Admitting Wrong
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HH 2019

I listen to a lot of podcasts. I enjoy podcasts about all sorts of topics, but my absolute favorite podcast is and has always been This American Life. Their human interest stories are fascinating, their investigative reporting is illuminating and well researched, and the stories open me up to other people's experiences. As far as I know, I haven't missed an episode in over a decade. I know that when This American Life is on, I will hear interesting stories by thoughtful reporters, and when I hear those stories, I feel that I can trust them.

A number of years ago, This American Life had an episode devoted to the story of a man named Mike Daisey who travelled to China to learn about how Apple products are manufactured. He had been travelling the United States sharing his story about the terrible conditions at the factory he visited in Shenzhen, and This American Life decided to give him the opportunity to tell his story on their show. In the episode, he talks about interviewing a thirteen year old employee, and about seeing nets on the windows of the building to prevent suicide. He talks about the tiny rooms in the dormitories for employees, and about the shaky hands of the workers he met, due to neurological damage suffered as a result of being exposed to

chemicals during work. The story was vivid and disturbing, and I felt a sense of discomfort as I listened attentively on my iPod.

And then, two months later, I downloaded that week's This American Life episode and I heard the familiar voice of the show's host, Ira Glass, saying something that was absolutely unexpected. "From WBEZ Chicago, it's This American Life, distributed by Public Radio International, I'm Ira Glass. And I'm coming to you today to say something that I've never had to say on our program. Two months ago, we broadcast a story that we've come to believe is not true. It's a story that got a lot of attention. More people downloaded it than any episode we've ever done." Ira went on to explain that he and his fellow reporters now believed that much of Mike Daisey's story about his trip to China had been fabricated, and that they no longer stood by their own reporting. That week's episode was titled "retraction," and the entire hour of it was devoted to acknowledging their mistake. The episode had four parts: An introduction, in which Ira Glass apologizes and explains how they discovered that they had messed up; Part 1, in which a reporter tries to uncover what really happened during Mike Daisey's trip to China; Part 2 in which the reporters give Mike a chance to try to explain himself, and then explain their usual fact-checking process and the way in which they had failed to follow it in this case, and Part 3 in which a reporter does his own investigation into working conditions in Apple factories in China. There were no excuses – only transparency and a sincere desire to set the record straight.

It is so rare to see people acknowledging and exploring their own weaknesses.

There's a story in the Talmud about a rabbi who, like the reporters made a terrible mistake, and like them, had to confront the consequences of his behavior.

"An incident occurred in which Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi's house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah. He happened upon a person who the Talmud refers to as an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: "Greetings to you, my rabbi." But Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting in kind. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said to him: "Empty head! How ugly you are! Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?" The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and say to the Artist Who made me: "How ugly is the vessel you made." When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned and insulted this man merely on account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey and bowed down before him, and he said to the man: "I have sinned against you; forgive me." The man said to him: I will not forgive you until you go to the Artist Who made me and say: "How ugly is this vessel you made!"

Rabbi Elazar walked behind the man, trying to appease him, until they reached Rabbi Elazar's city. The people of his city came out to greet Rabbi Elazar, saying to him: "Greetings to you, my

rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master." The man said to them: "Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi?" The people said to him: "To this person, who is walking behind you." He said to them: "If this person is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people!" They asked him: "For what reason do you say this?" He told them how Rabbi Elazar had treated him. They said to him: "Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar."

He said to them: "For your sakes I forgive him – provided that he accepts upon himself not to become accustomed to behave like this." Immediately, Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon entered the study hall and taught: A person should always be soft like a reed and he should not be stiff like a cedar, as one

who is proud like a cedar is likely to sin." This statement is somewhat cryptic but one way of understanding it is that Rabbi Elazar is talking about himself. He knows that he did wrong. He knows that he needs to change. And he is using himself as an example for others. Cedars are tall and strong and stiff. If you see yourself as infallible, and assume that you are as you always will be, never changing your opinions or behaviors, you are bound to get into trouble. However, if you are open to learning and changing as you go through life, you will be a more sensitive, and likely a more caring, human being.

I love this story, for so many reasons. At the start, Rabbi Elazar believes he can do no wrong because he is so well educated. Like many of us, who are experts at particular things, he is accustomed to praise and affirmation, and thinks of himself as a good and successful person. He presumably spends his time learning how to be a good person, and yet, when confronted with this ugly person, he completely fails at exactly that. Unlike so many of us, Rabbi Elazar immediately acknowledges his error when confronted. He is not defensive, he doesn't rationalize his behavior or pretend it never happened. In fact, his mistake informs his future teaching! He publicly acknowledges his failure to others in order that others can learn from his mistake. It is through his willingness to talk about it that he makes restitution to the person he hurt, and ultimately becomes a more authoritative role model.

Now you may have noticed that I haven't said much yet about the behavior of the man who Rabbi Elazar spoke to so inappropriately and meanly. It's not clear that he himself acts in a completely exemplary way in this story. Yes, he stands up to his tormenter and confronts him for his behavior in a way that leads him to recognize how awful his behavior was, but when presented with a sincere apology, he seems to reject it. He then goes on to speak negatively about Rabbi Elazar to the people of the town, not the kindest choice, and which might not be warranted, given that Rabbi Elazar appears to be genuinely sorry. However, when it comes to Rabbi Elazar's apology, I'm not sure that it really matters. So what if the person he insulted was a bit of a jerk? That doesn't excuse Rabbi Elazar for insulting the man in the first place, and it doesn't let him off the hook for acknowledging his wrong and trying to rectify the mistake. In

assessing situations, it's often easy to tie together the behavior of both parties, as if to suggest that bad behavior warrants more bad behavior, but that approach is destructive. If I did something wrong, I need to do what I can to fix it, whether or not the person I harmed forgave me.

