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What's Wrong With a Bit of Social and Political Correctness?

A couple of minutes before 7:00, I stepped out of the evening heat, up the stairs and into the seminar room. I noticed that all but one of the eleven students enrolled were in various stages of alertness. A few moments ticked by, and so I began.

“My name is Ricardo Planas, and I’ll be your instructor throughout this politics and current affairs seminar. As some of you may know, I’m replacing Professor Stepanovich who’s too ill to teach this session.” The groan of a distinctly disappointed student was my response.

I countered with a straight face. “Yes, I’m told he is a bright, erudite man. But, I can assure you that you will not notice the difference with his substitute.” I was trying to break the ice with my sense of humor, but apparently did not work. They looked at each other with sort of a ‘who the heck is this guy?’ face. I should have listened to my daughter who countless times told me, ‘dad, you’re not funny.’

I had no choice but to rely on being myself, somber, and often boring. I really wanted to do justice to this class. Harold Klaus, the Chair of the Poli-Sci Department at my Alma Mater, and a good friend, had asked me to teach the course. I remember holding my breath for a few seconds afterward. It was not only a chance to investigate a topic that I’d been concerned about for a while. The seminar, which would deal with moral and political values, also would be an opportunity to explore a new approach to political discussion.

I scanned the class as I asked, “How does one’s view or an opinion become a value?”

No response.

“Well,” I continued, “that depends on one’s internal market forces. Doesn’t a relatively free market ascribe value to products and services in our society?” A couple of nods here.

“Likewise, we all seem to have some sort of a market inside each one of us and that market is affected by the presence of a multitude of likes and dislikes,

each one trying to grasp our attention—call it an *internal market*, if you will.

“Our internal market is further conditioned by the personal particular situation we find ourselves facing at a particular point in time; the amount and quality of information we have at hand; our respective educational backgrounds, views we get from our family members, friends, and peers; the values and beliefs we hold dear, including our prejudices.”

We're off! I thought, as someone at this point raised his hand. I nodded at him to speak up. “Could you repeat that?” he requested in all earnestness. Eager to make the information as clear as possible to anyone who wanted to learn it, I fought my initial grimace at my lack of clarity as I repeated and modified what I'd just said.

“Once certain values attain social significance among large numbers of people, someone usually steps in to represent them. If a set of values can muster enough political support, they will be enacted into law. In a free society such as ours, values find lasting political expression and protection through legislation.

“We start with the premise that in politics, a great deal of the choices public officials face is about right and wrong, which is to say that the choices are moral in nature.” I noticed the position-adjusting and the concern on a few of the faces at the mention of the word *moral*.

“Why should morality have anything to do with politics?” someone asked me.

“Remember, we are talking about public officials that you yourselves placed into a position of power through your vote. So, when asked why morality should matter in politics, you only have to look at yourselves.”

As the entire class adjusted once more in their seats, I felt the interest level rise, as I explained further: “As you know, not all values can be politically legitimized at the same time or in the same way, which is why we need a sensible political system to arbitrate their struggle.

“If we all valued the same things in the same proportion, we might only require a one-party system in which the role of government leaders would be simply to interpret the national will.

“So,” a heretofore silent student entered the conversation, “because our values are different, our political system allows for these values to compete for pre-eminence among each other?”

“Exactly,” I replied, thinking. And so, the honest and downright straightforward discussion about American politics I'd hoped to generate had begun.

“Now, let me turn your attention to procedural matters. Here's a mental exercise I'll require of each of you. While you are free to bring out your views your feelings, even your prejudices, throughout our discussions, I will ask you from time to time to take a position that is diametrically opposed to your initial viewpoint and defend it with as much rigor and passion as you would

defend your personal views.

“You’ll play the role of your own devil’s advocate. This is one skill you need to develop to become disciplined thinkers and, maybe one day, relevant political actors as well.” Once again position shifting began as I continued, “Also, throughout this seminar, we are going to try to overcome the temptation to debate and to engage in political fencing with your opponents.

“If the object is to learn and not simply to be heard, then issues need to be reasoned; not debated, but reasoned.” Since I suspected that few in the room had been exposed to intense objective argumentation, I wasn’t surprised when no one said a word.

This silence welcomed the eleventh student who had entered the room and was now attempting to quietly take a seat against the back wall. I looked over at her and could see that she seemed to be holding her breath. So I continued, as if she hadn’t missed my introductory discussion.

“Before we begin, let me call your attention to an obstacle that we need to overcome. I’d like to call it the Scalia Syndrome, without meaning any disrespect toward the Supreme Court Justice. Sometime ago, I was reading in *The Washington Post* that a ‘legal sparring,’ as the *Post* had labeled it, had taken place between Justice Antonin Scalia and Justice Stephen Breyer.¹

“Let me read this part to you: *leaning forward pugnaciously in his yellow armchair, Justice Antonin Scalia declared his eternal resistance to the arguments of his liberal colleague on the Supreme Court, Justice Stephen Breyer.*

“*He will never convert me!*” I shouted, quoting Scalia. Again silence, as the class digested his statement.

“That’s what he said, ‘He will never convert me.’ So I asked myself, why in the world was he wasting his time arguing with his colleague? And why would anyone else, much less another Supreme Court Justice, squander his own time after being told that his views were irrelevant?”

“Maybe he was trying to prove a point?” the late student offered.

“Yes, you could be right,” I said, “Justice Scalia could have been putting on some sort of an intellectual display, hoping to convert others. And perhaps, Justice Breyer was attempting to do the same. The article, however, indicated that neither one ‘conceded any ground to the other.’

“But it was Scalia’s remark that caught my attention, so the Scalia Syndrome is a model for how *we’re not* going to conduct ourselves in class.”

“The point I would like to make about this story as we apply it to ourselves is that no one could have persuaded Justice Scalia but himself. The same applies to Justice Breyer, and the same applies to each one of us. All that others can do is to convey a message, an idea, a point of view. Of course, no one likes to think that his views are irrelevant or that he is only addressing thin air. Whenever we speak or write, we do so to let others know where we stand on certain issues as well as to attempt to sway others. However, it’s a

mistake to think that we persuade others. Others can only persuade themselves, and only if we give them, and ourselves, the opportunity to listen and to analyze critically the information we receive. No one will be able to persuade you if you choose to close your mind; but then, your thinking process eventually will become stagnant.

“There is another myth that we need to dispel as well: the view that giving others the opportunity to persuade us conveys the image that we have a weak mind and no convictions. Nothing, however, could be more misleading. Although we are capable of coming up with our own ideas, these ideas are not developed in a social or an intellectual vacuum. Learning is cumulative, meaning that it depends on others who came before us and laid the foundation that serves us to set up our learning process. We read, we observe, we listen to others and we react; we sift through and we analyze what comes to us, and then we elaborate our own conclusions.”

For a few seconds, the room buzzed and the seats began to rustle again. “I want you all to avoid, to discard, to shelve the Scalia Syndrome! For our purposes of forming a reasoned opinion and reaching a stand on the issues, this rigid attitude won’t get us anywhere.”

Smiles of recognition spread across the room as I added that, “Another one of our objectives throughout this course will be to avoid the type of pseudo-civilized, big-mouth, in-your-face chatting that goes on in the Internet, or the political shouting matches you watch on television or hear on the radio.

“Perhaps, you may have seen the supposedly more civilized, yet partisan, debates that take place in the US Congress, where each speaker acts more like a gladiator seeking to destroy his opponent’s viewpoint.” Again, much shifting in the seats took place as the relevance of my comments began to sink in.

“But I thought our whole system was based on debate,” the late arrival almost whispered.

I turned to her. “Yes, a culture of debate is deeply ingrained within our political ethos. No wonder there is so much gridlock in Congress! Debate does make for great political showmanship, but the question is: is anyone listening?”

