

## Forgiveness and Accountability in Community Life

It is not possible to explore, much less experience, healthy forgiveness in community life without first understanding the difference between forgiveness and accountability. Accountability is an earthly process; it involves looking clearly together at the difference between intention and impact, without shame or blame, and taking responsibility on both sides. Forgiveness, by contrast, is a grace that we cannot command; it is a gift that we receive from the Divine when our hearts ask for it, and open to it. It does not often come without accountability; it does not come without asking for it; and it does not come without openness to receive it.

What does accountability look like in the healthy and holy community? What does forgiveness look like, and what does it take to be ready to give and to receive it? What are the necessary practices and customs that we can nurture among ourselves, so that both forgiveness and accountability can take root and flourish in our “perfectly imperfect” journey together?

This is a topic that is healing in all communities—but especially so in communities with significant power imbalance among members, and where relationship with the Divine is everyone’s primary locus of integrity.

Let me begin by telling a story of two very good friends Abdul Ghaffar (which means servant of the divine quality of forgiveness) and Hasiba (which means reckoning or accountability). Abdul Ghaffar and Hasiba are Sufi community leaders. Hasiba holds dhikr at her house on Sunday evenings, and Abdul Ghaffar on Thursdays.

One Sunday evening, Abdul Ghaffar got totally drunk on Allah at Hasiba’s dhikr circle, and felt all the inner worlds opening. After dhikr, everyone sat around together, and he gave teaching after teaching from deep inspiration. Many beloveds experienced profound direct transmission of the Deep Love, and several newcomers took hand through Abdul Ghaffar then and there.

On his way home afterwards, pulling out of Hasiba’s driveway, Abdul Ghaffar ran over and smashed a whole row of little solar lights along the driveways edge. Hey, these things happen. There were no further casualties, and Abdul Ghaffar arrived home in a very high station, filled with Allah’s holy love.

Abdul Ghaffar came by the next day to thank Hasiba for hosting the amazing dhikr that had so completely opened his heart. He found Hasiba kneeling among her broken solar lights and asked her, “Hey, what happened?”

Hasiba explained, “Last night you were so majdub, brother, that you ran right over them without noticing. I don’t think any of them can be repaired. They’re pretty thoroughly smashed.”

Abdul Ghaffar fell to weeping holy tears filled with light. He cried, “Oh my holy sister. Let there be no separation between our hearts. I was drunk with Allah’s light, and I meant no harm. Please forgive me.”

Hasiba was flooded with grace, and her heart opened to the divine quality of forgiveness. As tears of light filled her own eyes, she said, “Let there be no separation between us. I forgive you, my holy brother.” They made dhikr together in celebration of the unity of hearts, and Allah was with them in the deep and holy way.

At last, Abdul Ghaffar once again thanked Hasiba for her mercy, her kindness and her really amazing dhikr circle, then said goodbye and went home. Hasiba stood there for a while, thinking what a beautiful holy brother Abdul Ghaffar is, but true to her name, there was also something bothering her. Namely, the reckoning of the price of little solar lights that cost \$5.99 each (before tax), six of which were now broken. Given that they were broken in a holy way, did this mean that she was blessed to eat the cost of replacements?

What do you think?

The following Thursday, dhikr was scheduled to be held at Abdul Ghaffar’s house as usual. Hasiba was planning to skip it because she was going to be driving Howla, another sister in the community to the airport, and didn't think she'd make it back quite on time for the start of the dhikr circle.

But Abdul Ghaffar called her up and said that he still felt shaky from the expansion he had experienced at Hasiba’s dhikr circle, and would deeply appreciate her leadership that night, as he didn’t feel that he would be able to lead.

Hasiba told Howla that she couldn't drive her to the airport, and so Howla had to do a fairly expensive Uber which she couldn’t really afford. Then at the last minute, Abdul Ghaffar sent a group text saying that the dhikr at his house was cancelled. He'd received an order that he needed to be in zawiya alone that night.

Hasiba called Abdul Ghaffar, and in listening to him, it felt clear to her that he was receiving true guidance—and yet Hasiba was not sure how she felt about this, or what to say about it. How would you feel about it? What would you say?

After a few more holy incidents like this involving canceled plans with financial consequences, breach of confidentiality, property damage and lost car keys, all of which were the result of Abdul Ghaffar either receiving direct guidance or being lost in holy ecstasy, Hasiba realized that it was time to have an important community conversation. She began by asking Abdul Ghaffar to read and write with her pages 103-106 from *Reality of Imagination, The Sixth Door: The Difference Between the Gnostic Knower and the One Acquainted with Knowledge*.

I’m going to read an excerpt from this out loud, and it will take a while, and it will not be easy to understand with your mind. Don’t worry about following it exactly; just let the transmission wash through you. Afterwards, Hasiba and Abdul Ghaffar will have a very good discussion about what it all means.

