

Bob Greene

Foul Mouths Are Fair Game in Our Coarsening Culture

Bob Greene was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1947. After graduating with a degree in journalism from Northwestern University, he began his writing career as a reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Greene quickly shifted from reporting to writing columns, and he joined the *Chicago Tribune* as a columnist in 1978. He resigned from the *Tribune* in 2002. In addition to publishing collections of his columns, Greene has written several full-length works: *Billion Dollar Baby* (1974), an account of his experiences touring with the rock band Alice Cooper; *Good Morning, Merry Sunshine* (1984), a journal about his first year as a father; and *Duty* (2000), a memoir of his own father, a World War II veteran.

In "Foul Mouths Are Fair Game in Our Coarsening Culture," originally published as a column in the *Chicago Tribune*, Greene explores the issue of vulgar language. Note how he presents several specific incidents to illustrate his main point.

GUIDING QUESTION

Why do people use profanity so often, according to Greene?

We claim to want to change the world, but before we attempt anything quite that grandiose,¹ we ought to work on changing how we treat each other.

Here are two scenes from the lakefront in Chicago, from two recent sunny days:

A fellow who is out with his wife—apparently uncertain of the etiquette of the lake's bike-and-jogging path—tentatively² moves his bicycle away from the water fountain and horizontally across the path so that he can get in the proper lane. Another bicyclist is barreling along. He sees the crossing bicyclist too late, and slams into him. Both men hit the deck.

The man who has been speeding along picks himself up and screams at the top of his voice, "You (bleeping) idiot! You (bleeping) idiot! What is wrong with you, you (bleeping) idiot?"

¹grandiose: impressive, important

²tentatively: hesitantly

The man who had been walking the bike across the path is humiliated; he tries to apologize, but the obscenities continue to bellow at him as people watch. His wife looks as if she is about to cry.

Here is the next scene:

Farther north on the trail, a line of six or seven men and women on bicycles is rolling, single file, in a southward direction. It's kind of narrow, and there isn't much extra room for people on one side or the other.

Walking north, by herself, is a woman considerably older than the bicyclists. She is not straddling the center line with her feet; she is where she is supposed to be. The bicyclists, as they speed past her, tell her to "Get over"—to move out of their way. As she is doing so, a female bicyclist, near the end of the line, pedals past the woman, whom she knows nothing about and has never met, and uses a vulgar reference to a female dog.

The expression on the older woman's face is startled, embarrassed, and sad at the same time. She has gone out for a walk—alone, unlike many people along the lake—and for no apparent reason she has been gratuitously³ cursed by some younger woman rolling by.

Now in the first scenario, the man who repeatedly bellowed the obscenity at the crossing bicyclist in front of the crossing bicyclist's wife, had the right of way; the person he hit was inadvertently⁴ in the wrong for trying to cross. In the second situation the older woman walking by herself was completely in the right. In both cases, though, the aggressors took control immediately with their foul language.

Why did they do this? They did it because they could. They did it because there is absolutely no value placed, in our current in-your-face culture, on the concept of restraint. If you don't refer to a man who has made a regrettable and unintentional mistake as "a (bleeping) idiot," you are somehow thought to have lost the upper hand. The same applies to the woman bicyclist's reaction to the elderly woman.

It's everywhere. At the Wimbledon tennis championships, the men's winner, Goran Ivanisevic, was telling reporters about a controversial point in the match, in which a female official called a foot fault on him.

"My first foot fault all tournament," Ivanisevic said. "That ugly, ugly lady, she was really ugly, very serious, you know. I was kind of scared."

How very, very gentlemanly and compassionate, after you've won the match, to publicly say that about the appearance of a woman whose only crime was to call a penalty against you that didn't even affect the outcome. Let the woman think of that in days after the tournament—let her think about what the new champion has told the world about her.

Of course, it won't make any difference in Ivanisevic's career. He's just doing what comes naturally in our society, in which strength is measured

³gratuitously: unnecessarily, without reason or cause

⁴inadvertently: unintentionally, by mistake

not by what is inside of you, but by the ferocity with which you choose to belittle others.

SUMMARIZE AND RESPOND

In your reading journal or elsewhere, write a brief summary (three to five sentences) of "Foul Mouths Are Fair Game in Our Coarsening Culture." Next, jot down your initial response to the reading. Do you agree with Greene that profanity is becoming increasingly common and accepted in our society? How often and in what situations are you likely to use coarse words or expressions? Why do you think people use profanity?

READ CRITICALLY

1. Greene presents several examples of people using foul language. How do these examples support his main point?
2. How is the example about the tennis player different from Greene's first two examples? What is significant about this difference?
3. Find examples of Greene's use of sarcasm. Is his tone effective? Why, or why not?
4. What does Greene say about the relationship between foul language and the desire to control?
5. According to Greene, how does today's society measure a person's strength?

WRITE AN ESSAY

Write an essay illustrating one of the following main points:

- People generally treat each other with respect and kindness.
- People generally treat each other with very little respect.

Use examples of incidents you have recently witnessed to support your point.