Eve Ensler

THE ALCHEMY OF Apology

Tony Award-winning playwright EVE ENSLER is equal parts artist and activist. After the success of her smash 1996 hit The Vagina Monologues, she founded a worldwide movement named V-Day that’s now raised more than $100 million to end violence against females. In 2007, on a trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ensler committed to helping Congolese women who are survivors of rape and torture. Soon thereafter, she cofounded a revolutionary sanctuary for them with Christine Schuler Deschryver and Nobel laureate Denis Mukwege called City of Joy, which opened in 2011. The following year, Ensler founded One Billion Rising, a global protest campaign dedicated to ending violence and promoting justice and gender equality for women. The passion that fuels her activism stems from the horrific experience of being physically, psychologically, and sexually abused by her father, starting when Ensler was 5 years old. She recounts the traumatic tale in her book The Apology (Bloomsbury, 2019), penned as an imagined apology from her now late father to herself. Here, she talks with Unity Magazine editor KATY KOONTZ about the importance and power of apology and how society can use that as a tool for raising global consciousness.
KATY KOONTZ: How difficult did you find writing this book?

EVE ENSLER: Once I plugged into my father’s voice, the writing itself flowed. He began to talk, and yet there were moments when encountering my father’s own history and his own pain—which I never allowed myself to fully enter before—was excruciating. Previously, I preferred to keep him a monolithic entity that I didn’t have to open myself to, so when his voice began showing his brokenness and his humanness, it evoked a lot of emotion in me.

KK: Did seeing his vulnerability change the equation?

EE: Seeing how the constraints of the patriarchy ruled his upbringing, robbing him of his own ability to be human—and seeing his compliance with that—was painful. So was seeing him as not believing he had the ability to be anyone else. People like him can become trapped in a narrative that leads them to do terrible things, and while that by no means removes them from being culpable, seeing that helps me begin to make sense of their actions.

KK: That must help in your healing.

EE: Absolutely. Those of us who have been abused or hurt really struggle with the why. Why does a parent want to destroy a child they brought into the world? Why does a person want to beat someone up? Why do some people want to violate others? Writing this book helped me answer a lot of those why’s for myself.

KK: This book must have been in progress long before the #MeToo movement began, but the timing is certainly fortuitous.

EE: So much of my life has been an outcome of that violence, but also about searching for ways women can free themselves from this kind of continuing onslaught to our bodies and our beings. I arrived at a place where I thought, For 20 years I’ve been working on it, and this movement has been going on for 70 years, beginning with African-American women who started the antiviolence movement. We have broken the silence; we have spoken out and told our stories.

People now know that one out of three women will be beaten or raped in their lifetime—that’s a billion women. But what’s the next stage? Some men have lost their jobs and a few have gone to prison, but how are men actually going to change so this doesn’t keep happening? I started to pay attention to the response of some of these men after they had been called out, and none of them were looking deeply into their past at how the patriarchal system had made them the kind of men who could do what they did. When in 16,000 years of patriarchy have you ever heard a public apology for this kind of behavior that was real? I started to think, Maybe I should write an apology from my father to me—what do I need to hear in order to get free?

KK: Has writing this book allowed you to forgive your father?

EE: I don’t think forgiveness is something you can do really. When you can see the person has done enough self-reflection to come to an understanding of what led them to do what they did—and they recognize you as a human being and feel the impact of their actions—there’s a kind of alchemic, spiritual, psychological, physical reaction where you can feel the release of the rancor, bitterness, and anger. That is as close to forgiveness as I think you can get, where all that has built up into hate or rage dissolves in the kind of truth-telling where the person accepts responsibility. So did the book do that for me? Yes, it did.

KK: So you’re saying the real power of forgiveness is in your own release so you can heal and go on.

EE: Exactly, but it’s often very hard to do that unless there is some kind of real or imagined apology or some process a person goes through. I don’t think it can just happen. There are these stages that lead to what people call forgiveness, but I worry about forgiveness being mandated. That’s very dangerous because when it’s forced, it’s not authentic and people skip over stuff that’s really lodged there—actions get repeated and people don’t really get free. I think we haven’t really looked at the significance of apologies and how they can be used with great intention as a transformative tool.

KK: What if, as in your case, that other person is deceased or for some other reason unavailable?

EE: My experience is that we actually carry our perpetrators inside of us. In some ways I know my father better than I know myself because he occupied so much space in me through his terrorizing and demeaning behavior. I learned I could change the trajectory of my father inside me. I had been gripped in a kind of vise of me being victim
to his perpetrator my whole life, and in some ways, I built my life around that. I wrote books and organized movements and wrote plays all trying to break out of this paradigm. Writing this book helped me realize that I could end the occupation. I could actually move him from being a monster to an apologist, from being this kind of monolithic entity to being a broken person who could share his brokenness and take responsibility.

**KK:** Were you able to release any blame you may have falsely put on yourself for being abused?

**EE:** Everybody is at different stages of their recovery and their process of healing. We go through rage, sorrow, self-blame—everything. I’ve gone through many stages—including horrible guilt, self-hatred, and shame where in protecting my father, I took on all the things he should have been owning. It took me years to understand that I wasn’t responsible for what happened.

Even two years ago, I didn’t have any desire to receive an apology from my father; I wasn’t ready. I want to emphasize that this book isn’t a prescription—it’s an offering. There are survivors who may have no interest in this apology process, but I wanted to be freed from that vise of being a victim to my father’s perpetrator. All my rage, all my bitterness, all my revenge was just keeping me connected to him. I didn’t want that anymore. I had to go through a lot of work to get there, though. I’ve been seeking the various tools for liberation and transformation my whole life.

