

Confessions of a Cursing Librarian

by Roz Warren

I recently strained a tendon in my foot, which made walking extremely painful. My podiatrist suggested a cortisone shot.

“This will hurt,” he warned, as he angled a gigantic needle toward my foot, “but I think it might alleviate the problem.”

When the needle plunged in, and the searing pain hit, I let loose with a stream of profanity that clearly shocked my doctor, a pleasant and amiable fellow, who also happened to be an Orthodox Jew.

I wasn't swearing at him. I was just swearing. But the verbiage I'd unleashed was at odds with my demeanor. I'm a mild-mannered, middle-aged librarian. Up to that moment, I'd been ladylike and well spoken. Nary a “damn” had crossed my lips.

Of course, up to then, he hadn't stuck me with any sharp objects.

I am, by nature, well behaved. Growing up in the 60s, my role model for correct behavior was my mother, a woman with exquisite manners. Mom was no aristocrat, just a middle-class Detroit housewife. But appropriate behavior meant a great deal to her. She was ladylike to the core and raised me to be the same.

And a lady didn't swear. Ever.

As a young girl, I never once heard my elegant mother say any of the words I'd just inflicted upon my poor podiatrist.

Upon occasion, Mom would say "darn." If truly provoked, she'd allow herself to exclaim "Jesus Christ!" which was always followed by this disclaimer: "I'm a Jew, so I don't believe in him anyway."

My mother wanted to set a good example for her daughters and she did.

Then I became a rebellious teenager and the counterculture kicked in. I didn't want to be ladylike. I wanted to be liberated! I marched against the Vietnam War. I read "Sisterhood is Powerful." I didn't want to be well-behaved. I wanted to challenge authority.

I grew my hair long and wore torn jeans and smoked pot and used profanity.

And if you didn't like it, you could just go * * *%@ yourself.

Mom was appalled. But perhaps, also, just a little intrigued. I think I was a good influence. By the time I hit my twenties, Mom had loosened up a little. The occasional "damn" crept into her speech. Only, of course, when strictly necessary. But do I believe she enjoyed it.

And why not? As far as I'm concerned, profanity is the spice of life. To this day, at home, and with friends, I love to employ a well-chosen swear word.

Of course, when I got a job in the junior room at my local public library, I had to put a lid on it.

Under no circumstances can you say "fuck" when you're working in a public library.

Especially in the junior room.

Eileen, dropping a heavy reference book on her sandal-clad foot, can exclaim only “Sugar!”

Deb, tripping over an extension cord and falling flat on her face, is allowed to shout “Dang!”

Even when a hotheaded patron, infuriated because I refuse to waive a fine, begins shouting and swearing and calling me nasty names, I'm not allowed to “return fire.”

The worst I can say is “I'm very sorry you feel that way.”

But when I'm not at the library, I swear. For emphasis. For flavor. To liven up an otherwise dull sentence. To fully express my emotions when AT&T puts me on hold for twenty minutes and then disconnects me.

When it comes to profanity, I lead a double life. On the job, I appear to be the perfect lady my mother raised me to be.

But inside my own head, and in my own home, and with my close friends, I'm Lenny Bruce.

When I'm really stressed out, the usual profanity gets cranked up a notch. Every other word out of my mouth is a curse word.

For instance, if I'm walking to the train station on a bitterly cold day, and am suddenly blasted by an icy wind, a little mantra made entirely of curse words will start going through my head. “Fuckity-fuckity-fuckity-fuck,” I'll chant to myself as I lean into the wind. “Fuckity-fuckity-fuck.”

It's best if I can say it aloud, but I don't have to. It calms me just to think it.

Observing my placid demeanor, you'd never in a million years imagine what I'm thinking.

And unless you stick a big needle in me, you probably won't find out.

Although Mom wouldn't approve, the truth is that research backs me up. When you're stressed, a little profanity helps.

One recent study (from the journal *Neuroreport*) found that people subjected to a painful experience (plunging a hand into cold water) could better endure the pain if they were allowed to swear.

Concluded the study's author: "I would advise people, if they hurt themselves, to swear."

As a mild-mannered, profanity-loving librarian, how do I feel about this study?

I think it's fucking awesome.

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