“I don’t mean *hearing*. I mean *listening*, thinking about what the other is saying; finding out if anything said merits support, even if it means having to cross partisan lines to back up that view.

“The whole idea behind holding a disciplined exchange of views begins with opening up our minds. We need to develop a dialoguing attitude; and then, we need to exercise it.”

I noticed that most of them started to look at each other in bewilderment. I got the impression that they did not know where I was going. I sensed that they were confronting this approach for the first time, so confusion on their part was to be expected. Nonetheless, I pressed on.

“Dialoguing is not easy; it requires a great deal of discipline on one’s part. If

this is to work, I need each of you to listen to one another before you speak.

“Sometimes, we tend think that simply by not interrupting we are listening.

“Well, all you’re doing is being courteous and respectful of the other’s right of speech. Instead, I’d like to ask you to absorb the other person’s viewpoint, breathe it in, swallow it, inject it into your skin, if you must. Own it; make it your own viewpoint!”

“At the end of the process your view may change. Perhaps, your colleagues may like you less afterward, but you will be able to claim that you have pursued the truth to the greatest of your ability. And tomorrow, if you receive new information, you would start again, dissecting the information carefully, methodically, dispassionately.”

Again, wrinkled foreheads began to appear at the thought of such a profound change, but I pushed forward, “Let each piece of information you receive affect your outlook. Set aside your feelings, your ideology, your fears of what your peer group would think, and see to what extent you can be persuaded of the opposite view. Any questions?”

Complete silence. Were they thinking about what I’d just said? They didn’t seem to be asleep. But, I reminded myself that their minds have eyes, too, and when those close, you won’t notice it in their faces. A mind asleep, after all, is like a dead fish mounted on the wall, seemingly alive, with its big eyes opened.

“Very well. Let us start our discussion. How about exploring the issue of correctness, both social and political? All of us express ourselves through our behavior, behavior that includes our mannerisms, how we shake our heads and move our hands when we talk, or even when we don’t. But mostly, we communicate among ourselves through language. Language expresses not only our ideas but our emotions, so I suppose that words are socially and political important. Just how important? Suppose I were to ask one of you what your favorite word is, what would you say?”

“Oh, that’s easy, it’s the F—word! At least for me; can’t do without it.”

“You are . . .”

“Michael Edson,” he said.

“True,” added the young lady who had come in late, “but I myself prefer, well, the S—word, don’t know why; I guess it’s matter of taste.”

“Taste?” I asked somewhat incredulously. “It seems that you’re giving *taste* a new meaning, Ms. . . .”

“Vanhurst.”

“Ms. Vanhurst, maybe it’s a matter of preference, choice, anything else, but taste?”

“What’s wrong with the F—word, sir?” Mr. Edson asked, with an amusing grin on his face. Ms. Vanhurst, on the other hand, didn’t say anything, although I could tell by her facial expression that my comment bothered her.

“Hmm, well, I’m sure you both believe that my reaction was judgmental in

a bad sense," I remarked. "Not that it was my intention to be judgmental. I'm beginning to realize that your selection of words were less of a choice on your part than a function of custom. If you were to utter those words in public and then asked to apologize, I don't see how you can feel apologetic when you don't believe you have done anything wrong."

"I don't understand what the fuss is all about, sir," replied Mr. Edson. "The F-word can't be that bad. If Vice President Cheney once used it in the Senate of the United States to make a point, why can't I? Besides, the term itself has cultural connotations that are protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution."

Michael Edson was the single undergrad in the seminar; a senior with above average grades who had impressed me with the essay he wrote seeking admission into the seminar. He was smart and outspoken with a tendency toward self-deprecation and cockiness.

"Anyone like to address this question?" There were no takers.

So, I answered him, "Well, I guess that we must accord Vice President Cheney the privilege of living in a democracy, which, unfortunately, entails enough freedom to be insensitive and disrespectful without caring about the negative example that he sets for others. However, I will ask you, please, to refrain from using these or any other cuss words in class."

"That's ridiculous!" snapped Ms. Vanhurst. "It will surely hamper my style, sir," said Mr. Edson.

"Maybe so, and, it's quite possible that the words you uttered may be protected under the First Amendment, and if so, maybe you would want to seek redress through the courts," I said in jest.

"I may just do that," he replied. Was he serious? I surmised that Mr. Edson's remark was more rhetorical than a threat, yet it wouldn't surprise me if he would legally challenge my stand. I thought of my friend Harold, who in giving me the course had insinuated that I was not to make waves. Yet, here I was, on the first evening and already creating conditions that could drag the university into court.

"Mr. Edson, I believe you have provided us with an opportunity to thoroughly analyze our topic for this evening. So, while you prepare your legal proceedings, why don't we use this incident to our advantage?"

I continued, "Let's take a look at our cultural mores, our norms of behavior, and their role in society. Let's delve into language.

"What's obscene language? Why is it obscene? What's vulgarity? What constitutes indecent behavior? Is there anything wrong with any of these questions," I asked the class, "or is it just my way of giving Mr. Edson a hard time?"

Facing a hesitant class, I asked, "Are we a hypocritical society—as political satirist Bill Maher once said on one of his late night shows—because we say bad words in private but do not seem to have a taste for them in public?"

I intentionally paused to allow the question to sink in.

“Let’s take Bill Maher’s view and discuss it. Should we speak in private differently than in public, and if we do, does that make us hypocritical? Why don’t we keep this question in the back of our minds, as well as these others: what’s in a word? What magical properties do words have that can evoke emotion and reaction?”

“Why don’t we start with the public use of the F—word that so soundly resonated in this room only minutes ago? I say the F—word because I think it’s the most preferred of all words nowadays by a large segment of the population. As you probably realize, this word is quite versatile.

“It’s a noun used for ‘sex.’ It’s used as a verb, to ask someone to leave in a not-so-gentle manner. It’s also used in the imperative, as a sexual command. It’s used as an adverb to denote, oh I don’t know how many different things: when something goes wrong; when it goes right; when you’re angry; when you’re happy; when you’re puzzled.”

Here, Mr. Edson joined the discussion, “Yeah, when something’s good, you add the F—word and it suddenly becomes great. And when something blows up in your face, you can explain how really bad it is.”

“The word, it seems, has gusto,” I replied. “Moreover, nowadays, as you said, the word appears in most, maybe all dictionaries. And, let us not lose sight that our focus is not the relative merits of the F—or the S—words, but the use of obscene and vulgar language in public, and the potential negative social consequences such language may have.

“Bear in mind that words are not only symbols that we use to communicate; words are also action-led communication. Moreover, we may want to consider, too, whether there’s a connection between the public display of obscenity and vulgarity on the one hand, and pornography, indecent behavior, and social ills on the other.

“So, why don’t we begin by asking ourselves why these words are regarded as vulgar and obscene? It felt like a long time had passed, but it was only about 30 seconds before a response came.

“Yes, Mr. Radusky, please go ahead,” I said. His bio card indicated he was a staff member working on one of the many bipartisan committees in Capitol Hill.

“Isn’t something obscene because society has deemed it obscene? In my case, I was told that obscene words were not to be used in public or in private for that matter. I mean, I would never use the F—word in front of my parents, although I’ll admit I use it privately among friends.

“But, as you say, there’s definitely something to the word. If I may be blunt, I can’t imagine one’s sex partner yelling out loud, ‘copulate with me, copulate with me’ as a sign of excitement. Or U2’s Bono publicly remarking, ‘This is so copulatingly great!’ It doesn’t sound right, it doesn’t seem to convey the feeling. On the other hand, personally I don’t like the use of the word in public. Why? I don’t know,

I just know I wouldn't have said that word in public."

"What about the use of the word in private?"

"Well, that's different. I guess it would be okay to use it in the bedroom, unless the couple is extremely uptight."