Rabbi Elazar learns to catch himself before making comments on other people's appearances by interacting with someone who is willing to challenge him, to tell him that he was wrong, and to help him understand why his behavior was harmful. So many of us find ourselves surrounded by articles and news stories and facebook posts by people who we agree with, that it can be hard to have the type of interaction that Rabbi Elazar had. Even when we do encounter other ideas, we are often so certain of our views that we tend to get on our own soapboxes rather than take the people who challenge us seriously. In our society, it's really hard to actively engage in disagreement with someone. We have to seek those moments out if we want to be challenged, if we want any chance of someone holding up a mirror to us.

We have all experienced responses to bad behavior, whether the behavior was perpetrated by ourselves, by those we know, or by those we hear about. I have to say, I think the world would be a different place if more people acted like Rabbi Elazar, despite how hard that must have been for him. I would guess that most of us have had some experience of making a mistake and experiencing the urge to pretend nothing happened, or to justify our behavior to ourselves and others, or to compare it favorably to what someone else did. It's not just politicians and celebrities who deny, justify, and obfuscate. We all have felt the urge to be defensive. It takes

openness to looking at ourselves honestly to see what we don't want to see about ourselves, and it takes courage to admit our mistakes, even if we don't have to admit them on prime time television.

For the past week, the daily prayer service has included *Seliḥot* prayers, prayers of repentance. In the *Seliḥot* service we recite the *Ashamnu*, the list of our sins that we will all recite together, many times, next week. Before the *Ashamnu*, however, we say this intriguing line that always jumps out at me:

אין אנו עזי פנים וקשי עורף לוֹמַר לְפָנֶיךָ: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וֵאלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, צַדִּיקִים אֲנַחְנוּ וְלֹא חָטָאנוּ, אֲבָל אֲנַחְנוּ וַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ חָטָאנוּ:

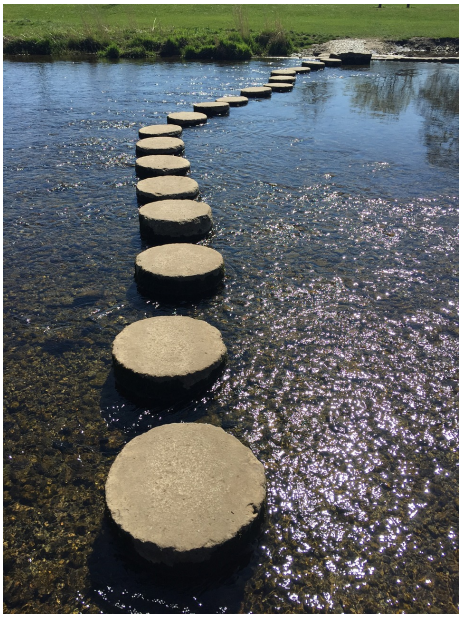
"We are neither so insolent nor so obstinate as to claim before you, God and God of our ancestors, "We are righteous, without sin!" For we, like our ancestors who came before us, have sinned." We say this every time that we confess our sins. Why do we need to say it? We're already *listing* our sins, so isn't it obvious that we know that we sinned? I think the prayer is acknowledging just how hard this is. In reality, we DO sometimes miss our mistakes. We DON'T like confronting our errors. And we DON'T want to reveal them to other people. Just reciting these lines is an acknowledgement of that truth and an important step in the right direction, but this prayer isn't just a statement of fact – it's a reminder, a push to us, to examine ourselves with humility, to recognize that there are, by nature of our being human, ways that we fall short – in our skills, in our perception of others, in our behavior.

Now of course, there are a number of reasons that we don't like to admit our errors. For one, we don't like thinking of ourselves as flawed. I know that I don't like that feeling that I get sometimes when I realize that I have made a mistake. It doesn't feel good, and I don't think I'm the only one. So is it any wonder that sometimes we avoid looking too closely at our own behavior, or considering that maybe we shouldn't have done something the way we did? Of course, even when we do acknowledge our mistakes to ourselves, admitting them to others is yet another obstacle. Will this person think less of me when they realize what I did? Or even if the person does know, do I have to bring it up again? Do I have to actually talk with them about it, endure their response, which may make me feel even worse?

Of course, often the outcome of admitting our mistakes is far better than we fear. In some cases, it can bring us closer to the person we hurt, because closeness can come from vulnerability. Furthermore, when we admit our wrong, we show, like Rabbi Elazar, that we can listen to others, and that we care what they have to say. And sometimes, as in the case of the This American Life story, admitting wrong actually makes us more credible. I might never have known that Mike Daisey's story was a lie if This American Life hadn't told me. Nevertheless, the fact that they aired their retraction gives me an enormous amount of confidence in them. By admitting their mistake, they display their underlying commitment to the truth. They seem more human, but more determined than I had even realized to share only information in which that they are absolutely confident.

I find it comforting to remember that when we make mistakes, we are in good company. We're in the company of rabbis like Rabbi Elazar and reporters like Ira Glass. And, when we have the courage to admit to each other what we've done, we realize we're in the company of each other as well. It's one of the things that I love about that prayer that goes before the confession.

I pray that we will all have the courage, in the coming weeks and months, to take to heart the



words of that prayer. "We are neither so insolent nor so obstinate as to claim before you, God and God of our ancestors, 'We are righteous, without sin!' For we, like our ancestors who came before us, have sinned." When we are confronted with our own mistakes, may we have the strength to acknowledge and address them, and use them as stepping stones to becoming the people that we want to be.