

# Swearing Is More Important Than You Think

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## Episode Transcript

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Lately, I've been using my phone a lot for dictation. I will dictate emails, texts, and occasionally a note to myself, like when I think of a question I want to ask in an interview for this show. The other day, for instance, I dictated into my phone something like, "Talk about the first time you did such-and-such." But the phone didn't render my dictation as "talk about." It said, "f\*\*\* about." Since when did the voice recognition on my phone start using the f-word? It struck me that swearing, or whatever you want to call it — profanity, blasphemy, curses and slurs, expletives and vulgarities — it struck me there seems to be more of it now than ever, and often in places you wouldn't expect. So, today on *Freakonomics Radio*: is it true that there's more swearing than ever — and if so, what does it mean? We will hear a little history.

| *John McWHORTER: These are people in the king's retinue.*

We'll learn why we don't know as much about swearing as you might think.

| *Timothy JAY: He said, "You know, that swearing research you're doing is not a good idea for a tenure."*

We'll find out what these words are meant to accomplish.

| *Melissa MOHR: Swear words have this very particular set of physiological and emotional effects.*

And we'll ask the big question: Should we all be swearing even more? Also, a warning: There will be a lot of swearing in this episode. As is our custom, we will bleep it out — but, I mean, the word is just sitting there underneath the bleep, and you know it. So if that is something you do not want to hear, now is a good time to find a different *Freakonomics Radio* episode to listen to. But, if you want to go on the ride with us, it is time to buckle the f\*\*\* up.

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Let's start by hearing from a few of our listeners:

Kristen NEVA: I tell my kids they need to save those words for when something really bad happens, instead of saying “I’m so f-ing happy,” because otherwise you have no language left to express extreme frustration or sadness or grief.

Olga CHILAT: What made me reassess my language was a conversation with a Spanish boy who I was dating. He told me that usually people that use swear words do so because they lack the vocabulary to express themselves better. I thought to myself, “This motherf\*\*\*er tells me my English is poor.” Needless to say, we are no longer dating.

Rebecca SCHAFFER: I f\*\*\*ing love cursing. I think it adds some oomph to your language. I think that s\*\*\* is awesome. I do have an 18-month-old, so sometime soon I’m going to have to stop cursing. But for now, f\*\*\*ing weeeee! Love you.

That was, respectively, Kristen, Olga, and Rebecca. Apparently none of our male listeners have ever sworn. But we did find one man who swears:

McWHORTER: My name is **John McWhorter**. I teach linguistics and some other things at Columbia University. I write a column for the New York Times, and my most recent two books were Nine Nasty Words, about profanity, and Woke Racism, about race and cultural issues.

DUBNER: So John, how would you summarize the role of cursing in language?

McWHORTER: One thing that it’s important to realize with cursing and profanity is that it isn’t words in the sense that “ironing board” or “yesterday” or “therefore” are words. Profanity, when you’re talking about real profanity, real cursing, is eruptions. There’s the left side of the brain, where most people process language, as in, “the boy kicked the red ball.” The right side of the brain is more Dionysian, is more about the melody, is more about the tone, and therefore is also where profanity is generated from. Profanity comes from such a different place emotionally than vanilla language to the point that it often doesn’t even make any grammatical sense. If I say, “What the hell is that?” — try parsing what “hell” is in that sentence, other than just a kind of a dog bark.

And here’s another expert, with a slightly different perspective.

Timothy JAY: Swearing is the use of emotionally offensive language to vent our emotions and convey our emotions to other people.

His name is **Timothy Jay**.

*JAY: I'm a professor of psychology emeritus from the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.*

*DUBNER: Would you call yourself a swearing scholar, or is that too reductive?*

*JAY: I've been called worse. I like to think of myself as pioneering the psychological research on American cursing. Having written six books on this and published dozens of professional articles, yes, I'm a scholar.*

*DUBNER: What would you say are the chief things you've learned about swearing then?*

*JAY: It's a normal behavior. It's not abnormal. It's part of language. Every competent speaker of a language knows what they're not supposed to say. One of the myths comes up about control. "All those swearers just can't control themselves."*

Why does Jay call this a "myth," the idea that swearing represents a loss of control? Well, this goes back to research from the early 1980s, when Jay set out to document the use of swearing and other taboo words.

