



RITA BERNSTEIN

Readers Write

APOLOGIES

I KNEW SOMETHING WAS UP WHEN my father demanded the tape measure from my mother's sewing basket and began to measure my chest, waist, inseam, and neck. Surely he couldn't be preparing to sew me a suit.

No, I was being sized for a uniform. I, a boy with no interest nor skill in athletics, reared to sit for hours without making a sound, was to play Little League baseball.

Many tears, entreaties, and slammed doors later, my mother lifted the crumpled application from the trash and pleaded with me: "For your father. Try it. Just one season."

I never missed a practice and always helped collect and stow the equipment afterward. In games, the coach let me play for the required two innings and not a second more. I was relegated to right field, except when a left-handed hitter was at bat. Then I was moved to the other side. When I came up to bat, the coach (who regularly beat his own son when the boy did not get a hit) told me, "Just let the ball hit you, and get on base. You're a big kid. It won't hurt."

After the last game, my parents let me change in the back of the car, and they turned in my uniform then and there. We drove home in silence, until my father's

steely blue eyes caught mine in his rear-view mirror. "I'm sorry," he said.

My mother patted his arm, then turned and gave me a smile that said, *This will never be discussed again.*

And it wasn't.

Nearly half a century later, I still cannot throw out that mitt.

*Michael Z Murphy
Hillside, New Jersey*

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW POSSESSES A LEVEL of compassion and sensitivity that seems out of reach to me. One day I dropped by her house unannounced and found her in the garden, talking to her flowers. I knew

the gate would squeak if I opened it, so I stayed behind the fence and watched as she carefully cut perfect long-stemmed roses from her bushes. Every time she clipped, she apologized to the buds that hadn't yet bloomed and were sacrificed in the cutting.

"I am so sorry," she said to each one.

I watched her for a while before I let the gate squeak.

*Julie
Los Angeles, California*

TWENTY YEARS AGO I HAD A JOB WORKING with mentally handicapped children. Every other week I would spend my days and nights in a group home for girls. Linda and Susan both lived there. Linda had frequent temper tantrums and would kick. Susan couldn't speak and was self-abusive. Neither of them was toilet trained. On my off weeks I lived at home with my active toddler and alcoholic husband.

I was nine months pregnant when my husband hit me for the first time. I hid it from my family and co-workers. I began to believe that it was my fault. I tried to be a better wife and not make him angry.

Once, the group-home staff took the girls on a field trip. I sat in the back seat beside Linda. It was a long ride, and Linda didn't like to be in the car. She began to punch me in the arm repeatedly. Frustrated, I hit her back.

On another field trip I sat in the front, and Susan kicked the back of my seat for an hour. I was eight months pregnant and bone tired. When her shoe flew off and landed on the front seat, I picked it up and threw it back. It hit her face and left a mark.

I was fired from my job.

For the next twenty years, I worked as a secretary. Then one day I saw a call for volunteers to work with handicapped adults. I'd long wanted to apologize to Susan and Linda, but since that wasn't possible, I decided to try to make a difference in the lives of other handicapped people.

One day I entered a classroom to help out, and there was Susan. She took me by the hand, led me to a cabinet, and pulled out a bag of blocks. Then we found a spot on the carpet and played together. They told me this was not an "appropriate" ac-

tivity for her, but we had a good time anyway, and I kissed her cheek and hugged her when I left.

A week or so later I ran into Linda. When she saw me, she said, "Hi, Grandma!" and asked if I would take her to the mall, or to McDonald's.

I've been a volunteer for two years now, and every other week I take Linda out to eat, or to the park, or to the mall.

This is my apology.

Name Withheld

IN 1992, I WAS RAPED AT KNIFEPOINT in Chiapas, Mexico, by a young Guatemalan man whose mother had been killed in front of him by American soldiers when he was seven years old. Though he was never caught, I was able to forgive him and go on with my life.

Several years later, I was invited by the Alternatives to Violence Project to attend a three-day workshop for inmates at a maximum-security prison in New York State. On the second day, one of the young workshop participants began

ranting about how despicable rapists are. (Rapists, I'd learned, are near the bottom of the prison hierarchy, just above pedophiles.) Listening to this man's rage, I felt moved to speak. I had told my story to victims before, but it had never occurred to me to speak to offenders about my experience.

