

Why Apologise For Others?

When a bad thing has happened to someone and they have suffered then sometimes their distress, their sleeplessness, their agitation, and their lack of concentration, don't diminish until another person has taken the time to really listen to the story, to really understand how bad the bad thing was, and to express fellow feeling. This is what we mean when we talk about "witnessing". I have written in this column about the act of witness before. It is something we do in a very small way every day when we listen to friends and family telling us about everyday worries. Every now and then we are called to make an act of witness in the face of a life-changing event. This is one of the ways in which we establish a sense of connection and community with one another. Happily we are not generally asked to bear witness for terrible events too often. Distress properly heard is in some way passed on. The listener shares in the pain of the original experience.

Sometimes bad things just happen and nobody is to blame. Failures of equipment, medical emergencies, what the insurance companies call acts of God: these are difficulties that we must occasionally bear because that's just how life is sometimes. However, there are other bad things which are caused intentionally, by malice or situations in which one person decides that meeting their own needs are more important than the welfare of others. In circumstances where someone has harmed another person in an unwarranted way an apology is due. When the offence is grave but no apology is forthcoming, the victim can be left tied to the experience. They repeat the details of the offence over and over again in their minds and are poisoned by the experience. People in this state need not only to be witnessed but also to hear an apology.

A colleague of mine taught me that such apologies can be made by proxy. It is possible to choose to assume the responsibility for saying sorry. It seems to me a wonderful act of compassion and healing to say to someone who has been harmed that in some sense you are willing to shoulder the responsibility for their persecutor's wrongdoing and, in their stead, to express profound regret.

© Adam May, MA (Hons), ADHP(NC), MNRHP, Cloth Hall, Llanddaniel Fab, Gaerwen,
Anglesey, LL60 6EB. Tel. 01248 421015.
e-mail: therapy@adammay.co.uk.

Comments and feedback on this article are warmly welcomed.