

ANXIOUSLY ENGAGED

WHY THE HECK DON'T
MORMONS SWEAR?

MUSINGS ON THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

By Jana Riess

I RECENTLY GOT a call from one of my colleagues, who apologized profusely for forgetting to teleconference me into an important meeting in New York. “Jana, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I f***d up.”

“Say that again!” I said.

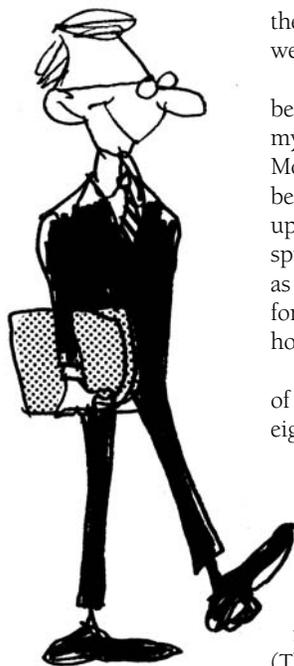
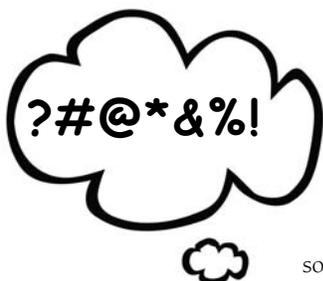
“I’m really sorry. I just forgot. I should have written it down.”

“No, not that part. The F word. Say that again!”

She seemed surprised that I’d want to hear her hurtling obscenities in my ear. Indeed, I was surprised myself. But the incident made me realize that hardly anyone ever swears in front of me anymore, and I miss it. Hearing my friend swear felt like a vicarious ordinance being performed on my behalf. I don’t swear much now, and sometimes I grieve the loss.

WHAT’S IN A WORD?

BY anyone’s estimation, I grew up in a sewer-mouthed family. My mother may come across as demure from the outset, but take my word that she can respond with such innovative phrasing as circumstances require. My father was not as linguistically creative as my mother, but he could put a sailor to shame. So my childhood didn’t feature the usual



PAT BAGLEY

proscriptions of Words That Must Not Be Uttered. I didn’t swear to show off or to be rebellious; this language was simply what one used at home. No one ever washed my mouth out with soap, but I learned pretty early on that words that were fine in the privacy of our own home were *verboten* at school.

Language reform has not been the most difficult part of my ongoing conversion to Mormonism, but it surely hasn’t been easy. When I’m tense or upset, my default vocabulary is sprinkled with expletives that, as in childhood, I reserve mostly for the privacy of my own home.

But no, I don’t swear in front of my daughter. Although she’s eight, I’ve never heard her speak what we in our culture would call a “bad” word—a problematic term itself. The worst I’ve ever heard from her is “butt,” which she acquired from the G-rated movie *Finding Nemo*. (Thank you, Pixar.) She always looks like the cat who got the cream when she says it, giggling

slightly and glancing around to see who might have overheard.

But why? Why has she already learned that “butt” is more questionable than “bottom,” and that some words are naughtier than others? Who decides which words are

acceptable terms for unmentionable things, and which are simply unmentionable? And when did Mormons transgress the Golden Age of J. Golden Kimball to become so, well, downright prudish?

Please don’t misunderstand me. I don’t advocate dropping the F-bomb into casual conversation. I agree with the advocates who want to fine shock jocks for on-air spewing and discipline high school students who imagine that the public realm is theirs to pollute with foul language. But I do want to exercise the privilege of using the language of my choice in my own home. I need to reserve a time and place for earthy talk should the situation call for its use. I breathe a little easier just knowing that such words are there. And although I feel that overly liberal “cussing” generally shows a profound failure of the imagination (or, at the very least, a sadly limited vocabulary), so too does unthinking abstinence from any words that would never qualify as polite conversation.

There are some biblical precedents for swearing, including Paul’s use of “dung” in the New Testament (Philippians 3:8). Here’s the passage in the King James Version:

Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.

