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Michael Gerson commentary: Clinton unacquainted with value of apology

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Tuesday August 9, 2016 6:09 AM

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One of the most unintentionally revealing moments of Hillary Clinton's campaign so far came during her recent, unconvincing explanation of the email affair: "I may have short-circuited it and for that I ... ah ... you know, will try to clarify."



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Most of the resulting ridicule has focused on the "short-circuited" portion of the statement, which seems a particularly gentle

euphemism for prevarication. But it is the later portion of her quote that exposes a serious political disability: an ingrained, almost automatic recourse to guile.

The moment really should be watched in order to be properly appreciated. Clinton launches her sentence with, "I may have short-circuited it and for that" If this were an SAT question, the natural completion would be "... and for that I sincerely apologize." Clinton looks like she is headed in that direction, but stops herself. The result — "and for that I ... ah ... you know, will try to clarify."

Then she proceeds with the opposite of clarification: "I have acknowledged repeatedly that using two email accounts was a mistake. And I take responsibility for that. But I do think ... having him (FBI Director James Comey) say that my answers to the FBI were truthful and then I should quickly add what I said was consistent with what I had said publicly. And that's really sort of, in my view, trying to tie both ends together."

The complexity of Clintonian knots is one reason that only 34 percent of Americans in a recent poll judge her "honest and trustworthy."

It is amazing how many problems are caused, in politics and in life, by an inability to sincerely apologize.

I am not referring here to the harder and richer form of apology and forgiveness required, say, in post-genocide Rwanda or post-apartheid South Africa. In such cases, the public acceptance of guilt by wrongdoers, the expression of regret, the recognition of terrible harm, allow whole societies to affirm a new set of moral norms and begin the process of healing.

No, my concern is public apology in a normal, everyday political setting. Forgiveness is the only force that allows flawed men and women to change their minds and reconstruct their lives on firmer ground. 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.

When an official makes a sincere apology, it can paradoxically improve his or her public standing. The authentic admission of wrong involves a type of courage. It shows vulnerability and humanity.

The qualities that turn people into successful politicians — self-confidence, ambition, persistence, thick skin — seem to work against them in situations that require humility and genuine self-criticism. Those virtues, by any historical standard, are dramatically lacking in the 2016 presidential nominees.

Clinton seems to have drawn all the wrong lessons from a lifetime of scandal management. Her determination to avoid partisan scrutiny resulted in actions — keeping personal control of her emails and destroying a bunch of them — that have invited massive partisan scrutiny and confirmed pre-existing suspicions about her character.

The ritual of apology and forgiveness has an unavoidably moral root. It is “inextricably linked,” according to theologian L. Gregory Jones, “to a commitment to change the behavior that would lead to a different way of life.” A sincere apology can be redemptive. What Jones calls “spinning sorrow” is among the lowest of political acts.

When Clinton mouths the words, “I am sorry,” and surrounds them with a thick cloud of self-justification, we are only convinced that she regrets being caught. Rather than making her look vulnerable and human, it makes her seem devious and supremely political. Does anyone really believe the Clinton way of politics has changed?

This is the American emergency: an acute shortage of public integrity at the highest level of our politics.

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