

Gratuitous Vulgarity

by

Jeffrey Race

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in which an expatriate Bostonian's rant to Fortune Magazine and chance encounter in the Forbidden City reveal changes in American culture and how Americans have come to be seen outside their native habitat.

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The responsibilities of child-rearing, and too many years as a businessman and government consultant beating back nonsense, have sapped my tolerance for sloppiness in any form. One day this past year my remaining tiny reserve of tolerance for abuse of the English language was extinguished by *Fortune*, of all media, which had just plumbed new depths of offensiveness.

I fired off a rant (slightly shortened, below), now become my boilerplate for similar occasions against other assassins of English and of public civility. Often silence ensues, but sometimes I receive back thanks for points well made, for glee experienced, or for insights gained. I share this correspondence and some commentary with my fellow Bostonians, because the incident tells us something important about what is happening to America. It's good for a chuckle too.

From: "Jeffrey Race" <jrace@attglobal.net>
To: "Stewart Alsop" <alsop_infotech@fortunemail.com>
Date: Sun, 20 Jan 2002

Subject: Rant about unprofessionalism in your column

Recent issues (e.g. January 21, 2002) have included an unprofessional vulgarism. Here is its etymology in case you are unaware of it:

THE DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY SLANG, Tony Thorne, Pantheon 1990

"To be repellent, inferior, worthless . . . suck is both a euphemism for fuck and an amalgam of notions contained in words such as 'sucker', 'cocksucker' etc. . . . (quotes Simon Hogarth, Observer Magazine, 1989) 'The term suck definitely had as its prefix the word for male hen.' "

Occasionally writers in other publications employ this vulgarism trying to be cute or trendy, or to attract money by cheap vulgarity. I was surprised the first time I saw it in *Fortune*—I believe you are *Fortune's* pioneer in this debased usage.

I respectfully recommend that you halt this usage for the following reasons. You lose nothing but gain a lot.

First, a person aspiring to live in polite society avoids words innately rude or having rude associations or well-known double meanings, just as he avoids belching or picking his nose in public. Using crude sexual vulgarities signals he is either intentionally rude or wasn't taught any better.

Second, this vulgar usage signals one doesn't follow the principle in life to seek the best rather than the average or (in this case) the worst. This principle was not cut into stone on Mount Sinai; it is an existential choice about the kind of life one wants to lead. My family believe that one should aim for the best, not the average ("everyone does it") or the worst (what one sees on television): it makes a better life for us and for those around us. If others see that we are careful to choose the best usage, they will confide in our judgment in other matters. But if they see we are careless in our language they may reasonably believe we have a don't-care attitude about other important tangible or symbolic life activities like finances or personal loyalty. Do you want to be known as a careful, considerate, cautious person, who respects the best standards of usage and behavior, or as one content to accept what the rude and lazy do, tolerating the worst in speech and behavior? If we are sloppy in one thing, we may be sloppy in others. If we practice precision and rule-based behavior, it will become a lifetime, confidence-inspiring, habit.

Third, as a writer you should set a good example, especially for those in their formative years, many of whom read Fortune.

Fourth, coarse language is of a piece with the uglification of our physical environment, air pollution, and dumbing down of the schools. We should reject it just as we reject chemical pollution and environmental uglification. We should strive for the good, the beautiful, the just, the kind, and shun their opposites. You would not use vulgar language with your mother, or your wife, or your daughter. Why with mine?

Because you live in America you may have been so coarsened by daily life as to have become unaware of the impact of your words. Let me tell you a true story. In 1999 while visiting Beijing I joined a group tour to the Forbidden City, led by a Chinese college girl. Our group included myself (a Bostonian who has lived in Asia 30 years), a Thai, several Guatemalan doctors, an English couple, and several "contemporary" Americans.

After a few hours the tour leader approached to ask why I was unlike "the other Americans" she saw daily, who spoke loudly, used crude language, dressed immodestly, and looked like bums, lacking any sense of clothing styles, materials, colors, combinations or maintenance.

I explained I lived in an Asian country where propriety in speech, dress and behavior each remain highly valued and are seen each to be essential to preserving the others, and essential to living—an "art" with rules of aesthetics rather than an "experience" to be lived in every dimension in

defiance of any rules. I explained that American media in their search for sales have desensitized their public by constant exposure to coarseness, so that many Americans have now become foul-speaking loudmouths (like our American tourists) ignorant of their impact on those around them. Those of you living in the United States may not see it, but it is plainly, repulsively obvious to foreigners, and no basis for pride.

You in the press should not promote coarseness, or defend it in any way or on any pretext ("everybody does it", "it attracts readers"). Rather you should aggressively speak against it whenever you see it.

My family and I keep vulgarity and ugliness away for the same reason we wash our bodies—we feel better when we are surrounded by the clean, the healthy, and the uplifting rather than the the dirty, the morbid and the debased.

You may wish to try this different approach to life. It is not dangerous or unhealthy! In fact you may find it good for yourself and for those about whom you care deeply.

Were my daughter to walk by and pick up a copy of *Fortune*, see your column, and ask "Suck what, Daddy?" what could I tell her?

I end this tale at its ironical beginning: my earlier remonstrance with *Upside Magazine* about a like atrocity on a 1998 front cover. Surprisingly the editor replied.

Actually, looking at the May issue, which is the one that offends you, it seems as though the word you must object to is "sucks". That top banner has nothing to do with our subscribers. It is intended to attract attention on the newsstands so people pick up the magazine. It is actually a marketing ploy and has nothing to do with editorial strategy. I do not even write that banner. My publisher does.

My followup correspondence with his publisher evoked a two-word reply: "*You suck!*". (This gentleman's rather poverty-stricken imagination, or striking sexual obsession, may be the reason he was publisher rather than editor.)

This epiphany inspired me to compose my boilerplate rant. I am pleased to report cosmic justice at work: *Upside* has now collapsed. And though *Fortune* never replied, I have never again seen such offensive language in its pages.

Speak up, Bostonians--rants work!