*Pages 103-106 from Reality of Imagination, The Sixth Door: The Difference Between the Gnostic Knower and the One Acquainted with Knowledge.*

When Abu Yazid (Radya Allahu Anhu) was asked, “Would the one acquainted with knowledge disobey?” he answered, “Indeed, the command of Allah is a measure decree.” The one acquainted with knowledge—those people who enjoy the divine attentive care—can still be disobedient because of the predestined decree that is executed through them. However, their disobedience is not because they meant to transgress the limit set by Allah, nor is it to make what is forbidden, permissible, because these types of sin do not issue from them as they issue from others. This is because faith is engraved in their hearts, and it prevents this from happening. The one whose veil is lifted witnesses this matter, and he will observe the etiquette of hearing. This station results in a bewildered state, and takes away the intellect that is charged with obligatory duties, and the gnostic remains without distinction with The Guardian like the angels.

Disobedience does not occur with the faithful believer except because of forgetfulness or heedlessness, or by getting an explanation that returns it to its origin. But if the same action occurred by the possessor witnessing, it is not even named disobedience, even though the ordinary might call it so, because of the cloudiness that exists upon the eyes of the veiled. Allah excuses the gnostics for their rejection of action. In reality, the doer was not really committing any disobedience. This is because Allah’s people are totally consumed in fana, and that annihilates the possibility of any opposition to Allah, but people do not recognize their infallibility.

People are of two categories.

The First Category: This includes those who only act in accordance with what is permissible, and even though some of what is called ‘disobedience’ according to the law of the ummah might manifest through them, they are granted a favor from Allah because they used to commit sins, but they knew that they had a Lord who forgives and brings everyone to account. So they repented until they arrived at the station in which it was said to them, “Act as you will, for I have forgiven you,” and they heard it as the People of Badr did. In this case, all the rulings concerning mistakes are abrogated. So in reality, they do not commit disobedience, because they actually do what is permissible for them.

So whoever has this station, let him know that he has not committed anything to be ashamed of in spite of the outside tongue that blames him for committing disobedience, because even though the outer picture may be similar to that of one who really did commit disobedience, the inner ruling is different in each case.

The Second Category: This includes people who have looked at the secret of predestination, and how fate rules over creation. They experienced the actions decreed for them as mere actions, not in connection to the ruling related to these actions. This occurs in the presence of pure light. In this presence, Allah’s people say that all of Allah’s actions are good, and there is no Doer except Allah. There is no action except Allah’s.

The story of Musa (SAWS) with al-Khidr (Radya Allahu Anhu) who killed an individual demonstrates this subtle state. Look at how Musa (SAWS) judged it and look at how al-Khidr judged it. There is a big difference between the two judgments, but each of them was right concerning the aspect of the reality that each saw.

However, the state of al-Khidr is the state of the people of the witnessing. They are able to see what is decreed before it occurs in this physical existence, and they do what they do with insight. They have evidence from their Lord, and this is a station that cannot be attained unless Allah becomes the hearing and the seeing of the gnostic.

You ask, should the restrictive law or punishment ordained by the holy book be applied to the possessor of witnessing? Know that whoever arrives in this world and attains the age of puberty when his intellectual capacity is established, and he is charged with obligatory duties, the restriction of the law will never be lifted from him in this world, because divine speech has not indicated that it should be so. The law must be applied because it is the rule in this world, not because it is his inner state. In his inner state, the gnostic was given the analogy that lifted the restriction of the law. However, it is still necessary to apply the law in this world, according to its rules. But when the promise of the final world arrives, and we will all move to it, the rulings in this lower world will not be applicable anymore. This means that ordained rights will be abrogated in the world of contentment, and this holds true for the one to whom Allah shows his grace, while another may be shown misery. In spite of this knowledge, the restriction of the law and the ordained obligations cannot be abrogated for either the contented or the miserable in this world.

This is because the laws were legislated to serve the benefit of this world and the final world as well. So it is impossible to abrogate the restriction set by the law as long as this lower world remains, and as long as the person remains in it. If it were not so, the law would have been abrogated for the one whose veil is lifted, because he does not see a doer accept Allah and Allah does not restrict Himself.

However, no matter how the friend of Allah crosses the scale of the law, his inner state is still secure because of the possibility that exists in the essence of the universally merciful concerning his reality. This is also contained in the permissible scale. Moreover, if he manifests an action that demands punishment according to the outer aspects of the law, which the ruler made constant, the punishment must be carried out, despite the possibility that he is one of the worshippers whom Allah exempts from that which is prohibited for others, and even though Allah might have excused him in the final world, as he did with the people of Badr, when he made their actions permissible, as it is narrated in Hadith, “Do as you will, for I have forgiven you.”

Notice that Allah did not say that He has exempted you from the law of this world. So the restricted punishment must be applied to him in this world, even though his inner being is free of sin. If it happens that you are one of the judges, you must apply the restricted punishment upon him, and if you do not do so, you will be disobedient and in opposition to Allah's command.