"Perhaps, if we try to find how vulgarity and obscenity are defined, we may shed some light into the discussion," I said. I turned to the shelves behind me and opened one of the dictionaries in the room. "Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the term *vulgar*, 'as relating to the common people; lacking in cultivation or taste; morally crude; undeveloped; offensive in language.' As for *obscene*, Merriam-Webster defines the term as, 'disgusting to the senses, repulsive; containing language regarded as taboo in polite usage.' The American Heritage defines it as something 'offensive to accepted standards of decency.' And, it defines *indecent* as that which is 'offensive to public moral values.'

"Any thoughts?" I inquired. I directed myself toward Mr. Wasserman, a legislative aide to a U.S. Congressman. "Mr. Wasserman, you were laboriously taking notes while I spoke. I'm sure you're not planning to keep the wealth of your ideas to yourself. Would you please share them with us?"

"Well, first of all, let me confess that I am a vulgar person, at least according to the definitions you have provided to us. I don't relish the label, mind you, because I don't like being told that I'm vulgar; I guess no one does. However, according to what you said, vulgarity is associated with common people and with people who lack in cultivation or taste.

"But this definition does not apply to us Americans! America is the land of the common man. Nowadays, being *common* means being down-to-earth; people who enjoy a beer and a hot dog on a sunny afternoon. That description applies to most of us. Moreover, we also see many low-income people with little or no schooling—the equivalent of yesterday's common people according to the definition—who act far more proper and refined than many highly educated and so-called upper class individuals who seem to insist they can get away with any type of boorish behavior, precisely because they are rich or famous.

"I guess that what I'm trying to say is that lack of manners and respect, and insensitivity, cut across social classes nowadays. It wouldn't surprise me to find more uncivilized and vulgar behavior among the rich and the so-called educated class. We all remember the ungracious spectacle some years ago to which we were all invited when Rosie O'Donnell and Donald Trump traded personal insults in the public media."

"Point well taken, Mr. Wasserman," I said. "In other words, if there're common people who are not common-minded, the definition might not be too useful. Perhaps, the type of common person whom the dictionary refers to as vulgar is someone who is undeveloped when it comes to social moral behavior. Undeveloped here could mean that he or she lacks something. We'll have to see what

that *something* is later on.”

Sitting in the back of the class, Ms. Vanhurst looked somewhat disturbed. It was an opportune moment to bring her discomfiture into the discussion. “Ms. Vanhurst? Would you care to comment?” I asked.

“Yes. However, I am somewhat troubled by the criteria that’s being imposed upon us,” she began saying. “What’s vulgar and obscene is relative to a specific view of morality. So, whose morality? Mine, yours, someone else’s? What’s vulgar or obscene is vulgar or obscene to those who deem it as such.

“Why am I going to be judged by standards I didn’t choose? It’s not that I want to be offensive, I don’t. But I’m not going to accept that I’m vulgar simply because others say I am. Words are words, and if a particular word sounds nice to my ear, I’m not going to repress myself into not saying it in order to please others or to show the rest of the society that I’m not vulgar. If others want to think I’m vulgar, let them. I don’t give a damn!”

Again, a moment of silence interrupted our intellectual pursuit. Ms. Vanhurst was visibly angry. I tried to understand her attitude more than her words. Perhaps, she was not raised by her parents to feel the way she does now. Maybe she was the product of the anti-establishment generation, a rebel no doubt, this one, perhaps, with a cause. Can I blame her? I wondered.

“Ms. Vanhurst, I believe you have mistaken what I have required you to do. The criteria we are using are simply being presented to you as tools. Far from being imposed, I have asked they be reasoned, and if you have logical ideas that can demolish these criteria, so be it. I think you’ve given us an interesting and seemingly valid perspective that we need in order to continue to dissect this issue.

“On the other hand, I did impose a process and some rules as head of this seminar, and you have failed to comply with them. First, I provided a definition of what constitutes respect in this class and asked that it be observed. I won’t say this again. I’m urging anyone who’s not willing to abide by the rules to drop the course and to do so now.

“Second, I requested—I feel it should not be imposed—that each of you begin to argue in dialectical terms. This is part of how I plan to conduct this course. It’s the same as if I were to request that certain literature be read as part of your curriculum. The reason I have chosen this method, Ms. Vanhurst, is that I want you to be able to act as if you were a surgeon.”

“A surgeon? I thought this was a course in politics,” she said.

“It is, Ms. Vanhurst. Think for a moment what a surgeon does. He or she dissects part of the human body and does so judiciously and carefully. He does things that most of us would probably either throw up or faint if we had to do them. But he realizes that his goal is to save lives, so at times he has to do that which he would prefer not to do if he didn’t have to: cut off a limb or an organ, become covered in blood, deal with matters of life and death.

“Meanwhile, think of the tremendous pressure the surgeon is under throughout the operation in order to save a life. What I have asked each of you is to act as if you were political surgeons; to do violence to your prevailing views, to seek and salvage what is logical in the opposing viewpoint, to set aside your feelings and adopt a somewhat more serious, detached demeanor while you thoroughly analyze an issue. To do this you need to be as methodical and cold-blooded as the surgeon.

“Now, Ms. Vanhurst, you don’t seem to accept that there is such a thing as vulgar or obscene language. Do you by any chance accept that the terms *vulgar* and *obscene* mean something? Is there anything in life you may find vulgar or obscene?”

“Certainly not words, actions maybe,” she answered.

“Could you provide us with some examples, perhaps?”

“I think picking one’s nose in public is vulgar.”

“Very well,” I said, “How about you eating someone else’s gooey mucus?”

“Ahhh, ugh, oh noooo, nasty,” they all said in unison, expressing revulsion at what I had said.

“Now, my question did not contain an obscene word,” I reminded them, “yet those words evoked a sense of disgust and nausea. Didn’t they, Ms. Vanhurst?”

“Yes,” she said, somewhat begrudgingly.

“So, words don’t have to *sound* ugly or vulgar in order to be so. One may not even have to use language that is vulgar or obscene; it’s the image, the feeling they evoke in one’s mind that makes them obscene. Like, for example, I suppose that if you read the words *chocolate cake* on a menu, it would bring to mind something quite more appetizing than if you were to read something called *fried shit*, would you not, Ms. Vanhurst?”

“Yes,” she said, again, grudgingly.

“Wait a second!” said Mr. Edson. You just said the S—word! Unless we have two standards of behavior in this class, I believe you just kicked yourself out of this seminar!”

“I see, well, there is one small problem, Mr. Edson,” I said. “But, no, we don’t have two standards in this class. My objective is to convey the idea to each one of you, and sometimes, as an educating technique, I will allow myself to seemingly violate my own rule in order to get the point across.

“In this case, a seemingly benign example was effective in getting you to admit that there are, indeed, words that express vulgarity and as such, can be quite offensive to others.

“It appears that Ms. Vanhurst felt repugnance at what I said, and so, I ask you, Ms. Vanhurst, what if you are offended by terms you deem vulgar but others disregard your views? What if they were to say, we don’t give a damn what Ms. Vanhurst believes?”

I paused for a few seconds and I said, “Please, think about what we just discussed here. I will come back to you later.”

“Captain Francis, what about you?” I asked while glancing at his name tag on his uniform. Plead your case in defense of the public use of obscene language,” I urged.

Captain Francis hesitated and nodded his head. I don't know whether he was expressing reluctance or if he simply did not know how to proceed. Then, he spoke.

“Dr. Planas, I'm a very disciplined man with strong set of values. Perhaps, if I had less discipline I could do what you are asking me to do. But I can't, and I don't mean to be disrespectful. I simply can't do it. I cannot defend a position I find repulsive.”

Here we go again, I said to myself. This seminar, definitely, was not going to be a piece of cake.

“Captain Francis, I don't expect this exercise to be easy, emotionally or intellectually. But, think as if you were in the battlefield. You'd be facing, circumstances calling you to engage the enemy, whether you felt good about it or not.

