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The lost art of remorse

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If you can stand one more mention of the Monica Lewinsky affair, read on. If not, you have my blessing to skip ahead. This sad chapter in our history is a great disappointment not only in terms of the unseemly behavior but our overly zealous fascination with it. I read last week that Monica is now officially a "celebrity." She commands such attention so as to shut down entire department stores in order to shop in peace. That's power. But that is also a good indication of how dramatically things have changed since the days when scandals ruined lives rather than created them.

My purpose, however, in bringing up this whole sordid mess one more time has to do with a moment in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar when Brutus declares "Th'abuse of greatness is when it disjoins Remorse from power." I think of all the things that bother me most about the reports, the trials, the proceedings, the interviews etc. is the apparent lack of remorse. What ever happened to remorse? The dictionary tells us it means "a deep and painful feeling of sorrow or regret." These days it seems that to feel remorse is to show weakness, to admit guilt and, therefore, to fold under pressure. It seems a better strategy to go on the defensive. Blame others. Blame society if you must but for God's sake, don't show anyone that you're sorry for what you did! Those with power should never be remorseful.

It is true that our president did indeed show some remorse. In fact, once he got on the train of public apology, it sort of ran amok. He couldn't stop saying how sorry he was. Still, the remorse seemed to come about more from political strategizing than from genuine regret. Surely it was his wise and savvy advisors and not his own heart that told him to say he was sorry. His partner in the "tango" (since it does take two) was no less reluctant to express that deep and painful feeling of regret. Her now famous interview with Barbara Walters showed a much more capricious attitude than most Americans were expecting to see. The last question she was asked dealt with what she planned on telling her children about her place in American history. The response: "Mommy made a big mistake." And then she giggled.

I am always reluctant to question what goes on in someone else's heart and soul. Perhaps because of political, social, economic and all kinds of other reasons, Bill and Monica simply cannot express their remorse freely. Maybe it is there.. Still, we have another very high profile case of influential people who give us the impression that admitting mistakes shows weakness, expressing regret makes us vulnerable. The complexities of this particular affair are not lost on any of us. I'm sure there are angles to this that we've never even considered, the least of which being national security.

But I can't help worry about what kinds of messages Monica and Bill are sending to our psyches. Are we to understand that saying we're sorry is appropriate only because it's the correct legal or political posture? Can't genuine human sorrow and embarrassment be seen as a strength?

William Cowper once said, "Remorse begets reform." The Monica Lewinsky affair has taught us all kinds of lessons about the way we honor an office such as the Presidency, how we respect the covenant of marriage, how we deplore the misuse of power and sexuality and how to address these problems when they arise again as no doubt they will. But I sincerely hope it has not taught us to fear remorse - for that would signal the end of reconciliation and rebirth. Hopefully, the kinds of trouble we fall into will not necessitate public confessions on national TV but even if it's in the quiet and safe privacy of a confessional, or simply looking into the eyes of someone we've wronged, we grow stronger as human beings when we are able to say "I'm sorry."