When Abdul Ghaffar and Hasiba finished writing, they looked at each other and said, “Wow.” Abdul Ghaffar said, “Clearly, when our heart’s intention is pure, or when we have made tauba and been purified, Allah forgives us, for indeed Allah is the oft forgiving. Subhanallah!”

Hasiba said, “Yes, subhanallah! And yet even when our actions are fully forgiven by Allah—and even when disobedient actions are ordered and decreed for us by Allah, and even when actions that would be considered disobedient in others are not considered disobedient for us, although we are forgiven, we must still be held accountable in this world for our actions, along with their consequences. This means that even if we receive guidance to do something, it's not a free pass here in community life.”

Abdul Ghaffar thought deeply, and said, “So...maybe that means that I owe you for those little solar lights that I smashed, even though you forgave me completely in the holiness of the moment.”

Hasiba replied, “Yes, my dear beloved holy brother, and not only that, because what it says here is that even if you were following guidance and even if you were moved by ecstatic witnessing, if I don't hold you accountable here in this world for everything you say, or do, or neglect to do, that inconveniences others, or creates chaos in our community life, then *I* am in the wrong in Allah's eyes.”

Abdul Ghaffar said, “Wait, run that by me again...”

Hasiba said, “Here let me read this to you right here on p. 106, at the end of the section:

Notice that Allah did not say that He has exempted you from the law of this world. So the restricted punishment must be applied to him in this world, even though his inner being is free of sin. If it happens that you are one of the judges, you must apply the restricted punishment upon him, and if you do not do so, you will be disobedient and in opposition to Allah's command.

Abdul Ghaffar looked very meek for a moment and asked, “Do you think that I deserve punishment?”

Hasiba said, “No, my sweet beloved brother, but I do think you should pay for those broken solar lights that you smashed—and I do think that we all need to be paying more attention to both forgiveness *and* accountability in our community life.”

Hasiba and Abdul Ghaffar kept discussing this chapter, and decided that understanding the clear distinction between accountability and forgiveness—between the law of this world and the next—was so important for the community that they decided to do a teaching together about it the next Sunday.

Abdul Ghaffar spoke first, about the divine quality of forgiveness. I wish that I could do justice to his beautiful speech; everyone was in tears as his heart overflowed with the grace of forgiveness, a grace of divine origin, which our hearts cannot command. Abdul Ghaffar made it clear that just like love, or wisdom, or patience, or strength, we cannot manufacture these qualities ourselves. They belong to Allah, and we can ask for them, but only Allah can send the lights of love or wisdom, or patience, or strength to us. Just so with forgiveness—we cannot forgive unless the Forgive sends the light of forgiveness to our heart. It can't be forced. We

cannot make the light of forgiveness arrive in our heart, nor demand that it arrive in anyone else's heart. We can ask with sincerity, and we can ask our beloveds to ask.

Weeping openly in front of his community, Abdul Ghaffar shared his feeling that the reason why he was named Abdul Ghaffar was because he so frequently—and so repeatedly—found himself needing to ask for forgiveness. Sometimes this forgiveness was forthcoming from others; at other times it was not.

What Abdul Ghaffar now realized is that there were times when others hardened their hearts towards him, or towards each other, because they did not know that there is a difference between forgiveness and accountability—and that accountability is important, too.

Here Hasiba began to speak with her very grounded, very practical perspective: “For instance,” she said, “Remember the time Abdul Ghaffar drove right over my little solar lights along my driveway? I thought that if I forgave him, that meant that I couldn't ask him to pay for the lights—and I couldn't bear to make separation between our hearts, so I forgave him.

“What I now know is that forgiveness and accountability are two separate things—I can forgive him completely, so there's no separation between our hearts, and on Judgment Day it will not come between us. But I can also hold him accountable, and ask him to pay for replacement lights. In fact, it is obligatory to hold Abdul Ghaffar accountable, according to the laws of this world. And, in fact *I* would be wrong if I did not hold him accountable. Now that I know that I can forgive completely AND hold accountable, both are much easier, because they really are two completely different things.

“Forgiveness is a gracious mercy from Allah that dissolves separation between hearts. Accountability is about the justice of earthly law in community life. Here's the relationship between the two of them: Forgiveness comes more easily with people who are willing to be held accountable, so sometimes accountability needs to come first, before forgiveness will blossom in our heart.

“But here's the other side of it: People are much more willing to be held accountable if we hold them accountable without shame or blame—and that happens when we *are* holding them accountable, but we've already forgiven them. They can feel that we've already dissolved the separation in our heart. So sometimes, even though accountability is important, it's forgiveness that needs to come first.”

At this point Abdul Ghaffar burst into tears again. Hasiba waited a few moments and then continued, “This is a really big deal. In fact, for me it's the biggest deal. Now that I know that forgiveness is easier when there's accountability—and accountability is so much easier when there's also forgiveness, I would love for all of us as a community to learn all that we can about both.”