*JAY: We've recorded over 10,000 people swearing in public with different means.*

"In public" meaning places like schools and stores, and at sporting events.

*JAY: I had a cadre of research assistants, and we had these pre-printed field cards. They had categories like the speaker, the listener, their ages, what was said, and what was the emotional surround — was this joking, was it anger? We've also used voice-activated tape recorders and put them in various places.*

This recording and note-taking was all done covertly, without the subjects' knowledge. But Jay also asked people directly about swearing.

*JAY: I've surveyed hundreds, thousands of students, having them fill out surveys on how frequently these words are used and how offensive they are.*

*DUBNER: When you started this research, I'm curious how your academic peers and/or elders responded.*

*JAY: Negatively. I had a dean pull me aside at a social event. I'm right out of college, 26 years old. I've got a wife and a kid. He said, "You know, that swearing research you're doing is not a good idea for tenure." So I switched gears for a while, and I became a guru of computer-assisted instruction.*

*DUBNER: Wow, that is a big gear switch.*

*JAY: Eventually, I won the G. Stanley Hall Award for Excellence in Education by incorporating computers into psychology. And about the same time, I got tenure.*

*DUBNER: Now you can do what you wanted to do in the first place.*

*JAY: Yeah. One of my buddies said, "Tim, everybody's doing this computer stuff. Nobody's doing the taboo-word research." The first analysis I did, I had a Nike sneaker box that was filled up with these cards. I said, "Okay, we've got to go through it and analyze all of this." We wanted to document the whole arc of this. What happens in the preschool years? What happens in the school years? Certainly, there are age differences. There are gender differences. You have boys and girls, men and women emoting with, say, anger or aggression, and they're using different language. You can make all of these age and gender-related comparisons.*

Okay, here are a few comparisons. First, gender: Men do curse more often than women; they use a larger variety of swear words and more hardcore swear words. This holds true for the internet era as well. Men and women both swear more when in the presence of their own gender. And what about age?

JAY: The arc is adolescence. Pre-schoolers don't have the vocabulary that teenagers do. By the time you're at 12, 13, 14, you've got a pretty adult-like vocabulary. What happens after that depends on the setting. Is this person in a structured corporate setting, or are they working outside as a laborer? Are they playing sports? It becomes very contextualized after that.

DUBNER: As to the why, the purpose of swearing — and obviously, it differs from person to person, situation to situation — even I can think of a lot of different reasons. You might be angry. You might be disgusted. You might be trying to elicit humor from someone else. You might be trying to bond. You might be trying to show that you are your own person and I won't be bound by society's rules. If I ask you to give the answer to the title of this one book of yours, Why We Curse — why do we? How answerable is that question?

JAY: You just answered it. Stephen, you just elaborated a lot of the reasons why people swear. Now, we're the only animal with emotional architecture in the physiological that can express our emotions abstractly with words. I regard this as an evolutionary leap, that instead of fighting tooth and nail when we're angry with someone, we can say, "I hate you," or a variety of other words.

Okay, and what about the common belief that swearing is more popular among the less-educated, the lower classes, than the upper? Timothy Jay says that this, too, is somewhat mythical.

JAY: The data that have been collected — Tony McEnery did this in England, he collected phone conversations. That's a much more class-oriented culture than ours. He's able to see that, yeah, there's more swearing in the working class, but there's swearing everywhere. There's swearing in every class. This class-oriented view of swearing is snobbery. It's a way to put the working person down, the lower classes down.

Jay has seen further evidence in his own research.

JAY: We gave people a task. "Say all the words you can think of that begin with the letter F. Say all the words that begin with the letter A." You give them a minute to do that. It's a measure of fluency. Then I ask them, "All right, name all the animals you can in a minute." And then, "Name all the swear words you can in a minute," which if you try to do this, you can get out about ten quickly. The people who generated the most swear words were the people who generated the most letter words and animals. It's the opposite of what people think. People that have a high vocabulary also have a high swearing vocabulary. It really doesn't make any sense that if you couldn't think of a word because it wasn't in your lexicon, you would say a swear word? That doesn't make any sense.

