



Confessions

I remember, a great many years ago back in elementary school, being a bit confused one day by something that one of my classmates told me. He had explained how his family had been at church recently, and that he had made his first 'confession'. I had no idea what he was talking about, but he explained something about the customs of the Catholic church to which his family belonged, how it was customary for someone to meet privately with a priest, confess to various misdeeds, and receive a kind of 'absolution', to clear the slate and allow the person to move on without being burdened by heavy guilt.

Now the idea of apologizing to a person for something you have done to hurt them or cause trouble is of course quite normal to most of us, but offering your apology to a third party seems a bit dodgy to me, and amounts to a way to avoid taking proper responsibility for your actions.

What does one do though, when the aggrieved party is not available for an apology, and you are not Catholic? How do you clear the slate? Well, let's try ...

It's 1963, and Dave is in Grade 7, or what would be the first year of middle school from a Japanese perspective. He's kind of bored with some of the classes, although you wouldn't really know this from looking at his report cards, which show mediocre results (to be polite).

One of his teachers, in an attempt to pull him out of the stagnation, asks him to come and help her in the school library. She knows he is very interested in books and reading, and this seems like a good way to encourage him to get involved with something other than the boring (to him) coursework.

He accepts the offer, and over the following weeks spends plenty of time hanging out in the library, helping her re-file books and doing whatever odd jobs she can come up with to keep him occupied. One day she decides to move things up a level. She gives him a stack of new books to process into the library's catalogue system. This involves assigning each book a number, making a new index card for the file catalogue, and stamping the new catalogue number in the necessary places.

The library has a special little stamping device for this. Because it is preset to increment the numbers automatically after a certain number of 'stamps' have been made, the procedure has to be followed very carefully, stamping once in each of those pre-determined locations: on the index card, on the borrower's card in each book, and on the book itself in a few set places - on the title page, the borrower's card pocket, etc. and etc.

The rest of this little story writes itself, of course. Dave starts off with the best of intentions, but somewhere along the way stamps a little bit too weakly at one spot, so does it again, producing the required clean impression. All very well, but the machine has incremented itself twice at that spot, and the sequence of numbering has now been thrown off. Dave doesn't notice.

This happens more than once. Dave still doesn't notice, but just stamps and stamps along the pre-determined route, blithely unaware that the numbering has become chaotic, with many of the books now carrying incorrect numbering at various positions.

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But at some point, nearly at the bottom of the assigned stack of books, he finally notices what he has done. He is terrified of telling the teacher; not because she might get angry, but from shame at his botching of the job after being trusted with the responsibility.

In the end, he cops out. Running quickly through the stamping of the final volume, he puts the finished books and index cards onto her desk, and then - instead of having the guts to explain to her what has happened, and offer to work together to fix it - he runs away ...

Here in 2014, fifty years later, I have no memory at all of what happened next. I suspect that my cowardice got the better of me, and I perhaps never returned to 'help' her with any more library work.

Looking on the internet, I see that the school is still there, I presume still with a library. I wonder if any of those books are still on the shelves, and I wonder ... is the librarian Catholic?

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