FORGIVENESS	ACCOUNTABILITY
A divine quality	An earthly responsibility
No separation between hearts	Repairing specific harm
Pertains to the next world	Pertains to this world
Receptive	Active
Ask and open to grace	Process and remediate
Easier when preceded by accountability	Easier when preceded by forgiveness

Let's take a moment as community to have an embodied experience in our hearts of what all these different words mean. For example, through our actions, we may have offended or harmed or wronged someone, and even if it was unintentional, trust was broken. Now the other person's heart is closed to us; there is separation. How does that feel, in our body? What is it like, when someone else has not forgiven us—even if they are being very nice about it on the surface?

Now let yourself remember in your body what it feels like when forgiveness comes, and the separation of hearts dissolves. Ah.

Accountability is different—it's an earthly process, usually involving some discussion back and forth, that brings us right into the weeds of the details, while not letting go of the grace.

Hasiba then invited the community members to join in small groups of 3 or 4, to have some discussion of how these topics were moving through their hearts, and through their community. If we had more time, we would probably do that right now, too. Perhaps there is a future date where we can explore together more deeply. For now, let's move on to the next, and very important step in our journey.

When everyone came back together to share their experiences, they found that the community response to understanding the difference between forgiveness and accountability was nearly unanimous: most people felt that they, and the community as a whole, had a much greater

capacity to forgive than to hold others accountable—up until the point where unspoken and backlogged accountability conversations started closing hearts to the grace of forgiveness.

How exactly, they wanted to know, do we hold others accountable in the clean and polite, healthy and holy way? How do we initiate these accountability conversations in such a way that we do not provoke defensiveness or even backlash, especially if the person whom we are holding accountable is of a higher rank than we are, and is following guidance?

Hasiba and Abdul Ghafar realized that this was a very deep question, and that it would be a good time to take these and other questions into dhikr together.

So, they did.

The very next day, Hasiba happened to be talking to Abdullah Pat Aylward about the Jami' Project, she mentioned the discussion taking place in her community. Abdullah Pat mentioned that someone named Maryam Thea Elijah was working on a teaching on this very topic, to be given for the Minnesota Sufi Center later that month. Hasiba said, "Oh Pat, thanks for letting me know—do you think Maryam Thea Elijah would mind if I contacted her?" Abdullah Pat said, "I know Maryam Thea Elijah, and I know that she'd be glad to talk with you about it."

Hasiba and Maryam Thea Elijah talked, and Maryam Thea Elijah said, "It is not possible to hold someone else accountable in the clean and polite, healthy and holy way unless you are first able to hold **yourself** accountable with that same cleanliness."

Hasiba said, "Please come talk with us about this next Sunday before dhikr."

When she arrived, here is what Maryam Thea Elijah said:

Accountability is not just something that happens when we've done something wrong. It's a way of life. It's an aspect of our alignment and inner straightness, from the heights of gnosis to the most basic matters of conduct here in the dunya.

In the human body, the alignment is held in the heart at the level where the spine passes through. This is the moral compass of the heart and it allows us to have an internal sense of straightness, even in situations that are not straight.

Take a moment to find that in your own body, because the thought is not the same as the understanding. You might want to put your hand on your heart, and then try moving very slowly, forward or back, little bit to the left, a little bit to the right—it's easier with your eyes closed—to feel in your heart, when am I straight? When am I upright? Your spine will let you know from the inside when you are straight in your heart.

Then, just for contrast, let's put our hands on our head, forget about our heart and our spine, and say, "I'M RIGHT! It's obvious that I'm right! Why? Because I'm right!"



Notice what that feels like—let’s feel it in our body, so that we’ll know in the future when we feel like that. We *might* be right—but we are definitely not in our alignment.

Come down from your head, into your body, with your hand on your heart to help bring you down and in. Close your eyes so you can feel from the inside. Move your spine back and forth, a little bit to the left, a little bit to the right, until you can feel from the inside what straightness feels like in your heart—a heart that is in alignment with an axis that is greater than yourself.

Let’s take another moment for the sheer pleasure of it, to sit together, each of us in our own alignment, individual and solitary, and yet shared. No one can find it for us—we have to find it from the inside—but once we are there, we are all there together.

Would you prefer to trade that in for all of us with our hands on our head shouting at each other “I’m right, I’m right, I’m right!” ....I didn’t think so. Let’s stick with this, the practice of alignment through the heart.

Directly relevant to this:

Back in the 1970’s, a researcher named Herman Witkin did an experiment wherein he set up a slanted room. The floor was slanted, the walls were slanted at the same angle, the windows and the ceiling and the doorframes were all part of a uniform slant. It was not enormously slanted—just some.

In the very center of the room, facing the one-way mirror (also slanted), there was a chair, bolted to the floor. One at a time, Herman Witkin would tell each experimental subject, “Go into that room and sit up straight in the chair, and we will let you know when the experiment begins.”