John McWhorter agrees that the class-based swearing theory is bankrupt.

*McWHORTER: Any notion that being a classy person is to not curse has fallen completely apart. I would say that as a very bourgeois, upper middle-class person who has no interest in shocking anybody — nor am I trying to take it down in order to indicate that despite the fact that I'm not poor, I'm still down with everybody else — I say "f\*\*\*" probably a dozen times a day. And I think I'm ordinary for people of my place and station. That was not true in 1950, but that's the way it is now. Cursing is no longer about sailors and bar stools.*

*DUBNER: So, John, there is a sense that there is more swearing today than in the past. I'm curious to know whether that's at all true.*

*McWHORTER: There is definitely today, in public language, more use of words that used to be considered blasphemous against God or blasphemous against the authorities that say that you're not supposed to talk about sex and excretion. I mean, the way language is used on a T.V. show — even, like, Parks and Recreation and then certainly in shows like, you know, The Wire, that's new. That's public language. But then on the other hand, I think a lot of it also has to do with the fact that those words just don't have the meaning that they used to.*

I asked Timothy Jay the same question: is there more swearing now than in the past?

*JAY: Unanswerable question. Preceding my work, there aren't collections of swearing, so there's no way to tell. History is written by the literate. You have no idea what language was like in a tavern or a brothel in —*

*DUBNER: Oh, wait a minute. You just told us that swearing is not necessarily the province of the uneducated, so why wouldn't the literate swear as well?*

*JAY: Censorship. The written documents have not included the language, except maybe Chaucer, where you just have examples, and those aren't frequency counts.*

*DUBNER: That's also a certain kind of bawdy-ness, more than defaming a deity, let's say.*

*JAY: Yes. I remember having to read The Miller's Tale in high school and not understanding what I was reading, about Absolon using the word "c\*\*\*," — Q-U-E-N-T-E. And there's my English teacher is having us read this stuff out loud and I'm going like, "She's going to go home and laugh her ass off."*

Whether the frequency of swearing is up or down over time, John McWhorter says we are currently living through the third major phase of swearing in human history. That's coming up. Also, what does swearing do to you?

| MOHR: *If you call someone a f\*\*\*ing idiot, your heart rate increases.*

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What have we learned so far about swearing? First, it's hard to know whether there's more of it today than before. It's even hard to know whether swearing is a normal, albeit heightened, part of language — or not a regular part of language at all. To add one more complication, swearing — like all of language — refuses to sit still. Here, again, is the Columbia linguist John McWhorter.

| McWHORTER: *Language changes, just like cloud patterns change. It's never not changed, and you just can't stop it.*

Since language is always evolving, swearing is always evolving as well.

| McWHORTER: *The neatest thing about the evolution of profanity is how differently people in different times feel about certain kinds of words.*

And this brings us to what McWhorter describes as the three major eras of swearing over the history of humankind.

| McWHORTER: *So it used to be that profanity was about religion. It was about God and Jesus. You were allowed to swear to God if you meant it. It was a form of signature in a society where most people couldn't write. So, "I swear to God that I will do X, Y, or Z." What you weren't supposed to do was swear in vain, because that was to disrespect God. And therefore you had euphemisms for "by God," etc., when you weren't going to do it sincerely. That's why we say "swearing." It used to be that you actually were swearing to something, and then it becomes shorthand for using bad words.*

What are some of those euphemisms?

| McWHORTER: *Gadzooks. Ods bodkins. Egad. By George. Geez. Jeepers creepers. Gee willikers.*

Okay, so phase one of swearing had to do with religion.

