

A Word About Language

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 19 May 2015 10:10 - Last Updated Wednesday, 20 May 2015 06:46



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Recently, I was lying in bed at 3:40 am – never a great time to be awake – thinking about the column I had to write later that day. When you’ve been penning columns for 15 years, like me, you sometimes approach them with a degree of weariness. (*Been there, said that, and who cares, anyway?*) If you’re also approaching deadline, that weariness can be tinged with panic. Weary panic is an unpleasant sensation.

When one is suffering weary panic at 3:40 am, all manner of ideas are likely to invade one’s brain... unseemly ideas that would never surface at a more decent hour, in a more appropriate state of mind.

On this particular predawn occasion, I began thinking about the F-word. Yes, the F-word. If I were writing for a big, fancy, nationally-acclaimed publication like *The Atlantic* or *Slate* or *Salon*, I would just spell it out – probably several times in this one essay – but

Lowcountry Weekly

is a small, family-owned paper in the deep south – and my mom reads it sometimes – so “the F-word” it is, the “the F-word” it shall remain. That expression alone, in fact, is making me squeamish.

(People at my church read this paper. Nice people. And, as I mentioned, my mom.)

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What I was pondering, during those torturous wee hours, was the interesting way in which certain words have become taboo in our public discourse, while others – that *once* were – are now downright commonplace. The F-word is, perhaps, the most glaring example. Once the crowned prince of curse words – the expletive that dared not speak its name – it now seems to crop up regularly in columns, critiques, and commentary, often in very sophisticated journals. And no matter how many times I’m confronted by that new normal, I just can’t get used to seeing this “dirty word” in print.

Now, please don’t think I’m a language prude. I fully endorse well-placed profanity. The occasional F-word can lend punch and verve to a conversation. In fiction, it’s practically mandatory these days; most every short story needs one, and most novels need a few. I say this because contemporary fiction typically aims for dialogue that reflects reality, and in reality – for better or worse – people throw the F-word around with abandon nowadays.

But in our public discourse – social commentary, art criticism, film reviews, etc. – there was always, until now, an upright civility that even the most colorful of commentators was careful to observe. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement that when discussing matters of high seriousness – societal ills, politics, art, etc. – we would maintain a certain level of dignity and decorum in the public square.

Apparently, the pundits and critics of the world recently got together, maybe in some secret back room somewhere, and collectively decided: “F-word that.”

I wasn’t invited to the meeting.

So now I’m trying to figure out what this new phenomenon says about the age we live in. Is this free-wheeling use of the F-word a good thing or a bad thing? Or is it merely... a thing?

But Margaret, you might ask, *why does it matter?* Why spend time (and space) ruminating on a four-letter-word when there are terrorists afoot and trains jumping tracks, elections heating up and famous athletes changing genders?

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My reply? F-word that S-word.

I kid. But not entirely. The truth is, I don't feel good about that sentence I just wrote – “spelled out” or otherwise – and I kind of hope y'all don't, either. I'm only slightly more comfortable with the S-word than the F-word in print. And I'm pretty darn *uncomfortable* with the sentiment I just expressed.

See, I have this feeling that our growing acceptance of crass, callous language in our public discourse reflects a growing acceptance of crass, callous attitudes toward each other and the world. Or maybe it's the other way around? Maybe the language actually *creates* the attitude? My guess is that they feed on each other. Rude feelings inspire rude language, which inspires rude feelings, which inspire rude language, which inspires . . . you get the picture. It's a chicken/egg scenario.

I have no doubt many folks believe this development is a step in the right direction – a move toward authenticity and honesty in our public conversation. Some might even argue that cussing commentators are the only ones you can trust, the ones who are “keeping it real.”

They might have a point, I suppose. There's nothing like a savory swear word to slice through the empty clichés and robotic talking points that abound out there today (along with the F-word). But when the F-word – traditionally the most offensive of them all – becomes so ubiquitous that nobody bats an eye at its appearance, has it not lost some of its singular power? At what point does a “real zinger” become just another mildly abrasive word, blending in with the general drone of ill will out there . . . just another drop in the rising tide of crude malice?

A lot of this, I think, is generational. I see the way my young friends talk on Facebook – especially those in their 20s. These smart, delightful, well-bred people are tossing around the F-word as if it were an everyday expression, and in every imaginable context – when they're arguing, when they're playing, even when they're ‘just sayin’.’ Perhaps this is a sign that the word really *has* lost its power to shock and offend.

But I always find myself wondering if their mothers are on Facebook. Or, heaven forbid, their

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grandmothers.

And I think about my friend and part-time employer, Pat Conroy, who's a generation ahead of me. Anybody who knows Pat well knows he's no puritan with language. To sit with him over lunch at his beloved Griffin Market, or on his porch overlooking Battery Creek, is to encounter a generous smattering of good-natured vulgarity. (Especially if Bernie Schein is there to egg him on.) And his novels, too, have their share of "swear" – because he's going for dialogue that feels real. This is how the characters that populate his literary universes would speak. And so they do.

But when Pat writes an essay – or a letter or a book foreword or something for his blog – it's very rare that a profane word creeps in. He treats his writing with reverence and a sense of high purpose. I've noticed this – I often type for him – and I always find it touching. It feels like a courtesy – almost an act of chivalry – not only to his readers, but to the writing profession, itself . . . a bow to this craft we both practice, a genuflection to this art form.

In the beginning was the Word. Language has the power to create a whole world. It has the power to shape our thoughts and emotions, which, in turn, shape our actions and our very lives. Language matters. Nobody knows that better than writers. It's our job to take care of it.

Profanity most certainly has its place. I just think we should keep it there.