

Being all things to all people – virtue or hypocrisy?



I have never understood why mean-spirited criticism of those in the public spotlight is afforded so much media attention. Has the vitriol of even a small percentage of the public become enough to make total avoidance of criticism paramount? Have we become so fixated with not giving offence whenever we speak or appear in public that our contribution, aided by opinion polls, has become, if not diluted and safe, hypocritical and insincere?

In essence, the media brouhaha around Wanda Sykes' entertainment keynote at the May 9th White House Correspondents' dinner asked whether she went too far in her rather bold and risqué address, especially with her unflattering comments regarding Rush Limbaugh. In the same week *Miss California* had to be rescued by *The Donald* for her utterances around gay marriage. Who cares? Did either person say anything particularly new, shattering or defamatory?

It is astounding that such trivia garners dedicated media attention during a decade that has seen more than a million lives lost in clearly unjustifiable wars,

wholesale global economic corruption, fiscal mismanagement and economic turmoil, not to speak of environmental and energy challenges that threaten our very existence. Yet it is precisely this attention that causes most of us, the moment we have to speak in public, to pretend we live in another world. A world that has absolute respect for the opinions and sensibilities of others instead of another awash with self-interest, the pursuit of cash at any cost, bigotry, power-mongering, greed and violence.

What monstrous hypocrisy!

Perhaps assuming moral high-ground when public figures slip-up allows us a moment to fuel the illusion that our criticism reflects a society motivated by "good old-fashioned values". I am told that the *nine-tenths of a second Janet Jackson exposed breast saga* is still under court review. Apparently the incident just made it into the infringement category of public decency protection laws—the complainants have to be appeased. One would think sexual virtue epitomized North American life.

My confusion is Kafkaesque in intensity!

Closer to home, it would also appear that a bill was placed before the Alberta legislature that would require teachers to inform parents prior to any potentially controversial utterances. This will allow parents time to decide what their children can or cannot hear. All this in a world where exhausted, working (and often dysfunctional) parents have probably used unfiltered television, video games, unsupervised Internet, etc. to occupy downtime since the child could talk.

On another tack, consider the F-word. My polite rendition of the term has already been translated to the real in your consciousness. Undeniably this word is prolifically and happily used across the board in everyday language, perhaps more so in North America than anywhere else. Yet in public utterances it is the kiss of

death... heads roll, jobs are lost, contracts torn up.

For a society that has judging people so high on its no-no list, it is more than surprising to see the self-righteous rush to judge or reject those that cuss in public.

Similarly, a bizarre standard of what is actually criminal is often applied: Lesser scandals often carry greater repercussions. Millions were spent in an effort to impeach a president who lied about private sexual relations, while another started two wars based on what is at best flimsy premises with disastrous human and economic consequences—without any public baying for blood.

Staying within the narrowest technical interpretation of the law seems to be a real political panacea these days. The illegality of Guantanamo Bay activity on American soil is another case in point.

Fearful of censure, we water down our impact to safe and supposedly acceptable levels. If so, to what percentage of society are we catering? How many people really care? To what extent are we allowing form to hold sway over substance? Are we reinforcing the discomfort of those who naturally fear herd disapproval? How many folk, inherently timid, will bury their ideas, opinions and opportunities to influence others through fear of being deemed inappropriate or improper?

Does our desire to seek across-the-board approval have its roots in morality derived from a naïve interpretation of "...being all things to all people."?

Meeting people on their own level is strategic; pretending to be them is downright false.

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