McWHORTER: Then there comes a time around the Renaissance when there develops a sense of privacy that wasn't known before. And along with that sense of privacy and perhaps individualism due to the Reformation, you have this new sense that what's profane is talking too freely about the body. And so sex and excretion goes from being a giggle to being something that you absolutely don't put down in writing and that you don't use in public. And all of this gets worse with the development of bourgeois society. And so that's when you get the idea that "s\*\*\*" and "f\*\*\*" and the like are very, very bad words rather than just mundane things that are part of being a human being. So that phase lasts for a while. It's not that the God words suddenly are okay — you have two layers — but it's certainly the case that throughout that time, "damn" and "hell" become less potent as profanity while "s\*\*\*" and "f\*\*\*" becomes so unspeakable that as late as the Kennedy administration, there are dictionaries being published, and big ones, where "f\*\*\*" is not in it. Then there's a new phase that we're in, where what is considered profane is slurring subordinate groups. That's why there's such a difference between the way the N-word was used in popular culture — even as recently as the '70s, when sitcom characters could within reason, use it, especially if they were Black — and today, where just the utterance of the two syllables in any way is often thought of as a transgression of legitimate humanity. So we go from religion to the body to slurring against groups. And you can see that as — and this is no disrespect intended against religion — but it's the intellectual and moral development of our society. If we're going to be sacred about something, my personal feeling is that it's better for it to be about slurs against groups than about Jesus or your butt.

DUBNER: Okay. Let me ask you — so, you happen to be Black.

McWHORTER: I happen to be, yeah.

DUBNER: Do you ever find yourself in writing, as you do quite a bit, about race and racism and language — do you ever find yourself having to signal overtly that you are Black?

McWHORTER: Yeah, sometimes when I'm writing about language, and especially if I'm writing about the N-word, sometimes I do feel like I have to slip it in because there are different tacit rules as far as that word goes.

As much as McWhorter cares about contemporary language, and as much as he knows and cares about language from the distant past, you get the sense he is most tickled by the rules of language during the second of the three eras of swearing — when the words considered the most taboo had to do with the human body. For instance, "f\*\*\*."



McWHORTER: Oh, f\*\*\* is amazing. And you see it popping up in early Middle English — not in prose, but in names. There were actually people taken seriously with names like Roger F\*\*\*bythenavel and Henry F\*\*\*beggar, literally. And this is not in some funny poem. These are, like, people in the king's retinue. And there were places called F\*\*\*ingrove, and you know what that was for. But it was on a sign. It wasn't something that people said among themselves. And then there comes a time when you're not supposed to use the word that way anymore, and there's all evidence that people were using it, but they weren't supposed to write it down. Or if they did, they wrote it in code, the idea being that it is a profane word. But it just started as a vulgar but common and accepted word for sexual intercourse.

DUBNER: You write about a monk in 1528 — he's talking about an abbot, he calls him a "f\*\*\*in' abbot." So that's meant to be just a general, "I think he's an idiot" kind of thing?

McWHORTER: What you see on the page is O, then a space, then D and then "f\*\*\*in' abbot." And you think that what he's writing is "old f\*\*\*in' abbot" and that because it's an old document, somebody smudged out the L. But no, there is no L smudged out. What he's writing is O, and he's abbreviating "damned f\*\*\*in' abbot." And so for him, you don't write "damn," because that's blasphemy. But then with "f\*\*\*in'," he puts that in with this kind of Beavis and Butthead snicker.

Let's hear some more about this middle era of swearing.

MOHR So there were a lot of names for plants and animals which I think are so funny. You had a plant called "c\*\*\*ehoare." There was a heron, the English word for heron was "s\*\*\*erow." Oh, yeah. And then "windf\*\*\*er." That was a good one. Windf\*\*\*er was a bird, a kestrel.

That is **Melissa Mohr**.

MOHR: And I am a writer. I got to figure out how to explain what I do. I'm a writ — yeah, my name is Melissa Mohr, and I'm a writer.

Mohr is the author of a book called *Holy Sh\*t: A Brief History of Swearing*. She had planned on being an academic, and she got a Ph.D. in medieval and renaissance English literature. But somehow, she got sidetracked by swearing.

