

CURSES

Something upset me the other day, and I automatically responded with a curse. Possibly goddam, or oh shit, or fuck, or something similar, but it got me to thinking. Why do we curse? Why do these expletives involve scatological or sexual, and sometimes, religious images (Jeezus Christ!)? What need does it serve? They are used when you do something stupid, or painful. Example: hitting your thumb with a hammer. Curses are frequently directed at someone else. Example: when you are driving—the person who cuts you off. However, it has the potential of getting out of hand when it is said in anger and directed at a person near you, known or unknown.

I am using the word “curse” as equivalent to “swear.” My son David pointed out that in the South, they say “cuss.” And both words have a religious connection. The dictionary defines curse as an appeal or prayer for evil to befall someone, and, as I was using it, a profane word or phrase. The dictionary definition of swear starts with, to make a solemn declaration invoking a deity, but then gets to, using profane oaths--to curse.

My earliest childhood memory of curses are divided between home (my mother) and street (my contemporaries). First, my mother’s curses, which were in Yiddish. She never used profanity, but when I may have done things that angered or that upset her, she might call me “hint meshigina.” Translation: crazy or mad dog, or “a paskudnyak.” Translation: rotten person. Occasionally she might call me a “nar” a fool, but that is not a real curse. Yiddish is replete with colorful curses, but my mother never used them.

On the street, the most frequently heard Yiddish curses were, “gay in d’rerd” (go to hell, literally, go in the earth.) “Khub dir in bud” (I have contempt for you, though literally, I have you in the bath.) Or someone might call another a “vanse” (bedbug), a “shtik drek” (piece of shit), a “putz” or a “shmuck” (penis),

Moving away from Yiddish, my earliest memories of real childhood cursing were to call someone “a fuckin’ bastid,” “a son of a bitch,” “a cocksucker,” a mother fucker,” “a shit-head,” “a jerk-off,” “an ass-hole,” “a prick,” and perhaps the worst: “a homo.” The least offensive were: drop dead, go to hell, jerk, dumb-ass, dumb-bell, or sissy-Mary.

Parents avoided using dirty words in front of their children, and would reprimand their children if they used such words. Still, they crept into speech, especially when there was anger. Kids were always surprised when they heard their parents swear. I assume they saw cursing as something kids did, but not their parents. Sometimes, when I felt silly, I would tell the kids it is OK to talk dirty, and would say “pishy, cockie, doody.”

As my friends and I matured, there was much less cursing and the use of profanity. From time to time, it would appear, but it was not an everyday part of our speech. Still, some of us would almost, without thinking, inject a “swear word” into conversation. A few of us would do it more frequently than others. The prudes among us would be shocked. I view it as “colorful” language, but it should be used sparingly.

As one might guess, I am very tolerant of cursing, swearing, and using profanity. My favorite comedians frequently indulged: Lennie Bruce, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, and more recently, Sarah Silverman, and Jon Stewart. When used on television, the words are bleeped out. Still, most everybody could figure out what was said. Unfortunately, many younger comedians think it is a good way to get a laugh. Hell, no. You better have some goddam good material.

Seems I have moved from angry people who curse to funny people who swear. What the hell.

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