
PAY IT FORWARD: TRANSGRESSION AND ATONEMENT

A transgression is your inappropriate response to an interference with your plans or expectations that negatively impacts another. Transgressions can “rent too much space in your mind.” You may harbor the belief that you ultimately will “pay” for your transgressions, but you continue to do nothing about them. This continued failure to “make amends” is an unconscious burden that impairs your ability to fully engage in the present.

Your transgressions become part of your narrative, shaping your perceptions, beliefs and judgments. Transgressions can also become habit, hurting your self-image and leading to deterioration of your health. But above all, transgressions cause suffering: A transgression inflicts harm on another, while contemporaneously inflicting harm on yourself.

There is a lot of self-denial around transgressions. You treat them as if they were impersonal, harmless acts. You blame the victims of your transgressions, attempting to make the victims the “cause” of your thoughtless acts. You create “excuse stories” that seek to blend your transgressions into the larger setting of your family, work, or culture, trying to minimize their impact. But as time goes on, the weight of these transgressions forces you to pay attention.

Atonement is the process through which you make amends to another for the consequences of your incompetency - to make things “whole” or “right” or “as good as they can be.” Atonement allows you to unburden yourself from transgression. The path of atonement is healing. Making amends also allows you to comprehend how to avoid future misdeeds, to relieve yourself of the burdens of past actions, and to open yourself up to the practice of “paying it forward” - doing good simply for its own sake.

Transgressions arise from a multitude of circumstances and are almost infinite in kind and severity. But you can consider any single transgression from each of four vantage points: subjective, objective, relational and environmental. It is important to understand the nature of the transgression to determine whether it is right for atonement, its priority, and what may be the appropriate amends to make.

Let’s begin with the subjective quadrant. Assuming your harmful response, what led to it? Was your act intentional, incompetent, or negligent? Was your action retaliatory or revengeful? Did you respond from fear, based on a perceived immediate threat or as a preventative measure? Did you misperceive the circumstances or the other party’s intention? Was your action prompted by a particular, cultural circumstance - i.e. a “gunfight?” Did you intend your action to cause harm? If so, why and to what degree? Obviously, an action taken with the intention to cause harm occupies one extreme, while an action negligently taken without harm intended occupies the other.

The inquiry of the objective quadrant concerns how your harmful act is perceived “objectively.” Irrespective of your subjective perception, did your act appear intentional, incompetent or negligent? Did you appear to be acting in a retaliatory or vengeful manner? And so on. The witnesses to your action came away with their own perceptions, despite your intentions. Those perceptions were as real to the observers, as your intentions were to you. In making amends, these perceptions will trump yours in measuring amends, unless or until you can realign those perceptions through your words and actions.



Timothy A. Tosta

Partner

415.356.4623

ttosta@luce.com

www.luce.com/timothytosta

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The next inquiry concerns how your action has framed others' perceptions of you. Intentionality, degree of harm, what was at stake, all will be blended into a story about you, which in some circumstances will be viewed as an aberration and, in others, as a confirmation of existing belief. As the story is repeated, spread and confirmed or denied by other stories, your relationship with your community evolves for better or worse.

Finally, the fourth quadrant assesses the impact of your action on the environment. Can the harm you caused realistically be assessed? Is it repairable? If so, over what time period? What resources will be needed to aid in reparation? What actions of other parties instigated, contributed to or aggravated the harm of your act? Maybe you intended to cause harm and failed miserably. Lucky you! Perhaps, your actions were completely defensive but you caused significant harm nonetheless. Too bad! In this quadrant, intention becomes irrelevant. This is about bringing the world back into balance, as a consequence of your acts.

Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 step programs have worked with hundreds of thousands of addicted individuals on atonement issues since the late 1930s. The AA experience is instructive in how to effectively make amends: Step 8 of the program provides, "Make a list of all persons you have harmed and become willing to make amends to them all." Step 9 provides, "Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."

As one AA commentator notes, "If we've continually harmed people and haven't made any effort toward amends, then we've got a lot of people, places and things to avoid. Large areas of life become closed off to us. When you're willing to make amends, those areas open up again. You don't have to avoid people anymore. This is true not only for people in recovery, but for all of us."

In carrying out Step 8, there is a consensus in the program's literature to do the following: Make an inventory of your transgressions and review it with a supportive person in your life. In collaboration, determine to whom you should or should not make amends.

Prioritize your inventory. Generally, there are three categories: immediate amends; eventual demands (those that you will make amends to, but not today); and "probably never" amends.

For those on the immediate amends list, take the first person and write down all the acts for which you seek to make amends. Review your notes with your supporter.

After you have gone through the list, review the specifics that you have written about each person and generalize. Chances are that there are patterns as to how you have acted. For example, you recall having ruined a specific family event, but then come to see that similar behavior has ruined many events with different people.

For each person, precisely script your admission of transgressions, apology and proposed amends, and review with your supporter. When the appointed time comes, you will want to work from your script.

Remember that atonement is intended to directly restore that which you have broken or damaged. However, if that is not possible, you may make restoration indirectly. An apology may be part of atonement, but alone is not sufficient. If you borrow a sum of money from a friend and fail to repay it, an apology would be, "I'm sorry that I borrowed money and didn't repay you." An amend would be that apology plus "Here is your money with interest."

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Step 9 contains the caveat “whenever possible, except when to do so would injure...others.” Sometimes direct amends are impossible. For instance, the person you injured has subsequently died. You still can make an “amend” by changing a specific behavior to serve as reparation, such as undertaking a regular practice of community service. Admitting an affair to a loved one may clear your conscience, but only at your loved one’s expense. Your indirect amend may be to return home all of your attention, energy, and love.

Make amends at the first opportunity, except when to do so would cause further harm. In damaged relationships, unresolved conflicts continue to exist. In making amends, you do not wish to aggravate old antagonisms and resentments. You will need to make an initial inquiry as to whether your atonement conversation is appropriate. If an invitation is accepted, you still must have a proper attitude. You must have forgiven yourself and the other for any and all grievances between you. You cannot succeed in making amends if you are still angry or defensive.

You must state your apology without reservation, enumerating your transgressions and proposing your amends. You will need to be prepared for any response, without becoming angry. You must remain grounded, accepting and open to whatever transpires. The injured party has a right to refuse to your apology and offer. You can leave an open invitation to talk later, when circumstances are more comfortable. Recognize that you may never speak again.

Know that if you come to understand your actions clearly, regret their impact, forgive yourself, and commit to change future behavior, you will know, intuitively, whether or when to approach the person you harmed, what to say, and what an appropriate amend should be.

Atonement is an empathy and compassion building practice. It sharpens your awareness and makes you more competent in dealing with disruptions. As you atone, life simply gets better. You see yourself in a better light. You become more approachable as your transgressions evaporate. Friends and relationships multiply without effort. Finally, you may find a new capacity for generosity. You may begin to “pay it forward” by undertaking acts of kindness, almost unconsciously.

Timothy Tosta is a partner with Luce Forward’s San Francisco office, specializing in land use law. He blogs at www.coachingcounsel.com/blog. He can be contacted at 415.356.4612 or ttosta@luce.com.

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