*MOHR: Yes. So when I was getting my Ph.D., I was reading a lot of medieval and Renaissance texts, obviously.*

*DUBNER: As one does.*

*MOHR: As one does. And I noticed that the swearing was really different, and the kinds of language that people were getting upset about was religious in nature, and the kinds of language that they weren't getting upset about were the things we do get upset about. And so I got interested in how and why that transition happened.*

If you've been paying attention, you'll notice that Melissa Mohr is talking about the same transition that McWhorter was telling us about: a new taboo on words concerning sex and excretion. Now, why did this new taboo arise? Mohr thinks it was driven not only by the newfound personal privacy, but by the technologies that made such privacy increasingly possible.

*MOHR: So, the bedroom actually — it needed an innovation in fireplace technology before we got a bedroom. Because in the time of Beowulf, you just had a big central fire pit, and people slept in the hall, ate in the hall, peed and defecated in the hall under the straw. I mean, it was really — it was like a barn. And eventually, 12th, 13th century, you got better fireplaces, aristocrats could get bedrooms, and it just took a long, long time before people had a sense of space that they could sort of, you know, be private. Originally, even privies weren't private. You'd have multi-seat privies and just go in there together. Actually solitude was a sort of suspicious thing. Like, what were you doing by yourself? It's like you and the devil, if you're not with other people.*

In her book, Mohr cites a pamphlet written in 1530 by the philosopher and theologian Desiderius Erasmus, advising young boys that: "It is impolite to greet someone who is urinating or defecating." Court regulations from the same era said, quote, "One should not, like rustics who have not been to court or lived among refined and honourable people, relieve oneself without shame or reserve in front of ladies."

*MOHR: As people got wealthier, you could become solitary. And it started to be not such a bad thing. And once you could be solitary, you could take care of your bodily functions in private.*

Meanwhile, there was a change in the practice of religious oath-taking, what John McWhorter had described as "I swear to God that I will do X, Y, or Z." Melissa Mohr argues that the spread of trade and capitalism meant that this sort of oath-taking was no longer practical or necessary.

*MOHR: By the 17th century, these oaths were just coming so thick and fast that you couldn't — you know, it's like one, you swear this, no, now you swear that. And as trade spread and people became involved in more and more transactions with people who they hadn't grown up with, as people moved and commerce opened up, what became the guarantee of your honesty was not your swearing but the fact that you continued to do business.*

This decline in oath-taking may have even helped boost the taboo index of all those newly dirty words about the human body. And then came the Victorians.

*MOHR: Yes. So the Victorian era was the sort of high point of power for the obscene words that are based in body parts and actions. So "trousers," for instance, was a very taboo word because — I mean, it sounds ridiculous, but it really was because if you pulled them down, you were naked, and they had kind of revealed the shape of your leg and so you couldn't say "trousers." And so there were all these crazy euphemisms for trousers that people would use, like, "etceteras," "inexpressibles."*

It's easy to laugh now, from this distance, at the notion of "trousers" being a taboo word among those long-ago prudes. But we maybe shouldn't laugh too quickly. John McWhorter again.

*McWHORTER: People back in the '20s and '30s thought that it was profane to say "belly."*

He's talking about the 1920s and '30s.

*McWHORTER: In the movie musical 42nd Street, there's a lyric where there's a reference to "with a shotgun at his belly," and then she changes it to "tummy" instead of saying "belly," despite the fact that "belly" rhymes with "Nellie" on the next line. You just kind of weren't supposed to say it.*

Coming up: These days, while "belly" and other words have become accepted, a long list of long-accepted words is being challenged.

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When we swear, what are we trying to accomplish? Here's a clue: in 2017, an international group of researchers ran a series of experiments to analyze the relationship between profanity and honesty. They found that people who swear are perceived as more authentic. Here, again, is John McWhorter:

*McWHORTER: Part of becoming close to people, part of becoming part of a group, is to be able to let your hair down, is to show that you don't think you're better than other people. And one of the best ways to do that is to use salty language. That is normal human behavior.*

And here's Timothy Jay, on the various uses of swearing.

*JAY: It's humor. It's bonding. It's defending yourself. It's putting people down. It's self-denigration. It's storytelling.*

Jay has written about swearing research that shows physiological benefits as well. Melissa Mohr is also a fan of this research.