“I'm not asking you to violate your principles. All I'm asking is for you to question your views as an intellectual exercise. Let me ask you, do you ever question your values when new information or new problems come along?”

There was no answer. “I sense you're not very critical. Too much discipline? Very well. Tell me, Captain Francis, do you always know that what you do is right?”

“I always do the right thing, sir,” he replied.

“No, I don't mean if you always do the right thing, but how do you know that you are doing the right thing?”

“I just do.”

“Tell me, have you ever been wrong?”

“Of course.”

“Did you know you were wrong before you acted?”

“Of course not, sir.”

“So, you were proven wrong afterwards, right?”

“I guess so, but when it comes to moral issues, somehow I know that I'm right; I can sense it,” he persisted.

“So, too, someone who's morally blind. Do you think that person thinks he is any less right? Many people who do wrong sometimes don't always know that they're wrong. Some people are blinded by arrogance or by self-righteousness. Others are blinded by ignorance or prejudices. I'm not asking you to divest yourself of your values and your moral upbringing.

“The basic premise of this exercise is that no one has the absolute truth; not you, not me. We find the truth by picking up bits and pieces of other points of view, but only if we allow ourselves to be penetrated by ideas, some of which might be alien to us. I wish you would reconsider and think of this exercise as

one that will sharpen a special skill that will come in handy one day.

"Ms. Williamson, how about you. Can you give it a try?"

"I'll try," she said. "I was thinking, suppose we consider the public use of obscene language as an indication of individual freedom."

"Oh? How so?" I asked.

"Suppose we envision a socially repressed society; one with oppressive social norms that coerces its citizens not to use profanity, kiss in public, dress provocatively or read or watch pornography. Many people might feel as if they were emotionally incarcerated."

"Go on."

"Their minds, their feelings, their creativity would be confined by standards they didn't create. Then, we could imagine how these people would feel if they were able to escape from that social prison. I'm sure they would want to do precisely that which has been denied to them.

"They would want to express themselves through those same means that had been denied to them in the past; the use of profanity would likely become symbolic of this liberation. Their newly gained freedom would feel as if they had broken off their shackles and defeated someone else's moral oppression.

"As a matter of fact, I wonder if there might not be some correlation between the flourishing of the arts and technology in the last thirty-something years and the legitimization of obscenity. They seem to go hand-in-hand.

"There are many people," she added, "who simply want to communicate their emotions using a different vocabulary. Not that they want to offend, only that they want to do things their way without anyone dictating them how to behave! Now that traditional social norms have been relaxed, people express themselves in ways they dared not do before. As a result, there's more cultural, social, even economic diversity. There's also more sexuality in the air, too; that's part of the outcome.

"However, think of the economic progress which this freedom has given us! Look at the automobile industry, the clothing industry, the movies, the music, pop art; the iPad; they all express this diversity, this enormous creativity that has come about as a result of being freed from moral oppression!" she ended up saying.

That was some rhetoric, I thought. It left me wondering if we should not repress society even further to see whether increased creativity would help us to reach Jupiter and eradicate poverty and disease from the earth, all at once.

"Thank you, Ms. Williamson. I would grant you that there is a strong social tendency in human nature in desiring to do, precisely, that which is being denied to us; think Adam and Eve.

"You seem to indicate that there might be some correlation suggesting a cause-effect relationship between obscenity and vulgarity and artistic achievement. Naturally, if art is broadly defined as externalizing one's feelings,

whether on the canvas, in literature, in film, or in music, well, then, who am I to say that something obscene is not art?

“On the other hand, one must remember that the various golden ages in literature and the arts that past civilizations have enjoyed have taken place without necessarily being accompanied by debauchery. Many of the most talented artists throughout history haven't been morally dissolute individuals, even if some of them were.

“Mr. Edson, how would you counter Ms. Williamson's thesis?”

“You mean even if I were to agree with her view.”

“Yes, Mr. Edson.”

“Well, it's true that I like the feeling I get out of not having anyone telling me how to express myself outside this classroom as opposed to how repressed I feel right now,” he said.

“And, as Ms. Williamson said, you never know, such repression might lead to a sudden lack of creativity on my part. I guess time will tell,” he grinned at his own repartee. “Nonetheless, the question that comes to mind is, don't we as a society need some social brakes? I mean, there's no doubt that social norms have been relaxed, and I presume that the movie and clothing industries are among those who owe their profits to this relaxation.

“So does, too, I suppose, the multibillion dollar pornography industry. Today's sex norms allow us to graphically publicize that which used to be kept in the bedroom. As a result, our society is saturated with sex. Should it surprise anyone that obscenity and pornography have simultaneously become widespread?”

He rushed on, “Don't words evoke feelings and images? Don't words suggest ideas and incite behavior? The social phenomenon that seems to be operating today goes something like this: ‘if someone else says it, so can I; and if it appears in the mainstream media, I can safely assume that it's socially approved; so I do it.’ It's like a vicious cycle that reinforces itself.

“Let's see, what else,” he paused. Has it not been sociologically and psychologically established that behavior is socially learned? But we all know that we not only learn while we are children. Adults learn and copy behavior, too. So, one can only wonder the extent to which through the relaxation of social norms allowing for increased vulgarity and obscenity have contributed to the public projection of sex, which have resulted in the rise of pornography and likely in the increased number of sex crimes and sex-related social problems.

“I mean, do we by any chance believe the high incidence of teen-age pregnancy is the result of magnetic forces exerted by the way the sun positions itself in relation to the moon? Come on! Sex is a very strong drive, and like all physiological drives, it needs an outlet. So, I would think that many of these social ills could likely be related to worn out social brakes; and, it's possible

that the lining in those pads are those norms that remind us to be respectful of others. There you go! Satisfied?"

"Thank you, Mr. Edson," I said. "I'm sure it wasn't easy, and that's the whole point of this exercise. You have strengthened your intellectual muscles a bit. Next time it will be somewhat easier.

"Let me ask now, suppose there is a such thing as obscene language, and it's deemed obscene because, somehow, it offends some or many people. But what happens if the intent to offend is not part of one's motivation, as it has been argued here? Should it matter less? Mr. Dickerson, I believe we have not heard from you, yet."

"Sir, may I argue this question from my personal standpoint first?"

"If you must, very well."

"I am still troubled by the issue that obscenity and vulgarity are pejorative terms. And, I don't think the question has been answered yet, at least not to my satisfaction. What if I don't agree with the criteria that judge my actions? And if I don't agree with the criteria, why should I care if others think I am vulgar? I think it's somewhat unfair to label people as being vulgar when they don't seek to offend anyone."

"Ms. Vanhurst," I called, "would you counter his point of view?"

"Of course, if that's what you want," she said.

"It is," I replied.

"In principle," she began, "offensive behavior requires the presence of intent. On the other hand, one can be offended even when the intention is lacking. Take killing, for example. From the standpoint of the victim, it doesn't make much of a difference whether someone has the intent to run down a pedestrian and kill him, or whether the pedestrian is accidentally killed by a distracted driver on a cell phone; the victim is dead all the same. In other words, whether it's our intention or not to offend is irrelevant. Our actions can affect others for the simple reason that we don't live in isolation from one another."

"I believe you're presenting an argument for *social correctness* as opposed to *political correctness*," I said.

"We may call it that," she replied. "Nonetheless, I must admit that I dislike social norms or anything that is socially imposed. At the same time, I realize that these same norms—and of course our laws—exist to protect our rights, or some version of our rights.

"Current norms and mores on obscenity were created hundreds of years ago by other generations relying on values that are not the same ones that we uphold today. I don't think it would be wise simply to discard all norms and mores. Instead, we ought to question them, one by one, to see if they play a significant social role; to see if they act, as Mr. Edson said, as social brakes on issues we believe are important.

