

Seize the opportunity to speak

For the seventh consecutive day, I am the woman with no voice. What a great benefit for the world!

In serving the world with my silence, hopeless sighs and occasional hoarse whispers, I found it very funny when people started whispering back to me. It's weird how these people, who can speak perfectly well, start whispering back to you. But it is weirder in this weird world when people, who can speak perfectly well, fail to speak up when the situation calls for it.

Let me take you to a Greyhound bus station in a small town somewhere in northern Florida. It was mid-May 1994. I was on my way back from Gainesville after checking out the school to where I was considering transferring.

Like all Greyhound buses, the bus was making innumerable stops and it was just another stop in a nameless town. But the difference here was the view out of my window.

I looked out of the window and I saw, beyond the lines of smokers and people who got up to simply stretch their legs, a woman sitting at the very edge of the site who was obviously upset. She was sobbing uncontrollably, hitting herself hard on her forehead, muttering something indecipherable. I was watching her soundless agony through the glass window, and so was just about everyone else.

I was at a loss for what to do. I had just gotten started with this long "American experience," and I had been warned repeatedly to be CAREFUL, especially in Florida, and to be wary of strangers.

My first instinct was to go to her and find out how I could help. But the fear and uncertainty of being in a strange part of a foreign country kept me immobile. My second



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thought was that the others definitely would help or, at the very least, do something.

But during the 10 minutes my bus stayed in that station, nothing happened. Nobody went to her. Everyone just stood out of the way and pretended not to notice, while watching out of the corners of their eyes. The one woman who did go to her took a hasty retreat.

But as the bus wheeled away, someone mentioned that the police and the emergency medical care were apathetic and were pointing fingers at each other. And I also noticed, as we were pulling out of the station, that there was blood around the woman in need. She was bleeding, and people just shrugged when I tried to draw their attention to it.

The bus left the town and I carried my guilt with me. I wish I had spoken up. I wish I had done something.

Tuesday was my brother's 20th birthday. I wanted to call him and wish him a happy birthday. I wanted to tell him how proud I was of him. I wanted to assure him that everything would be all right. Currently, he is going through a "Do I really want to be a doctor? Is this what life is all about?" stage. Above all, I wanted to tell him that I loved him.

I thought about the number of times we had fought and I had said

mean things to him. Countless. I was trying to remember the occasions that I had said how much I valued him or how much he meant to me. Not many.

When I had the opportunity to say that I loved my brother, I screwed things up by fighting over the most inconsequential things. The fact that we were born three years apart didn't help things. After I was done with adolescence and was ready for a mature relationship with him, he was going through puberty. And when both of us were mature enough to treat each other with respect, I had to leave for college.

So we really have not conveyed our true feelings and love to each other. This last year I have thought of him often but never told him so because I didn't want to be a sentimental older sister. I thought his birthday would give me a perfect excuse to tell him all the nice things — straight from my heart.

But since I am the woman with no voice, at the very least temporarily, I was hopeless on a phone. My words were a gust of wind and a frantic movement of lips: no sound!

Too often we take things for granted and refrain from speaking out. Too often when we have the capability to speak up, the chance to speak out, we remain dumb and tongue-tied. Too often when there is an atrocity taking place right in front of our eyes, we remain silent spectators.

So speak up and speak out — while you still can.

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Sex, consequences need sold to teens

When Kathleen Sylvester began researching welfare reform for the Progressive Policy Institute, she asked a Baltimore school principal the one thing she'd do to reduce the number of teen-age pregnancies.

The principal had an immediate two-word answer for her: "Shoot Madonna."

This was not a serious attempt on this educator's part to cure sex with violence. The principal was not a character assassin.

She was probably thinking of the Madonna of the 1980s, the one who wrote the classic paean to teen-age motherhood: "Papa Don't Preach." The Madonna of the '90s has a line in "Bedtime Stories" that sounds more like paean to Joycelyn Elders: "Happiness lies in your own hand."

But the principal was speaking in a familiar vocabulary. It's a language shared by parents, teachers, policymakers, the whole range of frustrated adults whose voices of reason are drowned out by a culture that sells kids sex as successfully as it sells them sneakers. Just Do It.

These messages that kids actually listen to ought to be piped into the hearing rooms where Congress is busy concocting a new welfare policy. The plan the House Ways and Means Committee is contemplating for teen-age mothers is called euphemistically "tough love." But our culture offers something else. Sex without consequences.

"How many times do kids see sex on TV," says Sylvester, "in which no one gets pregnant, no one gets AIDS and no one has to get up in the middle of the night to feed a baby?"

In the face of the onslaught, the true counterculture in America is not the "McGovernik elite" or, for heaven's sake, PBS. It's parents and reasonable adults who are left literally counter the culture, to do combat with the incessant messages of mainstream films, music, television — the conglomerate known as Hollywood — as best we can.

Hollywood may not cause teen pregnancy. But Sylvester and others are convinced that any national campaign that goes to the heart and hard-core of the problem is going to have to engage these cultural message-makers.

We're going to have to do more than label them as villains. We need them as allies.

It will take all their creativity to make a successful pitch against irresponsible sex and teen pregnancy. "Just say no" won't do it. Teen-agers are the most risk-taking part of the population. They're still being



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seduced by cigarette ads.