MOHR: If you're swearing or hearing swear words, your skin-conductance response changes, so the way your skin conducts electricity. There's a famous ice-bucket challenge, where you can stick your hand in ice water longer if you're using a swear word than if you're not using a swear word. Someone also did a grip challenge. You can hold a gripper with more strength and for longer if you're swearing.

DUBNER: That's interesting. It'd be fun to try that with current swear words versus the more toothless old swear words. What do you think is more common over time, for words that are taboo to become less taboo, or vice versa?

MOHR: Hmm, that's an interesting question. You've got this kind of euphemism treadmill that Steven Pinker talks about, where it starts off as a bad word, but then people use it more and more, and then you get used to it and then it falls away, and then you need to come up with another bad word. And you've seen that with the religious words, we're seeing it with f\*\*\* and c\*\*\* and s\*\*\*.

DUBNER: But on the other hand, "homeless person" becomes taboo.

MOHR: Yes, right now we are in a new new Victorianism in that way. And of course that's very culturally specific in the United States. Like, among my relatives in Wisconsin who didn't go to college, they're not going to say "the unhoused," you know, but in academia, and Cambridge it's, yep —.

DUBNER: Can I share with you this story, something that happened I think just illustrated where we are now. I happen to play golf, so I hope you don't judge, if you hate golf. And I belong to this club. Very nice people. And I was up there not long ago, and there were these three ladies getting ready to tee off, and one of them was describing — this tournament that they're playing in was one where you could play the 18 holes any time you wanted, and register your score. So in other words, you could choose when to play it based on the conditions — the weather and so on — but also based on where on a given day, the holes were cut on the green. Because they move around, and some days they seem easier and some days harder. So she was describing how the two women she was playing with — that they would, like, game the system to drive up to the course one day and if they saw the flags were in a bad place, they would choose not to register their score that day. And so she was describing how they were being a little bit strategic — or "sneaky" was the word she was using. But as she was saying it, she was saying, "Well, these sneaky ladies," and she's like, "Oh, wait, wait, wait, I can't use that word, 'ladies.' These sneaky gals. Oh no, no, no, I can't say 'gals.'" And then she said, "These sneaky motherf\*\*\*\*rs, here's what they —." In what world is, like, motherf\*\*\*\*r now okay? But it was!

MOHR: Wow.

DUBNER: So what does that mean?

MOHR: Yeah, that is really funny. Well, I don't think that the whole world will move in that direction. But yeah, people are preemptively worried about causing offense. Like, I'm sure no one would have been offended by "ladies." But you want to just make sure that whatever you say has no possibility of offending anyone. Did you see the Stanford University I.T. list of words that people couldn't say? It was meant to make technology more inclusive. It had very good aims, but it was, you know, "don't say 'American,' use 'U.S. citizen,' because if you say 'American,' there are so many countries in the Americas, you're disrespecting them. Don't say —."

DUBNER: I'm seeing — I looked it up now — you can't say "white paper?"

MOHR: "White paper," right. Because you can't say "white." Yeah.

DUBNER: So what do you think of that use? Do you think it's a good idea that that word be restricted?

MOHR: I don't think it's a good idea. I don't know — it is funny because I know John McWhorter is a very powerful advocate for not bowing to these winds. I think I probably quietly bow to the winds.

McWHORTER: Yeah. I think we overdo it today.

And that is the unbowing John McWhorter.

McWHORTER: The idea that somebody can lose their job because they use the N-word — and this is the important thing: We're losing the difference between using it and referring to it. For somebody to lose their job because they talk about the N-word, that's going into treating that sequence of sounds as taboo, which is frankly the way people acted about the excretion words, and I think we could get beyond that. But when did people not overdo things? And in general, if we are going to be pious about something, for it to be about disrespecting minority groups, I fully get that. That's an advance. That's a moral advance.

But, because this is language we're talking about, things are always changing, and there are always complications.

