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Mrs. Schultz

AP English 11 – Period 5

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### I'm Done Laughing

Here in America, we pride ourselves on our freedoms - particularly, our freedom of speech – and with it, the right to express, to dissent, to advocate, and to question. But, "with great power comes great responsibility," and at a time when social media posts thrive off controversy and our nation grapples with a level of political divisiveness not seen in recent decades, the need for our deliberate selection of words to reflect our thoughts and feelings has perhaps never been so readily apparent.

Now, I hesitate to share this story, because, it's a little personal - but at the same time, I really am passionate about this topic, and I feel like I should explain why.

While in fifth grade, I remember walking back from band one day and lining up with other students as we waited for our teacher. As I stood by the tree near the line, I recall overhearing my best friend at the time pointing to me as he stated to his other friends "...that's gay, like Grant." Muffled laughter then followed as I continued to stand alone beneath the tree. I did not think much of the comment until days later, as I sat with my table group, and became the subject of a torrent of immature taunts of my voice, lack of athleticism, and general "gayness." Though my teacher intervened and privately scolded my classmates, name-calling of "Graceful Grant" and ostracism persisted for the duration of that fifth-grade year, and into 6th, and 7th, and 8th, and you get the point.

Although that day in fifth grade has long passed, each time I hear another person describe something dumb or inconvenient as gay, or employ some homophobic slur to malign or characterize another individual, my thoughts still immediately return to the feelings of judgment and isolation I experienced in elementary school. While I recognize that the intentions of most of these careless descriptions are not to harass or intimidate, the effect of this substitution of a negative word with a filler word of someone's lifestyle is an implicit dismissal of another person's desire to be respected and valued. I cannot even imagine the emotions others who actually do identify as gay must bear as they hear others connote and homogenize their lives with another person's complaints or distresses, constantly reminded of their struggle for tolerance. This insensitivity in all our lives is not limited to one particular area, but is manifested across subjects, in the ubiquity of the R-word, the prevalence of racial slurs, the justification of misogynistic rhetoric as "locker room banter," and the poverty shaming in describing anything old or cheap as "ghetto." Our indiscretion in speech is also visible in the popularity of memes featuring images of Anne Frank, the Twin Towers, and the Sandy Hook shooting, each juxtaposed with lighthearted captions and mean-spirited jests, eliciting some "shock factor" from the viewer while normalizing and trivializing massacres.

I don't know about you, but I'm done laughing.

These casual uses of offensive language are not funny, and they have the consequence of desensitizing us to the unjustifiable implications of what we hear, say, and begin to believe. I doubt many of our peers sympathize with racist ideologies or bigoted leanings, but from an observation of lunch table conversation and Twitter feeds, one might presume us to be "Tom Buchanans."

Now, I don't mean to stand on some soap box and excuse myself from having ever said anything inappropriate, nor do I intend to suggest that we should all cater to one another's demands whenever someone is offended in some submission to militant political correctness. All I am trying to urge is a new resolve among us to be deliberate in what we say, ensuring it represents how we feel and who we are, and that we are considerate of everyone's opinions and are cautious to not generalize or name-call.

As we exercise our first amendment rights, let us all remember the faces behind a given taunt before we speak, the sensitive natures of historical events before we post, and most importantly, the intents of our hearts before we unwittingly demean and dismiss those around us.

Thank you.