The Greek word Paul uses here, *skubala*, is rendered in our beloved King James as dung, a polite term for animal feces. The LDS Scriptures add a sweet little footnote telling us that *dung* is equivalent to *refuse*. But the elephant in the room is that what Paul actually says is that he counts it all as *shit* for the sake of Jesus Christ. Yes, there were other alternatives in Koiné Greek that Paul could have called upon. Just as we have demure euphemisms such as poop, caca, excrement, dooky, crap, dung, or my personal favorite, guano, so did the ancients. Yet the Apostle went out of his way to be obscene. Why?

Obviously, Paul was gunning for a reaction; this noun is used only once in the entire New Testament. He wanted shock value. And in his own day, he got it, though in ours, we have rendered this passage wholesome and entirely inoffensive. Paul wanted to say that everything was *shit* compared to knowing Christ. Everything he had—all his possessions, his self-righteousness, his pride in his identity—was just a pile of *shit*. (There, I said it again. Damn, that felt good.)

I’ll tell you one thing about that passage. Ever since I learned it in my college Greek



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class, I've never forgotten it. Sometimes, when faced with a decision in my life, I ask myself: *Am I willing to count this [insert worldly accolade or honor here] as shit for the sake of knowing Christ? Can I look at it the same way I would look at dog crap on the sidewalk?* More often than not, the answer is no, but just asking the question has changed my spiritual life for the better. And this brand of self-examination was brought to me by none other than our friend, the attention-getting expletive. Without it, Paul's words would have been so polite and florid as to pass unnoticed.

So, to me, there is a season for a light sprinkling of profanity, which of course begs the question of why we Mormons generally avoid vulgar language like the plague. Apart from the obvious exception that I get into below—taking the Lord's name in vain—there seems to be no justifiable theological reason why we don't swear. The reasons most

Mormons give have more to do with polite culture than religion. We are no longer moving toward middle-class respectability; we are defining it. For better or worse, Mormons are now famous for sensitive ears and self-censoring tongues.

It's a class thing. As Mormons seek top positions in the boardroom, the Senate, and even the White House, and as our education levels and affluence have increased, our aversion to profanity has increased accordingly. "Swearing is a vice that bespeaks a low standard of breeding," taught President McKay. And in our culture, he's right; certain words are more associated with the working-class South Boston police officer of a Martin Scorsese movie than they are with the rarefied world of the privileged elite. But if we're going to forswear swearing, shouldn't it be for a better reason than social pedigree?

I find that when pressed, most Mormons

can only offer vague reasons for our linguistic asceticism. We seem to be greatly concerned with what people think about us and how our language might reflect on the Church. We are encouraged to use words that are "clean," "pure," and "edifying" to better reflect who we are as a people. Such language suggests that certain words are inherently unclean, impure, and soul-destroying.

To be sure, *some* of them are. But which ones, and in what contexts? And who decides? Using the example of my daughter again, will I sit her down someday and tell her that "bottom" is okay in any context, "butt" is acceptable only with close friends and family, and "ass" has been decreed by society to be unladylike? That breasts are acceptable but boobs and tits are right out? She's smart enough to notice that most of the words we've decided are swear words fall into the categories of body parts—usually female ones—and bodily acts, such as defecating, urinating, and sexual intercourse. And she will, of course, wonder: what does our anxiety about these words reveal about our much deeper anxiety about our bodies and what they do? Why are middle- and upper-class Americans more concerned than others about the impropriety of even mentioning such acts? Our default mode seems to be to avoid speaking of body parts and activities altogether, and when we're in doubt, we try to use Latin terms so that we can avoid saying anything vulgar. (The word "vulgar" is itself a Latin term meaning common, coarse, or "of the people"—all subtle indications of reduced class.) Our most intimate body parts tend to have Latin names—e.g., *vagina* (sheath), *penis* (tail), or *anus* (ring). Though there are exceptions, in general, the more private the body part, the more distant and scholarly the language we use to discuss it. Common, exposed body parts tend to have names that derive from ordinary people's vernacular speech, especially proto-German. We use "foot" and not the Latin *pedis*, for instance, and "hand" instead of *manus*.