*McWHORTER: We often talk about how groups can denature a slur by taking it on themselves. But that doesn't mean that the sting doesn't remain when it's applied by people from the outside. You can witness this with the N-word, you can witness this with the word "b\*\*\*\*." I think it's one thing for women to use it as an in-group term, but for the rest of us to casually use it when we happen to be upset with someone who's a woman — that was much more common in, say, the '70s or '80s than now. That's a good thing. We need to stop that.*

*DUBNER: Now, what's your position on bleeping curse words? Is it just a charade, or is it a good idea?*

*McWHORTER: The only ones that should be bleeped are the slurs against groups. However, that's just me. And I know many people would rather their children not hear the salty words, at least not until a certain point. I frankly disagree, because I think we're living in a different world. If your children around the age of nine are going to start hearing pop songs that are full of shameless profanity, and I have now watched that happen with my two little girls, I'm not sure why they should ever have listened to anything where words were bleeped out, because I think we don't give kids enough credit for understanding context. Very early on, my girls noticed that Daddy says "f\*\*\*\*" a lot. They instantly knew he does that, that's funny, but we're not supposed to do it. And I cannot prescribe for other people on how they raise their kids, but my kids have been raised listening to fluent profanity — not the slurs, but the other ones — since birth.*

*DUBNER: I may be reading too much into what you just said, but it sounds as though you're saying that profanity can help develop a sort of linguistic sophistication, in that it's a set of words that one is allowed or even encouraged to use in some circumstances, probably private ones and not in others, probably public ones and so on. Can you talk about that notion, whether profanity really does help us become better at our language?*

*McWHORTER: Frankly, yes, because the way profanity is used is often not just colorful and it's not just independent eruptions, but there is subtlety to it. There is wit to it. You have to learn when to hit the note, not to hit the note too many times. It's one way of being articulate.*

*DUBNER: Which curse word in English would you say is the most flexible?*

*McWHORTER: "F\*\*\*\*" is astonishing.*

*DUBNER: Give me the first, like, seven sentences that come to mind with "f\*\*\*\*" serving as different functions.*

McWHORTER: "F\*\*\* everything." "F\*\*\*'s in there?" "F\*\*\* was that?" "Get your hands the f\*\*\* off of me." "I don't have any more f\*\*\*s left to give." "He didn't do f\*\*\* all." "I am broke as f\*\*\*." "This person f\*\*\*ed the other person" — or "motherf\*\*\*er," and you're not really talking about f\*\*\*ing at all.

Melissa Mohr is also fairly fluent with the F-word.



MOHR: You can stick it in the middle of words. "That's abso-f\*\*\*ing-lutely not going to work." Intensifier, "that's f\*\*\*ing amazing." It can be a person, "you're a dumb-f\*\*\*."

McWHORTER: I never cease to be amazed by how many different ways you can use it, and how the people who use it the most often are considered inarticulate, vulgar, lazy, when really a grammarian could spend days feasting at figuring out exactly what each usage of "f\*\*\*" was doing. What the f\*\*\* is it doing there? What's the meaning of that?

DUBNER: What about realms or precincts in which swearing, profanity is still really not welcome? I guess I'm thinking mostly public realms. I mean, look, there are some people who just don't swear and don't like it. We agree on that. But then, like in politics, for instance, you're pretty much supposed to not swear still. What do you think about that?

McWHORTER: I think that in all languages there is a high kind of language. That might be about religion, it might be about battle cries. So if Joe Biden says when Obamacare is being signed, "This is a f\*\*\*ing big deal," it's going to be considered remarkable. We're not going to be a society with no sense of ceremony, and profanity amidst ceremony is always going to seem a little bit out of place except very judiciously applied.

DUBNER: So, for instance, you would not be in favor of Biden, let's say, during a televised address to the nation saying, "Look, America, Vladimir Putin is a real a\*\*hole."

McWHORTER: It would sound trivializing, yeah. I wouldn't find it immoral. I would not clutch my pearls. But I think there would be better ways of explaining what a terrible force he is that would have a gravitas other than using a towel-snapping word.

DUBNER: It's interesting you say trivializing. Doesn't it have a power that could convey some usefulness?

McWHORTER: The problem with "a\*\*hole," or the related "motherf\*\*\*er" in that usage, is that we tend to use those terms for everyday sorts of things. You get cut off in traffic, somebody takes the last slice of pizza. Whereas with Putin, we're talking about somebody who's monstrous. You want to bring out words that connote that he's not cutting you off in traffic, that he's committing an atrocity as grave as genocide. That's not an a\*\*hole. With, Putin it's beyond a\*\*hole.