"I do not want any of you to misunderstand what I am about to say," I told the group, "but I feel the need to say it. I was raped and almost murdered a few years ago, and while there is no excuse for what this man did — it is absolutely inexcusable — that doesn't mean it is unforgivable. For me those are two different things." All eyes in the circle were on me. "Just because someone does something horrible doesn't make him a horrible person. It means he made a mistake."

I could not tell what effect my comments had on my audience. As I wondered whether I had done the right thing, the inmates were called to lunch.

After lunch an inmate asked if he could speak to me in private. There is

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
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Tests	July 1	December 2005
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no private place in a maximum-security prison, but we went out in the hall. The nearest correctional officer was about fifteen yards away.

Due to this inmate's eloquence and education, I had assumed that he was one of the few nonviolent offenders in the prison. In the hallway he began to wring his hands nervously. "I don't know if I can do this," he said.

"It's ok," I said. "Whatever it is, say it."

He took a deep breath and asked, "Would you be a surrogate for me for a moment?"

I had no idea what he had in mind, but I felt safe, so I said yes.

Tears began to run down his cheeks as he spoke: "A long time ago, I hurt a woman very badly. I have tried to apologize to her family, but they want nothing to do with me. I respect that and do not want to hurt them any more than I already have. But I want you to know how deeply sorry I am for what I did." He paused to take a breath. "And how deeply sorry I am for what was done to you."

I was speechless. He was obviously trying hard not to fall to pieces in the middle of the corridor. After a moment, this giant of a man quietly asked, "Do you think you could forgive me?"

"Yes," I said.

I wanted to hug him, but I knew that was definitely not allowed. Then he shyly asked, "May I hug you?" I nodded, and we quickly embraced. Thankfully, the correctional officer didn't see us.

Afterward I wondered how many years that inmate had waited to apologize. How many thousands of other men — and women — in prison are waiting for someone to hear their heartfelt apologies? I knew then that I would do this work for the rest of my life.

Name Withheld

NOT ALL TEACHERS ARE EQUAL. I HAD a college professor who was a world authority on walnuts but couldn't teach the basics of biology to freshmen. My logic professor was the same way. He set aside the class session prior to the midterm exam for a review. The problem was, we students didn't understand the material well enough to ask intelligent questions — so no one asked any.

Incensed, the professor said, "I guess this means that you know the material by heart. Come tomorrow, you had damned well better know it. You may have time to waste, but I don't."

He left, slamming the door loudly. About half the class failed the course. The professor's position was unwavering: He had done his job. Those who failed had not done theirs.

By far my favorite teacher was my Old Testament professor in seminary. He usually addressed the class as "boys." (There were no female students in the seminary then.) One day, however, he addressed us as "gentlemen."

"Gentlemen," he said, "without exception, you have all done poorly on the last examination. There is only one explanation for this." We waited for the blame to fall. "I have failed as your teacher. I apologize and ask for your forgiveness."

We were shocked. It was unheard of for a teacher to apologize for a student's failure, yet he was sincere. "We will review the material again," he continued. "A new examination will be given. I am truly sorry for having failed you. I will try to do better."

*Tom Kramm
Reedsville, Pennsylvania*

"I'M SORRY THIS HAPPENED TO YOU," she says, and I hear in her voice a hint of understanding and recognition. She is good at apologizing. I wonder how often she has said this. She must be busy, this professional apologizer for the archdiocese's decades of neglect and child abuse. At least the church hired her. I suppose that's worth something.

The priest who molested me is long dead and would never have apologized anyway. Would I feel better if the bishop himself said, "I'm sorry," instead of this woman he has hired to do it for him? I'll never know. He's as unlikely to utter those words as the dead priest.

"The therapist of your choice," says the well-meaning apology professional. "An hour a week." We both know it is not enough. A broken life cannot be put back together, especially not in one hour a week.

What good is an apology, really?

Name Withheld

"MY HUSBAND AND I CONCEIVE JUST by thinking about sex," I joked. My colleague Bree's face fell, and she changed the subject.