“I can see that someone may not like being called vulgar, particularly on account of mere verbal expressions. But, I will admit that Dr. Planas made me see, in a rather explicit way, what vulgarity is. To me, what he said was vulgar because of the image those words evoked in my mind and the way they made me feel, all grossed out.

“I also thought of another example in the last few minutes. If I say *boofa*, or *rendon*, would anyone know what I'm referring to? No. These two words don't mean anything, at least in the English language, but what if I were to say the N—word? Now, that would attract attention! And, although I'm not African American, I regard the N—word as revolting because the term stands for hatred and for racism.

“And even if young Blacks use the word among themselves for whatever reason, in my mind it's insulting because it denotes the demeaning and humiliating manner in which Blacks were once treated in our country, and still are, although to a much lesser extent.

“So, what's in a word? The N—word will offend many people; will make others angry. Some will even kill over the word. And yet, there are people out there who use the word to insult, while others don't care when they hear it! And I understand why; they're not the ones feeling offended!

“Vulgarity, like obscenity, lies not only in the words themselves but in the offense others take when certain words are said because of the image or the attitude they evoke in our senses.

“In this sense, being vulgar is an attitude that conveys disrespect and insensitive because it offends others. And vulgarity, we all should realize, manifests itself through words as well as deeds, regardless of whether it's intentional or not.”

“Please. May I say something?” asked Ms. Bynum, a middle-age woman who, according to her bio card, was going for her Master's Degree while working for a conservative think-tank in downtown Washington DC.

“Yes, go ahead,” I said.

“Some time ago, there were a series of incidents that received some attention in the media about a group of University of Maryland students who would shout the F—word time and time again at Duke University basketball players. I happened to be there with my husband and my twelve-year old son.

“For better or for worse, I was raised by my family not to use the F—word because it's in poor taste and because it's offensive to others. So you can imagine how angry we were at the total lack of sensitivity on the part of those, supposedly, adult students who didn't care or didn't realize that they were offending other people.

“Needless to say, I don't know what was worse, the behavior of those students or the sorry lack of leadership and character on the part of the university's administrators and their inability to cope with the incident. It was pathetic that

the Athletic Director had to place the burden for the solution of this problem on the shoulders of the basketball coach, because, she said, 'Students look to him for leadership.' No wonder the basketball coach earns much more than the administrators. He has to be an educator, too!"

"Wait a second, guys," exclaimed Mr. Edson. "Ms. Bynum, I think you need to lighten up. The students were only having some fun at the expense of Duke players. It was in jest!"

"You're saying that was supposed to have been funny?" she said with a grin. "Nahh, that wasn't funny, what's real funny is when you try to say something smart and you pucker your lips up. Your mouth looks like the rear end of an old goat."

The whole class erupted into laughter. I realized that things were going a bit too far. I sensed that the remark hit Mr. Edson hard. He was fuming by the fact that others were laughing at him.

"I don't see why you have to insult me," he shouted. "I was only making a joke!"

"Mr. Edson, I, too, was trying to be funny," she said, "really! But, I guess that you take exception at my use of words. Both you and I, and the rest of the class realize that I was mean and disrespectful, and I apologize for that.

"But I couldn't help noticing that the words got to you, and I hope you won't lose sight of that. And this I say very seriously, Duke players probably didn't like the joke. My family didn't like it either, anymore than you didn't like my little joke, and the reason is that it was offensive."

I thought Ms. Vanhurst had it right. There isn't much difference if I get shot on purpose or if someone, in total disregard for safety, shoots his gun for fun and hits me. The bullet will kill me all the same. It upsets me when I am in a public place and I have to put up with men and women behaving disgustingly crude."

Mr. Edson shot back, "Okay, I see now. We're not supposed to use obscene language in public because that would be vulgar, but we wouldn't mind using the same words in private. Tell me, by any chance do the words become any less vulgar behind closed doors? Bill Maher is right, we are hypocrites!"

I was sure Mr. Edson meant well, even though I realized he was not getting it. I didn't think it was obstinacy on his part. He was trying his best to understand the issue, and I don't think I was doing enough to help him. I consider Bill Maher one of the best political satirists in the country, perhaps, because he's a smart comedian with the political savvy of an intelligent politician. Nonetheless, my sixth sense was telling me that Maher's remark lacked logical consistency.

"Mr. Edson," I said nonchalantly, "does your mother defecate in public?"

Silence. There was absolute, utter silence in the room. No one moved. I hoped

they were processing my question. I paused, and rephrased the question. "Does your father urinate in the middle of the street? Do you? Do you go to a restaurant to have a nice dinner and pick your nose in public? Tell me, are there not things that might be acceptable in private but are considered in bad taste, vulgar, or obscene, when done in public?"

"And when someone refrains from doing these actions in public, hopefully including Mr. Maher, is it not because we recognize they are vulgar? Don't we avoid behaving like pigs because we chose to be sensitive toward others, in order to respect others, and not because we are hypocrites?"

"Some words do matter, Mr. Edson. There are words that will offend you; we have seen that. So, why can't you accept that there are words that may offend others? I think that we have made this point here tonight."

"Mr. Edson, what do you think? This time, I'm not asking you to think dialectically. I wouldn't be pressuring you if I knew you couldn't take the pressure, but I believe that you can."

He looked down at his hands as I continued, "It's a normal reaction to want to defend ourselves when attacked. And right now, you probably feel that you're under siege!"

"The tendency in these cases is to defend one's ego rather than the idea. So, if possible, I would prefer that you concentrate on the issue at hand and set aside your ego, at least for the time being. Now, please, give us your view in light of what we have just discussed?"

Finally, Mr. Edson spoke up. "Look, it's not that I'm rejecting what you're saying. I'm struggling very hard to understand and to assimilate what's being said here. My mind accepts the logic of your arguments; my feelings, however, still resist them. I've been asking myself whether feelings are endowed with reason. You know, sometimes you sense that something is wrong even when you might not be able to articulate it in a logical manner."

"Could the opposite be true, too? Could something be logically correct even if inside of me I feel it's wrong? Which is the final arbiter of moral behavior? Is it feelings? Is it reason? Or is it the proper alignment of the two? I imagine that if I could bring my feelings in line with what logic and reason seem to dictate, I might change my attitude. Right now, that's easier said than done. I guess that's because I'm surrounded by obscenity, and I don't see anything wrong with it because I see it happening everywhere I go."

"Oh, I agree with you, Mr. Edson," I replied. "I realize the extent of this trend. Vulgar terminology and obscene behavior go hand in hand in many instances. That's why at the very beginning I realized that I could not bring myself to ask you to rethink something that, to you, is like drinking water every day. But we see people who defecate in public on a daily basis. We see it in sexual pornography. We even see it in mainstream filmmaking and on TV!"

"We listen to it in pop music whose authors are even awarded national

recognition. You have your average Sally and Jane, women who enjoy exhibiting themselves during Mardi Gras, spring breaks, and motorcycle rallies, not knowing or not caring that they are being exploited by men for their own fun and for profit. What can I say, that's the beauty and the ugliness of democracy; the system gives you the freedom of being either a human being . . . or less than that.

"I like the idea of the social brakes that Mr. Edson brought into the discussion. When we're not diligent enough to apply those social brakes, or to replace the pads when they wear out, then, yes, some people will defecate in public. And, the saddest part is that when they do it, they seem to feel as comfortable as if they were in the privacy of their own bathrooms.

"What's more, one would think that those who do the offending would at least be consequential with themselves and not mind being disrespected or offended when someone addresses them in a vulgar manner. Instead, if someone gives them the middle finger, they become offended!"

"Sir, how could these people—your public defecators—how can we expect them to object to obscenity or vulgarity, since they're so used to it?" Ms. Williamson asked.

"Why don't we ask Ms. Lewis? Perhaps she uses obscene words in public."

"Yes, I do," replied the young woman who had worked as a political activist and was going for her Master's Degree in International Affairs.