DUBNER: So what you're saying, if I'm hearing it right, is that profanity performs a lot of different roles. But among them are that there's a playfulness, but also a sort of triviality to it. And if I'm reading you right, then I'm going to go the next step and say:

*and that probably means we should all be swearing a little bit more than we do. Is that a logical conclusion or not quite?*

*McWHORTER: It is. And that's where we're dealing with this dividing line between salty and profane. Because we're using those salty words more. It's a more honest rendition of how we actually feel about life. But we're using them so commonly that we can't say that we're profaning against anything. Now, how that's going to play out in terms of our slurs against groups, that's going to be interesting, where the next angle of profanity is going to go. But where you've got things that are especially on that fine line between salty and profane, and even when they're profane, you're going to use them sometimes. And it's part of the general tool kit of being a whole human being.*

I also asked Melissa Mohr if we should perhaps be swearing more.

*MOHR: So, for obscene words, like s\*\*\* and f\*\*\* and c\*\*\* — should we be swearing more? I mean, they can be useful. It's funny that some studies though, that even the people who have done the ice bucket study that says you can keep your hand in longer if you're swearing — if you're a habitual swearer, that effect goes away. So I wouldn't say we should be swearing more. I think you should swear an appropriate amount. But if you swear constantly, it kind of loses its oomph.*

And I asked Timothy Jay the same question.

*JAY: We should all be more aware of what swearing is, where it's valuable, where it's harmful. Think about your toolbox. I would rather somebody swear at me than ram me with their car or pull a gun on me. I had a guy threw a hammer at me once in a car.*

*DUBNER: Why?*

*JAY: I passed him, so he got angry because I passed him. I thought he was driving too slow, and then he got out a hammer and threw it off. I'd rather you just give me the finger.*

Before we go, let's hear from a few more of our listeners. Here, first, is Alison:

*Alison COHAN: A lot of women, especially, don't like using the C-word, but I decided to embrace it, because I had a former friend that really did me wrong. And so I started calling her — you're going to want to bleep — “the c\*\*\*.” And it really made me feel good. It was cathartic to call her that. And I did, for many months. And then I realized one day that I did not need to use that word anymore. I didn't have a need for it. And I think being able to express that anger through the use of that swear word was really helpful to me.*

And here's Alex — finally, a male listener who at least knows what swearing is, and isn't.

*Alex GREGORY: When my mother was 100 years old, we were all sitting around the table one night talking, and someone said something very interesting. And my mother looked up and said, "Shut the front door." We have no idea where she learned that expression, but we laughed for hours.*

And, with the final word, here's Jenifer.

*Jenifer WEHMEYER: When I was a teenager, I was not the nicest to my mother, and one morning when I was rushing to leave the house, she became very upset with my attitude and said I needed to stop being a little witch, which surely was not her best parenting moment. But I heard a B instead of a W, and I turned around and screamed, "No, you're the b\*\*\*\*!" and proceeded to slam the door right onto my pinky finger and broke it. So in the end, I learned that karma's a b\*\*\*\*, not my mom.*

Thanks to all our listeners for sending in tape. And thanks to John McWhorter, Timothy Jay, and Melissa Mohr for so capably walking us through the thorny, and fascinating, landscape of swearing.

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*Freakonomics Radio* is produced by Stitcher and Renbud Radio. This episode was produced by **Katherine Moncure** and mixed by **Greg Rippin**, with help from **Jeremy Johnston**. Our staff also includes **Zack Lapinski, Morgan Levey, Ryan Kelley, Alina Kulman, Rebecca Lee Douglas, Julie Kanfer, Sarah Lilley, Eleanor Osborne, Jasmin Klinger, Daria Klenert, Emma Tyrrell, Lyric Bowditch, and Elsa Hernandez**. The *Freakonomics Radio* Network's executive team is **Neal Carruth, Gabriel Roth, and Stephen Dubner**. Our theme song is "Mr. Fortune," by the Hitchhikers; all the other music was composed by Luis Guerra.