But that was the experiment.

What they found was that fully 50% of the people in the experiment went in, and sat down in that chair slanted, in order to be congruent with the slanted room. In scientific terms, this is called being externally referenced. In Sufi terms, it’s called being caught by the dunya. Stopping with the outside picture.

The other 50% of the people went in and sat straight in the chair, with their spine straight in relation to gravity, even though it put them completely at odds with their entire environment. This is called being internally referenced, though we call it seeing Allah first, walking straight, not going left or right. It is only possible when we are in our own body, able to feel for our own alignment from the inside.

We all go through this all the time, right? We get totally caught by the dunya, externally reference, stopping with the outside picture and getting into a wrestling match with it—and then going to a community dhikr circles, and finding ourselves back in our heart again, in alignment.

Alignment is not about being in accordance with external human constructs, and it is definitely not a matter of opinion. Alignment is a physical and spiritual capacity to orient within an invisible straightness, and thus our own backbone forms the needle of our moral compass.

It's easier to find our alignment with our eyes closed. Close the door to the dunya, find your alignment within. The next step is much trickier: to open our eyes, and our ears, and our nose and mouth, and find our way through a jungle of slanted rooms while keeping our alignment within. No wonder we have to pray 5 times a day. No wonder we have so many practices to bring us back again.

Let's practice right now. As you see me and hear me, can you feel your own alignment, on the inside? You can still hear me speaking; you can still assess what I have to say, as input. But how would all of our relationships in community change, including our relationship with teachers, if we made a practice of staying in touch with our own alignment, our own inner compass, while face to face with each other?

I dream of community lived on this basis, including between teachers and students, healers and clients, both taking full responsibility for their own alignment, and meeting together on that basis.

This alignment, this sense of straightness from the inside, not stopping with the outside picture, forms the basis of our sense of accountability, first before God, and *then* within our community.

Now we are ready to take the next step, and this is where we get into blame and shame, which obstruct clean accountability from taking place.

The root of the moral compass is the tailbone. The spine goes up, and the tailbone, in health points down. We all have a tailbone, and believe it or not, we all have, in our brain, a caudal reflex—a part of our brain that is in charge of wagging our tail—our invisible tail, as the case may be—but the caudal reflex in the brain remains aware of that tail, and our tailbone position.

The position of our tailbone has everything to do with our capacity for clean accountability. I call it “Good Dog-Bad Dog Syndrome.” There is a neural feedback loop between the teeny weeny little tendons and ligaments around the tailbone and our sense of moral culpability.

With the tailbone even subtly curved under, we feel like a bad dog (“I’m a baaad dog!”). With the tailbone even subtly flared, we feel like a good dog (“I’m a good dog! How dare you say that I’m not this, or I did that... Don’t you know that I’m a good dog? How could *I* do something wrong?!”). That’s called defensiveness.

This has consequences in community life.

It's worth spending time with this in our own body, freeing up our own tail, and feeling how the position of our invisible tail shifts our posture, the tilt of our head, the width of our shoulders, and definitely our tone of voice. It's worth spending time just practicing holding yourself accountable—like for a month, practice not shaming yourself in bad dog mode, not going into the defensiveness of good dog mode, just being a simple, relaxed, tailbone-down, accountable dog.

Only when we ourselves are able to stand as Accountable Dog can we hold others accountable without blaming and shaming them. Blame is not uplifting or ennobling. Being held accountable is ennobling. The same words spoken from shame-and-blame land very differently than when spoken from clean accountability: I am here ready to be Accountable Dog, myself. Will you join me?

If anyone would like to spend more time on this, doing role plays and practicing how to stand and live and communicate as Accountable Dog, including with those who are of higher rank than us, I'd be happy to hold another gathering to practice this.

Believe it or not, that's just part one.

Please put a hand on your heart, and another hand on the low belly—low, below the navel. We are going to talk a little bit about the low belly. It is a place so tender, so sweet and so powerful. If we had more time I would present a fuller background as to the various teachings about this location and its meanings. Here's a short, practical version:

Just as the spine and the Accountable Dog tailbone are a living axis that keeps us in touch with our inborn moral compass, this wonderful place in the low belly is the seat of our natural ethics ... which is why it is very important not to be dissociated or cut off from this place. When we are not in touch with our natural seat of ethics inside of ourselves, we can't *feel* our ethical response. Then all we've got left is a bunch of inflexible and uninspired rules to follow.

We need both, morality and ethics, for clean and holy accountability. Stay with your hand on both heart and low belly, because I'm going to take us to a place that may hurt a little bit.

This low-belly place is a very child-like part of us. It is the part of us that experiences genuine pain and distress if we see one child hitting another child with a shovel, or calling them a nasty name. There's something in the pit of the belly that goes— "Aaaiigh!"

