

Go on, say you're sorry

In an age of celebrity confessions and *Hello!* hypocrisy, why not make a small, personal gesture to humanity?

In a globalised age, beset by unimaginable macroeconomics and garish world celebrities, there is comfort in small things and private people. The closer we get to the turn of the century and the fruit-machine thrill of the three big zeros, the more — I suspect — we will value the human scale, as a refuge from millennial blasts of hot air.

In this good cause I give you a toast: to Mr D of Newcastle who has taken an overdue library book back, to Mr A of Hertfordshire who has decided to speak to his neighbours again, and to Lorna from Lothian who has apologised for being jealous. If you accept that human hypocrisy is driven as much by the desires of countless individuals as by public windbaggy, you have to concede that D and A and Lorna have fitly marked the century's end.

I got them off the website of a campaign which has been running all year through British local radio and press, and picked up followers in the United States, too. It calls itself the Clean Slate campaign, and is a curious mixture of the cringe-making and the shiningly, naively good. Back in the spring, along with a weirdly disparate mob of others, I was persuaded to be one of its 90-odd "patrons". Others on the list range from the 1930s Wimbledon finalist Bunny Austin to the late Cardinal Hume, from the Chaplain of Oriel College to Sir Bobby Charlton, from Indarjit Singh via Gary Lineker to the Chief Rabbi. Ann Widdecombe hosted their brainstorming dinners; on December 1st at least half the patrons will do presentations chaired by Martyn "good news" Lewis.

There is something rather refreshing about the list, containing as it does several opposites who I suspect could barely sit at a table together without wincing; it undoubtedly owes its eclecticism to the simplicity of the original idea by a Moral-Rearming chap called Edward Peters from Oxford.

Mr Peters decided that a good way to celebrate the millennium would be for thousands of individuals, privately, to "wipe their slate clean" in one way, however small. There is a Clean Slate Promise you can sign, if you must, in churches and the like; but the essential thing is the message (so far promulgated out of total fundraising of only £18,000, which is cheap as millennial gestures go). It simply urges you to discard at least one piece of

poisonous old baggage — a grudge, a feud, a misunderstanding, a bad habit, an unadmitted dishonesty. Mr Peters himself says that it began because he was fretting about the breakdown of two friendships, after "I had hit back at some friends who I felt had bad-mouthed me". So he apologised and got the friends back.

Then he discovered someone else who had been resenting him for 15 years and sorted that out, too. Then he launched the Clean Slate campaign.

Early on, doubting, I met its core team. There are some on board whose general moral attitudes I find hard to line up with (oh all right then, Ann Widdecombe). For a murky old Graham Greene Roman Catholic such as myself there is an unnervingly bright evangelical edge to some of the literature. Yet the responses — many with real names attached — silence mockery.

There is something irresistible about people modestly trying to be a bit nicer. Here is a Merseysider: "I lost my temper with a woman in a council department. The next day I took a box of chocolates to her office." Here is a husband making himself apologise to his wife, a teenager trying embarrassedly to make friends with a schoolmate she dislikes, a shopper who has taken to pointing out when he is undercharged. Several families report the gradual patching-up of rifts over deaths, or wills. A Liverpoolian touchingly says: "I realised that I had closed my heart to Germany... I had seen TV programmes that made me scared of Germany."

"It hinged around a German colleague who I found difficult. I have decided to make my colleague a real friend and open my heart to Germany." Another man renounces

road rage and his tendency to be "intolerant of the elderly, slow vehicles and horse riders... I shall try not to subscribe to the time-pressured bully culture of the road."

Some, like this American e-mailer, go back 60 years: "As the oldest of three young brothers I got the largest allowance. It must have made me an economic imperialist. One day I flaunted my wealth by offering my brothers aged three and five the sum of \$1 each if they would eat dirt. To my extreme shock they

did so. I added shame to shock by renegeing on the deal." This aged Scrooge, hearing of Clean Slate,

"... decided to start with my earliest crimes. I am sending each brother a cheque for \$20, the present value of \$1 in 1930."

Another — one of my very favourites — vows to "be totally true to my age, experience and background, and open to new ideas without trying to be 'with it'". One can only imagine what desperate attempts at eternal youth lie behind that one: another baseball cap joins William Hague's on the bonfire of the vanities.

Some, of course, miss the point and pledge only self-serving reforms. Many speak of tidying cupboards, or stopping smoking. Some are impersonally PC, like the Canadian who is writing letters of apology to ethnically indigenous Canadians for their treatment after colonisation. I cannot warm to the self-righteousness of the slate-cleaner who thinks there is merit in returning junk mail unopened (satisfaction, yes. Virtue, no). Moreover, a number of honest correspondents admit that their attempted apologies so far have been forcefully rejected. But on the whole, you get an endearing snapshot of people willing to throw out resentments

and prejudices and present a smiling, open face to the new century.

It will be mocked and trivialised, naturally. On Sunday's edition of the dire *Heaven and Earth Show* (from what the BBC no longer can bear to call its Religious Department) it was covered by inviting the Editor of the *Sunday Sport* to "confess" about his story that Hitler was a woman, and plug his paper in the process. Mr Peters is forgivingly resigned: "The idea is just to get one simple idea, cleaning the slate, out into the national bloodstream. It doesn't take much."

He is right. It can do no harm. The humble, private notion of apology and restitution and a fresh start needs encouraging in the private domain, not least because in the public domain it is virtually extinct. On one side we have the political habit of refusing to admit that you were ever wrong (am I alone in boggling at the way that Norman Lamont and John Major are both so weirdly innocent of the ERM debacle?). On the other side we have the celebrity habit of braggadoccio confession, in which some dissipated bastard or self-righteous adulteress invites *Hello!* magazine round and smirkingly explains that their awful behaviour happened "when I was in a really bad place", that it made them grow, and that they are now to be congratulated on having "moved on". No fault, no blame, no apology, no plea for forgiveness, no sweat.

So to complete the dismal triangle we have us, the media, responding to this by being cruelly obsessed with toxic old press-cuttings about our subjects, and refusing ever to stop mentioning a past misdemeanour, embarrassment, bad hair day or discarded belief. Perhaps we could all do with a millennial wiping of slates.

All right, it won't be easy. I have to tell you that when the Clean Slaters had me to dinner in the spring I nerved myself to ask Ann Widdecombe whether she plans to set an example by being friends with Michael Howard.

I would not be so unchristian as to print her full reply, but take my word that it was in the negative, and left no room for sentimental doubt. We have some way to go before December 31, but that is no reason not to try.

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