"Very well. In that case, take the opposite view of what you believe and address Ms. Williamson's question."

"The opposite view? Darn it. Okay," she paused to think. "Perhaps, once you lose respect for yourself, there's little hope you would respect others or even think about being sensitive to other people's feelings. There's no doubt that new social norms have replaced traditional ones. But if the slippery slope theory ever applies to social phenomena, I believe it applies here.

"Years ago, a first generation of people began to change the rules and made choices that ended up desensitizing the minds of other generations," she continued. "Afterwards, there wasn't much that others could do.

"Perhaps, yes, the dam has been broken, and the gush coming out of the moral dam is simply too strong to try to patch it. Maybe if we were talking about human lives being massacred, the government would have stepped in long ago to stop the killing; but, I guess that words don't seem to matter much in these circumstances."

"Yes, Mr. Radusky," I said.

"I still see a problem with this issue. I agree that the argument sounds logical. However, if we were dealing with vulgarity and obscene behavior, wouldn't there be a problem identifying and defining those words or actions that we believe, or that some of us believe, are objectionable? I know of people who would object to words like, *it sucks*, meaning it's lousy or bad, or

damn it or something similar being said in front of their children. So, what do you do?"

"Any takers?" I inquired. "Yes, Mr. Dickerson."

"I agree that what Mr. Radusky says might be problematic, but it's not insurmountable. I believe there's consensus on a core of words and expressions that can be easily identifiable as being vulgar; same thing with obscenity. Suppose that through public education, ninety percent of all well-known vulgarity gets to be eliminated from our everyday public vocabulary. That means that society would be holding discussions on what to do about the other ten percent, and that's not bad."

"Very well, then, what do you do about it?" countered Mr. Radusky. "How do you tackle what amounts to social reform? How do you activate new mores and values? Do we resort to legislating behavior and language?"

"Ms. Lewis, please," I said.

"Aren't we being somewhat unrealistic here," she replied. "Isn't a bit far-fetched? I just don't believe there's anything one can do to change the impact that language has in our culture. It is what it is."

"Mr. Edson, what do you think, in dialectical terms, that is?" I asked.

"Hmm, well, it certainly was far-fetched to dream about going to the moon centuries ago. The important thing to remember is that it took several decades, but we surely made it. Look at the fight against cancer. I'm sure those who started to look for the cure didn't think it was going to be easy. But even after many decades of dedicated work and billions of dollars in research, and many disappointments, would we quit?"

"So it isn't too much to hope for?" I asked.

Mr. Brandon, a third year law student, immediately jumped in. "I would say it's too much to hope for. Do we think we can create a new vocabulary? There is very little one can do to alter language."

"I don't agree with Mr. Brandon," said Mr. Dickerson. "Of course we can do something about it! Let's bear in mind that freedom of speech is not absolute. We know that even shouting the word *fire* in circumstances where it may create panic is not legal."

"Are you suggesting that Congress would be willing to act?" I asked.

"But it has already," argued Mr. Dickerson. "There's new legislation in place that raised the penalties for vulgarity in the media. Now we have to see whether the issue will find support in the courts. I think that will depend on who wins the next few elections, Republicans or Democrats," he said.

"Interesting points, Mr. Dickerson," I said. "So you're of the opinion that resolution of these issues may come down to ideological politics. Frankly, I would not hold my breath."

"*Hollywood* and the entertainment media don't seem to understand the nature of the problem, and given how profitable the entertainment media

industry has become, I don't think they are willing to listen to anyone who might want to get in the way of their earnings.

"Moreover, Hollywood tends to find support among those who advocate freedom of speech without any restraints whatsoever. Unfortunately, conservative-minded politicians who extol family values don't have the political credibility or the creativity to take up on something of this magnitude.

"Yes, Ms. Vanhurst, go ahead," I said.

"I don't know if it would be wise to legislate obscenity out of existence. There would likely be an immediate reaction by the dominant counterculture that would come up with a counter word for the F—word—*tock*, for example—and the media would spread it throughout society like nerve gas. The word would appear on TV and radio, and in movies. Songs would be written, 'tock me, tock me baby, all day long,' while Bono would shout, 'this is tocking great!'"

"Ms. Vanhurst, I believe you've made your point, and it's well taken. Captain Francis, go ahead," I said.

"Just a brief thought. I agree that there would be replacement words, purposefully created to oppose dominant mores. However, the change would be an improvement. It's incredible how the sound affects the meaning of a word. The word *tock* wouldn't mean anything to me."

"I do think that we have to be realistic about this enterprise," I said. "Just remember that the F—word initially was not regarded as obscene or vulgar when it first surfaced over five hundred years ago. It's all a matter of time. Give it twenty years, Captain, and you will not like listening to your fourteen-year-old grandson yelling, '*Tock you grandpa!*' if you refuse to take him to McDonald's."

"I agree!" shouted Ms. Bynum. "Those University of Maryland students who were criticized for using the F—word, how do you think they got back at those who had been critical of them? They switched letters and came out with signs reading 'Duck Fuke.'

"These students foolishly believed that they had outsmarted the school's administrators. They really thought that their ethical IQ went up by double digits. These kids were defecating in public and didn't mind doing so, in part because they weren't mature enough to realize what they were doing."

"Now that you mentioned the incident at the University of Maryland, I would like to add a point," said Ms. Lewis. "I, too, have been angered when people in a shopping mall or at restaurants use profanity without any sensitivity toward those around them. It bothers me even more when I am with my family.

"I understand the Constitution protects obscenity on account of safeguarding freedom of speech. It seems that from the standpoint of the courts, the constitutional value of safeguarding this freedom far outweighs the protection

of my right not to be offended by those who use profanity. I've asked myself if I have any rights at all to be insulated from vulgarity and obscenity other than by staying at home, plugging my children's ears and mine as we walk through the mall, or by turning off the TV.

"Only a few years ago, you would not hear the words *kiss my ass* on TV. The term *son of a bitch* was downright demeaning then, but now we hear it all over. I still remember the sexual innuendos in mainstream programming. Yes, they may have been funny, and in my opinion, downright tasteless and obscene, even though there were no vulgar terms used. And this was taking place during the so-called family time.

"I always had been under the impression that the freedom of speech the Founding Fathers wanted to protect had to do with political, social or religious issues, slander and the like. Obscenity and vulgarity probably did exist during the first years of the Republic, but I'll bet that they were contained and isolated by the non-existence of a mass media, so vulgar behavior probably didn't pose much of a social problem then.

"Today, look at the state of confusion in government. Members of the Federal Communications Commission, some time ago had concluded that the F—word, when used in specific circumstances, like an adverb, was not subject to censure. That decision stood for about a year. Had it not been for Janet Jackson's exposing her breast, her right one I think, anyone could have attended a Congressional hearing and publicly stated that these F—ing individuals did not know what the F— they were thinking. I suppose such an enlightening speech would have had to be admitted into the public record."

She paused for a just a moment, just to pick up steam, "Then, the FCC reverses itself, concluding that the use of the F—word is obscene, but like Mr. Edson said, here comes the Vice President of the United States shouting the F—word to a senator, of all places, on the Senate floor! What is one to do now? What moral support do you feel you have, sir, to ask Mr. Edson to restrain himself? What good is it for parents, for teachers, to teach children proper manners and respect when people are incapable of restraining themselves in public!"

"Ms. Bynum, you are preaching to the choir, at least in my case," I said.

"There's another approach that has been tried in the past two or three decades and pretty much has attained the force of social norms, sir. I'm referring to *politically correct* speech.

"Mr. Hunt, right? Go on, please."

"It is interesting to observe that this concept is being used by the two ideological currents nowadays, although each pursues different objectives."

"How so?"