Keep a hand there, because what an incredible aspect of your being this is! How proud I am to know you, as someone who has not erased or exiled that child. When we are in touch with this child-self, it's like a pair of eyes down there that can look out, even over Zoom, and see the other caring, ethical children in our midst.

When others are also—however tentatively—empowering and connecting from that place of natural ethics down in the low belly, we can sense about each other, "Okay. I can feel OK with you, because if you ever did hurt me, you'd be sorry."

And, of course, the converse is also true: If someone is dissociated or cut off from this part of themselves, it's easy for them to hurt others and not feel anything about it. Thank you for staying in touch with your low-belly seat of ethics in community life. Thank you for not cutting off from that place in yourself, that allows you to feel your impact on others.

Ethical awareness is a commitment to showing up relationally in this soft place. It's a commitment to not being what I call 'emotionally hit-and-run.' Being emotionally hit-and-run

might include flinging strong language at someone, shooting flaming arrows of truth, even standing in righteousness, but not in caring. That’s emotional hit-and-run; that, and any other example of avoidance of showing up empathetically to experience the impact of our words and actions.

Ethical accountability mean that if I hurt you, I'm willing to notice. If I hurt you, I'm willing to feel it. I'm staying connected. It’s ecological, not hit-and-run.

The awakesness of this natural seat of ethics doesn't mean that we won't make mistakes. It means that our natural ethical reflex is alive and responsive. If I make an owie on you—ow ow ow—if we even see an owie taking place in front of us—our ethical commitment is to be connected enough to notice —not hit and run—and say, “Oh no! I’m so sorry! What can we do?”



Ethical awareness is not the same as moral compass. Moral compass gives us backbone, and the ability to take a stand on our values even when the whole world around us says otherwise. Moral stance is not relational except with Allah. It’s the degree of alignment in our intention. By contrast, our ethical sense is all about impact.

Before we look at how these two different aspects of accountability intersect, take a moment to feel it in your body: the accountability of the ethical child in the low belly, that hurts when we hurt anyone; versus the accountability of “not a bad dog, not a good dog, but a simple upright accountable dog.” We have both, right here in our own body, and we need both, right here in our own community.

Let’s look at some examples of how and where and why we need awareness of both. Can anyone think of any examples from community life, where both intention and impact needed to be considered as two separate aspects of accountability?

Hasiba spoke up and said, “My cousin Ed’s fiancée was devastated when he was 20 minutes late for a date with her. When he got there she was furious and crying, “You don’t love me. Why should I marry you?” My cousin Ed is not emotionally hit-and-run at all. He really felt the pain that his lateness caused. He was anguished when his fiancée’s said, “Every man I’ve ever dated has started showing up late like this when they were right about to dump me. So when you do it now, it’s just like one more dagger in my gut.”

Hasiba continued, “I can see how in this example, ethical accountability alone has turned Ed into a guilt-ridden walkover whenever his actions cause anybody any pain, ever, for any reason—and that’s not reasonable. We are never *completely* responsible for someone else’s impact from what we say or do.

“Also, Ed was late because he got caught behind a fallen tree on a back road where there was no cell service; he couldn’t call. He was morally straight; and yet there were still painful repercussions for his fiancée. Ed needs more backbone so that he can ask himself, “How out of alignment was I? Was what I did wrong in the eyes of God?” These questions bring much-needed balance to the accountability conversation, for a soft-hearted man like my cousin Ed.”

The community discussed this and other examples for a while, and everyone had a chance to consider the complementary differences between moral and ethical accountability.

Howla reflected, “I always thought that if I had a hadith to back me up, I didn’t have to care about the consequences of my actions. I’ve memorized more than a hundred hadith just so no one can tell me what to do, and what not to do.”

Laila said, “You’ve always had a very strong backbone, Howla, and your command of hadith is exceptional. But I admit that it has put a strain on our friendship sometimes, when I didn’t feel like you noticed—or even wanted to notice—your impact on me. I haven’t known how to talk with you about it until now.”

Howla considered. “Yeah,” she said heavily, “I guess I can be kinda hit-and-run sometimes.”

“Hit-and-run hadith!” shouted Said.

This led to a great community discussion of how we can sometimes leverage doctrine, scripture, or hadith as a way of dodging the more relational aspects of accountability. A surprising amount

of suppressed resentment was released, as people found new ways of talking about—and resolving—old patterns in the community.

Further, it was a great relief to everyone to realize that there may, or may not, be a clear degree of correspondence between the nature of our impact and the nature of our intentions. There may be barely any relationship at all. We may be *way* out of alignment, totally not straight—but our community may not mind at all; in fact they may want to join us in our error. Or, like Hasiba’s Cousin Ed, who was late for his date for entirely honorable reasons, we may be completely upright, and yet someone was hurt.

This recognition of moral straightness in our actions and intentions is not more important, nor less important, than the ethical consideration of my impact on you. Both belong in the conversation. Both belong in our body and in our community.

