The concept of apologizing for bad behavior that we are responsible for is ingrained in most of us by our parents and other family members from early childhood. The importance of apology is reinforced in most of our experience as students in schools and universities. Faith communities are usually particularly bold in emphasizing the importance of apology and its connection to forgiveness and reconciliation. Increasingly we are seeing more demands for apologies emerging within the context of civil and criminal court proceedings, as well as in response to public policy and entrenched cultural conflicts.
A growing body of literature is developing around the concept of apology and millions of dollars have been spend in the past decade conducting research on forgiveness, which is intricately related to apology making. The analysis of apology making and forgiveness is, understandably, a highly intellectual process grounded in verbal expressions of “apology” or “forgiveness” with little awareness or understanding of the deeper emotional and even spiritual aspects of apology making or forgiveness that are most often grounded in what research has found to be the most powerful language that humans possess, non-verbal language, or what I would prefer to call the language of the soul as well as the body.

So very often private or public apologies seem so shallow and meaningless, even when stated verbally in very clear and articulate terms, including the outward appearance of sincerity. People who hear these apologies are not just focused just on the verbal language. They are hearing the language of the soul, that sense of integrity in what we are saying, that presence or absence of a connection between what we are verbally saying, what our body is communicating, and the deeper values within our soul.

To walk the path of authentic apology making and even forgiveness, whether in a private or public setting, requires us to humble ourselves. It requires us to find the courage to embark on one of the most difficult journeys we face in modern times in western cultures. To slow down, tame our egos, become mindful of what has actually occurred and our responsibility (whether intended or not) for the harm caused, and to travel that long distance of 15 inches from our head to our heart. Authentic apologies and forgiveness are not ultimately cognitive processes that are well strategized and packaged. Authentic apologies and expressions of forgiveness, whether in private or public settings, are heart centered processes that are grounded in a spirit of humility, empathy, accountability, and compassion, to be followed-up with specific actions to repair the emotional and material harm in whatever manner is realistic and doable, even if only symbolic.

The private or public context of the need for apology making and/or forgiveness presents different challenges, opportunities, and even limitations. The specific context requires tremendous flexibility and cultural awareness. The core elements of an approach to authentic apology making and/or forgiveness that
can lead to a powerful transformative impact on the healing process following intense conflict or trauma in private or public setting remain the same.

**What is an apology?**

An apology is a statement of being sorry for a specific event that one is responsible for. An apology consists of three core elements:

a. Acknowledgment of either emotional or physical harm that one has caused to another individual or group.

b. Acceptance of responsibility for the harm caused.

c. Vow to repair the harm through a specific commitment or action.

**Where does it fit?**

There is no clear one-size-fits-all time for when an apology fits best. It depends on the nature of the conflict, its context, and the manner in which the conflict has unfolded. In many circumstances, an immediate apology following awareness of the harm committed, usually unintended, is clearly the most helpful. It prevents the offense or misunderstanding from escalating and becoming far more toxic.

In other circumstances, too quick of an apology may seem insincere. This is particularly true in cases involving larger groups who feel they have endured unfair treatment over a significant period of time, including in the context of public policy. In these larger group settings which often involve intense emotions and radically conflicting perceptions, it is very tempting for representatives of those in power to focus exclusively on immediate problem solving. Such a focus may well be grounded in a sincere attempt to resolve the conflict in the most effective and efficient manner. Yet, if a forum is not established for the stories of those who feel they have been harmed to be told to those in power, such a problem solving focus can often lead to a false-peace. The problem appears to be solved, including with written documentation of an agreement. Yet the aggrieved parties may feel that their stories have not been heard, that those in power don’t “get it.”
The enormous healing power of story should never be underestimated as a path to resolution of conflict and even trauma. Many people simply want to be heard, to have their stories validated in some form. This is true in conflicts involving individuals as well as large groups.

How is it done?

The manner in which an apology is offered is as important as the specific content of the apology, the words that are expressed. Quick, articulate apologies that are offered in a hurried manner, in which one’s mind is on many other responsibilities, are likely to be received as insincere, if not patronizing.

On the other hand, an apology that is grounded in a spirit of humility and the absence of defensiveness, and offered in a more relaxed and mindful manner, even if not very articulate or well stated, is more likely to be received as sincere. This is true even if the words “I apologize” are not even used. Why? Research has shown that less than 10% of our verbal communication has an impact on the person or persons receiving our communication. Non-verbal communication, our body language and what I prefer to call the language of our soul, is far more powerful than words. If we are humbled by truly recognizing and owning the harm we have caused, if we are feeling ashamed of what we have done and therefore uncomfortable in confronting those we have offended, the language of our body and soul will communicate a far more powerful message of authenticity and remorse than simply the words that come out of our mouth.