"Well, as the brainchild of the Liberal agenda, political correctness seldom

applies to obscenity or indecency, much less to pornography. The Liberal version is mostly sensitive about language that demeans certain groups of people. Lately, however, a somewhat strong Conservative approach to political correctness has emerged to deal with obscenity, pornography, and indecency, although it doesn't seem to support language that demeans social groups."

"Interesting observation," I remarked. "So, let me ask, wouldn't you say that political correctness, whether the Liberal or the Conservative approaches, is a form of censorship? And if so, is it a socially legitimate means to regulate both offensive and obscene speech and behavior?"

"I believe it is, on both counts," said Hunt. "Both ideological versions pursue the same objective—that people be treated with respect—so, any behavior and language that denigrates or demeans others would be considered morally and socially wrong. Yet, they won't support each other. The difference lies in that the Liberal version seeks to restrict behavior or speech that is offensive toward specific minority groups—African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, women, gays—groups that for the most part tend to vote Democratic.

"The Conservative version, on the other hand, stands for *correct public behavior*, meaning that it objects to speech, behavior, or visual images relating to vulgarity or public depiction of sexuality that many people find offensive or insulting.

"This doesn't mean that Liberals are indecent, just that they are not actively against restricting obscene language or pornography. Meanwhile, Conservatives would argue that indecent behavior and foul language displayed publicly through the media debases culture, relationships in general, and other social institutions.

"Their different points of view do not allow them to come together on issues dealing with offensive language. Liberals, for example, see the Conservative agenda on obscenity as an infringement on the First Amendment. They argue that whatever Conservatives regard as offensive language or behavior is not intended for those who find it objectionable. Liberals would argue that those who object to obscene language are not being forced to watch, hear, or read material they consider obscene, and they are free to turn off the TV or the radio or to abstain from going to a theatre.

"Liberals also point out that the reason speech is free is not merely to be able to express whatever one particular group likes according to its own standards of decency, but to say whatever anyone wants to say or do, provided it is neither libelous nor dangerous to the security of the nation or its government."

"But only insofar as speech does not offend their constituencies," I said.

"Right."

"Are you suggesting, Mr. Hunt, that political correctness as practiced by

Liberals is not censorship, or that it is, but it's justified?"

"The Liberal version of political correctness, I think, is justified largely because it's not being forced by legislation. It's a newly established social norm. Many people have bought into it simply as a form of self-imposed censorship, if you may, in order not to offend certain groups of people.

"Political correctness, even when it may result in silly excesses, as it has, focuses on rules of social conduct. Many people are now thinking twice before they speak to make sure they do not offend specific groups that in the past have been subject to discrimination and prejudice. Political correctness, in this sense, becomes a powerful form of social ostracism against people and ideologies whose language and behavior attempt against the dignity of certain groups and individuals. After all, sir, isn't this what we all argued about a while back?"

"So even if political correctness inhibits speech and intimidates social behavior, you still would support this approach?" I asked.

"Yes, but not because it inhibits speech or behavior!" he said. "All laws infringe upon our freedom. Any time a law is enacted, a portion of our freedom is sacrificed, supposedly, for a higher good. I'm intimidated when the law threatens me with a two hundred dollars fine if I go through a red light. And I hope such laws intimidate everyone in this room.

"Political correctness does not operate as a law, but it has the same impact; it tends to inhibit our behavior and restrict our freedom from doing what we please in cases when words or behavior would be offensive to others."

"Very well," I said, "there may be some validity to your arguments. However, if Liberals are so sensitive to the dignity of minority groups, why don't they tackle obscenity, pornography, violence, and drugs in the media and extend that dignity to everyone, minority or not?"

"I can only guess, sir. I'm not a fan of obscenity or pornography. As a matter of fact, I dislike it. I have very young children, and I do worry about the kind of society they will grow into and the social values that will nurture them. However, I think you would agree with me that Conservatives and Moderates, too, have done a lousy job with the opportunity that has been given to them while in power.

"We've had Conservative presidents who have preached family values but have been afraid, or have lacked the imagination, to formulate comprehensive strategies to deal with this problem. There seems to be this political fear of going against the culture of vulgarity, sex, drugs, and violence. My impression is that, as a society, we have yet to come to grips with these issues, and politicians, both Liberals and Conservatives, don't yet regard profanity, obscenity, and pornography as being harmful enough to the social fabric to take more radical action."

"I think they do," replied Mr. Brandon, "just that they might not know how

to deal with the problem.”

“You may be right,” said Mr. Hunt. “Let me give you an example. During the 2004 presidential campaign, Senators Kerry and Edwards and members of the Democratic Party held a fund-raising event at Radio City Music Hall that was attended by some Hollywood celebrities. The media reported that a few of these celebrities engaged in profanity and made obscene jokes about President Bush.

“Media reports indicated that the Kerry campaign sought to distance itself from the profanity-laced anti-Bush jokes, lyrics, and statements made by some of the entertainers. How did they attempt to do that, we may ask? Kerry’s campaign manager said that Kerry and Edwards didn’t approve of the remarks, even though, she added, *the performers had a perfect right*—mind you, not just a right but a *perfect right*—to say what they said. Kerry’s campaign manager, in fact, was defending obscenity as well as those who uttered it.

“Now, suppose that instead of Hollywood celebrities, these would have been drug pushers making the jokes. Do we think the Kerry-Edwards campaign people would have made the same remarks?

“Look, if I’m hosting this party, I’m going to make sure I invite those who share my basic core of values. After all, my guests act as my representatives on the campaign trail. And I would certainly make it my business to tell them to behave accordingly, or not to show up at all, regardless of how much money they would donate to my campaign.

“Then, along comes so-called Conservatives to safeguard family values when, to the surprise of many, some *smart* political aide within the White House sets up First Lady Bush, a school librarian, to make raunchy jokes about her husband while roasting him on public TV.² As I said, politicians take these issues lightly, too lightly.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hunt,” I said. “That was an important point you made. Obscenity and vulgarity have flourished in our culture because it’s not largely considered as being disrespectful of others or harmful enough to the social fabric.

“We may recall, too, the Don Imus incident in 2007. It would confirm what you’re saying. Beyond racism—which I don’t believe applied here, if we go by the definition of the term as well as by Imus’s past behavior—his comments were disrespectful, hurtful, and vulgar. But, it might be interesting to observe that this culture of vulgarity and disrespect that Imus projected grew out of poor Black communities and later became glorified and expanded by much of the White American establishment, both private and public, when they noticed that a large section of our population would buy into this culture because it was deemed to be *cool*.

“Should government become involved on this issue more than it has?” I asked. “Ms. Vanhurst.”

“Sir, in retrospect I will say that whatever government does will be nothing more than to put a band-aid on the problem. I remember that when President George W. Bush signed legislation on obscenity, he offered as a reason that, *language is becoming coarser during the times when it's more likely children will be watching television.*³ But, reflecting on this issue, I think that we're falsely attempting to protect children with any type of government legislation.”

“Why do you say that children are being falsely protected, Ms. Vanhurst?” asked Ms. Williamson.

“Well, because the legislation is aimed at children while the root-cause lies in adult behavior. Aren't we in fact telling children that obscenity is bad for kids but it's okay for adults? Aren't adults supposed to set the example? What are we talking about, granting kids a license to speak vulgarity once they become adults? When they reach eighteen or twenty-one, then they can become as obscene as we are. Isn't this some kind of atrocious logic?”

“Government's ignorance, our ignorance, lies in that we keep focusing on words instead of attitudes. Yes, words do hurt, even when there's no obscenity in them. I remember Ann Coulter's remarks directed against some of the World Trade Center widows some years ago. Ms. Coulter believed that these women, who had lost their husbands during 9/11, were enjoying their celebrity status a bit too much, and remarked, *I've never seen people enjoying their husbands' deaths so much*⁴. She didn't use any obscene language, but the type of humanity she exhibited, I feel was rather obscene!”