The question for the moral body is: Was I in alignment?

The question for the ethical body is: Who was hurt in this situation? Was it 100% necessary? Or could we have done something differently, and still been in alignment?

Howla asked, “But wait a minute! If everything looks different depending on whether we are looking at the situation morally or ethically, how can you figure out who’s right and who’s wrong?”

Abdul Ghaffar and Hasiba looked at each other, and then both said at the same time, “You can’t.”

Hasiba said, “A good reckoning is not about blame. Often nobody is completely right or completely wrong. Accountability is an opportunity for everyone to look at what happened, and take responsibility for our part, including how we can do better in the future.”

Abdul Ghaffar added, “What I now understand is that forgiveness blossoms like flowers in a garden, where accountability has pulled out all the weeds.”

At this point, Howla asked, “Hey, when people say ‘You hurt my heart!’ what does that mean, morally and ethically?”

Said shouted, “When people say ‘You hurt my heart!’ what they mean is, ‘You hurt my nafs!’”

Several people laughed; a few people looked very shocked, and Laila said, “When people say ‘You hurt my heart!’ what they mean is, ‘I want to feel that you care about your impact on me, and so far, I don’t.’”

Howla admitted, “Well, sometimes when I say, ‘You hurt my heart!’ what I mean is, ‘You are behaving like a total asshole, and I can’t think of a polite way to say so.’”

Said said, “Yeah, but ‘You hurt my heart!’ can also mean ‘You are not behaving like my ideal mommy or daddy, so I hate you. I’m not even sure what’s bothering me, but I’m sure it’s your fault.’”

Laila laughed but then said very firmly, “Let’s take the best-case scenario here. When people say ‘You hurt my heart!’ what they mean—possibly on an unconscious level—is, ‘I’d like to have an accountability conversation. I’d like to understand the intentions behind your words and actions, and I’d like you to understand how I was impacted by your words and actions. Then we can both look at our own level of accountability in this interaction.’”

The community agreed that from now on, when anyone said, “You hurt my heart,” this is what they would take it to mean. From that point on, in this community, hurt hearts always meant that accountability was on its way from *all* directions.

At this point, Maryam Thea Elijah re-directed the conversation by asking Abdul Ghaffar and Hasiba, “So, in light of the difference between forgiveness and accountability, and in light of the two different aspects of accountability, what makes a really good apology?”

Abdul Ghaffar said, “A sincere desire for the restoration of the flow of grace between hearts, with no separation!”

Hasiba said, “A highly specific communication of regret for any harm done, a practical plan for the remediation of said harm done, and a mutual agreement about how similar circumstances might be handled differently in the future.”

Everybody laughed appreciatively at how Abdul Ghaffar and Hasiba so perfectly reflected the qualities associated with their names, with Abdul Ghaffar most concerned about the forgiveness aspect of the apology, and Hasiba most concerned with the accountability aspect. Hasiba and Abdul Ghaffar smiled at each other fondly, and Hasiba said, “I guess the point is that both are equally important.”

Howla said, “The best apology is whichever kind satisfies the person receiving it.”

Said interjected, “No, no, no—that’s not a practical way to think about it, because unless the person is named Abdul Ghaffar or Hasiba, how would we know which aspects of the apology are going to be most important to them? We’re going to have to learn to make apologies that cover all the bases.”

So the community set to work, then and there, to create The Unity Apology, a guide to how to make an apology that covers all the bases. Here’s what they came up with:

## THE UNITY APOLOGY

1. A clearly expressed sincere desire to do the work required to restore the open flow of grace between hearts with no separation, not just a surface patch up.
2. A clearly expressed understanding, caring, and remorse as to the nature of our impact on others (low belly/ethical accountability).
3. A clearly expressed recognition and remorse as to where we were “off” in our behavior i.e. our inner experience of how we were not straight (backbone/moral accountability).
4. A sincere offer of a new behavior and/or reparation process.
5. A request for feedback on our apology: Is anything more needed for resolution, with regard to both earthly accountability and divine grace (no separation between hearts)?

Everybody was feeling really great about this new understanding of forgiveness and accountability in community life. Howla and Said were making extremely comedic, exaggerated apologies to each other, and Laila was taking notes in her journal for some apologies that she now felt ready to make—because she now felt much more clear as to what she stood accountable for, and what she didn’t. Various other members of the community were also chatting with each other and looking very pleased with the proceedings—

when Maryam Thea Elijah interrupted to say, “Don’t get too confident yet—there’s still got one more BIG subject ahead of you, and that is accepting the responsibilities of the person who receives the apology.”

Said shouted, “But now we know how to make bomb-proof apologies! We rock!”

“Yes,” said Maryam Thea Elijah, “Nine times out of ten, you rock, with the bomb-proof apology.



