

# Editorial: Twin powers of humility and apology

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We would be better off—and by “we,” I mean families, churches, workplaces and any other group that involves two or more people—if we embraced a trait and a practice apparently unfamiliar to presidential candidates.



Marv Knox That would be humility, plus the ability to apologize.

Neither Hillary Clinton nor Donald Trump carries those qualities around in their personal or political toolboxes. For purposes of balance, we will illustrate the humility/apology failure of both, but that does not necessarily imply moral equivalence.

Michael Gerson of the Washington Post illustrated Clinton’s failure to apologize—even when an apology would have worked to her advantage—in [an insightful column](#) that inspired this editorial.

Seeking to explain her email-server affair, Clinton recently said: “I may have short-circuited it, and for that I, ah, you know, will try to clarify.”

**One reason ...**

Afterward, Gerson observed such a statement “is one reason that only [34](#)

[percent](#) of Americans in a recent poll judge her ‘honest and trustworthy.’ In the email scandal, we have seen deceptions used to cover deceptions; then a minimalist apology, filled with caveats, which themselves must be revised; and then a fuller apology, long after it appears cynical and forced.”

“It is amazing how many problems are caused, in politics and in life, by the inability to sincerely apologize,” he wrote.

That inability to apologize may be a political tactic. Politicians are loath to admit wrongdoing or shortcoming of any kind, because their opponents will seize upon the admission to gain advantage with voters. And what admission is stronger than an apology?

### **“Why me?”**

Gerson could have written about Trump, too, but that particular column focused on Clinton. When asked about his need for repentance and forgiveness, Trump [famously told CNN’s Anderson Cooper](#) told CNN’s Anderson Cooper: “Why do I have to repent or ask for forgiveness if I’m not making mistakes? I work hard; I’m an honorable person.”

So, according to Trump, no repentance—apology to God and to those wronged—is needed. This from a thrice-married, handicap-ridiculing, xenophobic, misogynist who reviles military heroes and issues thinly veiled assassination threats.

A big ego is a requirement for a successful politician. It’s a byproduct of the tough political hide required to endure minute-by-minute criticism, whether justified or not. Still, you’d think humility and willingness to apologize would be qualities voters might admire, rather than deem weaknesses. (Of course, if politicians thought humility and apology were political assets, many pols would at least fake them. Since that’s not the case, we can see who actually expresses humility and who apologizes, which provides at least a tiny window into their souls.)

## **Path to forgiveness**

Apology—as well as the humility required to offer it—is vital, because it provides the only viable path to forgiveness, another quality in short supply.

“Forgiveness is the only force that allows flawed men and women to change their minds and reconstruct their lives on firmer ground,” Gerson explained. “It preserves the possibility of moral progress. For most of us, getting what we truly deserve—appealing to standards of justice alone—would not be pleasant. We know we should show forgiveness to others because we so often have need of it ourselves.”

This is true in our personal lives, too. It’s solid advice for how we engage others at home, at church, in our workplaces and neighborhoods. No doubt, you can name marriages, families, friendships, churches and businesses wrecked because of arrogance and stubborn unwillingness to apologize.

A friend and mentor used to quote a Methodist bishop who always responded to criticism with a simple, humble statement: “There’s an excellent chance you may be right.” (I’m sorry if I’ve told that story before; I love it.) By acknowledging the critic may be right, the bishop admitted he may be wrong. He led with humility.

## **Strength from humility**

Think how all our institutions—from families, to the nation itself—would be stronger if more people manifested humility. That’s because humility clears a path for people to come together and to walk alongside each other through all the challenges and joys of life.

All our relationships would be stronger—marriages better, churches more authentic, schools more unified—if more people would say just four simple sentences when appropriate:

- “I don’t know.”
- “I was wrong.” (The subject of [a classic Happy Days episode](#).)
- “It’s my fault.”
- “Will you help me?”

Beyond that, sincere apology—a true test of humility—possesses the power to transform and redeem brokenness, wright wrongs and restore relationships.

Oh, and we’re not talking about wimpy, dodgy, half-hearted apologies. “If something I have done offended you, I apologize” is not a real apology. It puts the onus on the one who was offended. A true, lasting apology comes from the heart, without caveats: “I apologize. Please forgive me.”

Humility and apologies seem like almost too much to expect of presidential candidates, at least this year. But maybe these relationship-building virtues can percolate from the bottom up if we start practicing them ourselves.

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