a whole new way of life. We stop accumulating fresh insults to ourselves and others....”

John MacDougall concludes, “If we've continually harmed people ... then we've got a lot of people, places, and things to avoid.” Large areas of life become closed off to us. When [we're] willing to make amends, those areas open up again. [We] don't have to avoid people any more.... When we bring justice back into our lives by making amends, 'we will comprehend the word serenity, and we will know peace.'”⁵

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Making amends begins with an apology. Let's review:

I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.

I'm thinking about world-changing apologies – apologies made on the world stage. Think of some famous – or infamous – apologies: President Bill Clinton; Rev. Jimmy Swaggart; basketball's Kobe Bryant; actor Mel Gibson; Rev. Ted Haggard; actor Michael Richards; Olympian Marion Jones; Senator Larry Craig; Governor Eliot Spitzer; and, logging the longest public apology at thirteen and a half minutes, golfer Tiger Woods.⁶ Did these apologies change the world? Before we answer *no*, consider a quote from journalist Bob Woodward. He said, “Nixon's grand mistake was his failure to understand that Americans are forgiving, and if he had admitted error early and apologized to the country, he would have escaped.”

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Two years after *Love Story*, Ryan O'Neal starred across from Barbra Streisand in a comedy called *What's Up, Doc?* At the close of the film, Barbra Streisand's character bats her eyelashes and intones, “Love means never having to say you're sorry.” Ryan O'Neal's character responds, “That's the dumbest thing I ever heard.”

⁵ hazelden.org/web/public/has70305.page

⁶ nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Famous-Apologies-119865309.html

Beloved spiritual companions,

Love means having to say you're sorry ... over and over again.

Would you rather be happy, or would you rather be right?

Let's say it:

I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.

Let's take responsibility for our actions;

acknowledge the repercussions of our choices;

ask for forgiveness or offer redress;

and stop talking!

Above and beyond apology, may we make amends, and restore justice.

May we all be happy, peaceful, and free.