However, there are times when, even if someone makes the most sincere and complete apology, sometimes our heart does not open right away. There may be hard feelings that just don't disappear on cue. This is natural and this is common, but it can be awfully hard to accept—and even harder to be honest about it, including within ourselves, because usually these hard feelings are not entirely rational. Often we can't even explain them clearly, and if we feel rushed to forgive before we've worked through our hard feelings, we start getting very cantankerous and unreasonable. Even if everything has been going very well up until this point, hard feelings can still throw the whole mediation into a ditch.

I had an experience with this where, until recently, I was unable to work through something with a beloved in community because I just could not get past the ways that he very painfully reminded me of my brother. I could not handle it in the midst of the conflict that we were having, and my heart shut down.

It wasn't until just recently, many months later, that I had worked through enough of that inner pain to be able to come to him with tears streaming down my face to apologize for not having been able to show up and meet him as his heart deserved to be met. The grace of forgiveness flowed between us immediately, and on the level of accountability, we are still very carefully looking at our next steps. The situation is delicate, because our hearts are delicate. But we can handle that now.

Whereas back when the whole situation first erupted, I didn't even know why I was so upset. He kept telling me that I was triggered, and I felt like, "I'm not triggered! You're driving me crazy!"

I'm not proud of that. In some sense, this whole teaching is my tauba process being made public. My hard feelings were like a jumbled ball in my chest, so there was no room for the grace of forgiveness, and no capacity for clean accountability. I was ashamed of feelings that I didn't even want to admit to, so I reacted outwardly with blame, because back then, I didn't know how to recognize hard feelings.

When I say "hard feelings," I mean more than just strong feelings. What I mean is feelings that it is difficult to be honest about, even with ourselves, and that cause us to harden our heart, because otherwise, we just feel too vulnerable.

In my recent example, I was seeing my brother's beauty—as a man and as a soul—and I was feeling like "He's beautiful and I'm not." This is an all-too-familiar feeling for me. It also was way too embarrassing to admit, even to myself, so I got angry and exasperated instead.

I wish I'd understood then what I understand now about hard feelings—so that I could have said, "It's not you. We still have an accountability conversation pending; the issues themselves are not resolved. But I'm in the grip of hard feelings, and I feel way too vulnerable to go there directly with you."

Most hard feelings come down to a sense of subtle rejection that it's too painful to admit, especially in front of the person by whom we feel subtly rejected. As Sidi says in MOS p.68, "Everyone wants the love, but in their own way."

For instance, maybe the other person loves us as a Sufi brother or sister, but doesn't consider us to be the most amazing, wonderful person they've ever met, ouch! Or they don't consider all of our ideas to be fascinating enough to want to hear us talk about them for half an hour when they are busy or tired, ouch. Or they still don't want to be our beloved, or they aren't as interested in spending as much time with us as we want with them. It's really difficult when that happens. Most of us can hardly stand it. It's easier to stuff it, and then be mad at the person for something else that never gets resolved.

Said shouted, "Hey, this is what I was talking about, with the whole 'You hurt my heart' routine: 'What, you don't love me? Fine. I hate you forever. You hurt my heart.'"

Laila said, "Said, when people say, 'You hurt my heart,' at least part of the time they are saying that more ethical accountability is needed—they feel disregarded in some way. Remember 'Hit and run hadith?'"

Said said, "Yeah, but the other part of the time, it's just hard feelings."

Maryam Thea Elijah continued, "These are not 'just' hard feelings. Hard feelings can be very strong, and often these hard feelings bring us all the way back to our earliest childhood. They can go really really deep. So it's very important to acknowledge them, with dignity, as part of our healing journey.

I want to emphasize dignity here, Said, because when we have hard feelings, we are at our most vulnerable and undignified—that's why we get so self-righteous on the outside. It might be time to say, "Hey, are you having hard feelings? So am I. Let's take a break from the issues, while we each work separately with the hidden emotions first."

So when someone makes us an apology, first we have a responsibility to give them feedback as to whether the apology is complete, and to be very specific and clear with that feedback.

We also have a responsibility to recognize when the apology *is* complete, but we are having hard feelings, and that's what's holding up the flow of grace between us.

As a mercy, we have a responsibility to look at where we have hard feelings between us that actually have nothing to do with the other person's accountability. These are tender places where healing is needed, but no one else can do it for us. It's a mercy when we can recognize in ourselves, "I'm having hard feelings." It's a mercy when we can say to the other person, "It's not you; I have some hard feelings that I need to clear first, before my heart is ready to re-open."

When the healing comes, then the doorways of forgiveness open, too.

Said said, "Howla, after all these years, I forgive you for not finding me stunningly handsome. No hard feelings!"

Howla replied, “Oh yeah? Well, I forgive you for not considering me more tactful than YOU are! No hard feelings!”

Said stood up and said, “Oh yeah, well I forgive you for—”

Laila interrupted and said, “The best medicine for hard feelings is strong dhikr. I think it’s time we began.”

They all agreed that it was time to make dhikr.  
...and I agree, too.