

Planning Has A Lot To Be Sorry For:  
Seeking Apologies and Forgiveness in Social Impact in Practice

By:

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They don't teach apologies in planning school, but often planners have a lot to be sorry for. In *Social Impact in Practice* – as with apologies – impact doesn't always equal intention. "Intent is far less important than impact when it comes to apologies," says Marjorie Ingall, co-author of *Sorry, Sorry, Sorry: The Case for Good Apologies*.<sup>1</sup> I have spent the past month thinking about forgiveness, about apologies, about my Historic Site Management teacher Laura's closing words in a classroom conversation, "I'm sorry to end on such a depressing note." I've been thinking about our walking tour with Troy from SEAMACC, about a conversation that doesn't end, about how heritage is the past made useful. I've been thinking about craft: crafting engagement, crafting interpretation, crafting history, and crafting an apology. I've spent all of the weeks since our visit to Mifflin Square Park with an open draft reflection written to Troy – to my peers, to Mike and Maurie – thinking about how to apologize for bringing in the inspiration for a depressing end note in Historic Site Management, for being sorry that I was cold on our tour, that my back hurt, that I sat down, for the guilt of needing special treatment, for when Leah used the word 'placemaking' and Troy got so angry about the Bok building because placemaking no longer equals joy, it means theft. I am sorry that he has to lock up his doormat and flowerpots because of other forms of theft. I am sorry that he has to resort to violence to stay alive. I want to apologize. I am not alone in the quest of crafting apologies. Planning and social practice teaches us so much on craft, on interpretation, on how to be astutely sensitive, but it leaves us with few examples of apologies, of forgiveness mediating lingering guilts, large and small. In crafting and interpreting apologies and forgiveness, we have a lot to learn.

This short essay is a reflection on apologies and forgiveness and *Social Impact in Practice* from the classroom to the practice, and a meditation on seeking justice. The definitions of forgiveness are not clearly defined. My childhood therapist told a young and troubled version of myself that "forgiveness is the fragrance left on the sole of the shoe that tramples the flower." Psychologists Michael Wenzel and Tyler G. Akimoto's research investigates whether,

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<sup>1</sup> Erika Ryan and Mary Louise Kelly. "Do you use these words when you apologize? It's time to stop, researchers say." *NPR*. 25 January 2023. Retrieved 24 October 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/25/1150972343/how-to-say-sorry-give-good-apology>

*...following a wrongdoing, the restoration of justice promotes forgiveness. Three studies - one correlational recall study and two experimental scenario studies - provide evidence that while a restored sense of justice is overall positively related to forgiveness, forgiveness is highly dependent on the means of justice restoration being retributive (punitive) versus restorative (consensus-seeking) in nature. The findings showed that, overall, restorative but not retributive responses led to greater forgiveness. Although both retributive and restorative responses appeared to increase forgiveness indirectly through increased feelings of justice, for retributive responses these effects were counteracted by direct effects on forgiveness. Moreover, the experimental evidence showed that, while feelings of justice derived from restorative responses were positively related to forgiveness, feelings of justice derived from retributive responses were not.<sup>2</sup>*

Their work reiterates that justice is inextricably linked to forgiveness but says nothing about the role of an apology specifically – one can only surmise or hope that perhaps in crafting restoration approaches, an apology might be one of the methods utilized.

Robert Gould of Portland State University complicates the apology’s relationship to justice by integrating it into atonement. He interrogates what atonement is required for forgiveness, and if forgiveness is possible in response to direct oppression. “Direct oppression exists when certain people hold power over other people on the grounds that the powerless group is unjustifiably deemed less worthy than the powerful group. Oppression is rather obvious in the case of racism.”<sup>3</sup> Direct oppression represents the unforgivable. “To forgive ongoing oppression is to grant it permission.”<sup>4</sup>

This is where I always get hung up in rereading and interrogating Arnstein’s *Ladder of Citizen Participation*.<sup>5</sup> Tokenism and Nonparticipation are an awful lot like oppression, direct and indirect. Arnstein’s ladder is a core principle taught in planning school, as is its rethinking since its original inception in 1969. However, there is no documentation or record of if – throughout the learning process and across many decades

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<sup>2</sup> Wenzel, M., & Okimoto, T. G. (2014). On the relationship between justice and forgiveness: are all forms of justice made equal?. *The British journal of social psychology*, 53(3), 463–483. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12040>

<sup>3</sup> Gould, Robert. (n.d). Part Two: Forgiveness and Atonement: Role in Social Justice. Navigating the Space Between Us, Finding Connection, while Embracing the Continua of Difference: A Dilemma Driven Conflict Analysis. Retrieved 16 October 2023. <https://pdx.pressbooks.pub/navigatingspace/chapter/part-two-forgiveness-and-atonement-role-in-social-justice/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Sherry R. Arnstein (1969) A Ladder Of Citizen Participation, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35:4, 216-224, DOI: 10.1080/01944366908977225

– if anyone ever apologized to those harmed in the case studies or examples. There is even less said about if planners were forgiven for their wrongdoings. Did anyone ever apologize? Was justice ever achieved?

