

# The Importance of Apology in Healing and Reconciliation

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National Chief, Professor Mahoney, respected Chiefs and Elders, honoured guests, fellow attendees: I appreciate the opportunity to speak this afternoon on the importance of apology in healing and reconciliation.

When I was first asked to address this topic, my instinct was: this is something for former students to speak to; it's those who have been harmed who should speak about whether or how apologies are important for their healing. As someone representing one of the offending institutions in the residential school system, it's not my place.

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I believe we do need to hear those who suffered the harm speak about the importance of apology to them, but on reflection I also believe that those who created the harm, the offending parties, can and should also speak to the issue of apologies—about how apologies can be one part of what we offer to those we have offended against; about how apologies can be important for our *own* healing journeys; about how apology can be the foundation of a vision of a reconciled relationship.

In reflecting on the importance of apology, I draw both on my current role with The United Church of Canada, and also on 20 years' experience in restorative justice, including 10 years facilitating victim-offender mediation in cases of serious criminal harm.

In my spiritual tradition, Jesus teaches: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23–24).

Three things emerge for me in this teaching about broken relationships:

- First, the offending party is to be *pro-active*. "If you remember someone has something against you, go!" In other words: Take the initiative! Don't wait for a lawyer's letter or until you are dragged into court. Don't deny or avoid, hoping the problem will go away!
- Second, "be *reconciled* with your brother or sister." The dictionary defines *reconcile* as "to restore to friendship or harmony." So there is more than an apology to be given. There is a relationship to be restored, a friendship to be rebuilt, a living together to be re-harmonized.
- Third, offer your gift at the altar *after* the reconciling has been done. My teaching is that there is a connection between my being in right relationship with my neighbour

(or brother and sister) and my being in right relationship with the Creator. Harmony with God depends on harmony with others!

So something substantial is called for when a relationship is broken, when trust is betrayed, when harmony is fractured. Reconciliation is called for, a rebuilding of harmony and trust. This is spiritual work, sacred work, because reconciliation is about coming back into balance with our brothers and sisters, and coming back into balance with the Creator. One of the first steps in this sacred work is *apology*.

Mike DeGagne of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation put it beautifully at a conference of survivors in Winnipeg a few weeks ago: "The importance of apology is not just in the words. The importance of apology is that it is the gateway to forgiveness. And forgiveness is the gateway to reconciliation."

So an apology can open the door to the sacred work of reconciliation. Not just a superficial saying "sorry," but an apology that is full and genuine and substantial. What does a full and genuine and substantial apology look like? I believe that there are *six characteristics* that define that kind of apology.

1. The first characteristic is that an apology must contain *accountability*, the acknowledgement of responsibility for the harm that was done. Most of us know how hard real apologies are to give. Taking responsibility for doing serious harm is very difficult. In my other life, I work with people who have been affected by criminal behaviour, from break-ins to murder. I see how hard it can be for the one who offended to take responsibility, how tempting it is to deny or rationalize or minimize his behaviour, how seductive to "blame the victim."

Think of your own life, of a time when you had to apologize. Do you remember how hard it was? To look that person in the eyes and take full responsibility for the harm you did. Very, very difficult. We fear the shame of it or the consequences that may result from accepting responsibility.

Yet, this is often the most meaningful component of apology for those who have been hurt. Having the perpetrator acknowledge responsibility for the harm that they did is often critically important for those who have been victimized because it validates their experience; it tells them "you were not responsible for what happened to you. It was not your fault. I was the one who caused the deep wounds to you."

Accepting responsibility can also be a first step in the offender's *own* healing. In 1986, the United Church offered its first apology to First Nations people. The recognition that First Nations people had something against us, that our relations with them were laced with racism and assumptions of cultural and spiritual superiority, was hard to face. But I believe that this was a *watershed moment* for our church because we learned a huge lesson about ourselves: that many of the beliefs we took for granted, or the ministries we carried out with good intentions, or the assumptions we accepted without question were in fact destructive and

damaging to others.

The 1986 Apology to First Nations acknowledged: "We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality....We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel....We tried to make you be like us, and in doing so we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were."

By acknowledging our failure, we came face to face with our own need for healing. It shattered our self-perception of being "the good guys"; it injected a huge dose of reality about our beliefs and operating assumptions. That Apology remains a touchstone to which the United Church can be constantly called back to faithfulness with respect to its own healing.

2. The second characteristic of a full and genuine apology is *impact awareness*, that is, an apology should demonstrate some understanding of the impact of the harm on those who have been hurt. For an apology to have any meaning, the wrongdoer must become aware of the how the harm has affected the life of the person wronged. Often in mediation, when an offender hears how the crime affected the victim physically, emotionally, psychologically and even spiritually, it is sobering. It breaks through denial and dramatically deepens his understanding of the total impact of his behaviour on the victim's life.

