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Sometimes It's Good Not to Forgive

By ALINA TUGEND

IT seems, these days, that we can barely keep pace with the tales of the famous and near famous who climb to great heights, plummet to great depths and then try to work their way back into the public's affection.

Since the beginning of this year alone, we've had Lance Armstrong's sort-of apology interview with Oprah Winfrey acknowledging his use of a variety of performance-enhancing drugs, the efforts by the fashion designer John Galliano to put an anti-Semitic tirade behind him and the seemingly ill-fated, public (and lucrative) mea culpa by the best-selling author Jonah Lehrer for plagiarism and fabrication.

Even as I was writing this column, news broke about another fallen celebrity: Oscar Pistorius, the South African double-amputee Olympic runner, was charged with murder in the shooting death of his girlfriend.

These never-ending stories may not affect our lives — except, perhaps, to make us more cynical when the mighty fall. But they do raise questions about forgiveness and atonement that are important outside the world of the celebrity.

“Stories of trust violations abound in the media and business press,” Kurt T. Dirks, a professor of managerial leadership at Washington University in St. Louis, and colleagues wrote in a recent journal article. “However, these high-profile incidents are vastly outnumbered by the many trust violations that occur in the offices and hallways and other arenas of virtually all work organizations.”

And with our friends, partners, children, parents and, of course, the companies we do business with.

I've written quite a bit about the need for our society to be more open to mistakes and failure. But what happens after that? Is forgiveness automatic? And how difficult is it — or should it be — to get redemption after a serious misstep?

First, what is forgiveness? Jeffrie Murphy, a professor of law, philosophy and religious studies at Arizona State University, who has written about the issue for years, says it is “a change of heart toward someone — overcoming the feelings of anger and resentment that typically come from being wronged by another.”

But it is important to differentiate between forgiveness and trusting someone again, Professor Dirks said. So you may be willing to forgive a business that messed up a deal but nevertheless decide not to work with that business again. Or forgive an abusive partner, but never be in a relationship with that person again. Or even forgive those who committed a crime against you, but still believe they should be punished.

“The question is how much you've been personally harmed and what's at stake for you in the future,” he said. “It depends, also, if we have something to gain by interacting” with the person or business again.

Of course, it is often easier to avoid interacting with a person who has harmed you than a business, because often no good alternatives are available.

But we can feel that we have some control by refusing to buy from a company that has sold us a lemon or provided terrible service. And, on occasion, enough consumers have pulled together to force a company to back down, as they did in 2011, when Bank of America bowed to customer pressure and dropped plans to impose a \$5 monthly fee on debit cards.

Research has also shown that we seem to be more willing to forgive — and trust again — those who make errors of competence rather than of character, Professor Dirks said.

“We believe issues of competence are changeable over time, but not issues of character or integrity,” he said. “And the truth is that probably you can change certain skills, but the underlying value system is probably harder to change.”

It has become somewhat common wisdom to believe that forgiving a person who did you wrong is not just the right thing to do, but will make you emotionally, and even physically, healthier in the long run by alleviating the anger and stress you feel.

But Professor Murphy warned against assuming that forgiveness was always the right answer and that someone who failed to offer forgiveness was “not a good person or a mentally healthy person.”

“It’s a good thing and a blessed thing to forgive, but I am skeptical of any universal sentiment,” he said. “Some people may be liberated by forgiving. Some may be liberated by getting even. Saying that people should automatically be forgiven doesn’t do justice to different moralities and different psychologies.”

For example, he said, when he was a professor in Minnesota, he used to offer a colleague a ride to work during the harsh winters. The colleague then questioned his professional integrity in an unrelated matter, and refused to apologize.

“Did I forgive him?” he said. “No. I got pleasure seeing him wait for the bus in the freezing cold while I drove by in my nice warm car.”

And, some experts say, forgiving an offense too quickly or too readily may just paper over the offense and leave it to fester.

What about our curious relationship with celebrities who have fallen? Why do we feel betrayed by people we don’t really know? And are we more forgiving of them than of the people in our own lives?

Jeremy D. Holden, who wrote about political, cultural and commercial movements in a book called “Second That Emotion” (Prometheus Books, 2012), said he believed that we develop a “social contract” with famous people that is based not on logic, but rather on the mistaken belief that we actually understand them because we hear and read about them so much.

“We feel we know these people intimately,” he said. “And they don’t ask anything of us — they just give us pleasure.”

We also imbue celebrities with traits they don’t necessarily have, often because that’s the image they’re trying to sell and that we’re very willing to buy.

As the blogger Deborah Dunham wrote, in a post about her feelings of anger and disappointment toward Lance Armstrong: “We wanted to think that someone could be the idol, the comeback champion, the survivor, the dad, the do-

gooder and the boyfriend of a sexy rock star all wrapped up into one fit, strong body. Because if it was possible for one guy to have it all in such a big way, well, maybe, just maybe, we could have a slice of our own American dream.”

But the question of whether we should forgive Lance Armstrong or any of the celebrities who have let us down is irrelevant, Professor Murphy said.

“How have these celebrities wronged me? You have to be a victim in order to be wronged,” he said. “We have a fantasy image of them and we feel let down by them. That’s more our fault than theirs.”

One thing that is true — famous people, whether athletes or actors, are more likely to be able to overcome serious setbacks than the average Joe. Eve Tahmincioglu, a spokeswoman for the Families and Work Institute, noted, for instance, that most workers would be fired if they admitted to having sex with a subordinate. But David Letterman wasn’t. And Kobe Bryant, who was accused of sexual assault by a hotel worker, said they had consensual sex but still made a public apology and continues to play with the Lakers.

Even Mike Tyson, convicted of rape, seems to be on the comeback trail — working with the director Spike Lee last year on a one-man Broadway play and doing the talk show circuit.

But a noncelebrity would have a hard time simply getting hired with a criminal record or even a bad credit score, Ms. Tahmincioglu said.

One could argue that few of us have the talents that these superstars possess and that we need to separate their skills from their personalities.

Maybe. But it is also the case, as Ms. Tahmincioglu said, that when you are on the bottom and mess up, “you are doubly in trouble.”

Perhaps one reason that we give the famous a pass, she said, is that we wish someone would give us a pass sometimes.