

# *The Right of Repair*

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Last year I visited my 84 year old mother in California. The evening after I arrived, she was getting out bedding for the guest bed. As she handed me one blanket that I had used as a teenager, she again pointed out a hole in it that I had unintentionally caused. It was just a little mention, not a big deal. As soon as I settled in, I got out some sewing supplies and mended the hole so well that it was difficult to find where it had been. Before I left, I quietly pointed out that it had been repaired and playfully asked if she could find where the hole had been. She could not. A look passed between us that was both healing and enlightening. I had claimed the right of repair and my mother acknowledged it. A little something lifted that had been in the way of our loving each other fully.

As in so many families, mistakes were indelible; they were permanent stains on our very beings. We put each other in boxes, we put ourselves in boxes, holding tightly to limiting images of who we were, and believed we could never get out. We shamed and blamed and the scars ran deep. This had occurred for generations. It wasn't a new thing or particular to our family.

My mother and I have worked diligently to heal our relationship and we're succeeding handily. Our intention and motivation is high. She didn't mean to keep me in a box about the blanket, and I hadn't realized I'd kept myself there—until I understood I had the right of repair, claimed it, and climbed out of the ungrateful-child-who-damages-blankets box.

Self-esteem has become largely misunderstood. It's not something that one has; it's something that one gives oneself moment by moment, day by day. It's not given by anyone else; it's not earned from anyone else. If others esteem us, it may support our ability to give positive regard to ourselves, but the regard is our own, it belongs to us. It's something we claim for ourselves. (If we believe the esteem of others is not warranted, however, it creates a complex knot of inner conflict.) When we do our personal best, and especially when we stretch and surprise ourselves, our self-esteem increases. When we do something that is less than our best, or if we break agreements with ourselves or others, our self-regard is lowered.

Many years ago, a highly educated, idealistic friend found himself for a short time in the Bowery of New York City. He had a conversation with the concierge of a flop house at which he was staying. In passing he mentioned his assumption that the frequent residents of the flop house must not have very high ideals. "On the contrary," explained the concierge. "Most of the residents have extremely high ideals. They're here because they haven't been able to live up to them and it's broken them."

As with self-esteem, the right of repair is something we claim for ourselves. No one else can give it to us or demand it of us. It's an event within the self. It's that moment when we realize that we've not done our best or we've made a mistake and we have the right and ability to fix it. It's an act that reclaims our energy. It's standing tall, getting up from the guilt and shame, and stating to oneself in a clear voice "I recognize I haven't done my best, something is broken and I claim the right to repair it!"

How one chooses to repair is also a personal event. There are myriad ways of making the repair. In daily interactions, we can do a rerun—replaying an interaction in a better way which acknowledges that we know we didn't do our best the first time and then takes the opportunity to do it over. We can seek understanding, confess a transgression to another, ask for forgiveness, or make amends. The list is endless, limited only by our own circumstances and imagination. When we reach the point of claiming the right of repair, we usually know somewhere inside what is necessary to make the repair. It may involve another, but the repair is for us. When we make the repair, we feel better, cleaner, lighter, and we like ourselves for it. Our energy shifts. At best, we realize that what seemed to be a mistake was really just an opportunity for learning. Others usually see the energy shift. If they acknowledge it, it's icing on the cake, but it's not essential. The shift is essential.

How many times have you seen (or experienced) a child who has made a mistake, standing stoop-shouldered in his shame, helpless to make it right? How many times have you seen (or experienced) a couple arguing, bickering bitterly about an event from decades hence, creating a wedge deeper and deeper between them each time it is revisited? What would happen if there was an understanding that there exists a right of repair that can be claimed?

What if when the child tried to clean up the spilled milk, the parents supported him in doing so—not demanded—supported? What if mistakes were seen as opportunities to learn? Instead of defending herself, making excuses, and pointing out his faults, what if the wife said to the husband, "I claim the right of repair. I know I broke an agreement. I didn't do my best. Can we talk about what I can do to make it better for us both?"

What if we supported each other to claim the right of repair instead of holding ourselves and each other in the boxes of our stuck concepts or feeling swallowed up by irrevocable shame? What if we claimed the right of repair instead of trying to assuage our guilt or shame by justifying or rationalizing our actions, or making others wrong? What if we claimed the right of repair instead of trying to make ourselves feel better with food, TV, alcohol, drugs, sex, or disparaging others?

When I mended the blanket, I got to repair a mistake I'd made many years ago. My mother got to see me a little more clearly and perhaps she realized she'd been holding on to the mistake and to an image of me that was so long past. It was just a quiet moment that, without discussion, moved us closer. And it moved me, 40 years later, one more inch into my own driver's seat. It's never too late to claim the right of repair.



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