As a church, our awareness of the impact of residential schools was very partial at the time of the 1986 Apology. But as horrendous stories of the residential school experience were told, we came to understand the breadth and depth and duration of the harm in a way we never did before. We understood more deeply the destructive and long-term impacts of the residential school system, not only on former students, but also on their families, communities and cultures. As a result, we came to see that we needed to offer a second apology. In 1998, our church offered an apology specifically to former students of residential schools and their families.

The journey of learning and understanding is not over for our church. We will undoubtedly learn much from the Truth and Reconciliation process, and this may call forth from us an even deeper expression of regret and acknowledgement in the future.

3. The third characteristic is *remorse or sorrow*. What most people are looking for in an apology is sincerity. They want the apology to come from the heart. They want to know that the offender feels something, that they "give a damn" about the damage that they have done. In a sense, the victim is looking for the offender to share the pain that the incident or experience has caused them. An apology that comes with an emotional connection to the harm indicates to the victim that the offender "gets it," that he has some feelings about the pain he caused, a sense that what he did was wrong. An apology that comes from the heart can bridge the gulf of brokenness like little else can.

Apologies that are ordered or coerced carry little meaning because they do not seem to be “felt,” they do not seem to come from the heart, they do not seem to be “true.” I have found that those who have been victimized have very sensitive antennae with respect to the sincerity of an apology. They will forgive much if they sense that the apology is sincere and heartfelt.

4. I see a willingness to make *reparation* as the fourth characteristic of a full and genuine apology; the offer and intent of the wrongdoer to repair, to the extent possible, the damage that was done. This makes the apology tangible and gives substance to the remorse. What can I do to make things right?

The United Church recognizes that we can't turn back the clock 150 years. There is no way to repair much of the damage that was done through the residential school system. But some things can be done. We can be present to hear the stories of former students. We can fairly and expeditiously settle claims by those who were abused in the schools. We can support efforts to recover Aboriginal languages. We can open our hearts to the wisdom of traditional spirituality. We can challenge racism and the attitudes of cultural and spiritual superiority that led to the residential school system in the first place, and the social inequities that keep many Aboriginal communities in third-world conditions. We can support the implementation of treaty rights and the settling of land claims.

We know that words are not enough. Some Aboriginal languages don't have a word for “apology.” How will they know what we mean by an apology unless they see the words put into action?

5. This leads us to the fifth characteristic, *the commitment not to behave in the same way in the future*. In my experience within the criminal justice system, I have found that the second-most important thing to many victims, after an acknowledgement of responsibility, is a commitment by the offender not do the same thing to them or to anyone else in the future.

In my spiritual tradition, to confess or repent means a kind of conversion, a turning around and going in the opposite direction. Only when we commit to do so, do we have the right to begin to talk about right relations, about a new future together in a different relationship, one based on equality, friendship, and respect.

6. Perhaps it is only when the first five characteristics I have named are addressed that we who have been responsible for the residential school system have the right to move to the sixth and last characteristic: *asking for forgiveness*. Forgiveness is something that can be sought but never demanded. The request for forgiveness returns a measure of control to the wounded party. Will you forgive me?

After the 1986 Apology, the Elders, in their wisdom, decided to receive the apology but not to accept it or offer forgiveness until they saw whether or not the church lived out its words. The decision to forgive lies in the hands of those who were harmed. The church must live out its words and be content to wait,

recognizing that the willingness to forgive is related both to the healing journey of the Aboriginal community and also to the healing journey of the church itself.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the work of reconciliation is sacred work. I believe that the kind of full and genuine apology that I have described is the doorway into that sacred work. Such an apology changes the nature of the conversation between victim and offender from one that is adversarial, focused on the past and seeking to establish blame, to one that is reparative, focused on the present, identifying the impacts and what should be done about them. When accountability is denied or resisted, the relationship remains broken. When responsibility is accepted, the focus of the dialogue can shift to what needs to be done to repair the harm and restore the broken relationship.

That is why the United Church has encouraged the federal government to also make a full and genuine apology *before* the Truth and Reconciliation Commission begins. Former students, the government, the churches and the Canadian public can then focus on the sacred work of healing and reconciliation.

Full reconciliation may not happen in my lifetime or in yours. But our faithfulness to walk this journey and the faithfulness of our children will determine whether we are able to arrive at the vision of renewed relationship held out by Chief Bobby Joseph, who once said, "We need to reach a place where we can reconcile, and at the end of the day, your children and mine can walk forward together, as equals. There are a lot of people in Aboriginal communities who are still very angry. But I have hope that little by little, heart by heart, we will begin to heal and learn to walk forward together."

Thank you for listening to me. *Meegwetch.*

