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Here's the scenario: You've just walked out of your parole hearing, and you're feeling really optimistic about your prospects. You went in there and told them you took responsibility for your crime early on when you stood before the judge and changed your plea from "not guilty" to "guilty". You pointed out that by doing so, you had saved the state the expense of having to hold a trial and had thus spared the victim and the victim's family as well as your own family from having to sit in the courtroom and relive the crime and hear about all the ugly details. Or, if you didn't plead guilty, you told the Board members that you took responsibility for your actions and that you were truly sorry for what you did. Another reason you feel good about your chances of making parole is that you have not received a single major misconduct since you've been incarcerated. Surely this shows that you have changed, have been rehabilitated, and are remorseful. Why wouldn't they grant you parole, right?

A month later the mailman stops at your door one afternoon with the news you've been waiting for, your letter from the parole board, formerly referred to in Pennsylvania as your "green sheet". You quickly open it and read the words, PAROLE DENIED.



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With a frown and a pounding heart, you scan down the page looking for the reason(s) for the denial. The first one stated blows your mind: FAILURE TO SHOW REMORSE. "What a bunch of crap!" you say. "They didn't even ask me about remorse, but I told them anyway. I told them I took full responsibility for my crime. I even included that in my written statement to the Board. What do they want from me?"

It's no secret among would-be parolees that a failure to show remorse is a common reason for being denied parole. When I recently shared this fact with a Thinking for a Change student who was about to go before the parole board, he waxed indignant on me: "Thanks for the info, Captain Obvious! What rock have you been hiding under?" Now as a peer assistant, all I was trying to do was be helpful, and he had to go and hurt my feelings. How was I to know that he had been up for parole twice already and denied both times due to a failure to show remorse for his crimes? I was half tempted--more like three-quarters tempted!--to hurl my own retort back at him that would have gone something like this: "In case you haven't noticed, Mr. Jack Smart-Aleck, there are no rocks to hide under in this prison! They've all been broken up into little rocks. All that's left to hide under or behind are life's problems and the monotony of self-loathing. Now if you feel like it, we can break up some of this monotony by taking on one of life's real problems, like how to address



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this matter of remorse which you apparently need some help with. So what do you say?" But I didn't go there. I remained professionally cool and calm and simply asked the fellow why he thought this thing was so difficult to pull off, "showing remorse." He seemed to know that I was a glutton for ear-beatings, for he immediately went on a tirade about how next to impossible it is to "show" remorse because whatever you say, the authorities are always going to view it as self-serving: "They know a man's going to say whatever he needs to say to make himself look good," he said, "so what's the use? You can't win." Once again, I started to retort, but I caught myself.

It's true, there is no way to express remorse without it being self-serving, that much I agreed with the fellow. But whoever said that being self-serving is necessarily a bad thing? It's only detrimental when it lacks genuineness. A fellow who tells a pretty lady that she has a pretty smile is being self-serving, but that doesn't make his statement about the lady's smile any less true or sincere. Likewise, if you are deeply honest and sincere when you tell someone you feel guilt and shame for the hurt and pain you've caused the victim(s) of your crime, that may be self-serving, but it doesn't make your expressions of remorse any less sincere. Let's keep it real. The parole board and corrections staff have heard it all.



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They know full well that most prisoners who come before them are going to say whatever they can to try and put themselves in a favorable light. They expect you to do that. It's not a bad thing; after all, the end goal is to gain parole, right? You'd be crazy not to want to make a good impression.

So why do so many prisoners fail to show remorse? Is it do to a lack of communications skills? Do prisoners just not understand the importance of the issue and, consequently, skim over the topic? Or is the problem more profound? Could it be that we don't know how to express remorse because we have never really learned how to feel remorse?

The truth be told, many of us grew up trampling on other people, their feelings, and their property and didn't care one iota about the damage and pain we left behind us. As a very young boy, I was abandoned by my father and left, along with my siblings, to be raised by an alcoholic mother who had her own problems and pain to deal with. Feeling emotionally abandoned, I lashed out at the world every time something didn't go my way. My hurt and pain became other people's hurt and pain. I let it build up inside me until the pressure got to be too much, and then I didn't just let off a little steam, I blew a gasket!

Thankfully, under the care of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Jesuit priests of Southern Maryland, my



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Catholic upbringing provided me with two weekly rituals that kept my conscience stirring at least for a while: Every Saturday afternoon from the third grade to the eighth, I sat in the back pew of the Sacred Heart Church going over every sin I'd committed throughout the week. The monk Martin Luther had nothing on me when it came to examining my conscience and arranging my sins in order from mortal to venial before walking into the confessional booth and spilling my guts out and, in return, receiving my just desserts in the form of some penance. Then there was Sunday Mass, a ritual my siblings and I were never allowed to miss. Mass provided me with a second opportunity to acknowledge and reflect on my weekly faults ("mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa").

