ACTIVITY for September's Character Trait of the Month: RESPONSIBILITY

It's easy to take responsibility for things that go well. "Yes officer, I take responsibility for obeying the speed limit." "Yes mom, I'm responsible for my stellar grades."

It gets tough when you have to take ownership of something that went wrong. This is why apologizing can be difficult. One of the most important ways human beings show responsibility is by owning (and apologizing for) their mistakes. Saying "I'm sorry" seems like a simple thing, but there is actually an art to giving a good apology.

Perhaps the best way to explain how to give a good apology is to see an example of a poor apology. This 4 minute clip is just as relevant for adults as it is for children and Trolls.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WPWxwyLKio

At the beginning of the video, Branch told Creek "I'm sorry" in a flat tone through clenched teeth. A good apology involves more than words: tone of voice and body language matter. Creek initially rejected Branch's apology because it sounded insincere.

Creek gave Branch very explicit instructions on how to give him the apology he wanted: "You just have to apologize to me in front of the whole village, singing in A sharp, extolling my many, many virtues." Although it's obnoxious to give someone such specific instructions, Creek's request actually incorporated the template for a satisfying apology. What made Branch's final apology a great one is that he followed the secret "Apology Recipe." There are four parts to it:

I'm sorry for…

This is wrong because…

In the future I will…

Will you please forgive me?

The beauty of the "Apology Recipe" (or a version of it) is that it forces the apologizer to identify their wrongdoing. This is much more satisfying than a non-specific "I'm sorry." After acknowledging the transgression, the apologizer explains why their words or actions were problematic. This signals a deeper understanding of why the mistake was a mistake. Next, the apologizer makes a pledge to change their behavior in the future.

True remorse should result in an attempt to avoid further transgressions. Finally, the apologizer asks directly for forgiveness. This reduces ambiguity: hopefully the apology will be accepted and there will be a sense of resolution.

Even when you know the "script," it can be tough to stick to it. People sometimes (unknowingly) undermine their own apologies. Try to avoid the following:

- **Making excuses** for your transgression (i.e. "Well, I was really tired when I said that")
- **Minimizing** your mistake (i.e. "I know it was no big deal, but I probably shouldn't have said that")
- **Splitting the blame** with the other person (i.e. "The reason I said that is because you kept pushing me for an answer')
- **Giving a pseudo-apology** (i.e. "I'm sorry you took what I said the wrong way")

Branch did not make any of these mistakes during his second apology, and there was a happy ending to the Troll's story: Creek agreed to forgive Branch. The next time you need to take responsibility for a mistake, I hope you can avoid the apology pitfalls and focus on the apology "recipe." You'll increase the odds that your story will have a happy ending, too.