**KK:** Did going through this publicly make it more difficult?

**EE:** On one hand, I think, I can’t believe I’ve done this. This is really exposing! But then I also feel humanity is at rock bottom. The planet is about to literally throw us off, and there’s so much hate, racism, and xenophobia—so many traumatized people. I feel like if we’re not telling the truth now, then we’re keeping ourselves from where we need to go.

**KK:** By telling your truth, you’ve certainly both empowered and emboldened others to tell theirs.

**EE:** I hope so. I hope people feel that there’s no shame in owning that—even for perpetrators. We must start to ask what ways we’re offering people who have brought pain on others to change because otherwise we’re just punishing people, and punishment doesn’t transform. It may stop people momentarily, but it doesn’t change them.

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**KK:** Do you feel hope for the future that we’ll be able to heal these things?

**EE:** I always remember what this woman in the slums of the Philippines once said—that hopelessness is a luxury of the rich. In other words, we cannot afford not to hope. But I don’t have blind hope—I have a kind of fierce, radical hope. I’m going to give all I’ve got to being part of a collective to transform this consciousness. I want to join forces with the people who say, “Yes, this is possible,” and “Yes, we’re going to move this forward,” and “Yes, we’re going to change things.” If that’s naive, I don’t really care. I’m not going to spend the last years of my life in a nihilistic slump, resigned to the apocalypse. I’m going to create and fight until the bitter end.

**KK:** Do you think your work has made you more empathetic?

**EE:** It has. Climbing into the head of a perpetrator really gave me another perspective. I really experienced my father speaking from another realm where he was completely stuck. In fact, I think there are so many people stuck in the world of the living and the world of the dead who need help to get free.

**KK:** I feel your book gives all of us license to heal from other incidents—like sexual harassment—even if those events can’t compare to what you went through.

**EE:** Exactly, because all those lingering things that don’t get said or dealt with in some ways control us, whether we’re conscious of it or not.

**KK:** Did you have nightmares when you were writing this?

**EE:** No, but I would have nights where I’d wake up feeling like my father was telling me to go and write, like there were things he needed to tell me. He didn’t tell me anything about himself when he was alive, so a lot of stuff I conjured in this book. It wasn’t stuff he’d ever said to me.
**KK:** Did you have the feeling that it was the spirit of your father as opposed to just where he lives in your imagination?

**EE:** The voice of this book is my father’s voice. He uses certain phrases and words that are not necessarily the words that I would use. People have said to me, “This isn’t your voice—this is somebody else’s voice. I didn’t even think for a minute this wasn’t your father speaking.”

**KK:** When you were younger, did you ever see yourself becoming an activist?

**EE:** I don’t think you can see and understand the themes of your life until you get older. I now can look back and realize that every piece I’ve ever written has been about the body and about women trying to get free. Every writer has their gestalt, the thing that they’re obsessed with. You can look at any writer and say, “He’s written that play seven times, telling the same story in seven different ways.” Writing and imagining were ways I kept my sanity, turning poison into medicine.

**KK:** Do you have to go to a different place in your head when you are doing your activist work so you’re not reliving your own pain in hearing so many similar stories?

**EE:** In years and years of doing this work, I have listened to a lot of stories and taken them in. Then nine years ago I was diagnosed with Stage 3-4 cancer. After that I decided I wasn’t going to listen to a lot of stories anymore, and I’ve been halfway true to that. But for a long time, it was really important to me to be with women and hear and know their stories.

**KK:** Can you speak to the resilience of the amazing women you have worked with in the City of Joy project in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

**EE:** I’m a little wary of the word resilient because if we label women as resilient then people think they can do whatever they want to them. I honestly wish women could be relieved of the burden of being resilient. But the desire these women have to nurture, heal, build, and lift communities is so powerful that it often overrides the terrible things that have been done to them. City of Joy is an incredibly sacred community run by extraordinary Congolese women who have created an amazing environment of love and healing where women are very deeply empowered. They created it out of what they envisioned, what they needed, and what they knew would work for them. It’s been an inspiration to see the depth of their commitment, particularly Christine Schuler Deschryver, who’s the director.

**KK:** Do you see activism as a type of spiritual practice?

**EE:** Definitely. The work of fighting for justice, peace, and basic kindness comes from the heart. But we often separate activism from humanity. I don’t even know if I like the word activism anymore. Activism is a desire to transform suffering, but sometimes it becomes like a career—something separate from your spiritual self. We’ll say, “Well, activism is for some people and not for others,” as opposed to, “This is the work that we’re all here to do as human beings.”

Amassing wealth and doing what it takes to be the most famous or the richest—being on top—is so profoundly isolating and destructive. It’s a system that is bringing us to our ruin. The alternative is building community and looking outside yourself to see where people don’t have your privilege—putting yourself in service to the world instead of dominating the world. That also means looking at how we treat others—including people who are different and people we don’t understand—asking ourselves in what way are we serving that which is divine, both inside of us and outside of us? That’s what I think we’re here to do.

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Activist **EVE ENSLER**, award-winning author of a dozen plays and nine books, is best known for creating *The Vagina Monologues*, a 1996 play that explores women’s attitudes about their bodies and sexuality. The work has been published in more than 48 languages and performed in more than 140 countries. Her latest book is *The Apology* (Bloomsbury, 2019). Visit eveensler.org.