We are in a moment of social and civil liberation, protest, and reckoning. White public apologies run rampant, as do social justice allyship statements from institutions and organizations, particularly in the non-profit sector. Michael Büch explores the performative paradox of the social justice apology, focusing specifically on the hypermoralization of forced white public apologies:

*The emphatic morality of white public apologies also exploits a rhetoric of individual intention. Offenders regularly claim to have been misunderstood; they protest that they never “meant to hurt anyone’s feelings.” However, falling back on the kind of moralistic individualism implicit in such protestations precludes repercussions, reparations, or a more in-depth recognition of what happened. Intention and morality are dead ends: “He said sorry, what else is he supposed to do?”*<sup>6</sup>

The paradox of justice and the role of the apology seems to be that to apologize is forced, performative, and suspect, but to not apologize is callous and unjust.

Instead of ending on a depressing note, we turn again to Gould and the reassurance of mutual awfulness via two of his insights on forgiveness:

*First, although to be oppressed is certainly dehumanizing, it is also dehumanizing to be an oppressor. Those who are dehumanized—oppressed or oppressor—knowingly or not—seem to deserve our compassion and even, at times, our kindness. Although it is easy to see that being oppressed can be awful, we often fail to see that being an oppressor is also, in an important way, awful, as an oppressor has arguably lost his or her humanity by being an oppressor. With this view, retaining one’s humanity requires compassion and care towards victims of oppression, as well as a commitment to end oppression—freeing both oppressed and oppressor from their dehumanization. ...*

*Secondly, out of our compassion for both victim and oppressor emerges the possibility of forgiveness. Holding out hope that an oppressor will stop oppressing is also holding out the possibility of eventual forgiveness. Oppressors can be motivated to change, at least partly, by the possibility of redemption and forgiveness. In this way, compassion and the possibility of forgiveness help pave the way toward the transformation of oppressors into allies in the struggle for freedom.*<sup>7</sup>

This potential for forgiveness brings us to Darren Walker, to the quest to course correct when doing right at any scale is unpopular at best and dangerous at worst, to Mifflin Square Park, and to concluding on a less

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<sup>6</sup> <https://blog.degruyter.com/reassuring-sounds-the-impossibility-of-white-public-apology/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

depressing note. Walker encourages us to practice on a continuum between “generosity and justice,<sup>8</sup>” a way of practicing that, “...requires humility, moral courage, and an unwavering commitment to democratic values and institutions. It demands that all members of society recognize their privilege and position, address the root causes of social ills, and seek out and listen to those who live amid and experience injustice.<sup>9</sup>”

Planners – and students of planning, in which I intentionally include and implicate myself – have a lot to learn about apologies and forgiveness. Definitions and understandings of forgiveness, of apology, of restoration and conservation of the ephemeral desire to repair not just materials but also relations, of being on time, of ending on time, of being in the room, are not clear. In order to have a shared understanding, we must share our ideas. In order to share our ideas, we must share space with people who are not like us. Sometimes there will be tensions and injuries in this process of sharing. To have impact, we must have intention, and sometimes those intentions include seeking forgiveness via apologies. As the planning literature and scholarship on apologies and forgiveness is lacking, a helpful guide is provided by an NPR book review<sup>10</sup>, augmented with

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<sup>8</sup> Walker, Darren. (N.d.) From Generosity to Justice. *New Gospel of Wealth*. Ford Foundation. Retrieved 16 October 2023. <https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/big-ideas/the-future-of-philanthropy/from-generosity-to-justice/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> According to the NPR book review, “*Sorry, Sorry, Sorry: The Case for Good Apologies*, draws from a broad range of research to explain the power of apologies, why we don't always get good ones, and the best way to tell someone you're sorry.

Co-authors Marjorie Ingall and Susan McCarthy break down the six (and a half) steps to great apologies. They are:

1. Say you're sorry. Not that you "regret," not that you are "devastated." Say you're "sorry."
2. Say what it is that you're apologizing for. Be specific.
3. Show you understand why it was bad, take ownership, and show that you understand why you caused hurt.
4. Don't make excuses.
5. Say why it won't happen again. What steps are you taking?
6. If it's relevant, make reparations: "I'm going to pay for the dry cleaning. Just send the bill to me. I'm going to do my best to fix what I did."

For more detail, see: *Do you use these words when you apologize? It's time to stop, researchers say* via <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/25/1150972343/how-to-say-sorry-give-good-apology>

examples like those by Darren Walker or from SEAMAAC's Troy. On a day that ends in 'y,' on a big day, on a small day, at all scales and at all times, we must practice humility with our competence, embrace that we are experts in our failings; thereby, we move towards justice by way of generosity and curiosity. As Walker notes, "Justice is calling. It's time we answer."

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