

Sorry, not sorry

**Sometimes we need a place where we are told,
“You did nothing wrong.” Can our communities
provide that space?**

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I'm grocery shopping during those precarious hours before Thanksgiving. Carts crowd each aisle. The shelves are spaced just wide enough for two customers to pass, but then the store always manages to put a display *in* the aisle to muck up the entire system. It's like putting an auto accident on the highway, just for fun.

So, I maneuver around the wife anxiously calling her partner to make sure she gets the correct brand of stuffing. She takes photos, because there are two kinds "with the blue label" and she wants to get it right. Then I dodge the mom arguing with her two children that they cannot have Sour Patch candies for Thanksgiving dessert. And I just barely side-swipe the woman who looks simply overwhelmed with calculating

costs and quality.

All the while, we greet one another with,

“Oh. Sorry.”

“M-m-my bad. I’m sorry.”

“No, no. My fault. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about my kids. Kids? Tell the lady you’re sorry.”

“Sorrerrrry.”

“Are you kidding? I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“Sorry. Sorry. After you. Sorry.”

And it continues. A flood of apologies from women (including me) who are doing nothing wrong.

So, I start greeting people with something else: “Please. Don’t apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Then, I remember my stint as a business manager. It was about 25 years ago when my boss called me into his office and yelled at me for something. I didn’t do anything wrong. He just raised his voice a lot when he was teaching me how to do my job.

I said, “Oh. I’m sorry.”

Then he shouted at me louder. “As long as I’m signing your paycheck, I don’t ever want to hear those words come out of your mouth!”

I was stunned. I had to bite my tongue, because my knee-jerk impulse was to apologize again. “Sorry” was my magic word. It was the thing that diffused the anger. I was happy to take the blame and be the sacrificial lamb in any situation, if it meant keeping the peace. How would I function without “sorry”?

I suppose, from his standpoint, he couldn’t have his business manager apologizing for everything. What if I incriminated the company in a transaction? What if there was a dispute over a deal, and I admitted to wrongdoing when I didn’t do anything

wrong?

It seems like our culture is in the midst of these two realities. We have become a culture of quick capitulation *and* stubborn denial of fault. Some of it has to do with power, gender, race, or socio-economic status. Some of it is because of legal issues and liability. Whatever the cause, the two create a predatory ecosystem.

We see misplaced shame in our assault stories. I write about it in my own story (Chapter 9, you can find an excerpt [here](#)). Women, in our confusion, often feel guilty for the harm that has been done to them. That is why those questions, “What were you wearing? Were you drunk? Did you lead him on?” work so well. They turn the blame onto the victim. When we say, “I’m sorry,” the whole thing can go away without any litigation, firings, or upheaval.

Racism allows us to systemically blame people of color for crimes they did not commit. Children who experience abuse in their homes quickly take blame, in order to steer the violence in another direction. Workers accept responsibility for things their bosses ordered them to do.

One of the beautiful things about our worshipping communities is that we have a chance to settle our thoughts and confess our sins. Our churches call us to weekly repentance. But I do think there is a flip side. What if we have been trained to always take the blame? What if we need to reflect on the fact that we just might be innocent? Do we have any liturgical calling for peace when we have done nothing wrong?

I know that Calvinists will say that none of us are innocent. And, of course, we all have sinned. But. Really. Sometimes we need a place where we are told, “You did nothing wrong.” Can our communities provide that space?