

Dad, Stop Saying You're Sorry and Ask This Instead

It was not the kind of question I was expecting as we sat there, hands sticky with drips of ice cream running down our fingers.

It was not the kind of question I'd ever asked myself, or had someone else ask me, let alone a 14-year-old.

It was not the kind of question I wanted to think about, or even acknowledge, and yet, here I was, face-to-face with a young teenage girl, being asked a question about a reality we will all one day face.

"What would you do if you knew it was your last day on earth?"

I closed my eyes.

What would I do if I knew it was my last day on earth?

I wanted to answer right away with something that would be all-encompassing of my values, something that would be richly and epically proportioned, something that would be wise and an example to her and her two younger sisters sitting right next to her, but my mouth was like a desert. I had nothing.

She took another bite of fudge brownie ice cream and said, "I know what I'd do."

I leaned in. I was curious. Something absolutely childlike and fanciful was soon to follow, I was sure.

But it wasn't.

"I would ask for forgiveness," she said. "I would go around and ask others for forgiveness."

I set down my cup of melting ice cream.

This was no 14-year-old answer I'd ever heard of. No eating cake for breakfast, lunch and dinner. No meeting her favorite movie star crush. No taking all her friends and family to Disneyland. No. This answer was nothing childish.

"Have you ever asked for forgiveness before?" I questioned.

"Yes," she said, taking another bite of ice cream.

"Was it easy for you?"

She put down her ice cream too.

"No," she said. "It's difficult, and scary, but it's what we're called to do."

Suddenly, I realized that any answer I would have given would have been a bit trivial, in comparison. Because—to be honest—my answer would have been more self-focused, more about satisfying my emotions and last-moment desires.

Her answer, "forgiveness," was anything but selfish. It was everything selfless, humble and sacrificial.

I owe a great deal to my honorary sister, Dative, for the question she asked me, and for the answer she gave, for it has confronted me with something that makes most people start to squirm: asking for forgiveness.

The reality is, because we're human, we are hurting people all the time. Most of the time we don't even know it, though sometimes we do, and guilt may begin to rise up within us, compelling us to act.

In response to that guilt, we often say, "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry"—if we were to give that phrase currency, how much value would you attach to it?

I can say I'm sorry like it's my job. Bump into you in the grocery store aisle, "Oops! I'm sorry!" Accidentally spill a

bit of coffee on your papers, “Oh my word. I’m so sorry!” Speak a little too loud at the meeting, “I am so sorry.”

“I’m sorry” is worth pennies to me, passing through my hands before I even know they’re gone.

But asking, “Will you forgive me?” That weighs a whole lot more.

It’s not a question I dole out very often, because it comes at a great cost: my vulnerability.

“I’m sorry” is a one-way street statement. It’s a Band-aid quickly patched and left to hope the wound might heal, eventually.

“Will you forgive me?” requires a dialogue. It’s the burning antiseptic, tweezers pulling gravel out of flesh, inviting the healing process to begin.

Forgiveness necessitates empathy, humility and courage.

When answering her own question, “What would you do if you knew it was your last day on earth?,” Dative didn’t say she would go around telling people “I’m sorry.” There’s a difference between saying “I’m sorry” and asking for forgiveness.

“Don’t be sorry,” Dative’s words seemed to tell me. “Be vulnerable.”

How did Dative, a 14-year-old, arrive at the conclusion that the final 24 hours of her life she would spend doing one of the most vulnerable things you could do?

If I were to venture a guess, I believe it’s what has been modeled to her from the place where she grew up, a place that has shown her how true healing, restoration and reconciliation comes from radical forgiveness—a country called Rwanda.

It has only been 23 years since the Rwandan Genocide, when nearly 1 million people were killed in 100 days. And yet, if you were to visit Rwanda today, I'd be hard pressed if you didn't come away with the word "peace" on the forefront of your mind.

Why?

Forgiveness heals seemingly fatal wounds.

Dative knows this. She's lived it. And if she knew it was the last day of her life, she would do the costliest thing she could think of, because she knows it yields a priceless reward: healing, peace, freedom.

I bet most of us could share a personal story of forgiveness. And upon further reflection, I bet we could all think of someone whom we've hurt, or wronged, and know that deep down, it's probably the right thing to ask them for forgiveness—but probably not today, or tomorrow, or ever? Dative's question gives us an opportunity most people will never get—to plan how we would spend the last day of our life. For how many of us will know when it's our last day? Or when it's our friend's or brother's or mother's last day?

I have never been more caught off guard than when my dad passed away from a heart attack in 2008. When I think about the last 24-hours of his life, while I didn't have the opportunity to say goodbye, I did have the opportunity to practice forgiveness.

During the four years after my mom died, my dad did some amazing things with me and for me, but he also did things that left me hurt and wounded. I would be lying if I didn't say I was burning up waiting for my dad to come ask me for forgiveness. However, I realized that during those four years, I undoubtedly did things that hurt him, too, and how I had an equal opportunity to come to him and ask for forgiveness.

So I did. I went up to my dad and said something to the effect of, "Dad, if I've ever done anything that made you think I love you any less, or that I didn't desire your happiness, would you forgive me? Our relationship means far more to me than who is 'right' or 'wrong.'"

How on earth my dad and I had that conversation in his last 24 hours, I have no idea. But God knew. And believe me, I haven't forgotten it.

I don't know when my last day on earth will be, and truth be told, neither do you.

In what I believe was a divinely-appointed conversation in an ice cream shop with my honorary little sister, Dative, I've been reminded that I have a choice to live each day as if it were my last—to not go to sleep at night with bitterness or guilt on my heart, should I not wake up and have the opportunity to ask one of the most meaningful, powerful and radical questions I could think to ask, "Will you forgive me?"

If I can be so bold, don't be sorry.

Be vulnerable. Be humble. Seek forgiveness. Give forgiveness. For you have been forgiven. {eoa}

This article originally appeared at .