It will be harder to fashion a stand against sex than against smoking. After all, smoking is always bad for you; sex isn't. And hormones are even more powerful than nicotine addiction.

It will also be harder to campaign against unwed parenthood than against drunken driving. The campaign against drunken driving was successful in curbing dangerous behavior by creating a new social role: the designated driver. But a baby is a different sort of accident than a head-on collision.

If we can't preach, however much papa (and mama) may want to, we can say unequivocally in rhythm, rap or reel what Sylvester says in plain words: "It's wrong to bring a child into the world that you can't take care of." It's not cool, it's not manly, it's not womanly. It's wrong.

This goes beyond using Madonna for target practice. It even goes beyond lowering the sexual thermostat of the culture.

Entertainment executives like to say, on the one hand, that they are just reflecting reality and, on the other hand, that they're in the business of fantasy. With both hands, they wave furious charges of censorship at any critic.

But how about more reality. In an ad campaign, in soap operas, movies, music.

Not long ago, an outraged producer complained to Jay Winster, the public-health guru who created the designated driver campaign: "Can you imagine that people are lobbying to have Tom Cruise use a condom? Tom Cruise?" Why is that so hard to imagine?

At Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, a nervous Barbra Streisand recently offered a spirited defense of the artist as citizen. But the problem isn't that this "cultural elite" is too political, it's that it isn't political enough. As Winston says, "They ought to be powerful players in this process. They need to come to the table."

Let's begin with some sexual truth-in-advertising: one part passion to two parts diapers. Sex and consequence. Try humming a few bars.

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Jockeys not just about briefs

There's nothing like a stern letter from a lawyer to get the old juices flowing. And maybe a few facial muscles twitching.

Even if the letter isn't the lawyer's scariest effort — the kind that vows to take away your home and car, and leave your family cold and hungry — it's always enough to make me sit up straight.

So I was all eyes when a registered letter arrived from Charlotte Shapiro, the corporate counsel and a vice president of Jockey International.

Shapiro was upset because I appeared to have misused the trademark name of the company's product.

As she wrote: "We feel it necessary to bring to your attention the improper use of our JOCKEY trademark in the attached article 'Ties, briefs — who knows what's next.'"

(She was referring to a recent column I wrote about all the nice widow ladies who have been sending me garments belonging to their late husbands.)

"Jockey International Inc. is the owner of the JOCKEY trademark that is widely known and associated with JOCKEY brand wearing apparel and serves to distinguish our product from products manufactured and sold by others.

"The JOCKEY trademark refers to our famous brand. It is correct to refer to Jockey briefs; therefore, the mark should be capitalized completely or used with the initial capital and italicized 'Jockey.'"

"It is important that our mark be used properly. Misuse of our trademark as in your text can have serious legal consequence."

The last thing I want or need is a serious legal consequence. Like any non-lawyer, the mere thought of serious legal consequence is all it takes to give me stomach cramps.



Mike Royko

It doesn't even have to be serious. Even a giggly legal consequence can bring on cold sweats.

So my instinctive reaction was to fling myself to the floor, grab Shapiro's hem and grovel and weep and promise that I would never again improperly use the Jockey trademark, cross my heart, hope to die.

However, it appears that there might be what a lawyer would call "mitigating circumstances." (And a lawyer probably would bill me \$500 just for spelling it correctly.)

Consider the way the J-word was allegedly misused. I quoted from a letter I received from a widow in Ohio, who wrote:

"My husband died last October and left me well-situated financially. He was frugal but not stingy.

"Among his personal effects are about 50 jockey briefs, of which 20 are still in original plastic packages. My husband never passed up a jockey briefs sale.

"I should tell you that the waist elastic in some of the used ones has stretched. But you can gather the waist in with a safety pin like he did. They are size 38."

As you can plainly see, it was the widow lady who used a small "j" instead of a big "J". I merely quoted her letter as she wrote it. To have done otherwise would have been discourteous, even insensitive, since feeling could have been wounded if I appeared to question

her language skills.

However, it's still possible that I bear the ultimate responsibility for the small "j." And the underwear lawyer would probably say that I should have known better, even if the nice Ohio widow didn't.

Maybe. But there is more mitigation — a strange fact that I did not want to reveal out of respect for the lady's desire for privacy.

But now I will, in hopes that the underwear lawyer will recognize that this was nothing but an innocent misunderstanding.

As we all know, the word "jockey" doesn't solely mean underwear.

It is also the word used to describe those small but highly skilled athletes who ride racehorses for a living.

And that is what this lady's husband used to do. He was a professional horse jockey.

So in describing the underwear with a small "j," she was saying that they had belonged to a jockey.

Of course, some skeptics might wonder why he would have had size 38 briefs, since most jockeys are slender and wiry little fellows.

I can explain that. Yes, most jockeys are slender and wiry. But this lady's husband was the exception. He was that rarity — a short and round jockey. He stood less than 3 feet tall and was about 3 feet around at the waist.

You guessed it — the legendary Shorty (Bowling Ball) McSquatt, who thrilled racing fans by frequently falling off the saddle and bouncing right back up.

That should settle this matter to everyone's satisfaction.

I should have gone to law school. I'd probably be on the dream team.



Mike Luckovich