Though partaking in these rituals did much to wash away my guilty conscience, they did little to sensitize me to the hurt and pain my actions were causing others. That sensitivity didn't arrive until I ended up in prison for the rest of my life at the age of twenty-four with nothing left in the world to distract me but my own inner demons. It was then that I set out to find myself. My journey to self-discovery led me through the halls of higher learning for twelve straight years, ending in a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh, eight years of formal teaching at two different universities, and five published books, including two college texts in experimental psychology. Today,



forty-some years later, I am still on my personal journey to finding myself.

In the first edition of my self-help book, Healing Our Imprisoned Minds (2010), chapter ten ("Apologize for Your Mistakes and Misdeeds"), I wrote: "For some of you, this will be the most challenging chapter of your journey to inner freedom. 'I'm sorry.' Why are these words so difficult for us not only to say, but to truly mean?" When I wrote that, I didn't quite know the answer to that question. Why are so many of us unable to feel and express remorse? Years before writing that chapter, I had conducted a thorough review of the literature on theories of criminality in search of an answer. In doing so, I learned all about the nature versus nurture argument. Briefly, proponents of the former believe that the causes of criminality are biological (in our DNA), while the latter believe the environment causes people to become criminals (abuse, poverty, poor nutrition, family dysfunction). Some scientists in the nature camp believe that hardcore criminals are born without a conscience and, consequently, lack the ability to feel empathy and compassion. For me, the only problem with this premise was that it wasn't true, and I had anecdotal proof. At the age of nine, I had exercised my moral conscience in an act of civil disobedience so bold it would have made Henry David Thoreau proud: Living in the Southern Maryland town of La Plata, where



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WHITE ONLY and COLORED ENTRANCE signs still haunted the landscape eight years after segregation had been ruled illegal by the U.S. Supreme Court, my childhood friend Ike Wills and I had booted Jim Crow right in his Jim Crow ass when we walked into the County Drug Store on the hottest day of the summer of 1961 and copycatted the Greensboro sit-ins of the previous year. We sat at the lunch counter and Ike, who was "colored," demanded to be served. After the soda jerk, a pretty high school girl named Sherry, told Ike she couldn't serve him, I ordered two hot fudge sundaes for myself. I was sure that Sherry knew what I was up to, but there was no law against a white boy ordering two hot fudge sundaes on the hottest day of the summer. She picked up my coins and got busy making the two sundaes. When she delivered them, I slid one over to Ike who immediately scooped up the cherry and a dollop of whipped cream before devouring the entire treat just as the pharmacist got wind of us and came to investigate. "Too late, Mister! We're out of here!" Ike sang out.

Anecdotes can only take you so far, but now there's real proof, real 21st century scientific evidence that even hardcore criminals have a conscience: Using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), neuroscientists have recently demonstrated that criminals, including psychopaths, are able to feel empathy when asked to do so. Their findings suggest that the ability to appreciate



and understand another person's feelings may be repressed, or dormant, rather than missing altogether, as was previously believed. These researchers have also demonstrated that because the human brain's neural circuitry is very flexible, a person's tendency for empathy and compassion is not fixed. We can, in other words, learn how to rewire our own brains so that we can feel empathy for others and remorse for the suffering we've caused our victims. Before we get to this work, there's one thing you need to address first, and that is, acknowledging and coming to terms with your own hurt and pain.

#### UNDERSTANDING YOUR PAIN

When you were growing up, there was no way you could have changed the actions of your parents, guardians, relatives or society. Looking back on your childhood now, you can see that whatever cruel and harmful things were done to you occurred at a time when you were helpless to prevent them. It's tragic enough that these horrible things happened to you, but it's even worse if you allow the hurt and pain you suffered to live on and control your life.

I cannot emphasize enough that before you can ever find real peace within yourself, you have to learn to let go of the hurt and pain you've been carrying around with you for so long. Confronting the people and processing the events that caused



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your pain and trauma are also prerequisites to acquiring the mental and spiritual maturity necessary to fully understand the pain and hurt you caused your victims. Holding on to your pain and hurt prevents you from becoming the responsible and caring human being you are capable of becoming.

My friend Francine hadn't spoken to her alcoholic mother in over twenty years. "I can't forgive her for the way she neglected my siblings and me when we were kids. She doesn't deserve to be forgiven, and I just don't feel forgiveness for her. Besides, I could never forget some of the cruel things she did to us."

No victim of child abuse, neglect, social injustice, or violent crime should ever be asked to forget the traumatic things that happened to them or to their loved ones. Forgetting, though, is not the same as forgiving.

So why should we forgive? Aside from the fact that it's the humane thing to do, forgiving is the only way to truly heal. When we refuse to forgive those who have hurt us, the resentment and anger we harbor gnaws at us. Forgiving is something we do in order to heal ourselves so we can move on with our lives. By definition, forgiving means giving up the hope of a different or better past. When we openly acknowledge to ourselves that whatever happened to us can never change no matter how hard we fight against our memories, only then are we able to begin



to put the past behind us and begin the process of self-healing.

