

Profanity: Tools, Power and Ownership

By Holly Lisle

*If profanity had anything to do with actual offensiveness – with content – **murder**, **rape**, and **child abuse** would be the most profane words in the English language.*

Let us talk about the F-bomb, shall we? And please understand that when I use that phrase – F-bomb – I do it with gritted teeth and with my fingernails dug into the palms of my hands. I loathe weasel words, euphemism, and coward-speak, and **F-bomb** is yet another bowdlerization of the rich, powerful, gorgeous language that I love. A wimp word for weenies.

So. The F-bomb.

Let's start with a little desentization. Let's agree that nobody is distraught about the letter **C**. Okay? The letter **F** still makes regular showings on Sesame Street, as do the letters **K** and **U**. Right? At the alphabetical level, everyone is still breathing easily, no one has run screaming from the room, no one has dropped a book as if it had cooties because it contained four letters written in a particular order.

Let's look at similar words, or words that describe the same act.

- copulate
- have sex with
- have intercourse with
- bang
- futter
- hump

Admittedly, these are not all pretty words. They are not delicate. They probably were not said, any of them – or even

alluded to – within earshot of those delicate upper-class Victorian women who were adjudged by the men who owned them to be too fragile and feeble to vote, read newspapers, hold jobs, or own property.

But we can safely assume that the babies of women who **are** capable of doing any of those things today will not be born with two heads if someone utters the word 'hump' within their mothers' hearing.

Please don't turn away in horror by what follows, because my reference to the virtual prison in which many Victorian women lived their lives was not an accident. If you are at a point where you are allowing mere words to offend you, I suggest that you are still living within a variant of that prison. You are giving the exhalation of a breath power over you. You are **allowing** something to disturb you, upset you, change your state of being, distress you – and it is able to do this because you have given it this power.

I won't say that if you use profanity, you will be free. The use of profanity is like the use of a Phillips screwdriver. Words are tools, and sometimes you want a particular tool to get the job done. Sometimes profanity is exactly the right tool for the job. Sometimes it is precisely the wrong tool.

If you live your entire life without finding yourself in a situation where a Phillips screwdriver would be the right tool, however, there is neither shame nor pride in that. The same is true if you never use a word of profanity – you don't get any shame for limiting your vocabulary, but you don't get any credit, either. It's not a point of pride. It's simply a tool usage issue. You want to jimmy a Phillips screw out with the corner of your flathead screwdriver, a dime, or the corner of a credit card, be my guest. But we do make tools for that. And we make tools for expressing sharp displeasure, rage, disgust, and dismay, too.

And that's all these terrifying words are. They are not "bad" words. They are only words. Tools to convey meaning. The formation of fricatives, sibilants, exhalations, and so on, to express emotion via sound – or via writing, which is the translation of sound (one kind of symbol) into shape (another kind of symbol). It is, however, **all symbol**, and this is the point that people both know and ignore.

The word is not the act.

If profanity had anything to do with actual offensiveness – with content – **murder**, **rape**, and **child abuse** would be the most profane words in the English language. If profanity had **anything** to do with content, the four letter word describing a guy and a girl doing what people do to make other people wouldn't even be a blip on the radar.

There are numerous theories about why the word **fuck** is considered profane (along with all those other juicy four-letter words). One I like is that the Normans, invading Saxon Great Britain, forbade use of the Saxon language of the conquered people, and Saxon words – like **shit**, **piss**, **cunt**, and **fuck** – became "bad" words, while their Norman cognates – **feces** or **excrement**, **urine**, **genitalia**, and **copulate** – became "good" words. Since my people (possibly) came from the Saxon side of the fence, I'll take a good solid Saxon word over a prissy Norman word any day of the week and twice on Sunday.

But that's just one of the theories, and theories about why some people think some words are "bad" words really misses the point.

The point is this: If you are permitting profanity to offend you – that is, to cause a form of emotional distress and change in you – you are giving a mere tool power over you. Power to affect your thought, your behavior, your mood, your state of happiness or unhappiness. If you are permitting the exhalation of a single syllable, or the written symbology of

that same syllable, to cause you pain, you are handing power that you own to someone else. You are saying, "Here. Manipulate my emotions, make me angry, make me miserable. It's simple. All you have to do is breathe out."

I use profanity. For me, all words are tools I'm comfortable using, and I'll use any appropriate tools in situations where I find them fitting. A lot of people, however, are appalled by this.

If you are offended by the word "fuck," let me ask you, have you ever asked yourself WHY?

Really.

How is **copulate** acceptable but **fuck** so heinous that you'll drop a book, or stop reading an article, and turn away in horror? The words mean the same thing. They reference the identical sexual act. They are comprised of the same breath and same process of formation by tongue and teeth and palate, or in the case of the written symbols, are built from the same collection of twenty-six letters as all the words you like, or even love. Neither the word **fuck** nor the meaning of the word **fuck** cause you any physical hurt. Neither the word nor the written symbol can spiritually imperil you. This sound, this symbol of meaning, in no way diminishes you as a human being.

So how have you come to let four letters comprising a single exhaled syllable own your emotional state? **How have you given complete strangers the power to enrage you, distress you, embarrass you, shame you, hurt you** – not with the content of what they are saying – but by simply including in what they say a single syllable?

Why have you chosen to give the word **fuck** power over you?

Here is the key to your freedom: If you choose to keep your own power, all you have to do is ... keep it.

Don't hand over your strength to words. Don't give it to symbols. If you permit four letters of the alphabet and an exhalation of air to offend or hurt you, you create a weapon and offer that weapon to anyone who **chooses** to offend or hurt you, and the more you allow yourself to be shocked, hurt, offended or embarrassed, the more powerful the weapon you offer your enemies.

Fuck is just a word. Sometimes, it's even the right word.

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