Authentic apologies that are meant to be heard and accepted by those receiving them should be anchored in a mindfulness-based approach. This approach is based on the recognition that true conflict resolution and peace-building, including the expression of apology, requires human encounter through face to face dialogue among people in conflict, not simply agency policies and settlement-driven mediation. A mindfulness-based approach is distinctly different from conventional strategies of peace-building and mediation which are highly cognitive, problem solving oriented, and focused on increased intellectual understanding of the complexity of the presenting issues. While this conventional approach is important and necessary, it is not sufficient. A mindfulness-based approach is a different way of understanding and responding to conflict and trauma. As an approach grounded in what Jon Kabat-Zinn calls an open hearted
moment by moment non-judgmental awareness, the focus is on honoring the enormous healing power of story rather than simply obtaining a thorough intellectual understanding of the issue. Gaining a better understanding of the context of the conflict is important, but learning to work with the energy of conflict and trauma as expressed through what many believe to be the most powerful form of human communication, the non-verbal language of the soul, is even more important in repairing relationships and building bridges of understanding and tolerance between individuals and groups that have experienced intense conflict and even trauma.

Lessons learned?

1. Public apologies to large groups often need to be followed by meeting to express the apology in smaller group settings.
2. Apologies that are slick and strategic can often have the opposite impact.
3. In making an apology, the specific words that are spoken are less important than how they are said….is there humility and lack of defensiveness in the message.
4. Having one feel ashamed of one’s action is critical to giving an authentic apology.
5. Honoring the power of story and the need to be heard is supremely important in authentic apology making.
6. Timing of an apology is critical and it depends on the context of the conflict or trauma.
7. Centering oneself before giving an apology is crucial to being authentic and humble.

Guidelines for Consideration

Based on the recognition that public apologies are necessary but often not sufficient to foster deeper and more widespread healing and reconciliation within communities and based on the enormous healing power of stories of conflict and/or trauma being shared and received through deep listening,
1. Public apologies should follow bearing witness to the stories of conflict and trauma from those whose lives were affected, through face-to-face restorative dialogue that can foster the development of empathy. Talking circles or circles of accountability are a particularly good format for this to occur.

2. Public apologies should be followed by numerous opportunities for more private apologies to various communities and groups, preceded by hearing the stories of conflict and trauma from individuals in these communities and groups.

3. Public apologies should be anchored in specific plans to repair the emotional and material harm, to the extent that is realistic and doable.

**The Paradox of Forgiveness in Restorative Justice**

Proponents of restorative justice face a significant dilemma. Forgiveness has been demonstrated to occur in the most horrendous of crime. Outcome studies also show that forgiveness-related constructs (e.g. empathy, remorse, and apology) as well as concerns about forgiveness are a part of the dialogue experience for a sizable number of victims and offenders. The extrapolation of forgiveness for study, however, gives it pre-eminence over the other components of healing and raises valid concerns among victim advocates and victim services staff about the possible imposition of external agendas on victims. Since victims have historically been given no voice or were valued only as witnesses by the criminal justice system, it is imperative to protect their safety and the integrity of the restorative justice process by paying close attention to the emergence of scholarly interest in the health-promoting effects of forgiveness related to criminal offenses.

The significance of both forgiveness and restorative justice is their potential to facilitate victim healing. If victim healing is paramount, then constructs such as reduced anger and increased empathy may be as important as forgiveness. Moreover, victim healing in restorative justice requires and is intricately wrapped up in restoring victim safety and security. Victim safety and protection from prescribed forgiveness have been ensured, so far, by making forgiveness ‘irrelevant’, which allows it to play naturally in the background. The goal in restorative justice, therefore, needs to remain on creating conditions that further
healing including conditions such as offender apology and remorse that may facilitate victim-desired forgiveness. It is also important that the institutional and structural approaches that lead to forgiveness continue to be as flexible as necessary to assist rather than inhibit the healing process of both victims and offenders.

Forgiveness in the context of restorative justice remains a paradox. The more the concept of forgiveness is used as an explicit intervention, many victims and victim advocates will, at best, feel unsafe or even preached at. Some may feel quite offended. On the other hand, the more forgiveness remains in the background with the focus on creating a safe place for dialogue, the more likely many, if not most, victims will feel safe enough to travel the path of authentic forgiveness if that is what they truly desire.