Step one

Spend a few days reflecting on the people who hurt you during your childhood (physically, mentally, emotionally, and/or spiritually). Write their names down on a sheet of paper, including those people who may have passed on since then. If you don't feel comfortable using someone's real name, that's okay--just make up a name. The important thing is to list every person who caused you serious pain during the first ten to twelve years of your life. By "serious pain", I mean pain that is either still with you today or that remained with you for a long time. Keep in mind that no one is going to see your list unless you choose to share it. Here is my own list:

1. My father
2. My mother
3. My stepfather

Step two

Once you have completed your list, go back and describe, in as much detail as you can, exactly how each person hurt you. Don't make any excuses for the person. Simply describe his or her actions, what he or she did that caused you to suffer. Here are examples from my own list:

1. My father, after abandoning my mother, left my brother and me standing on the side of the highway one day when we were



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six and five years old, respectively, with a promise that he would be back to see us again in a couple of weeks. I didn't see him again until I was sixteen and lying in the hospital in critical condition from a gunshot wound.

2. My mother put her addiction to alcohol ahead of my need for her love, nurturing and attention. She was hardly ever there for me emotionally.

3. My stepfather Max only knew one way to punish me each time I misbehaved--which was often--, and that was to beat me with a two-inch wide leather belt. I came to both fear and hate him for that.

### Step three

Once you have completed steps one and two, write a letter to each offender and inform him or her in as much detail and accuracy as you can just what he or she did to you that caused you pain and suffering, how it made you feel then, and how it affected you in the years that followed. (Make sure you write a letter to those people who have since died, too.)

Your letter should be in two parts. In the first part, include statements that describe each specific offense the person committed against you and how it affected you then and in the years that followed. In the second part, include specific statements of forgiveness:

Dear Mom (use the name or title that best represents the



person),

I have been thinking seriously about my life and our relationship and I have discovered some things I need to say.

Mom, when I was (age) years old, I remember how you . . .  
. (Write an action statement that describes what the person did that hurt you.) I want you to know . . . (Write a statement that describes the pain and suffering you felt as a result of the action committed against you.)

List as many examples of the person's offensive actions and how they affected you as you need to. Be specific.

Mom, I forgive you for . . .

Mom, I forgive you for . . .

Mom, I forgive you for . . .

List as many statements of forgiveness as you need to.

To help you gain a clearer picture of how to write your letters, here are excerpts from my letter to my mother, who passed away in 2004:

Dear Mom,

I have been reviewing my life and our relationship, and I have discovered some things I want to say to you.

Mom, you neglected my need for your expressions of love and nurturing throughout my childhood. I don't have a single memory of you ever holding me, or hugging me, or tussling my hair when I was a child. I was very hurt and sad by this



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throughout my childhood. I thought for a very long time that you didn't love me.

Mom, I remember how you gave me the silent treatment sometimes for days on end. You wouldn't speak to me unless I asked you a question. This made me feel like you didn't love me, and I was always worried about you and filled with anxiety until your mood changed and you were happy again.

Mom, I remember seeing your vodka bottles hidden all over the house and secretly watching you take drinks from them. I remember how you would be happy for a while after taking your drink, and then you would be sad and silent again. I was afraid of what might happen to you when the bottles dried up. I was anxious, too, about what mood you would be in whenever I came home from school or from playing outside.

Mom, I forgive you for not holding me or hugging me or messing up my hair when I was a little boy.

Mom, I forgive you for giving me the silent treatment and making me feel like you didn't love me all the times when you were sad and unhappy.

Mom, I forgive you for causing me to constantly worry about whether you would have enough vodka left in your bottles and what would happen if you ran out.

Mom, I want you to know that I understand that you were dealing with your own hurt and pain and you weren't intentionally



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trying to ignore me and make me anxious and afraid.

Mom, I love you, I miss you. Good-bye. Love, Pat

Writing letters of forgiveness to the people who hurt you during your childhood should be done by yourself and in private. This is the time to end your relationship with the hurt and pain you've lived with by completing what is unfinished between you and the person you're addressing. Each letter will help you become complete with everything about the relationship that has been unfinished for you until now. It will also allow you to hold on to the fond memories you may have of the person, as well as your beliefs about your spiritual principles. At the same time, you will be able to let go of the hopes, dreams, and unrealistic expectations you had of getting something from someone who couldn't or wouldn't give it to you.

It's important to understand that your letters of forgiveness are a private and confidential matter. Any letters you write should never be mailed or shared with anyone other than a spouse, a close friend, a corrections counselor or psychologist. Nor should you ever try to forgive someone in person. Unsolicited forgiveness is almost always perceived as an attack, and the experience could leave you feeling even more hurt and angry than you were before. The person(s) you are forgiving need never know that you have done so. This applies to family members, bullies, teachers, police officers, or anyone



who has hurt you.

Even so, for your forgiveness to be complete, it's always necessary that you verbalize it to someone--a close friend, spouse, counselor, someone you trust. The reason is that our unconscious minds demand closure, and closure can best be obtained by having someone witness this very important process you have just completed.

The fact that you are reading this book is a good indication that you are searching for answers to some very serious issues in your life. Few issues are more important than learning to forgive. If you followed the procedures outlined above, you should be feeling some sense of relief and accomplishment for having settled unfinished business between you and the people who caused you hurt and pain during your childhood. Now it's time to address the meaning of the word remorse.