

The F-Bomb and the Age of Public Crudity

Let's start with a question: Is anyone other than your correspondent sick of the public use of the "F-word"?

Hollywood actors, celebrities, politicians, commentators, bloggers and those who comment on blogs sling the word around like sailors on shore leave. (That simile is probably unfair to sailors.) When I am scouting out the news online every morning, inevitably that word pops up, most often delivered by someone snarling about a political opponent.

We hear the word in songs and movies. We read it in books. We listen to passersby on the street employing the word as casually as our grandparents once discussed the weather with their neighbors.

I would contend that the word is emblematic of the crudity of our culture at large, a four-letter banner of our decadence. Because we ourselves are so caught up by time's dizzying alterations, we often fail to recognize how radically our customs, arts, fashion, and civility have changed in the last fifty years.

Look at actors like Cary Grant or Gregory Peck, Audrey Hepburn or Katherine Hepburn. Can you imagine any of them ranting like Robert De Niro at the Tony Awards? Listen to comedians like Bill Burr, who drops the F-bomb in every other sentence, and then try to imagine Jonathan Winters or Red Skelton behaving this way. Where's the class? Where's the charm?

Gone.

Listen to today's music. Then hit YouTube and pull up Frank Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald. Which music is more sophisticated? More articulate? More, dare I say it, adult?

Remember those threats and profanities shouted out during various protests around the country in the last two years? Some of these demonstrators seem to think that shrieking obscenities reveals the righteousness of their cause.

Instead, they come across to many listeners as inarticulate lunatics.

About a year ago, I wrote a letter of complaint to the director of my local public library. The library has two adjoining study rooms for patrons wishing to work in silence. Often when I was in one of these small spaces, a man next door was talking on his phone. Frequently he occupied the room for hours at a time. After a month or so of this situation, I wrote a letter of complaint and mailed it to the library's director.

On my next visit to the library, this woman recognized me. "I just wanted to tell you," she said, "that you should be working for the United Nations or the State Department. That was the nicest, most diplomatic letter of complaint I've ever received here."

I mention this incident not to pat myself on the back. I wrote my letter in ordinary language, suggesting that the library post signs reminding patrons that the small rooms were not sound proof and that patrons should not occupy them for more than two hours at a time. Within a week, those signs appeared, and the problem disappeared.

Nonetheless, the librarian's positive comments about my letter disturbed and saddened me, as they should you. I wondered how many others from my relatively small community must have written her raging letters about some problem with the library, perhaps lacing some of their remarks with profanity. If that librarian judges my simple letter as superior to all others, then we have indeed fallen low in our practice of civility and manners.

When I was a boy, my mother told me several times that men and women who habitually used profanity or obscenities were to be pitied. "People who talk that way don't know how to express themselves," she said. "They're just displaying their own ignorance and their limited vocabulary."

Thanks, Mom. Once again you nailed it.

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