

Things I'll Never #\$%@ Get Used To

By Dennis Payton Knight

There are things in life to which we remain defiantly unaccustomed. In my own case, it's calves' liver and onions. On the stove, the aroma of the dish is savory and mouth-watering, but credit for that goes only to the onions, because the liver hits my palate like cotton dipped in iodine. I will stay unaccustomed, thank you.

I have unaccustomed myself also from turnips, hummus, and canned spinach. Pickled pigs' feet in a jar at the bar? They may be a treat for others, but not for me. (Do you suppose pigs get pickled before their feet go in the jar? Or vice versa?) I have seen thousand-year eggs getting older by the day in barrels at oriental grocery stores. I avoid them too, preferring the conservative use-by dating policies at Safeway.

There are things other than food that I also keep at arm's length. I plan never to be a rodeo clown, or an astronaut. I do not want to run marathons, perform root canals or un-append appendixes. I avoid nuclear fission, pole vaulting, pearl diving, and the writing of romance novels.

And that brings me to a discussion of unnecessary profanity as among the things I never want to get used to. I am not talking about cursing the hammer that smashes my thumb or other such linguistic opportunities. Those are common occurrences in my life, and I have words at hand to address them. There are many times in one's life where a full and rich vocabulary is valued and warranted, and for those purposes I am glad mine is at least serviceable.

Katy Steinmetz, a TIME Magazine correspondent, had an interesting article in 2016 on the growing phenomenon of gratuitous profanity. According to her research, it is our own sensibilities that give foul words their potency, and that by trying to punish people for saying them we are socially training kids that, by being offensive, their words become that much more powerful.

But Steinmetz recognizes first the value of cussing with a purpose, opening her article with the line, "It has been a long damn year. But do you know what studies show may help ease your pain? Swearing."

That is why cursing was designed, and its use is justified when your toe has been stubbed. The profanity to which I prefer to remain unaccustomed, however, is not strings of colorful vitriol used to condemn circumstances, but the four-letter words that people use as fillers in their common conversation. They are vacuous when used without cause – an emptiness that makes them offensive. It makes me realize I am not so much embarrassed by foul language itself as I am embarrassed for the person who curses to no good effect.

And now, when I hear a random obscenity in a grocery store, I want to get in the offender's face and say, "Stop it, dammit!" But I then I say to myself, "Oh, screw it."