

Century Marks

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Say you're sorry: A sincere apology can mend a broken relationship and heal the grievance of an offended party. But forced or insincere apologies, including ones in which the offender doesn't acknowledge his own wrongdoing and only expresses regret that the wounded party was offended, are ineffective and can even backfire. Aaron Lazare believes there is also a linguistic problem in English. Any student of Greek knows that "apology" comes from the Greek word for defense, whereas in some other languages the word used for apology admits wrongdoing or implies guilt by the one apologizing. Lazare thinks there is also a gender problem with apologies: women apologize more than men, sometimes to excess, because they are more likely to feel guilty about certain kinds of behavior and are more inclined to work at healthy relationships. A good apology acknowledges the offense, gives an explanation of it, expresses regret and offers reparations (*On Apology*, Oxford University Press).

Forgiveness without apology: The two Totiev brothers, both Baptist leaders, lost six children between them during the recent attack by Chechen rebels on a school in Beslan, Russia. One of the brothers said: "Yes, we have an irreplaceable loss, but we cannot take revenge. As Christians, the Bible teaches us that we must forgive." A Baptist mother, who was held hostage with two of her children, escaped with one child, but her nine-year-old son was killed in front of her. The Totiev brothers run a summer camp that approximately 50 of the child hostages had attended. In an area where counseling hardly exists, the church has been playing a key role in responding to the crisis (ENI, September 10).

Incredible odds: When Joel Sonnenberg was 22 months of age, his family was in a severe auto accident in which he suffered burns over 85 percent of his body. The accident left him without hands, toes, hair or other facial features. His remarkable story of growing up with these disabilities is told in *Joel* (Zondervan). Sonnenberg recently revisited the site of the accident that took place 25 years ago in New Hampshire, a multicar crash involving an 18-wheeler. He said it sometimes drives him crazy that he can't separate himself from the story about the accident, yet it's

part of who he is. He said he came “back to this scene to show you that bad news has turned into good news,” and to pay tribute to the people who helped save him, some of whom appeared at the accident scene with him and his mother.

Sonnenberg, who is studying theology, has traveled the country telling his story in churches and at motivational seminars (*Boston Globe*, September 15).

Looking for FDR: In the latter decades of the 20th century thousands of jobs were lost in the move from a manufacturing to a service-based economy. This has led to a brewing anger in much of America’s heartland, according to Dale Maharidge, a chronicler of the rust belt. “One cannot displace millions of workers from high-paying jobs to low ones without a sociopolitical cost,” he says. But since 9/11 that anger has been joined with fear, which makes for a dangerous brew. “Fear alone, of another terror attack, is a strong force in American politics. But fear connected with anger is an especially volatile combination.” Right-wing talk radio shows are a prime outlet and purveyor of this anger mixed with fear: in 1980 there were about 75 all-talk radio stations; now there are 1,300, and conservatives reign on the airwaves. Maharidge likens the situation to the 1930s depression, when America could have moved in a right-wing direction had it not been for Franklin Roosevelt’s emergence as a center-left leader. Helping working-class Americans with jobs and health care won’t “erase the fear of another terror attack,” says Maharidge, “but it will dissipate some of the anger resulting from economic hardship” (*Homeland*, Consortium; excerpted in the *Nation*, September 20).

UN for religions: John C. Danforth, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, says that the time has come for the religious leaders of the world to get involved in resolving conflicts. He notes that many of today’s conflicts are not between nations, but between peoples and religions. “If there are people who believe that God commands them to shoot children in the back and if we start with that kind of belief, is there any voice against it and if so, where is that voice?” His ideas are still in formation, but he envisions an international forum for mediating religious conflict, a forum that involves people of faith. Danforth, a former Republican senator from Missouri, is an Episcopal priest (*New York Times*, September 13).

Hell on earth: At a recent meeting of the Arab League, Amr Mussa, its head, warned that “the gates of hell are open in Iraq.” His comment was a reflection on the rising death toll from insurgent forces and counterattacks from the U.S.-led coalition. The Arab League’s 22 members were to debate a resolution that would restore diplomatic relations with Iraq and provide training for Iraqi government

personnel, including members of the police and security forces. However, some of the league's members favor the Iranian position of disparaging the interim government as a creation of the U.S. (Agence France-Presse, September 14).

How we view Muslims: Americans' attitudes toward Islam have remained stable over the past year, despite the war in Iraq. Thirty-nine percent have a favorable impression of Islam, with nearly as many (37 percent) taking an unfavorable view. Likewise, the number of people who think Islam is more likely to encourage violence than any other religion has remained almost unchanged (it went from 44 percent last year to 37 percent this year), but that number is still considerably higher than it was in March 2002 when it stood at 25 percent (poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in July).

Keeping faith with Fido: Many Christians assume that St. Francis of Assisi was the first person to perform a blessing of animals, a tradition still carried out by some churches early in October. But Jon Sweeney (editor of *The Road to Assisi: The Essential Biography of St. Francis*, by Paul Sabatier; republished by Paraclete Press) argues that this practice was actually begun by ancient Judaism. The Jewish ceremony is often performed on the seventh day of Passover or in the fall when the Torah reading is about Noah's Ark. In both Christian and Jewish ceremonies, the message to pet owners is the same, according to Sweeney: "Take care of [animals] as you would take care of yourself. They are gifts from God."

Fashionable religion: When Atoosa Rubenstein was editor of *CosmoGirl!*, she proposed starting a section on religion. Her editorial colleagues nixed the idea, saying a fashion magazine was no place for God. But now that Rubenstein has taken over *Seventeen*, a fashion magazine for teenage girls, she's added a religion section that includes inspirational messages and personal faith stories on such issues as prayer or gay teens in the church. Intentionally interreligious, the religion section includes verses from the New Testament and the Qu'ran and teachings from the pope and the Dalai Lama. Rubenstein, who is Muslim, formed an editorial advisory board that includes an evangelical pastor, an Episcopal youth minister, a Roman Catholic priest, a Reform rabbi, a Buddhist teacher and two Muslims. Rubenstein claims that reader response has been mostly positive, but Christopher Robinson, a DePaul University professor who researches religion in the media, is critical: "My impression is it gives you a nice feeling to ask these questions, but it makes no demands on you at all. It's fun to hear about what other people think about God. It doesn't call me to make a stand" (*Dallas Morning News*, September 16).

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