

High-Octane Words

by BROCK WEIR

As a writer, I've always been conscious of the power of words.

It's a lesson that's hard to avoid.

You learn it fairly early on as a kid when you find yourself on the giving or receiving end of a good old "Sticks and stones" lecture when certain words struck a certain chord on the playground or in the classroom.

If you're from a certain generation, perhaps your precocious word choice got you a mouthful of Ivory Soap if what you said proved particularly crass or controversial.

There are more avenues than ever before to learn this valuable lesson. Yet, looking back, to hear my mother tell it, my first lesson in this regard started off in a particularly innocent and potentially unavoidable way.

Family lore records a rather ordinary visit to a convenience store when I was about three years old. Apparently, there were a bunch of much older kids hanging out in front of the shop, shooting the breeze, having a good time, and apparently using what the Brits sometimes like to call "fruity language."

We went in, got what we set out to get, and went home. End of story.

But not quite.

A short time later, my mom asked me to do something that has been lost to the midst of time. Evidently, however, it was something I didn't want to do because, despite my age, my response was "F___ off!"

I guess there's something to the adage of "little pitchers have big ears" because, when the initial surprise wore off and she had the wherewithal to ask where I had picked up such a word, my simple response was, "At Becker's!"

I guess the store was serving up more than dairy that day and I wanted to milk it before it was too late!

Her reaction was a curious mix of surprise and slight annoyance and, in hindsight, more than a couple of snickers she tried to hide. That melange underscored from that early point that words can indeed make an impact, depending on how you use them.

I'm not going to lie and say that the lesson was so powerful I never swore again "nobody who knows me would be able to keep a straight face if they read any words of mine suggesting it" but, in addition to the power words hold, it also instilled a curiosity in how simple combinations of letters can be so divisive.

There is one word, an adjective that has sadly been directed over the years at certain individuals or groups thereof, that was rightly, in my view, consigned to the historical dustbin as an inappropriate relic of a bygone era. Yet, in certain groups, it has sadly made an alarming and astonishing comeback.

I like to push back on it whenever it flies out of the lips of someone with whom I'm conversing. When I do so, I can sometimes see the speaker's back straighten just slightly as they really lean in and try to justify it, with varying degrees of anger at being called out or pleasure at knowing that what they said got under someone's skin.

A common refrain in this situation is, "I can say what I want!" as if that was the proverbial hill they wanted to die on. Yet, when I

reply that I too can say what I want, and that was it, it's often met with astonishment and confusion that speech and the freedom thereof can be a two-way street. Who knew!

I'm writing this on Tuesday morning with just hours to go before comedian Jimmy Kimmel is due to return to the airwaves on his eponymous late-night show after what has been, I think we can all agree, a week that has prompted many to take a deeper dive into what freedom of speech and expression means in this highly-polarized day and age.

?Last Wednesday, we made the decision to suspend production on the show to avoid further inflaming a tense situation at an emotional moment for our country,? said The Walt Disney Company on Monday, explaining its decision to reinstate Jimmy Kimmel Live! ?It's a decision we made because some of the comments were ill-timed and thus insensitive. We have spent the last days having thoughtful conversations with Jimmy and, after those conversations, we reached the decision to return the show on Tuesday.?

It will be interesting to see what the results of these ?thoughtful conversations? might be this evening, and, indeed, whether his monologue will throw water or gasoline on last week's embers. Will he apologize for his words, double down on sharing his perspective, or walk a delicate tightrope down the middle?

Whichever way you slice it, he's in an unenviable position.

And whether you agree or disagree with his comments, the debate that has taken place since his suspension has, I believe, been a valuable one.

Regardless of where you might fall on the political spectrum, there seems to have been a collective wake-up call on just how precious freedom of speech and expression is and has always been ? but also how fragile it is, how it can be snatched away, how it can be undermined by the usual suspects, and, as evidenced last week, some surprising ones as well.

It has also caused many people to consider the words Kimmel used, evaluated them against the facts, and come to, one can only hope, an informed view point.

One can also only hope that some have also embraced the idea that while freedom of speech and expression is of the utmost importance, it needn't be a free-for-all and the words that you use can have the power to hurt and cause harm.

My mother, as a woman who embraces ?fruity language? herself and really had no real ground to stand on feigning offence when I dropped my first ?F-bomb? (without even knowing what an F-bomb was, mind you) brushed it off pretty easily ? but I can only imagine it's a bit more of a challenge when one is on the receiving end of an outmoded, ridiculous, and inflammatory term that has been taken out of that historical dustbin and given a spit-polish out of, at best, ignorance, or, at worst, malice.

Freedom of speech and expression, as mentioned above, cuts both ways. No one person or group has the monopoly on it, but without being conscious of the words we use, and how we use them, it can be more fragile than we'd ever like to think.

THANK YOU

I'd just like to end this week's column by thanking all those who took the time to reach out last week with birthday wishes. It was heartening to hear from so many of you and it made turning forty all the sweeter. Thanks also to the anonymous individual who sent in a very generously-loaded coffee gift card. While it's getting harder and harder to find genuine milk from Becker's to brighten up the coffee a little bit, rest assured it will be well-used, whoever you are, and, as autumn has now officially arrived, I'm thinking something in the pumpkin spice family might hit the spot. Wait, that too is a divisive choice. But, if you disapprove of my beverage choice, I hope you defend my right to drink it!