“And no less a Conservative icon, Sean Hannity, backed her up! According to the media, he said that he felt sorry for the widows, but that *America is better off for the free exchange of ideas.*⁵ This gentleman was arguing that displaying human insensitivity is the price that we have to pay for our freedom, even though the same ideas could have been expressed differently and in a different tone.”

“The point I'm trying to make is that words are the outcome of attitudes; words are the bullets that cause injury while attitudes are the guns that propel the bullets.”

I felt that Ms. Vanhurst was getting it, after all. “Let me read something I found in the newspaper some time ago,” I said as I opened up my briefcase. “A very telling article appeared in *The Washington Post* about adults behaving like adults at Washington Redskin games. Here's what it says:

Up in one of the nosebleed sections at FedEx Field, a man watched the game wearing a shirt reading: [Expletive] the Refs.” With him was a little boy, maybe 5 years old. A few rows in front, two guys greeted every referee call against the team by shooting their arms into the air, middle fingers extended. Leather lung louts screamed obscenities against the Oakland Raiders.

The rowdiness and the language of the fans is definitely different, said

another fan.⁶ Another fan replied to the article days later saying that the experience was not pleasant, in part because of people drinking *and their distasteful language. I don't know the exact demographics in the stands, but many of us are, um, older. Some of us bring children.*⁷

“And I remember an even more telling story in which a writer queried teachers throughout parts of the country only to find out that *more and more, kids say the foulest things* and that efforts to educate these kids are *falling on deaf ears*. In the article, a teacher in Illinois said that today *kids swear almost incessantly. They are so used to swearing and hearing it at home, in the movies, and on TV, and in the music they listen to that they have become desensitized to it.*”⁸

Ms. Vanhurst replied, “That’s because we’re foolishly trying to shield kids from an adult-created and guided culture, and we seem to believe that we can ask kids to shut their ears at times when adults are being obscene. We just don’t realize that while their eyes and ears are opened, these children absorb vast amount of profanity and obscene behavior that they get at home, in the street, and from the entertainment media. Kids today are learning to use these cultural guns from adults.”

“Are these incidents, by any chance, inconveniences that citizens have to put up for the sake of living in a free society?” I asked.

“Inconveniences?” asked Ms. Williamson. “I’m trying my best to educate my children— not shield them—but educate them so they grow up to become respectful and sensitive of others when they become adults. But it’s a non-winnable battle because culture is far more powerful, it exerts far more influence on the behavior of adults who are then conditioned to behave similarly. I’d say that it’s a cultural problem, not just an inconvenience.”

“Very well, in that case let me go a step further,” I said. “This is what a Jeffersonian specialist said about Thomas Jefferson’s take on this issue:

*Jefferson was in favor of free speech even when it produced offensive language or sentiments. To preserve the highest, noblest ideas, we have to tolerate some of the lowest and ignoble. Jefferson didn't like vulgar language or hateful ideas, but he believed that with imperfect people, they are unavoidable. And to try to suppress or censor bad speech would cause worse problems (censorship, oppression, and untruth) than the offensive speech.*⁹

As I finished reading, once again silence set in, except that the faces looked differently. I read disappointment and frustration in some of the faces, perplexity in others. It seems that they didn’t know how to react to the views of one of our most illustrious presidents. After, all, who would dare to take on Thomas Jefferson?

I didn’t have to wait long for an answer; Mr. Hunt took the challenge.

“It seems that, as a society, we have lost respect toward each other. We put each other down; we discriminate and exploit people in more ways than one; we

make fun of and denigrate gay people. We're becoming more rude and offensive toward each other when we discuss politics. At school, bully teenagers pick on their prey.

"Remember the movie *Mean Girls*? Today, it's a reality show in our schools! Ours is becoming a very violent society. We shoot our bosses when we get fired. We curse and give the finger to those whom we dislike. We use foul language in public because that's how the media projects adult behavior. Our culture incites us and then validates such behavior.

"Sir, ours is not the same society Jefferson left behind. If there is a vital social need today, it is not for less social and political correctness but for more, and of both the Liberal and the Conservative types. When it comes to being *a kinder and gentler nation*, we shouldn't be making ideological distinctions.

"Respect ought to be extended to all, not just some individuals or groups. I'm sure that many of us would reject Jefferson's agrarian ideal as outmoded, just as any modern soldier would reject the musket in favor of a more reliable AR-15. And, while no one is arguing about censoring the essence of political, religious, philosophical, or social freedom of speech, we need to recognize the new social realities we confront in the twenty-first century.

"I agree that social and political correctness will never be perfect. Would it inhibit behavior? Well, I hope it would inhibit language and behavior that is offensive, callous, disrespectful, and insensitive to people. Otherwise, it wouldn't be effective. Would it inhibit creativity as well? We don't know that, but I doubt it.

"Besides, if we have to err on one side, it certainly shouldn't be on the side of offensive, vulgar, and downright insensitive speech and behavior. Granted, people would have to walk on eggshells for a while, until our social behavior assimilates new norms; norms that would value kindness and respect toward one another. Once it becomes second nature, I think social and political correctness would improve the health of our society."

"Thank you, Mr. Hunt. That was an eloquent speech," I said. "Anyone else? Okay. I believe we are coming to the end of this session, and I would like to call up on someone to summarize what we have concluded here tonight. Ms. Vanhurst, please, would you mind?"

"I'll try," she said. "I believe that after receiving first hand shock-treatment, we were all enlightened upon learning that words are not simple means of communication, but they convey a great deal more. Words not only conceptualize aspects of reality; words also convey feelings, emotions, and images. They serve to transport ideas as well as to reflect behavior.

"Words can offend people, regardless whether they are addressed personally or just spoken publicly. Further, we accepted that society brands both words and actions as vulgar, indecent, or obscene, through social norms. It was

indicated that there might be a close relationship between vulgar and obscene language and subsequent indecent behavior. And, I believe we also have learned that terms like *indecent*, *vulgar*, or *obscene* go beyond mere words; they refer, primarily, to attitudes that individuals adopt, consciously or subconsciously, and often seem to go hand in hand with obscene or vulgar public behavior.

“Then, there was the question of what happens when government protects the use of offensive language in public in its attempt to protect freedom of speech, and whether those who feel offended have any rights at all. Lastly, we saw a match of ideas between Mr. Hunt and Professor Planas regarding political correctness of both kinds. Personally, I think Mr. Hunt got the best of you, sir.”

“Thank you, Ms. Vanhurst. And, yes, he may very well have. This goes to show that we all learn from one another, including teachers from students.

“I’ll see you all next week.”

The class chattered as I gathered my papers and followed them downstairs to the exit. As I walked into the muggy air, I felt confident. The class had done well, even though learning to argue in dialectical terms instead of debating an opponent isn’t something easy to do. The sheer energy required not to put down or insult one’s opponent is incredible, but I felt that this class had it in them.

Not even Mr. Edson had resorted to insults or profanity when he’d felt cornered. He had already learned that mudslinging isn’t so much a skilled art as a failure on the part of individuals, including politicians, who feel incapable of persuading others with logic.

But tonight was the easy part, I reminded myself, I can’t wait to see what happens when we get to the war in Iraq, gun control, or gay marriage.

Endnotes

¹ The Court Is Open For Discussion, *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2005.

² During the TV event that took place on April 30, 2005, the First Lady told a joke in which her husband, the president, once mistook a horse for a cow and ended up milking the horse’s penis.

³ Bush Signs Legislation On Broadcast Decency, *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2006.

⁴ Ann Coulter’s Jab at 9/11 Widows, Reliable Source, *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2006.

⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁶ Beer, Boorishness in Stands Spoil Games for Some Fans, *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2005.

⁷ At FedEx Field, Fans Behaving Badly, Letters to the Editor, *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2005.

⁸ *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2005.

⁹ Sheldon, Garrett Ward, *What Would Jefferson Say?* (New York: The Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998), p. 121.