



Dan Naumovich: Give a #\$!@ sparingly

*Sunday, November 11, 2007*

Recently in this newspaper, an article included a direct quote containing a word that, at one time, was considered off-color and not suitable for print.

Some readers who commented on the online version of the story felt that the newspaper had crossed over a line to a place where decent journalists ought not tread. Others countered that the word hasn't made anyone blush since Rhett Butler smugly uttered that he didn't give one.

I can't join the outraged in condemning the newspaper, as the word has grown benign over the years. But I will mourn the demise of a once-proud expletive, while advocating for the conservation of those increasingly rare words that still incite fervor in polite society.

I'm not much of a swearer myself, calling upon it only in reaction to physical pain or when watching Notre Dame struggle through the football season. But I am a big fan of the English language. For all of the negative connotations associated with its use, profanity does have its place and our language is richer owing to its presence.

Steven Pinker, a Harvard psychology professor, says that taboo words elicit a strong reaction in people by stimulating the amygdala — an almond-shaped organ located in the temporal lobe of the brain, although not technically a naughty part. I won't get into Pinker's rather clinical explanation, except to say that the key word here is "taboo."

For profanity to be effective, it must be used sparingly and even be prohibited in many situations. In circles where f-bombs are approved for everyday use, the word becomes linguistically defused and packs all the wallop of a cap gun.

One would imagine that Joe Pesci, an actor so given to swearing that he probably dotes over his grandchildren with a blue streak of "cootchie-\*\$#@-coo's," has a hard time convincing people when he's really angry. For someone who rarely swears, however, one well-placed obscenity can stop time.

During my freshman year at an all-boys high school, an attractive young teacher of the non-boy sex sought the assistance of a priest to restore order in her classroom, a rambunctious group of scholars we. This normally mild-mannered priest stormed the classroom, having heard the bedlam from the hall, and delivered a profanity-fortified rebuke that couldn't have been more thunderous if it had been sent down from on high. We were stunned into silence.

It was an impressive performance that wouldn't have had such dramatic effect had it come from one of the saltier-talking football coaches. Who could have known that a man of the cloth even knew that word, much less be able to deliver it in a manner that would have made

Bobby Knight proud?

Profanity isn't only useful for demonstrating anger or evoking fear; it also can be good for a laugh. But again, moderation is key.

In the movie "Planes, Trains & Automobiles," Steve Martin's character, after falling victim to a series of setbacks while trying to return home from a business trip, lets fly a tirade of four-letter words directed at a ditzy car rental attendant. It's a funny scene that works because up until that point in the movie, Martin's character has remained composed and hasn't uttered a single profanity.

As a father, I do think it's good that we keep our bawdier words out of the newspapers and away from the children. As a lover of language, I think it's important that we use profanity sparingly, if only to preserve our ability to occasionally be profane. As a Fighting Irish fan, aw (censored)!

Dan Naumovich is a freelance writer and the author of BlogFreeSpringfield. He can be reached at dan@naumo.com.

[Print Story](#) | [Close Window](#)

---