It's not just Mormons who are concerned about language and social mobility. Other religious groups who have been marginalized in the past have become exponents of the super-clean language movement as well. In my day job in religion publishing, I've followed with some amusement the strictures that various evangelical Christian publishing houses have for their authors. For example, one CBA publisher put out a historical novel set in the South after the Civil War. In it, a Southern character used the phrase "Damn Yankee," certainly a realistic sentiment and expression for the era. A customer com-

HONEST JON by Jonathan David Clark



Brother Johnson—stop saying "Aw heck!" and "H-E-doublehockeysticks!"
You can say the word now!!

plained to a bookseller, who complained to the manager at the top of the chain, who complained to the publisher, who had to take the books back and, at great expense, reprint the novel without the offending phrase.

And things seem to be getting even more restrictive. Last fall, a major Christian publishing house circulated an internal memo to its authors, citing new words and phrases that are considered unacceptable. In addition to the traditional swear words that you might expect, the publisher also nixed terms such as “bites,” “blows,” “sucks,” “damn,” “dang,” and “snafu” (which is apparently an acronym for something unsavory—who knew?).

THE NAME OF THE LORD

THE one exception to all these gray-area deliberations is the crystal-clear mandate we’re given in scripture to avoid taking the Lord’s name in vain. In my view, the third commandment of the Decalogue doesn’t leave us an ounce of wiggle room. In fact, I would argue that as a people, we don’t go far enough in keeping this commandment. We could take a cue or two from our Jewish neighbors. About ten years ago, I taught Hebrew part-time at a Reconstructionist synagogue in New Jersey. My class consisted of fourth- and fifth-graders who were still struggling with the basics such as the *alef-bet* and the blessing for food. (I got the job only because I was able to recite the Shema from memory to a very skeptical rabbi. The synagogue had never hired a Gentile to teach Hebrew before.) Even though the kids in my class needed some work on their Hebrew, one thing that had been drummed into their heads was to *never* take G-d’s name in vain.

The kids passed this vigilance on to me by their example. One day, I was innocently trying to illustrate a point about the Exodus when I said that God had led His people out of slavery and into the promised land. Suddenly their eyes were wide as saucers and someone said “Ummmmm,” in that sing-songy, I’m-going-to-tell you that only a ten-year-old can muster.

“You said The Name! You said The Name!” one of my favorite students told me, half-shocked, half-wondrous. Up to that point, I had meticulously observed the custom of always referring to God as “HaShem” (The Name) or “Adonai.” Was my misstep a big deal? Maybe not, at least not by Mormon standards. But for these children, well-schooled in the unutterable, it was a profoundly transgressive moment, one that

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disrespected the chasm that exists between profane humanity and the Holy One.

As with the other “Swearing Lite” terms, society has invented a number of faux terms for taking the Lord’s name in vain. My favorite is “Gosh!” which, in our post-Napoleon Dynamite world, has become counter-culturally cool by default. There are other substitutes as well: sheesh for Jesus, golly for God, crikey and criminy for Christ. They probably sound archaically quaint to my colleagues and non-religious friends, but they actually sometimes make me uncomfortable because they are placeholders for imprecations that holy scripture has forbidden me to use.

In my research into Mormons and swearing, I find a deep and rather baffling conflation of the terms “profanity” and “blas-

phemy”; Mormons use these interchangeably. But to me, the salty language of the earth is one thing (and with deep biblical precedents—have you read Song of Solomon lately?) while blaspheming the name of the Lord is quite another. “The Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain,” we’re told in Exodus 20. Profanity has a cultural origin, and what is considered profane in one time and place is perfectly unremarkable in another. Blasphemy is a much more serious and eternal matter. I pray that, as the Psalmist says, the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart are acceptable in God’s—I mean HaShem’s—sight.

But as for my non-theological flashes of earthy expletives, frankly, my dear, I don’t give a . . . damn. 



Although popular with the youth, Bishop Parker didn't last very long. . .