As we became closer, Bree confided that she had been trying for a year to get pregnant. She had seen a physician, and the prognosis wasn't good: she was ovulating about once every two months, and her hormone levels were low.

She said sex had become a medical procedure; there was no time for the sensual, the spiritual. She felt resentment toward friends who became pregnant with ease, and anger at mothers with four children. I marked Bree's cycle on my calendar to remind myself that she would likely be distant and hurt when her period came.

This went on for a year. Then, unexpectedly, I got pregnant with my third child. After the initial shock and excitement wore off, I thought, *What am I going to say to Bree?* Although it wasn't logical, I felt as if I had betrayed her. I decided to write her a letter so she could react without me as her audience.

Her response came a few days later. She thanked me for my letter, but said she didn't see any way that we could continue to be friends.

I was devastated. At work Bree bowed out of a project on which we had been collaborating. She wouldn't sit with me during lunch or at meetings. I felt uncomfortable and isolated. If someone brought up my pregnancy, I would try to change the subject. Whenever I was tempted to complain about morning sickness or my anxieties over becoming a mother of three, I always thought about Bree and remained silent.

A couple of weeks before I left on maternity leave, my friends threw me a shower, and Bree attended. Not only did she attend, but she brought a sweater she had knitted for my baby. I was speechless.

Afterward Bree invited me to go for a walk. "I wish I could tell you that I simply stopped being hateful and jealous," she said, "but seeing you have everything that I couldn't was too much. The only reason I could come to your shower and make a gift for your baby was because I finally got what I wanted. I'm pregnant. Can you forgive me?" she asked.

I had wondered how I would feel if and when this moment came. Would I harbor anger or resentment? The answer was no. Her apology was enough.

Name Withheld

WHEN MY MOTHER WAS CLOSE TO dying, she momentarily emerged from her morphine fog and said to me, "There's something I have to tell you. Something about Happy."

Happy had been my childhood dog. Mom had been at the mental hospital a year when Dad brought him home. We kept Happy outside, in a chicken-wire pen. As soon as I got home from school, I'd run to his pen, lie on my back in the grass, and let him cover me with licks.

As Happy got older, we house-trained him and kept him inside, but he grew restless. He was an English foxhound, bred to run long distances. He would pace back and forth in front of the door, barking sharply or throwing his head back and howling. He grated on our nerves so much that we'd sometimes just open the door, and off Happy would go.

When I was ten, my father left for a yearlong research project in London. Mom was home from the hospital, and it was just her and Happy and me. Happy began to come home with his sides torn up from getting caught in barbed wire. One time he returned whimpering and oozing blood from several gashes, one of them so deep a bit of intestine peeked out. The vet sewed him up, and Mom and I tried to keep him in, but as soon as he healed, he started pacing and howling again. Finally one of us let him out, and sure enough, Happy came back with his wound reopened. We had to leave him with the vet for a week this time.

When it was time for Happy to come home, Mom said the veterinarian knew a farmer who was looking for a dog. "Happy would have a big farm to live on, and could run all he wanted without getting into trouble. The vet thinks it's best: Happy just keeps getting hurt living here. What do you think?"

Happy was my pal. I loved him and didn't want to lose him. But I didn't want him to keep getting hurt either. I went to my room and cried. When I came out, I said the vet could give Happy to the

farmer.

On her deathbed, my mother said, "There was no farmer. That was just a story I made up." Her voice caught. "I just couldn't handle Happy anymore. I had him put to sleep. Can you forgive me?"

I was so shocked that I laughed out loud. All these years my mother had kept this secret. Given the immediacy of her dying, Happy's death seemed faraway and unimportant. "Of course, Mom," I replied. I wanted there to be no hard feelings between us, and so I overlooked my own.

Several years after my mother's death, I thought about her decision to have Happy killed, and felt a hint of fury. Had there been no other way to tame my dog's wildness? She'd robbed me of one of the few things that had given me comfort and joy in my childhood.

Since I was a young girl, I'd been taught never to be angry at my mother; it wasn't her fault she was sick. Anger that had been buried for decades now leaked out. I imagined a different deathbed conversation with my mother: I'd take her dear face in my hands and tell her, "Mom, I have hated you. At this moment, I hate you. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

Chana Wilson

Oakland, California

(end of excerpts)